MATERNAL THEORY

ESSENTIAL READINGS

2nd Edition with 30 new chapters

Edited by
Andrea O'Reilly

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Chapter 42

Reconceiving Young Motherhood

SARAH BEKAERT

This chapter explores the understanding of young motherhood for the millennial and postmillennial generation in Western countries. In recent history, the term "young motherhood" has been synonymous with that of "teenage motherhood." For example, in the 1980s, Anne Phoenix's seminal work in the United Kingdom (UK) entitled "Young Mothers" was done specifically with teenage mothers. Her work marked the early critique of much ensuing negative policy and media attention towards teenage pregnancy and parenthood, which extended across the latter decades of the twentieth century in the UK. This attention focused on, at worst, assumptions of fecklessness and benefit scrounging and, at best, avoidance of social exclusion. Over recent years, it has become noticeable that the term "teen mother" has been increasingly replaced with "young mother" in policy and media. The word "young" has a less specific age parameter than "teen" does, and it can be seen used with reference to mothers up to their late twenties. The timing of becoming a mother in Western nations has become more delayed in recent decades due to changes in personal lifegoals and societal expectations. Most people now spend longer in school, and having a job and financial security are usually expected before starting a family. Such a preparatory trajectory may continue until a woman is in her late twenties; hence, motherhood before these years is increasingly viewed as early. As a consequence, sociopolitical expectations are that women will control their fertility until the socioeconomic timing is right.

I note alongside this, however, that exchanging the term "teen" for "young" extends a stigma that has become associated with teenage motherhood. This stigma has become embedded in public and personal ways of being. It is implicit in government policy, such as reduced welfare payments for women under twenty-five (for example the universal credit welfare payment in the UK with age banded amounts). This thinking has also become normalized among the general public and in the media, which refers to mothers in their twenties as young (Kale, Benson). Women themselves have internalized this thinking and now see, for example, pregnancy as being a barrier to university

(Beater). I argue that the changing terminology also represents an extension of the social control of women's fertility. According to the Office of National Statistics, the average age for first time motherhood in the UK is 28.8 years. There is also evidence of waning fertility for women over thirty-five years old (Yoldemir 240). Therefore, there remains a very narrow window in which it is deemed appropriate, and indeed possible, for women to have children. Such governmentality (whereby citizens are controlled through politics, policies, social expectations, and personal goals) favours and promotes certain ways of being and problematizes those outside of them. Teen mothers have consistently been othered over recent decades, and now it seems this has been extended to mothers in their twenties.

There is, however, an alternative view to this critical view of the term "young mother." Many women who begin motherhood in their teenage years prefer and appropriate this term. Referring to themselves as "young mothers" puts a distance between their lives and the negative connotations that have come to be associated with teenage motherhood (Bekaert and Bradly 6). This highlights that the term "young" has nuanced meaning depending on who is using the term and how it is understood. This chapter, considers the genealogy of this evolving terminology, its meaning, and the consequences for younger women's pregnancy and parenting decisions in the early twenty-first century.

Marking out young mothers as a distinctive group is one of the latest social turns in Western culture regarding who is (and, therefore, who is not) fit to parent. Pam Alldred discusses the concept of "fitness to parent" and observes how families that are viewed as different are more likely to be seen by authority as problematic. Such families are pathologized and are therefore subject to increased scrutiny. She discusses how "fitness to parent" is powerful as a moral discourse yet is actually "vacant of qualities that give it meaning" (Alldred 243). It is these qualities or arguments put forward across the previous century in relation to teenage and young motherhood that I will explore in this chapter. These arguments began with economics, turned to moral considerations, then to developmental concerns, returning to an economic discourse by the end of the century. The economic discourse persists into the twenty-first century.

In the early twentieth century, the social hygiene movement, mostly driven by upper class women, sought to control the fertility of the poor (Bland 378). Their motivation was either located in the eugenics movement, with the specific desire to reduce the childbearing of the lower classes, or that there should be favourable financial circumstances before starting a family. In the mid-twentieth century, the focus turned to pregnancy out of wedlock, a religious moral turn. Unmarried young mothers-to-be were often sent away by their own families or communities out of shame to self-supporting institutions. These were often operated by religious orders yet recognized by the state. The inhumane treatment and disregard of human rights of some of these organizations has come to light in recent years (O'Rourke 200).

