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Socially Constructed Teen Motherhood: A Review

Marc Fonda

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, and Western University, Marc.Fonda@aadnc.gc.ca

Rachel Eni

University of Manitoba, Rachel.Eni@ad.umanitoba.ca

Eric Guimond

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, and Western University, Eric.Guimond@aadnc-aandc.gc.ca

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Abstract

This article reviews literature on the gradual construction of teenage pregnancy as a social issue in North America. It shows how teen motherhood emerged not as an issue unto itself, but as a microcosm of numerous, closely intertwined phenomena including: the evolution of Western views on human sexuality and gender roles; the place of religious values in society; and the emergence of various modern technologies, the social and medical sciences, and how such disciplines view childhood, motherhood, and women in society. In particular, it shows that even as teen pregnancy is today viewed primarily through public health and/or socioeconomic lenses, it has never been completely divorced from its original construction – as an indicator of failure to adhere to social, religious, and moral values. The article closes with an informal content analysis of several First Nations-related documents that highlight both similarities and differences to the non-Aboriginal perspective.

French Abstract

CONSTRUCTION SOCIALE DE LA MATERNITÉ À L'ADOLESCENCE : UN EXAMEN

Marc Fonda

Affaires autochtones et Développement du Nord Canada
et Université Western

Rachel Eni

Université du Manitoba

Eric Guimond

Affaires autochtones et Développement du Nord Canada
et Université Western

Résumé

Cet article examine la documentation sur la construction graduelle de la grossesse à l'adolescence en tant que « problème » social en Amérique du Nord. Il montre la façon dont la grossesse à l'adolescence est devenue non pas une question en soi, mais un microcosme de nombreux phénomènes étroitement liés, dont : l'évolution des points de vue occidentaux sur la sexualité humaine et les rôles des sexes; la place des valeurs religieuses dans la société; l'émergence de diverses technologies modernes ainsi que des sciences sociales et médicales, et le regard que ces disciplines portent sur l'enfance et la maternité. Plus particulièrement, nous constatons à quel point, même si la grossesse à l'adolescence est surtout abordée aujourd'hui d'un point de vue socioéconomique et de santé publique, elle n'a jamais complètement été séparée de sa construction initiale, c'est à dire comme indicateur de non respect des valeurs sociales, religieuses et morales.

Spanish Abstract

EXAMEN DE LA MATERNIDAD ADOLESCENTE DEFINIDA POR LA SOCIEDAD

Marc Fonda

Ministerio de Asuntos Indígenas y del Norte de Canadá
y Universidad Western

Rachel Eni
Universidad de Manitoba

Eric Guimond
Ministerio de Asuntos Indígenas y del Norte de Canadá
y Universidad Western

Resumen

En este artículo se examina la documentación sobre la interpretación gradual de los embarazos de las adolescentes como un 'problema' social en América del Norte. En él se muestra cómo los embarazos de las adolescentes surgieron no como una cuestión en sí, sino como un microcosmos de numerosos fenómenos estrechamente ligados entre sí, como: la evolución en Occidente de los puntos de vista sobre la sexualidad humana y los roles establecidos en función del sexo; el lugar de los valores religiosos en la sociedad; y la aparición de diversas tecnologías y de las ciencias sociales y médicas modernas y la manera en la que estas disciplinas ven la infancia y la maternidad. De manera concreta, nos damos cuenta de que, aunque los embarazos de adolescentes se ven principalmente en la actualidad desde una perspectiva socioeconómica y de salud, nunca se han distanciado de su interpretación original, esto es, como un indicador de no conformidad con los valores sociales, religiosos o morales.

Keywords

social construction, teenage pregnancy, gender roles, sexuality, religion, morality, Aboriginal

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Socially Constructed Teen Motherhood: A Review

Is teenage motherhood an issue? The answer to this question is “it depends.” It depends on whom you speak to, where you are coming from, and where you are located in history and the world. For example, teen motherhood is an issue in the USA¹. In 1976, the Alan Guttmacher Institute (1976) declared it an epidemic in the report “Eleven Million Teenagers: What Can be Done About the Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancies in the United States?” Suddenly, there was a growing moral alarm in the USA, where there was no previous problem. This sense of alarm spread to only a few English-speaking countries, excluding Canada (Patterson, 2004). Unlike extreme poverty, famine, or protection against infectious disease, teen motherhood is not viewed uniformly around the world as an issue worth debating in the public sphere (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 1999). While it is not clearly established in the existing literature that teenage motherhood in First Nations communities is an issue, there are indications that it may be perceived as an issue. To be sure, there have always been instances of teenage girls becoming mothers, but until the Alan Guttmacher (1976) report, teenage motherhood was not considered a problem. Rather, the focus was on children born out of wedlock (Linders & Bogard, 2004), resulting in a child not receiving the support of both the mother and father.

