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How Do Mother's Who Were Pregnant as Teenagers Achieve Success?

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By

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work to my mother and sister. Thank you for your endless support and for being my greatest role models.

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Abstract

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The purpose of this research study is to explore how mothers who were pregnant as teenagers (ages 13-19) achieved success in their lives and identify any challenges they had to overcome at such a young age. The method used to conduct this study was in-depth interviews with former teen mothers (N = 8) over the age of 18 years old. All of the participants were pregnant between the ages of 13 and 19. Results indicated that former teen mothers shared similar viewpoints of wanting to do better for their child and push through the stereotypes of being a teen mother. Furthermore, balancing work, school and motherhood for teen mothers was challenging. This research is important for social work as it takes a closer look at the challenges and experiences of a teen mother and identifies the areas where they need the most support for a positive outcome.

Keywords: teen mothers, teen pregnancy, success.

Introduction

Parenting can be a very tough job, but many will say it's also the most rewarding job they experience in their lives. Bringing a child into this world and trying to guide them in the right direction certainly seems special and exciting, but how might that experience feel for a teenage mother who is also trying to figure out life herself? Teenage pregnancy is often viewed as destructive for young women and it is associated with negative career and educational outcomes (O'Brien, 2015). Although there has been a decline in teenage pregnancy rates, it is still a public health concern as teenage pregnancy has been associated with detrimental social, psychological, developmental and health outcomes for the mother and the children (O'Brien, 2015). From an educational perspective, one of the concerns for teenage mothers is the likelihood to not complete their high school education or achieve a university degree, which can limit their future career choices (O'Brien, 2015).

Although teen pregnancy may have a negative impact on the mother and child, there are various misrepresentations of teen mothers (Smithbattle, 2013). Teen mothers are vulnerable to being stigmatized due to their age, class, and ethnic backgrounds, which can contribute to a teen mother's already challenging life (Smithbattle, 2013). Teen mothers are well aware that they are considered as unfit parents by the outside world, and many of them report feeling fear, shame, and anger when faced with these experiences and stereotypes (Yardley, 2008). However, others described those experiences as strengthening their dedication to improve their lives, resist the stigmas and embrace their new beginnings.

Literature Review

Decades ago, teenage pregnancy was frowned upon, as pregnant teens would be sent away to have their babies, or be convinced to give them up for adoption (Guilli, 2008). However, today our society seems to be more accepting of young mothers and the diverse experiences of motherhood across all ages (Gulli, 2008). Duncan (2007) suggests that perhaps we have been too accepting of teenage pregnancy and have stopped considering it a social problem. A study by Gregory (2007) explains that teen mothers do not have the financial means to “stand up for their rights” (pg. 25). The belief that teen pregnancy is a social problem is not only here in America, but is universal and many countries struggle with it (Gulli, 2008).

Neiterman (2012) identifies three major ways teen pregnancy is a social problem. The first factor was the issue of welfare and young mothers with their children, second includes health concerns of the child and mother, and lastly, the discourse on the morality of teen mother (Neiterman, 2012). According to the study, it is widely recognized that a large proportion of teenage mothers come from low-income families and are in need of extra assistance (Musick, 1993). This creates a huge concern for teen mothers trying to make ends meet and provide for themselves and their children. Another concern for teen mothers is their future outcomes in terms of completing high school and gaining employment. Teen mothers are seen as less likely to get their high school diploma and have successful educational attainment (Bonell, 2004).

Although many studies indicate that teen mothers and their young age result in negative outcomes, Nathanson (1991) explains that it's actually the disadvantaged backgrounds from where they come that results in harmful outcomes. Children of teenage parents are more likely than other children to grow up in poverty, drop out of school, die

as infants, and become adolescent parents themselves (Nathanson, 1991). These findings indicate that it's important to look at the upbringings of teenage mothers as well and how that may have affected them. These discoveries of teenage pregnancy are alarming and raises valid concerns for teen mothers and their children.