Younger mothers were overrepresented in these situations, as they were less likely to be married.

Advances in the 1960s and 1970s—such as the women's emancipation movement, the advent of the contraceptive pill, the legalization of abortion, and increasing divorce rates—led to single mothers feeling more confident to live autonomously with their children. Growth in women's employment rather than financial welfare provided lone mothers with income. Financial autonomy meant single mothers were enabled to live independently and contributed to their visible growth in numbers. However, politicians saw increasing numbers of single mothers as reflective of the breakdown of the family and a drain on public resources through making claims on government welfare provision, legitimate as these claims were (Atkinson, Overton, and Burns 1). Marriage is most likely favoured by the state because the nuclear family, for which it is assumed there is one or more working parents, makes no financial demands on the public purse (Fraser 591). Teenage mothers are less likely to be married or even cohabit with their partner, although this does not necessarily mean that they are single. There are many ways of being a family or growing as a family. Supportive extended family practices have been observed to both enable a teenaged parent's growth in parenthood; they also highlight how informal support and childcare provision reduces or removes the need for financial demand on state provision. Several typical family arrangements have been noted for teenage mothers, including the following: an intergenerational approach to family, in which the parenting teenager remains with her family (Furstenberg et al., "Burdens" 64; Smith-Battle, "The Vulnerabilities" 32); a visiting union, which is an unmarried couple who is living in separate households but is committed to the relationship and any children from the relationship (Clark 155); or a living apart together family model (Duncan 589). In a qualitative study I undertook with teen mothers, none were living with their partner, although they went to great lengths to communicate how the father was involved and committed to his young family. For example, one young mother stated: "Yeah, he's a brilliant dad, like I must say cos I thought he would be like a typical dad. He's not ... he looks after her, provides for her, and provides ... he's a good guy. He's a really good dad" (qtd. in Bekaert 152). This provides a counter-narrative to the political promotion of the nuclear family as sole model for economic self-sufficiency.

Psychological and social developmental theory also emerged mid-century and had an impact on professional and lay views of teenage motherhood. This theory suggested normative linear progression through psychosocial developmental stages. Within such pseudo-scientific discourse, pregnancy "out of wedlock" is seen as out of sequence in a developmental order rather than an immoral act (Arney and Bergen 14). Explicit in these staged developmental models is the assumption that children are on their way to adulthood and adult responsibilities. Therefore, young adolescent women are

viewed as not ready for the adult responsibility of motherhood. Children are viewed as socialization projects, in which they are prepared for future social and economic participation in society (Mayall 270). As more knowledge is deemed necessary before participating in the workforce, an increasing time in education is required. The child, adolescent, and now young adult, is increasingly "scholarised" (Qvortrup 4).

Currently, more young people attend university than ever before, and young people are deemed to be at a disadvantage if they do not have a tertiary qualification. Thus, young people are viewed as childlike until they have completed university (Kamp and McSharry 4). Within this changing education and work landscape, younger parents are unlikely to have completed education or be in full-time employment. As their peers increasingly delay parenthood, a woman becoming a mother as a teenager or in her early twenties is more noticeable. The mothers in my study were keen to communicate to me that they had completed their education before embarking on motherhood, fulfilling this good citizenship discourse. For example, one mother said, "I've done my GCSEs. I'm a big girl now and, you know, make my own decisions." Such sentiments, however, appeared to be more of a rite of passage to adulthood and autonomous decision making than a pathway to further education or career progression.

There have been recent advances in the understanding of brain growth that ostensibly support the view that teenage and young women are not psychologically ready for motherhood. Research suggests that the development of "cognitive control," which was previously thought to occur in the teenage years, continues into the twenties (Cohen, Breiner, and Steinberg 560). If cognitive control is deemed to be a marker of adult brain development, then the understanding of adolescence as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood is extended. Following a staged development approach, this may mean one should not make significant life decisions, such as having children, until cognitive control is attained. However, another view is a life-course understanding of brain development rather than reserving certain life decisions to specific ages. Timing and length of adolescence have varied historically and still vary between cultures and will likely continue to do so. More specifically, when adolescence ends remains undefined and not fully understood. Definitions tend to start with puberty yet end with a less defined and constantly evolving moment, usually revolving around the time a person can live independently in society.