What happened to make the historically common event of young women having children a moral concern? The short answer is that it was a socially constructed. Statements such as those made by the Alan Guttmacher (1976) report helped bring about a dramatic change to social understandings regarding the fact that young women often got pregnant before they were 20 years of age. People started to see this fact differently. This led to a cycle of research, reporting, and institutional and social claims that further supported this new view.

For this reason, this article briefly reviews the history of issue making of teen motherhood. It first focuses on the gradual construction of teen motherhood as a social “problem” in North America. It traces how teen motherhood was never completely divorced from its original construction - as an indicator of a failure to adhere to social, religious, and moral values. After reviewing the history of claims made in regard to teen motherhood, we then look at the notion of social construction and how it relates to teen motherhood. We then deconstruct the modern ideal of the child-parent-expert nexus and provide a brief critique of the European-based developmentalist model. What follows is an informal content analysis of technical papers and program descriptions from national First Nations organizations and government programs, respectively, to draw a very preliminary picture of how some First Nations individuals and groups view teen motherhood. This approach is used because there is a relative dearth of available literature on First Nations teen motherhood, making it difficult to document what precisely it is that First Nations persons and organizations think about teen motherhood within their communities.

Any examination of the issues of fertility and sexual behaviour in First Nations communities should be undertaken with respect, humility, and deep awareness of how teen motherhood has come to be an issue

¹ There is no intention to conflate the “approach to” and “instance of” teen motherhood in the USA as compared to Canada in this report. Rather, although there is some Canadian literature on this topic, we acknowledge the information limitations in Canada when compared to the USA, where data is much more abundant and can be taken to reflect the situation in Canada to some degree. More importantly, however, the relative paucity of literature on teenage motherhood in the First Nations context makes it very difficult at this time to develop a parallel argument that investigates the development of First Nations views regarding teen motherhood.

of concern in mainstream society and whether its current formulation in the public discourse is free from prejudice and misinformation when viewing First Nations teen motherhood. This article is not tied to a negative moral perspective about teen motherhood. Rather, the main focus is on examining the relationship between teen motherhood and the well-being of young mothers, their children, families, and communities.

Reviewing the Modern European History of Early Parenting

Before urbanization and industrialization, the fact that young women under 20 years of age had children was not an issue in North America. It was the social norm (Linders & Bogard, 2004). What was an issue was when children were born “illegitimately;” that is, out of wedlock and without the support of both mother and father. With religion playing a central role in terms of setting norms, values, and controls, sexual activity outside of marriage and illegitimate births were considered sinful. At that time, pregnant teens had two choices: marriage or ostracization. The vast majority chose to marry (Addleson, 1999; Harari & Vinovskis, 1993).

By the second half of the 1700s, premarital conception, in what would become the USA, increased. This increase paralleled a steady and visible erosion of church and civil opposition to premarital sexual activity (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993; see also Rhode, 1993). This changed again in the early 1800s when there was a substantial decrease in premarital births. By the Civil War, there was an extension of adolescence as a lengthy period of financial dependence. The education of youth became a primary goal as American society became more urbanized (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993). However, at that time, a double standard was introduced in white, middle class North American society: education and labour force participation was reserved for men. This resulted in a situation where young, unwed, and pregnant women had limited means to support a family alone, given the difficulties in obtaining an education and the lack of employment opportunities (Addleson, 1999; Patterson, 2004; Rhode, 1993).

By the early 1900s, premarital sex re-emerged as a part of courtship patterns as the previous century’s moral standards and religiosity diminished and legal doctrine followed suit. In the 1920s, premarital intercourse rates jumped significantly. However, the Depression era of the 1930s showed the lowest rate of teen pregnancies during the twentieth century with fertility rates declining for all age groups (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993). Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin’s (1948) study found that 50 percent of American women and 90 percent of men had engaged in premarital sex. But the teenage pregnancy rate remained low.

