

Monitoring parents: Childrearing in the age of intensive parenting

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Teenage Parenthood in Britain

“I wish they’d ask instead of just judging first.”

Helen Holgate

As we progress into the 21st century young pregnancy and parenthood continues to incite attention from policy makers, academics, the media and the public. Indeed, successive political parties have described it as a social problem since the 1980’s.

New Labour’s value base, The Third Way, pays attention to family life, crime and the breakdown of the family and is concerned according to Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1998:40), to engage with life politics which are about the challenges we face in a world where science and technology have altered what used to be defined by nature, and in which tradition and custom are losing their hold.

Within the ideological rationale of the third way is a new discourse, specific to New Labour, that of social exclusion, the reduction of which is a key priority in its policy. Thus the SEU was established in 1997. One of the foci of the SEU is teenage pregnancy. In 1999 (Social Exclusion Unit 1999:6) it formulated a strategy with two central aims:

- Reducing the rate of teenage conceptions, with the specific aim of halving the rate of conceptions among under 18’s by 2010

- Getting more teenage parents into education, training or employment, to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion

Underpinning these goals lies a set of contested assumptions. Firstly, that young pregnancy represents a problem and secondly, that the problem has reached such an extent that rates should be reduced. Thirdly, that the solution to the problem of young parents being at risk of social exclusion lies in education, training and employment.

The focus of this presentation is some of the findings from my recent doctoral research which examines the experiences of young mothers. I wanted to know how young mothers located themselves within the political and media discourses surrounding them and to hear what they feel it is like to be a young mother.

Methodology

The research was concerned with exploring and elucidating the power relationships at work in the structuring of the discourses of young pregnancy and motherhood and the ways in which young mothers manage their own power. Hence the research was divided into two distinct yet inter-related areas, these being the contexts within which young mothers operate, and the experiences of the young mothers within these contexts. It is the latter of these upon which I will focus today. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 11 women who were aged between 15 and 19 years of age when they had first given birth or were due to give birth. Of the 11 women, two were pregnant with their first child and the remaining all had either one or two children. Discourse analysis was utilized to elicit the key discourses which permeate the experiences of young mothers. I will discuss these separately as being first, the binary of the Good-Bad mother that second, informs and exacerbates experiences of maternal ambivalence.

The Good-Bad Mother

The first of the concepts involves the binary discourse of the good-bad mother within which the women positioned themselves. This list details the attributes listed by the women as those of “good” mothers

- A good mother does not become a mother for personal gain
- A good mother provides for her children
- A good mother is self-sacrificing
- A good mother has a partner
- A good mother copes
- A good mother plans her pregnancies
- A good mother has her children at the right time

A good mother does not become a mother for personal gain

The reason behind the motivation to have a child has been researched (Gerber, Pennylegion et al. 2002; Speizer, Santelli et al. 2004)] and forms one of the major themes in the literature on young pregnancy (Ferguson and Woodward 2000; Tabberer, Hall et al. 2000; Arai 2003b). An example of the type of personal gain referred to is the commonly cited myth amongst the media that young mothers become pregnant in order to obtain social housing.

Some of the women I interviewed lived in social housing, others in a variety of alternative types of accommodation. I did not raise the issue of this stereotypical myth with the women but several of the women made reference to it of their own volition:

Extract 1

372. Hayley: Um I think basically its right towards some people, some
373. teenagers, it’s like my sisters friend she got pregnant just so she
374. could get a flat off the council and just so that she couldn’t work
375. basically I find that very wrong, very wrong

A good mother provides for her child (ren)

In this concept provision may be defined as providing for the materialistic and/or psychological needs of the child.

Extract 5

34. Jo: I'm not one of those like when people look at you being a
35. young mother thinking oh I bet she really struggles I thought I
36. don't I've been out there and worked its, not as if I've never
37. worked, you know so P he works really hard 6 days a week
38. brings home the money we're fine. So like really if I put myself
39. across the way I am now people wouldn't think I was a young
40. mum do you know what I mean?

Jo's final sentence (lines 38-40) in this extract demonstrates that she has a clear image of a young mother. She does not construct this image from physical appearance alone. If she did she would recognise that she probably does look like a young mother in the narrowest definition given her appearance corresponded approximately with that of her age (18 years). Jo seems here to disassociate herself from what she constructs as the stereotypical image of the young mother. Instead she positions herself as a good mother by telling how she has worked and that her partner works hard, a point she emphasises with the word "really" (line 37). Thus the implication is that as a good mother Jo, and her partner, are economically able to support their child. In distancing herself from the opposite to this she creates the binary construct of a bad mother as one unable to do so.