An alternative approach might be to consider the capacities of the child (and adult) that are culturally and experientially varied (Lansdown 22). Indeed, perhaps life experiences help to achieve cognitive control through learning "on the job." Research attests to personal growth through motherhood (Nelson 475). In my interviews with teenage mothers, they accounted for a range of new practical skills and emotional changes since becoming a mother. These included budgeting, home management, rebuild-

ing relationships with their parents, and reassessing romantic relationships. They demonstrated reflexivity through motherhood, which also led to their reengagement with their education, work, and career plan. For example, one young mother was inspired towards becoming a midwife after her birth experience: "By September I need to be in college ... for [daughter]. I don't want her to be like 'Oh my mum she doesn't do anything with her life.'" Such a trajectory, however, was not always easy due to the inflexibility of college timetables and wariness of employers. Another young mother wanted to find part-time work but felt she was discriminated against for having a child: "I really wanted to try and find work, but it's really difficult. I've never been in such a difficult position, sometimes they ask if you've got kids and then (they are) automatically alert."

In the 1990s, there was an increasingly political focus on single motherhood, which centred on age. Charles Murray, American political scientist, brought moral, economic, and developmental discourses regarding "fitness to parent" together. He suggested that young women who have illegitimate children and become dependent on the state lack personal responsibility because they willingly have children and remain unmarried yet are unwilling to work, which costs the taxpayer money. His solution was the reconstitution of the nuclear family and the reassertion of the role of the father within it (Murray 23-52). Margaret Thatcher, then prime minister of the UK, was influenced by Murray's thinking and took a similar stance. She stated that withdrawing welfare benefits was the only way to reestablish the traditional norms of married parenthood; withdrawing benefits would disincentivize single parenting (Hills 5). Teenaged parents are less likely than older parents to be married and live in a nuclear family arrangement and are more likely to be legitimately drawing on state benefits. Teenage mothers became embroiled in an economic discourse that stated they were undeserving of welfare support.

The economic discourse of teenaged parenthood in Western countries continued to the end of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first. In the UK, the New Labour government introduced a ten-year teenaged pregnancy strategy. This policy focused on the avoidance of social exclusion presumed to arise from teenaged parenthood. A supposed inability to participate in education as a mother was viewed as compromising her chances in the workplace, even though many mothers, at all ages, combine motherhood and education as well as many other roles, such as carer, work, and community group membership. A linear socialization approach was very much apparent in this policy. Neoliberal rhetoric was no longer couched in judgmental tropes of family breakdown and benefit dependence but marketed through a caring discourse of helping teenage women reach their full potential and raise their aspirations (so long as those aspirations and potential were in education and work). The UK strategy could be read as a reworking of familiar discourses from the early twentieth century pertaining to responsible parenthood and the obligation towards being a good citizen. The assumption

that motherhood hinders potential fails to recognize the sociocultural contexts of many young people (as well as devalues motherhood as part of this potential). For many young mothers, pregnancy and motherhood gives them, and often their baby's father, the incentive to stop drug use, permission to withdraw from gang involvement, and the encouragement to reengage with education and work. One young mother I interviewed was struck (and a little overwhelmed) by the change in her partner since she said she was pregnant: "Ever since I told him that I'm pregnant, he's just been getting everything ... and the day of the scan, he come here and was filling out job applications on my laptop and was telling me [he needs] to go get a job ... that he's on about getting a job and ... housing."