The twentieth century, in general, can be characterized as an era of a declining rate of births for teenage mothers, smaller families, and later marriages. There is the exception: the baby boom period in the 1950s where the USA temporarily changed course and fertility went up dramatically, including the rate of teen pregnancies, which peaked at 97.3 per 1000 for women aged 15 to 19 in 1957 (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993). Regardless, the dominant culture retained strong sanctions against out of wedlock births. Polls in the 1950s and 1960s show that only 25 percent of Americans approved of premarital intercourse (Rhode, 1993). In 1957, teenage motherhood was not seen as much of a problem because marriage was still considered an adequate solution. However, in the 1960s, this began to change due to alterations to women’s familial roles and labour force participation, as well as amendments to programs

providing support to families with dependent children. Consequently, at that time, many unwed mothers made the decision to keep their children (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993).

The 1970s are widely known as a period of significant social change in the Western world. During this decade, the rate of American non-marital childbearing increased steadily, while rates of marital childbearing among adolescents declined (by some 74% between 1970 and 1984). Education became even more important as high school diplomas became essential for meaningful employment (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993).

Starting in 1976, the role of public interest groups in exacerbating the situation cannot be overstated. The Alan Guttmacher Institute's "epidemic of teen pregnancy" was one starting point. Other interest groups soon joined. They did so in the context of a deep cultural ambivalence regarding teen sexuality. Sex is often presented as a goal unto itself in popular culture, on the one hand; while on the other, there is little evidence of wide-spread parent-child discussions of its risks or responsible contraceptive behaviour in religious American family life (Regnerus, 2007; Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, 2003). Religious families are known to use such opportunities to reinforce moral values, as opposed to providing information about healthy sex and birth control (Regnerus et al., 2003). At the same time, there has been increasing information made available in public educational programs and through health messaging, which has been contentious for many religious Americans (Moore, 1987).

Before moving on to the next section, it is important to take a brief look at how American people viewed teen pregnancy among its ethnic and cultural populations. This is important because it illustrates a further double-standard in the American teen motherhood debate: the perception of sexual permissiveness as a cultural preference in ethnic populations persists and has a significant bearing on how teen motherhood is perceived by mainstream society with respect to such populations. Sexual norms for American women of colour evolved out of different cultural traditions and different sociological constraints (Rhode, 1993). These sorts of perspectives persist today and tend to result in viewing teen motherhood among black peoples as a cultural preference. In contrast, pregnant middle and upper class white teens tend to be pathologized as psychologically and socially deviant (Patterson, 2004; Phoenix, 1993).

Social Construction as a Form of Critique

Social constructionism is a sociological theory of knowledge that examines how cultural and social responses develop in social contexts. A social construct can be said to be a concept or practice that is a creation of a particular group or subgroup (Patterson, 2004). One of the major methods of social constructionism is to "deconstruct" how people and groups participate in the creation of their perceived reality (Hacking, 1999a; Macleod, 2001). This includes asking questions about the very assumptions a society holds about the way the world is organized, examining how such assumptions are created, institutionalized, and made "traditional." Deconstruction could be said to be a critique of a social construction designed to point out its ideational roots with the goal of demonstrating that its view on a topic is rarely a reflection of naturally occurring phenomena, but rather a cultural interpretation thereof. An examination of the contemporary Western social construction of teen motherhood is considered here because there is not much official documentation on teen motherhood produced by First Nations voices. Because there is so little written about teen motherhood in First Nations, there is little choice but

to view the debate in the larger North American social context in which First Nations are located and with which they interact. This exercise provides a glimpse into the ideational environment on teenage motherhood that surrounds First Nations in Canada.