In this extract Hayley defines herself as a good mother in terms of being able to provide for her child in a physical capacity

Extract 6

383. Hayley: I don't really care what other people think actually as

384. long you know as long as I look after my little girl. She gets
385. clothed and watered and all that sort of thing I don't neglect her
386. or anything

A good mother is self-sacrificing

Some of the women described a conflict in needs as being an issue for them. They had their own needs that at times came into conflict primarily with the needs of their children and sometimes with those of their partners. The notion of the good mother as self-sacrificing fed this conflict, as the women felt guilty at meeting their own needs instead of devoting themselves entirely to their children. An example of this conflict was the issue of going to work as described here by Caroline:

Extract 7

199. Caroline: So I can't really see my life without her now but
200. sometimes I get annoyed because I really do feel as if my brain is
201. just going to turn to mush being in my flat twenty-four, seven. I
202. mean I always try going for a walk you know like twenty minutes
203. every day just to get out of the flat, just to get a bit of fresh air
204. but you know your brain isn't like ticking over I mean there's
205. only so much baby language you can take so I do understand
206. mothers that stay at home and say I want to go back to work, I
207. want to go back to work, but on the other hand I wouldn't have
208. missed out what I've missed with her so far I mean her first roll,
209. her first crawl you know she's just started to say like dada or
210. baba or stuff like that its things like that I mean I just don't
211. want to miss that out with the first one or anything

In line 199 Caroline is taking stock of her situation and summarising the changes she has made in her positioning in life. She is unable to fully embrace her new life though as she describes her frustration at her lack of mental stimulation that she associates with not going to work. This links to the good/bad mother discourse that holds that the good mother stays at home to raise her children, thus sacrificing her needs, in this case for mental stimulation. Caroline aligns herself with stay-at-home mothers who want to go to paid employment. She is ambivalent however; as she acknowledges the pleasure she has received from watching her daughter develop. She expresses her desire clearly in line 207.

In the next extract Charlene describes her need for time out as coming into conflict with the same needs in her partner.

Extract 12

134. Charlene: but I think he should spend some more quality time
135. with him, he comes in from work “I’ve been working all day I just
136. want to sit down” and all that sort of thing well I’ve been working
137. with K all day with K all I want to do is let you take over let me
138. relax but I just feel like S doesn’t sometimes give enough to K,
139. maybe last few weeks have made S realise how hard it is looking
140. after K

Here Charlene can be seen to negate her needs for a break from her days work in favour of her partner’s needs after his day “out” at work. She is not only faced with meeting her child’s needs, but those of her partner, before she can think of her own. She uses her desire for her partner to “give” to K to justify her need for a break. This places the needs of the child as being of greater importance than her own. Her belief may be that her partner will support this and relieve her thus meeting her need for a break thus compromising her feelings of guilt at not placing her child’s needs first. Charlene

describes her perception that her partner should spend more “quality time” with their son (line 134). This perception reveals Charlene’s acceptance of dominant psychological theories of parenting that suggest there exists such a concept as quality time, as opposed to non-quality time. The idea of quality time stems from the ideology that places the needs and demands of the child over the demands of everyday life, such as housework. (Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001) describe the process whereby mothers walk a tightrope in attempting to meet these conflicting and impossible demands. Charlene recognises the needs she and her partner have to relax after their day’s work (lines135-138) yet she feels conflicted by her need to provide more and better for their son which she perceives would be provided by relaxing together, or taking individual time out.

A good mother has a partner

The women described a feature of the good-bad mother binary as the need for mother to be in a stable relationship; ideally this is with one male partner, preferably to whom she is married

738. Charlene: I think that yeah you are probably going to find it a
739. little bit easier when you’re older than when you’re younger cuz
740. people do discriminate they all think that if we walk around on
741. our own without our boyfriends there they assume you’re a
742. single parent or that our children haven’t been planned when
743. they have, that annoys me cuz I know that I made a point of
744. telling everyone that I was planned cuz you know not that you
745. should be embarrassed if your children come along accidentally
746. but its just the whole stereotype that goes with it
747. Helen: Really, and you have experience of people thinking that?
748. Charlene: Yeah, yeah. I walked down to the shop and there’s this
749. old dear the other day and “it’s really nice that you’re coping
750. really well” and I said, “well thank you”. “You don’t need a man
751. do you?” “No not really” “you’re coping really well” “well yeah

752. alright then I'll just take all responsibility," you well may be a
753. single parent round here, they treat you like one

Initially, Charlene speaks for the group she identifies with – young mothers – using “we” and “our.” She then goes on to describe how she disassociates herself from the group as she doesn't want to be connected with the stereotypical image of the young mother (line 746).