Such a singular and narrow lifepath that leads from education to economic self-sufficiency disregards the complex lives in which many young people are making parenting decisions. Deciding to parent at a younger age than the expected norm can be based on a realistic appraisal of life circumstances. Sometimes this appraisal does centre around economics but not necessarily in the individualistic manner policymakers presume. Economics are considered in a relational network, such as maximizing on free childcare from grandparents while it is available (Mulder 64). Decisions may also be based on a realistic appraisal of career opportunities, in which parenthood, sooner rather than later, represents less loss of earnings, as the young women are not yet established in the workplace (Phoenix 5), or they do not expect a highly remunerated career trajectory. All the young women in my study expressed worries and concerns and had experienced many significant life events. These included parental divorce, parental death, seeking asylum, gang involvement, death of friends through gang activity, and involvement in the drug trade, among others. One young woman stated: "So much has happened in the space of time, so many things." Getting on with motherhood made sense at this point in their lives. Motherhood is also part of a landscape of life events rather than a singular momentous decision. Also, contrary to the dominant political exclusion narrative, teenage motherhood can represent social inclusion for young women (Phoenix). This inclusion comes through gaining a respected role in the local community as a mother. Early childbearing is a logical response to family and cultural worlds that are largely invisible to middle-class professionals (SmithBattle, "Teen Mothering" 88).

The sociopolitical assumption is that teenaged parenthood incurs poverty. Much emphasis has been placed on intergenerational teenage motherhood and a cycle of poverty (Furstenberg et al., "The Children" 57). This faintly echoes the eugenics discourse from a hundred years earlier, regarding controlling the fertility of the poor. However, contrary to these assumptions, research has presented a counternarrative in which preexisting socioeconomic conditions account for any adverse effects of teen mothering. Poverty precedes, rather than leads to, teenage pregnancy and parenthood

(Smith Battle, "Legacies" 416). A poverty cycle is not caused by or perpetuated by teenage parenthood; it is caused by lack of socioeconomic opportunities that span generations. This reality brings broader sociopolitical responsibility into play to counter the effects of poverty, such as work opportunities, minimum wage, employer responsibility, social housing, and welfare provision. Meritocratic politics though, prefers to locate the solution in the individual rather than looking to wider social justice policy, which could mitigate the consequences of poverty. There is increasing political desire to mould citizens rather than tackle the conditions in which they live (Aldred and Fox 221). In this vein, Lee SmithBattle, who has years of experience working with teen mothers and their families in the United States (US), increasingly calls for a reduction in social inequities to further support mothers (SmithBattle, "Teen Mothering" 93).

Public and internalized personal justifications for delaying motherhood often begin in the psychological yet end up in the socioeconomic realm—from not being developmentally ready to not being financially ready. The psychological argument draws on biological scientific evidence but fails to recognize life-course experiential understandings of development. The economic argument is socially constructed and represents a powerful "common sense" understanding of the path of young motherhood as ill-advised. However, this stands in contrast to the lives of many young mothers, for whom getting on with motherhood is a realistic appraisal of their life opportunities and does not represent a failure to achieve their potential in terms of education or their career.

Nevertheless, it is this "economic science" discourse associated with young motherhood that is the most enduring (Goncalves 201). The good citizen is economically self-sufficient. It is this discourse that extends across women's lives, beyond their teenage years, as economic considerations are wielded to further control women's fertility into their late twenties. There are echoes of previous political moves to disincentivize single and young motherhood evident in current parameters around welfare payments—for example, needing to live with parents and be in school to receive temporary assistance for needy families (TANF) payments in the US (Molborn and Jacobs 7) or receiving a lower rate of universal credit for those twenty-five years and younger in the UK (Bekaert and Bradley 5). Moreover, state intervention in young parents' lives is increasingly legitimized. For example, in the UK, the family nurse partnership (FNP) (an intensive health-visiting program for pregnant first-time young mothers and their child for up to two years old) began in the UK in 2006 as a service for teenage mothers. In 2015, the program was offered to mothers twenty-five years and younger, and now in 2021, the wording is simply "first-time young mums." Though holistic in its approach, one aim of the program is to facilitate the young mother's return to education and work. Familiar suggestions regarding her supposed drain on public resources are evident in the emphasis on the benefits of the state for

participating in this program and breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Such policy and practice both fuel and compound popular perceptions about when women should have children. These are examples of an unsettling legislative shift that economically and socially disadvantages those who become mothers earlier than the expected norm.