One of the first critiques of teenage pregnancy as a socially constructed category appeared four years after the Alan Guttmacher Institute's report (see Murcott, 1980). Since then, there have been several other critiques of the social construction of teenage motherhood, including Wong and Checkland's (1999) *Teen Pregnancy and Parenting: Social and Ethical Issues*, which initiated a Canadian debate on this topic to accompany that in the USA. Among other interesting chapters, Wong and Checkland's volume includes what might be considered an important overview of social construction as a method written by Ian Hacking. Hacking (1999b) is skeptical of such critiques because he thinks everything is socially constructed. Despite his scepticism, Hacking (1999a) proceeds to characterize the method in light of teenage motherhood. In the following section, Hacking's (1999a, 1999b) elaboration on the methods and approaches employed by social constructionists is briefly outlined. This is followed by some responses to Hacking's dismissal of critically viewing teen motherhood as socially constructed.

Hacking (1999b) finds the roots of social constructionism in a doctrine called linguistic idealism, which is descended from Berkley's idealism. Hacking (1999a) noted that there are two halves to social constructionism. The first looks at the historical and material conditions that took place making an idea appear as it does. The second follows upon the first and also states that the idea in question is not inevitable. The case of "teenage pregnancy," Hacking concludes, is as "natural" a category as there possibly could be. In his analysis, saying that teen pregnancy is socially constructed makes sense but is not very useful:

What it means is that the very idea of teenage pregnancy is one that comes into being, in certain historical circumstances, and the practices, institutions, and experiences are the product of those circumstances. It means that the idea of teenage pregnancy is not an inevitable one, a mere description of the state of certain young women, but rather a label used both to identify, advise, and control... (Hacking, 1999a, p. 80)

For Hacking (1999b), social construction claims are not always clear about precisely what is inevitable or what should be removed. What he is trying to get at is the subtle distinction that there need not always be a conflict between saying a thing is "socially constructed" and saying it is "real". Rather, it is our culturally conditioned *ideas* of things that are not contingent on the nature of the things in question. Such ideas exist within a matrix of social meanings, which act to change the way persons see themselves and others see them. Thus, in the context of teenage motherhood, it is not the fact that teenage women become mothers that is socially constructed but rather it is about the invention of a new "class" of young women that are ascribed a series of challenges accompanying early parenting.

In response to Hacking, Wong and Checkland (1999), note that the phrase "teenage pregnancy" seems like an objective description of pregnancies for women 13 to 19 years of age and has a "natural ring" to it. However, as seen above, the phrase emerged in the 1970s. Before then, people used categories of illegitimacy and unwed mothers. This is not a question of interchangeable labels for the "same" thing: "the categories of 'unwed mothers' and 'teenaged mothers' are very different ways of describing and gaining knowledge of the events" (p. 273; see also Patterson, 2004).

For Wong and Checkland (1999), it is a question of transferring the concept out of the realm of morality, where it originated, and turning it into technical problems with new categories for study and “resolution” by the medical sciences, the social sciences and the public health enterprise. It is not that the moral claims are eliminated in the process, but they are displaced and transformed. It is possible to see this differently than Wong and Checkland. This may be a case in which one set of objections is overlaid by a second set. That is, the issue of illegitimacy, the moral threats to “traditional” family structures, and the fear of subversion of religious and patriarchal authority have not gone away. Rather, they have been supplemented and made secondary (for some) by issues of socio-economic, health, and psychological burdens put on the teen mother, her parents, and child.

Wong and Checkland’s (1999) next point looks at the fundamental practice of “kind-making” in the sciences. The making of kinds and the identification of people as belonging to certain kinds has the effect of changing how people see themselves. Such “kinds” influence the persons it defines and those doing the defining, resulting in a feedback loop that changes how researchers see their subjects. Wong and Checkland (1999) argued that kind-making is more complex in the case of teenage pregnancy than Hacking allows and is in need of socio-political analysis.

The characteristics and categories of teenage pregnancy reflect the expectations of dominant culture and are determined by specific modes of questioning that emerged at a specific historical and social juncture. They are not imaginary findings, but they do set up expectations of what it means to be a “normal” adolescent (Macleod, 2001; Murcott, 1980). Once the nomenclature turns to issues of normality, we find accompanying connotations of deviance, sickness, or abnormality – all of which can be seen as an extension of the Christian moral discourse regarding out of wedlock, or “illegitimate,” child-bearing.