Although teenage pregnancy in the U.S. has actually dropped over the past decades, the challenges for teen mothers remain present (Mollborn, 2016). The decrease in teen pregnancy has been attributed to an increased use of contraception among young women (Mollborn, 2016). Further, Mollburn (2016) finds that the birth rates for Latina and African American women are double what they are for White teens, and poverty is a huge indicator as well. The majority of teen mothers who had infants lived below the poverty line, and 56% of infants in poverty live with a mother who was a teen mom (Mollborn, 2016). These statistics are important in noting the struggles the majority of minority teen mothers face and how it can impact the child's life.

However, Mollborn (2016) further mentions that getting an education and becoming a good caregiver is a path that teen mothers make an effort to seek. Many teen mothers have stated they experience much personal growth and feel motivated to overcome obstacles they are faced with despite the challenges in their lives.

Previous literature helps to determine contributing factors teen mothers face that may have lead to their pregnancy at a young age and can continue to affect them and the baby after childbirth (East, 2014). However, research is limited and not particularly current. East (2014) suggests that the association between pregnant adolescence desire to continue their education and their pregnancy wishes has been only vaguely previously studied. Although it's significant to find that teen pregnancy has decreased over the

years, it's critical to analyze the components that have contributed to this decrease and explore areas that need greater attention.

Aims and objectives

The researcher aspired to explore the experiences of former teen mothers and how they balanced work, school and motherhood. In addition, examining what success means to them and discovering which outlets and decisions they had to make to achieve success, or continue to work towards their idea of success, may inform future interventions.

Method

Participants

For this research study, 8 in-depth interviews were conducted with participants over the age of 18 years old. In order for participants to qualify for the study, they must have been pregnant between the ages of 13-19. The in-depth interviews were conducted in a private area of the participant's choice and took approximately an hour of their time. The initial goal was to have 10 participants provide in-depth interviews that were audio recorded so the researcher could later analyze the data and find relevant themes in the research. However, of the 10 participants that were approached, only 8 women agreed to participate in the study.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique whereby the primary investigator reached out to known former teen mothers who were also asked if they knew others who met criteria for the study. If so, the researcher contacted the potential participants via email to pass on further information. The participants in the study were all Hispanic females, with their current ages ranging from 25-35 years old.

The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at California State University, Northridge approved this study.

Measures

The participants were asked questions regarding their challenges as a teen mother and outlets they took to overcome certain obstacles to lead towards a successful trajectory. "Success" was measured by analyzing their desired outcomes for each participant after their journey with teen childbirth. The goal was to focus on the voices of former teenage mothers and their stories to success and finding several relevant themes in

the data. The interview questions were divided into 5 sections. The first section consisted of asking about the participant's personal feelings around their pregnancy. The second section inquired about the participant's educational background. The third part focused on financial situations. The fourth part examined the participant's family and support system. The final section focused on the participant's goals and their definition of success.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design and therefore focuses on themes found in the data, rather than variables. A significant strength of a qualitative study is being able to dig deeper into understanding the unique experiences of the participants and allowing them to elaborate to gain an enhanced understanding. A possible risk of a qualitative study is feelings of discomfort or embarrassment that may surface during the interviewing process when participants are reflecting on their past. A second risk is sensitivities that the researcher may feel when conducting the in-depth interviews. According to Sarah Stahlke (2018) there is a growing risk that researchers themselves may face emotional impacts of the research due to disagreeable statements, disturbing stories and managing the research study itself. To reduce the potential of this risk, the researcher was mindful of her own biases and remained open and understanding towards the participants.

Procedure

The primary investigator handed participants a consent form for their review and informed them about what the study entails and offered them the opportunity to ask any questions or voice their concerns. The researcher allowed the participants to decline

answers or end the study at any time to minimize a potential risk. The audio recordings were placed in a secure, locked location and were deleted once transcribed.

Results

Teenage mothers define success and what it means to them in a variety of ways. The 8 participants in this study were asked about their experience and challenges as a teen mother. Common themes that were found from the interviews included challenges with balancing school and/or work and raising a child, yet still feeling motivated to keep going and moving forward. Emotional challenges during and after the pregnancy, educational attainment and the participant's definition of success were all common themes found in this study.