Historical societal attempts to control the fertility of poor and younger women can seem quite shocking. Yet control is still very much present, more embedded, less obvious, even covert. The legacy of neoliberal goals and specific policy at the end of the twentieth century has led to teenage mothers currently experiencing regular and overt negative judgment from both professionals and the public (Ellis-Sloan 8; Fearnley 73). Furthermore, mothers in their early twenties are now reporting being scrutinized and judged by society, which has led to poor self-esteem and postnatal depression, in ways that echo the experiences of teenage mothers (Whitley and Kirmayer 345). In addition, whereas teenage motherhood has clear boundaries, young motherhood is a more elastic concept, which can be stretched to fit different agendas.

As such, more mothers can potentially be infantalized, leaving them open to judgement regarding their reproductive decisions. The "motherhood mandate" (Russo 143-53), in which women are defined by their ability to bear children (against which many feminists rail), is increasingly not afforded to younger women. Through such structural mechanisms and stigma, teenage mothers have been silenced in expressing their desire to get pregnant and become a mother. This is through wanting to present as good citizens and as adhering to the dominant narratives of pregnancy avoidance in the teenage years (Bekaert 9). They gave me accounts of failed contraception, being convinced they were infertile, as well as discovering their pregnancy too late to have an abortion. Nevertheless, a desire for pregnancy occasionally became apparent in a short, almost imperceptible comments, such as: "I wanted to get pregnant by him" (Bekaert 6). One young woman had a long narrative of taking a pregnancy test and telling her partner about the pregnancy in a creative way, leaving him a note and the positive pregnancy test to discover, which said: "Congratulations you're a daddy and I'm a yummy mummy." She described how he immediately face-timed his mum to let her know. This couple was not unsure about what to do, nor were they taken by surprise with this pregnancy. However, despite the description of her partner's excitement, his mother's positive reaction, and the suggestion of multiple pregnancy tests, she never overtly said that she was happy to be pregnant during her account (Bekaert 8).

I suggest that this expanded and elastic range to the term "young" as a manifestation, and extension of, women's fertility control continues to be reworked in the twenty-first century. However, there is a caveat to this narrative of the term "young mother" as manifestation of women's fertility control. Many mothers who began motherhood in their teens claim the term to distance themselves from the stigma associated with teenage motherhood

(Bekaert and Bradley 6). Viewing young mothers as a specific group viewed as a positive trend that helps us consider how the social and economic challenges experienced by teenage mothers are increasingly experienced by those who mother in their early twenties. For example, the stigmatizing discourse around welfare dependency is levied against young mothers. In fact, far from welfare payments being an incentive towards motherhood, continuous economic reform represents a shrinking safety net of economic support pushing younger mothers further into poverty (Molborn and Jacobs 18). As it encompasses mothers in their teens and twenties, the term "young mother" may facilitate conversations between mothers who have all experienced barriers of exclusion, different forms of stigma, and the failure of the welfare state to adequately support them. I maintain that we should be mindful of the continuous shapeshifting of societal control of women's fertility and motherhood decisions. However, the appropriation of the term "young mother" by young mothers as a term of solidarity in terms of finding common ground out of experiences of exclusion from society's view of success is a satisfying development. Mothers themselves have taken control of a term that has been used to control and judge them.

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Justine Dymond's forthcoming collection *The Emigrant and Other Stories* won the 2018 Eludia Award from Hidden Rivers Arts. Other honours include a 2007 O. Henry Prize and Pushcart nominations. She coedited *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/Writing Lives* (Demeter Press, 2013) and teaches writing and literature at Springfield College.

MOTHERHOOD STUDIES / WOMEN'S STUDIES / FEMINIST THEORY

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Andrea O'Reilly, PhD, is editor/author of 27 books on motherhood including most recently *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*; *Feminist Parenting: Perspectives from Africa and Beyond*; *Matricentric Feminism, Theory, Identity, Practice; Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic;* and *Monstrous Mothers: Troubling Tropes.* She is twice the recipient of York University's Professor of the Year award and was the 2019 recipient of the Status of Women and Equity Award of Distinction from OCUFA (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations).

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