In this extract Charlene is at pains to position herself as separate to the image of young mothers as single mothers. This supports the concept that a good mother is one with a partner.

A good mother copes

This is about the ability to take responsibility for a situation and address it, regardless of external factors.

Extract 16

975. Charlene: I'm glad I didn't have him any younger cuz I don't
976. think I could've coped financially or mentally and stuff but I do
977. think I'm coping quite well with him, mentally and financially
978. you know we might not be going on holiday every day but you
979. know he does get all the best of everything and if I cant give him
980. something physically you know I give him love, that's it, time,
981. love.

The constructs being demonstrated in extract 16 are clearly inter-related with the good mother as provider construct. Charlene constructs coping as being able to provide mentally and financially for her child. In lines 979-980 she places greater value on the provision of “physical” things as she describes how, when she's unable to provide these, she can provide the concepts of time and love. Here coping is providing.

A good mother plans her pregnancies

In this extract Claire demonstrates her recognition of the concept that a good mother is one who has planned her pregnancy:

Extract 19

292. Claire: because if you're young people assume that its not, it
293. wasn't planned and you're on your own which yeah for some
294. people they don't agree with because you're going to be
295. scrounging off the state or things like that but once you sit down
296. and tell people they're more understanding its just the fact that
297. you don't want to stop everybody

Claire constructs the concept that people judge young parents unfavourably if they see their pregnancy as unintentional. She assigns this concept in particular to young parents. She also perceives people as making the implicit assumption that young parents will access state support.

A good mother has her children at the “right” time

The advent of oral contraception and the arguable access to equal opportunities in the work place has contributed to some women postponing their reproductive careers. This has been reflected in child bearing trends with the average age for first birth in the UK increasing to 27.4years of age (Office for National Statistics 2004). Women who mother outside this framework, i.e. “young” or “old” mothers are less prevalent and constructed as deviant (Berryman 1991, Phoenix 1991). This informs the concept of there being a right, and therefore by default a wrong time at which to become a mother

605. Heather: like there was one on the news about a girl who was 13

606. or something and those kind of stories make the headlines you
607. see that on the local news but you don't see about the norm, the
608. people that are getting on with it and sorting it out and stuff like
609. that. I think I was a bit more conscious when I was pregnant
610. before I had D, that people would see me when I was out
611. shopping by myself and think oh look at her she's got herself up
612. the duff and stuff like that, when at the end of the day it was
613. planned I was with my partner, it was what we wanted to do and
614. that's what I think a lot of people don't realise, is that not every
615. teenage pregnancy is a mistake. I mean I know about
616. contraception, I know about how to use contraception I was on
617. the pill before I came off it, I actually came of it to have D

Donna provides a clear description of being verbally abused in public:

Extract 24

239. Donna: Um just like when I was pregnant I used
240. to get a lot of abuse in the street and that
241. Helen: really. What kind of thing?
242. Donna: just people calling me a slag and everything
243. Helen: really. When you were pregnant?
244. Donna: Mm
245. Helen: How did you feel about that?
246. Donna: Oh I just took it
247. Helen: Who would do that, young people, older people?
248. Donna: Mostly like older people"

In a sense Donna can be seen to position herself here as a helpless victim in this situation. This is an interesting position when placed within the context of the good mother who has her children at the right time. As a young mother Donna was visibly demonstrating her deviancy. Deviant behaviour can be constructed as active so in polarization to her

position within this discursive framework, Donna positioned herself here as the victim of a discourse that evaluates her behaviour in such a way that strangers feel in a position to pass verbal and public judgement upon her.

Donna describes a scenario in which she is clearly being judged as a person. In the extracts prior to this the women are less able to be specific in their description of being judged as their experiences relate more to a self perception.

Thus far I have focused upon the first of the two concepts to be elicited from the analysis. We have looked briefly at a few examples of data that demonstrate the young mother's construction of the good-bad mother binary. They can be seen to reproduce, contradict, resist and ultimately negotiate their positions within this discourse. I now want to focus upon the discourse of maternal ambivalence.