This pathologization of the unmarried teen mother de-emphasized, but did not eliminate, the “illegitimate” act of premarital sex. It transformed pregnant teenagers into a public health and social problem, where sexual permissiveness is seen more as a symptom of socio-psychological problems and less as a sign of immoral character. In the end, the present way of talking about teen motherhood subjects contemporary young women to entirely different sets of practices and solutions than before. Now, they are seen as having deviated from the “natural” order of human development and that such deviation may lead to economic, social, and psychological problems (Macleod, 2001; Murcott, 1980). Teen motherhood is now more of a technical issue: an error in timing and interruption of psychological development and social position rather than a moral transgression.

This pathologized discourse on teen pregnancy in general includes a wider target population than that of the “fallen woman.” It now includes all adolescent girls, who are not pregnant but are seen as “at risk” of becoming so. The plethora of North American psychological and sociological studies on teen motherhood expanded its conceptual framework to include behaviours that are also classified as normal or deviant. In this context, Patterson (2004) concluded that motherhood is a social, rather than a natural category. And social constructionist critiques, contra Hacking (1999a, 1999b), illustrate that dominant views on motherhood and types of mothers are neither fixed nor inevitable.

A further consideration alluded to earlier is that social science explanations for teenage motherhood were not applied to all unwed mothers in the same way. Rather, it is fractured along racial and class lines. It is only the white, middle and upper class teen mothers who were thought to be emotionally troubled.

Unwed pregnancy for teenaged black women is still often seen as a sign of deep cultural or racial pathology in the USA (Adler & Tschann, 1999; Macleod, 2001; Patterson, 2004; Phoenix, 1999). This is an important consideration for our purposes given that Canadian mainstream society often shares similar “myths” of Aboriginal Canadians.

A third consideration addresses the American political culture’s view on welfare programs. When speaking about the belief that teen motherhood is at the heart of the problem of welfare dependency, Pearce (1993) stated, “the real issue behind the relation between teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency is single parenting – in other words, mothers living and surviving economically without men” (p. 52; see also Kelly, 1999). Additionally, Patterson (2004) points out that the moral alarm in the late 1970s and 1980s served a historically specific set of conservative political interests in the USA. During this period, family values were co-opted by conservative politicians who argued that social life, in general, was endangered by changing patterns of family formation. Consequently, conservative American politicians cut welfare entitlements and limited access to contraceptives in the name of the family (see also Lawson & Rhode, 1993).

This last point suggests that the (social) science discourse may not be as immune from moral discourse as supposed. It is possible that a new kind of person has emerged from the hybridization of these two sets of discourses, but most people are not trained in the social or natural sciences and have more exposure to theological and moral views on social issues. What can be seen here then is the interaction of a number of views and ideologies resulting in the over-determination of teen motherhood as a social problem. The next section will address this further by looking at how discourses, or social scripts, such as ideals of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and the power relations represented by categories like “experts” vs. “children” have further complicated the situation for teenage mothers.

Deconstructing the Ideals of the Child, Parent, and Expert

The dynamics leading to social ideals of good and bad motherhood are also found in European developmentalist views on adolescence. Anne Murcott (1980) was one of the first sociologists to examine teenage pregnancy as a social construction by addressing legitimacy. Legitimacy, in this context, has to do with the acceptability of conception. It is a question of age and control. For instance, Patterson (2004) noted that the idea of teen mothers being trapped in a culture of dependency mirrors the situation of traditional nuclear families, where the mother is economically dependent on the husband (See also Kelly, 1999; Pearce, 1993). Dependency is one of several characteristics invoked by the modern view on adolescence. Because adolescents are in transition between childhood and adulthood, they are seen as dependent due to their immaturity and inability to support themselves (Macleod, 2001; Murcott, 1980).

This developmentalist framework on adolescence has been more or less accepted throughout the world, insofar as it has adopted Western psychological and social paradigms. But things change: there is a growing body of literature that problematizes this notion of childhood and, by implication, adolescence. Childhood is not a timeless, transcultural phenomenon. It is best seen as the product of a number of cultural processes and modernist ideals that have come to define a specific life stage as different from others (Macleod, 2001). In modern times, being a child or adolescent is not so much being a potential adult as it is belonging to very separate category (Murcott, 1980). In this view, teen motherhood is a

problem because it is a contradiction in terms: child and adult are exclusive categories and a child, thus, cannot beget a child (Macleod, 2001; Murcott, 1980; Phoenix, 1993).