Balancing work, school and motherhood

For the majority of the respondents, balancing work, school and being a teen mother was extremely challenging and stressful. Many of the respondents mentioned that trying to juggle all 3 areas of their life was the most challenging part of becoming a teen mother:

- *Trying to juggle going to school, work and caring for my son was so hard. I could not do all 3, it was always one or the other, and I had to pick and choose. I tried going to college and only lasted two weeks. Respondent 6*

Resiliency

A key finding in the study was the resiliency the majority of the participants carried after having a child at a young age. When asked what their biggest challenge was raising a child, 7 of the 8 participants (87%) reported that trying to raise a child at such a young age and balancing school or work was difficult, but they felt motivated to try. Becoming a mother changed and motivated them to do better and provide for their child:

- *Oh my gosh, my son changed my life. I came from an abusive family; my father was very abusive with us. I went to therapy for months at a young age because my father would hit me and my teachers found bruises on me. I began to hit my younger brother sometimes and I caught myself repeating the cycle. At 15, after I had my baby I got myself back into therapy because I did not want to be like my father. Having my son made me want to be better.*

Respondent 4.

- *It really made me grow up faster. I had to make better decisions and learn to be more responsible. It pushed me to want to do better and to graduate high school. It made me more eager to do better for myself, for my son and to prove people wrong. Respondent 1*

Emotional challenges

Emotional challenges were another common theme found in the interviews. The majority of participants reported feeling scared, nervous and very shocked after finding out they were pregnant. 3 participants (37 %) reported feeling scared because of what others would think of them and how they would be perceived:

- *I remember being so scared, more so because of my parents and what they would think. My dad was hard core Mexican and I just kept thinking he was gonna beat my ass. That's what I was mostly afraid of. Respondent 2*
- *I was confused. My parents never talked to me about sex, I was so confused. I didn't know who to go to. I went to Planned Parenthood and got most of my information there. My dad was horrible; he was so worried about what others*

would think of me. He was nothing but negative. My dad was disgusted with me; it was devastating. Respondent 7

When asked about their emotional well-being, 6 of the 8 participants (75%) reported feeling very depressed, unhappy and overwhelmed during and after their pregnancy:

- *I was in a deep, deep depression. I was pregnant and married at 17 and dealing with a verbally abusive husband. My parents made me get married when I got pregnant; they had to release me to the court. We had to get married because of my family. I had just turned 17 and moved in with his (baby's father) parents. He started being abusive within 6 months of our marriage. My husband was very verbally abusive and my dad did not want me back home, so I had no one. It was a very, very dark place in my time. (Participant became a bit emotional) My pregnancy was very traumatic. Respondent 7*

- *I struggled with my social life. I had a very bad reputation because of my pregnancy. My friend's moms did not want them hanging out with me, so I lost a lot of friends. I struggled with that a lot and was alone at school, so I would just go to the library and do my homework Respondent 8*

The other two participants (25%) described their emotional well-being as feeling fine and happy after their baby was born. They also reported to receiving a lot of help and support from family and friends with childcare and financial hardships:

- *I remember being happy. I was a kid, I don't remember being stressed. I remember everyone helping me out, my mom and my grandma helped me with*

taking care of my baby and driving me to appointments, it really did take a village. I also did not worry about money, the baby's father made sure to provide for our son. Respondent 5

Educational Achievement

When participants were asked about their educational background and achievements, it was discovered that none of the participants completed college. Three participants (37%) reported that they did attempt going to college, but found it challenging to finish. They struggled with working full-time and raising their baby. However, 6 participants (75%) reported that going back to school is one of their current goals:

- *I always loved school. When I had my baby it was so hard to finish college and I didn't have much support. I would love to go back now that my kids are older, I always loved learning. Respondent 3*

Success

When the participants were asked to define success and what it means to them, every participant responded that success to them means being happy, with family, and feeling content with their lives. 6 participants reported to feeling successful and on their right path to feeling successful:

- *Success to me is happiness. Being with family and having a great support system. Family and great health is how I define being successful. Through everything I have been through, my family has been so important. I want to be healthy because I also want to be there for my grandchildren. Respondent 7*

Discussion

A surprising finding from this research is that none of the participants shared experiences of having post-partum following the baby's arrival. Some of the participants did share they felt lost, confused and depressed during and after the pregnancy, but did not describe it as being post-partum or not feeling connected to their baby. Another key finding is that none of the participants completed college due to the challenges of trying to balance each area in their lives in addition to motherhood.

The findings from this research are significant to social work because young women who give birth as teenagers may often feel lost and confused after bringing a child into this world. The transition to motherhood involves so many life changes, featuring the new role of motherhood for a teen mom. Some teens may have had strong educational aspirations before becoming pregnant and had to make necessary changes (East, 2014). In addition, post-partum is experienced by many new moms and is a critical area to discuss to ensure the mental well being of teen mothers (East, 2014). In this research, participants did not mention they experienced post-partum depression, but many participants did struggle with their emotional well-being during and after their pregnancy. Therefore, teen mothers need the guidance and assistance of others as they works towards their own goals and future while also raising a child. It's important to look at the obstacles teenage mothers face and how these challenges may have a negative impact on the mother and children. It's critical to look at these areas where they are negatively impacted, such as their mental health, family support, and educational aspirations to provide resources and support to assist in a more positive outcome for young mothers and their children.

Limitations

A limitation to this study is that the participant group was not that diverse as all of the participants were Latina. Many of the participants grew up with similar cultural backgrounds and upbringings. Although the research gave a closer look at the challenges of Latina teen mothers, it would have also been helpful to compare the stories amongst teen mothers of diverse backgrounds.

Future Research

Considerations for future research include having a more diverse participant group. Having participants with diverse cultural backgrounds and upbringings would allow us to discover further challenges and experiences based on different intersectionalities. In addition, it would be interesting to discover any major differences or similarities between more diverse groups. Another consideration for future research would be to focus on solutions and ways to better assist the challenges teen mothers face to accomplish their goals.

Conclusion

In society, we often hear about the stereotypes of teen mothers and assumptions people make, but their challenges and stories are rarely brought to light. The findings for this research were significant in allowing us to take a deeper look at the various challenges faced by teen mothers and which areas may impact them the most. From their emotional state throughout their pregnancy to the new decisions they are faced with at such a young age, the research revealed that stereotypes could contribute to social isolation and have an impact on teen mothers' emotional well-being and family support. The participants in this study expressed their struggles and how teen motherhood changed

their lives forever. This study also found that despite the challenges, many wanted to remain positive for their future and find a way to adapt to their new life to achieve success.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Personal

- At what age did you become pregnant?
- What were your feelings at the time you found out you were pregnant?
- How did those around you react?
- What would you say was your biggest challenge raising your child?
- What was your greatest joy?
- How would you describe your emotional well-being as a teen mom?
- What about now?

Education

- How were you doing in school prior to your pregnancy?
- What challenges did you face with academics?
- Did you go to college? If so, did you graduate? And how did you manage being a mother and in school?
- If not, was going to college an aspiration of yours?

Finances

- Were you able to meet financial needs?
- Did you have a job? If so, where did you work?
- What is your current job?
- Do you feel like you are currently financially stable?
- What programs were available to you to assist in raising a child?
- If none, what type of program do you wish would have been available to you?

Family

- How was your relationship with your family at the time?
- Did you have a positive support system? If so, who was your support system?
- Did the pregnancy have a huge impact on your family at the time?
- Did the baby's father/his family help you?
- What does your family life look like now?

Goals

- What were your goals before becoming a mother? And how did they change after the baby arrived?
- What challenges did you face trying to reach your goals?
- Is there anything you would change?

- What are your current goals?
- Do you feel content with your life now?
- If not, what changes would you like to see in your life?
- How do you define success?