The concept of maternal ambivalence is recognized within the academic community (Rich 1977; Parker 1995; Maushart 1999)] and can be defined as “the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side” (Parker 1995:1). Despite this recognition it is not a concept that many mothers find easy to discuss as for many it is an unacceptable emotion (ibid). Women are socialized into the belief that mothers should love their children at all times, unconditionally and regardless of any internal or external pressures exerted upon the relationship. The acknowledgement that we do not feel that way at all times, or even indeed some of the time, is to fly in the face of accepted culturally and historically specific conventions on what defines and constitutes a good mother. Arguably, this is something few women wish to do. Parker (ibid) argues that it is the rigidity imposed on definitions of mothering that inhibits creativity in the processes of mothering thus disempowering women from relying on their instincts and intuition and instead creating a dependency culture whereby women rely on the increasing amounts of professional guidance available on how to be a “good” mother described as a process whereby “parenting has been successively encoded in religious strictures, then moralised, medicalised, psychologised, psychiatrised, and more recently legalised” (Ambert

1994:530). For Ambert this process represents a form of Westernised masculinist hegemony, a conceptualisation supported by Parker (1995) who argues that it is important to acknowledge that representations of mothering are not only imposed upon mothers, but that we all help in maintaining them.

The following examples of DA demonstrate the women in this study as describing their feelings of maternal ambivalence although it was never named as such by them. Simplistically, this could be explained by the absence of such terminology in the women's vocabularies. Speculatively, they may not have felt comfortable exploring the issue in the context of the interviews. Alternatively, it may be that for these young mothers the feelings are too unacceptable to voice particularly when framed within their identified need to position themselves as "good" mothers within the Good-Bad mother binary.

In this interview Jo had reassured me that she was happy with her position as a mother although as the next extract demonstrates this was not always the case as she describes her journey to a position of acceptance.

Extract 35

221. Jo: and I thought oh god I've got to do this all by myself now and
222. like you know it wasn't B, he's such a good baby, he only cries
223. when he wants a feed, but I think it was where I was stuck in I
224. thought all my friends are, out I haven't got a life anymore and I
225. was really crying all the time and I think when the HV came
226. round one day I think that was it I had to tell her you know
227. because I was just so upset, I dunno what's wrong with me, I'm
228. just crying for no reason, but I just feel like I couldn't get 2
229. minutes to myself you know I was with the baby all the time. I
230. started getting into a routine after that, I started going out a
231. little bit more, seeing all my friends with babies, cuz a lot of my
232. friends have got babies and they're all my age and I don't know

233. its nice to talk to people I think and I was fine after that

In line 221 Jo positions herself first as the person with sole responsibility for her position, despite the fact that she has a partner and support available from her family. She describes her feelings of maternal ambivalence as being her responsibility, making it clear from the use of her description of her son as a good baby in line 222 that he is not at fault. She constructs being at home all day with a baby as not having a life (line 224). She then goes on to tell a story about how this situation came to be resolved. It is constructed in a polarised fashion – it was awful, then it was fine. There is a sense of wrapping up and making good as if the difficulties she encountered are behind her for ever.

The following excerpt illustrates that her journey continues at times to be a struggle as Jo attempts to reconcile her pre-motherhood life with the new:

Extract 36

106. Jo: And I went no I really want to have a baby but when I had B
107. I could see where other people are coming from like sometimes I
108. wish I still had my life all my friends are still going out, I think
109. you know I wish I could still have my life again but I've got B
110. now. Which I don't mind but I can see where adults are coming
111. from you know, you should wait. Cuz Ill probably say it when I'm
112. my mum's age

Line 111 of this excerpt (“you should wait”) can be seen to contrast with the first excerpt (34) used in which Jo affirms her gladness to have a baby now. Jo is able to acknowledge the reality of her situation and take responsibility as she constructs it at this stage in her life – that it was not the ideal time for her to have a child but equally she is glad she did. In line 109 her ambivalence is expressed most strongly with the statement “I wish I could still have my life again but I've got B now.” This statement is particularly powerful

suggesting she feels her life is over or that it has been taken away. The differing positions Jo uses during her interview illustrate her ambivalence is difficult to articulate for example, she says she “doesn’t mind” having her baby which is countered by the knowledge she has gained in becoming a mother demonstrated in line 111 when she says “I can see where adults are coming from, you should wait.”

Becky describes her changing feelings as her daughter grows and becomes upon occasion, more demanding:

Extract 37

174. Becky: At first like Jo when my little one was just 2 months it
175. was brilliant then cuz they behave, they don’t do anything
176. wrong. She’s just well sometimes she’s just horrible, she wants
177. my attention all the time, I can’t go to the toilet by myself, I can’t
178. go in the bath. It’s nice but (lowers voice) it gets on my nerves
179. sometimes.