When a teenager becomes pregnant she becomes a “deviant” adult (Macleod, 2001) or, for that matter, a “deviant” child. Teen pregnancy, thus, brings to attention not only the transgression of the child/adult boundaries, but also her sexuality, which further emphasizes the teen mother’s existence on the margins of society. If these observations hold, then teen motherhood constitutes an affront to both moral and developmental categories (cf., Caragata, 1999; Lawson, 1993). In cases where social structures rest on grave paradoxes, exaggerated avoidances develop. One might see the American moral outcry surrounding teen motherhood as an expression of this phenomenon. Certainly, what we have learned to this point supports this view that there is an over-determination of teenage motherhood as a problem (MacIntyre & Cunningham-Burley, 1993).

This paradox has left the field open for the professionalization of the construct of childhood, where experts define the characteristics of youth and explain their behaviour using developmental language. Thus, the teen mother is placed in a paradoxical situation. She is subjected to a developmental blueprint, where she supposedly progresses through invariable stages of moral and cognitive development, but it is this very process that renders her vulnerable. It puts her at risk for the “unnatural” event of teen motherhood. Once having conceived, her developmental stage is used to pathologize her *ability* to mother (Macleod, 2001). Considering the influence that the developmentalist model has had on teen motherhood, it is important to offer a critique of developmentalism.

A Critique of the European Developmentalist Model

By way of a conclusion to the previous section, what follows is a critique of the developmentalist model. Developmentalist approaches to psychology and social work are influenced by the medical sciences, which can be problematic. From a medical science perspective, anything deemed abnormal is seen to be pathological and in need of cure (Hillman, 1964, 1972, 1975a). In addition, in the medical sciences, the body is seen to be a mechanical wonder (Hillman, 1972). This perspective encourages a view of the body as one that functions like a machine, meaning that when one of its parts breaks down, it should be removed and replaced (i.e., be cured in one way or another) (Hillman, 1964).

In psychology, this medical influence historically resulted in various types of reactions to abnormal behavior, which have differed over time. From the viewpoint of developmental psychology, the image of the child is set up as an ideal and it is believed that what happens to it will affect the person for the rest of his or her life. Developmentalism may put too much emphasis on the child and adolescent as precious, delicate, and vulnerable. While it is true that children have these aspects, it is not all that characterizes them. What about their stubbornness or resilience to suggest two other possibilities? The result could be that a lot of adult memories and experiences that do not fit within the developmentalist picture of childhood are repressed, transformed, or otherwise altered and made inconsequential (Hillman & Ventura, 1992). Presumably, the developmentalist approach is one that sees the child as being closer to a natural state, in need of growth and civilizing. And this growth takes place under the tutelage of the expert (Hillman, 1975b).

Such a model of growth is a Western cultural preference that often butts heads with other cultures and their views on childhood and adolescence. But one cannot fully understand adolescents without first

studying the culture(s) in which they are embedded. Different cultures afford different levels of autonomy, as well as different types of social roles and responsibilities. For instance, in certain cultures adolescents are expected to contribute significantly to household and economic responsibilities (Lerner, Rosenberg, & Lerner, 2001). Additionally, different cultures tolerate different degrees of adolescent intimacy. Some expect adolescence sexual expression and allow it, while others attempt to suppress it. Finally, the notion of a transition from childhood to adulthood varies drastically by culture. In Western countries, for instance, it can take nearly a decade or two; in other cultures, the transition – often in the form of an initiation ceremony, which are maintained in or being revived by many First Nations cultures – may be over in a few days. Additionally, such transitions can vary by gender. All this underscores the point that adolescence, like motherhood (early or not), is a social construct: it is shaped differently depending on the cultural and social context and may be enforced more by social and cultural practices than by biological change.

Is First Nations Teen Motherhood an Issue?

This section attempts to see if there is a difference in how First Nations view teenage motherhood as compared to mainstream Canada. This is a difficult goal to achieve because there is little research literature on teenage motherhood in the First Nations context. Additionally, there are a variety of histories, cultures, geographies, and other considerations that make it difficult to capture all the different views on teen pregnancy within First Nations. With these challenges in mind, we applied an informal content analysis to a small group of documents to get a glimpse of how First Nations perceive teenage pregnancy, the role of experts, and other related themes discussed above. Content analyses is an accepted methodology in the human sciences that quantifies the presence of certain words, phrases, concepts, themes, or characters within texts or a set of texts in order to make inferences about messages within the text and how they affect the reader's understanding of the subject at hand and, indeed, within the general culture and time in which they originate (Busha & Harter, 1980).