Becky starts this extract by positioning herself, as she perceives it, alongside the previous participant. She constructs an image of being happy then and explains why that was. In the next clause she hesitates before articulating her feelings that she locates within her daughters behavioural manifestations. The use of “but” (line 178) as a conjunction locates the second clause of this statement as negative. The lowering of Becky’s voice that suggests she was less comfortable with making this feeling heard supports this. This illustrates the concept that expressing such feelings is not entirely acceptable.

Whilst it has been suggested that acknowledging maternal ambivalence is perceived to be negative (Maushart 1999) Bailey (1999) has demonstrated that this may not always be the case. She researched the effects of maternal ambivalence during pregnancy. Her study found that “those who acknowledged that their pregnancy was poorly timed seemed to rally and do their best to provide good child care.”

As with Caroline, Hayley's pregnancy was also unintended. She describes her feelings about becoming a mother thus:

Extract 41

33. like we get little sheds down the bottom. I started putting her
34. buggy down the bottom in the shed thinking it would be easier,
35. but that got broken in to before this new buggy we've got now,
36. her buggy got stolen so I have to basically run up the stairs you
37. know with the buggy, all the shopping and B. Being pregnant
38. now I still have to do it now there's no one that can really help
39. me so and it like 4,5 floors with stairs up so like one time I
40. actually had to leave her in like the flat so I could run further
41. down because now I'm like just getting really like bad back pains
42. so that's not exactly helping so it's a bit of a struggle. I just wish,
43. no offence, I wouldn't change her for the world now I know we do
44. use precautions but obviously and um, I just wish now that we'd
45. actually you know been a bit more careful, if I had the chance to
46. go back I probably would cuz I've basically got nothing, a lot with
47. my mums boyfriend being really nasty, living on the streets and
48. this moving. I think that's why she's a bit mummified now
49. because we've been on the move all the time and I've been living
50. at that place since last July and that's the only time you know
51. she's actually known it as hers. I just wished we'd have waited.
52. But it's a bit, a bit sorted out now, I'm hoping to exchange or
53. something but not many people want a top floor

This extract tells us about Hayley's feelings about motherhood, in which she describes the practical and physical effects of living in this environment to set the scene for her next regret – that she hadn't waited before having her first child and then conceiving again (line 74). This is a difficult thing for Hayley to say. This can be demonstrated by

analysing the way in which she does so. She begins by making a wish. Instead of saying the wish immediately she prefaces this with the words “no offence.” She feels therefore, that the statement may offend me and/or that she finds it offensive. This means that Hayley constructs the idea of her wish, irrespective of any circumstances, as being offensive. She further softens the impact of her wish by expressing her love for her daughter using a commonly used phrase (line 72 “I wouldn’t change her for the world now). Although at this point Hayley still has not actually expressed her wish, she then feels the need to reposition herself by saying (line 73) “I know we use precautions” so as to position herself again as a responsible/good person. She continues by reiterating what she said earlier but softening its impact with the use of the word “probably” (line 75). Finally she states her wish “I just wish now that we’d actually you know been a bit more careful, if I had the chance to go back I probably would.” She completes this statement by justifying it in terms of what she constructs herself as having – “nothing” (line 75). This is reinforced in practical terms in the following statement (line 76). Having taken such pains to bring herself to make such a difficult statement she repeats it, much more clearly and explicitly: “I just wished we’d have waited.” The next statement seems to be an attempt to soften the impact of the previous one, upon herself as she seeks to reassure herself the situation is improving. The conjoiner “but” tells us that it doesn’t carry the weight of the first half of the sentence and that therefore, she doesn’t fully accept this.

Hayley's feelings of ambivalence about her situation are clear. Yet she finds it unacceptable to say so. She describes a situation in which she finds it difficult to cope with the activities of daily living from a practical and physical perspective. She expresses her love for her daughter in this extract in the interview, and at other points. Yet, she does not find it easy to say to me that she sometimes regrets her position.

It is important to recognise that maternal ambivalence is not confined to mothers of children resulting from unintended pregnancies. It can also be an issue for those who positively chose to become a mother. From some perspectives the feelings may then be constructed as less acceptable given that the mother feels that as she wanted and planned the baby she has less “right” to feel any “negative” feelings about her situation.

During this session I have used data taken from interviews with young mothers to illustrate how they construct some of their experiences. In particular I have focused upon their internalisation of the Good-Bad mother binary that informs and exacerbates their experiences of maternal ambivalence. There remains much to discuss, a process I look forward to but for now I would like to conclude with the words of one young mother who in describing her understanding of people's perceptions of young mothers said "I wish they'd ask instead of just judging first."

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