In the following analysis, the goal was not to count reports on the topic but, rather, to see if and to what extent: (a) the texts reviewed include discussions of the themes identified above, and (b) if they might demonstrate a difference in approach to teen motherhood. In other words, the goal is to reveal similarities and differences in how mainstream Canadian society and First Nations view early motherhood and the associated risks. This exercise might also encourage those concerned to ask whether teen motherhood in First Nations has not received much attention to date because it is a women's issue in general and not necessarily a First Nations' community issue in specific.

The sample of documents discussed below was derived from a process by which the authors identified technical articles or program statements from selected organizations, some Aboriginal, some Canadian government, and one international. This resulted in nine technical papers (Anderson, 2002; Archibald, 2004; Bannister & Begoray, 2006; Brown, et al., 2007; Hill, 2003; National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO], 2008; Ordolis, 2007; Redding, Kmetc, & Gideon, 2007; Robbins, 2008), one masters' thesis (Davis, 2005), descriptions of two federal government programs (Health Canada, 2007; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008) designed to encourage and support to First Nations' participation on issues related to youth and maternal health. The authors identified relevant sections in each document related to a limited number of themes, such as developmentalism, experts (social

scientific, parental, and elders), disparities such as risks of poor socio-economic and health outcomes for teen parents, statements of cultural differences or supports for the transmission of traditional culture, and deviance (including the outcomes of various aspects of the colonial legacy). A brief analysis of the findings follows.

With respect to the developmentalist view, statements were found that reflected the following familiar themes: due to early menstruation, children are ready biologically but not yet emotionally; adolescents are immature, their identities are in formation; a medicalized view of health and development; youth are excluded from decision making; there is a need to strengthen personal attributes of adolescents; use of phrases like “fixing,” “making better,” and ensuring “correct behaviour” among adolescents; and the idea that adolescents are in need of the guidance of experts, such as Elders.

In virtually all of the documents reviewed strong statements about “cultural differences” and calls for “programming and policies that are culturally sensitive” or assist in “transmitting cultural knowledge” were found. Moreover, the analysis identified different developmental models that are derived from First Nations’ cultures that are, to some extent, close to the social scientific model discussed above. With respect to the category “expert,” we found references to parents and Elders as role models and important figures in the development of children. There was no discussion of the social scientist or medical practitioner and other professions as experts in these documents. However, these documents were often authored by “experts,” who decided which risks to report and how to do so. There is also the theme of adolescent deviance, which included the effects of colonialism (e.g., intergenerational trauma, cultural loss, racism, loss of traditional life styles). Such themes appear in almost all the documents reviewed.

From these findings, it is possible to conclude that First Nations’ social understandings of teen motherhood share several of the scripts outlined in the above discussion on the social construction of teen motherhood. However, they also show a distinct and strong cultural foundation not found in European-based constructions. This is to say that the approach to teen motherhood seems to be both similar and different at the same time. What needs to be mentioned here is that within Aboriginal discourses the child is seen as being independent of the factors associated with his or her birth. In other words, while the mother may have a history of unacceptable behaviour, it is not automatically assumed that her child will be the same. In Western discourses, in contrast, the child is seen as a product of the young mother’s shortcomings and thus shares with the mother these “developmental problems.” This conflation – this inability to see the child as his or her own spirit, being, as a gift from the Creator – is very different in Aboriginal texts. Here, no moral stigma is necessarily attributed to the children of young mothers. Although in such texts pregnancy can be discussed in terms of “more ready” or “less ready” with respect to timing, there is an emphasis on the child being always welcome in the world and community.

Conclusion

When a teen’s community, culture, and nation are said to be dysfunctional (as a result of colonization and historical trauma) and in deficit (as per poor social economic and health outcomes), there is a risk that mainstream views on First Nations teenage mothers are made that much more negative through conflation. Consequently, the challenges and difficulties faced by First Nations teen mothers risk being disregarded by many persons because they may see teen motherhood as a fact of First Nations’ cultures,

despite the recognition that children are the future of Canada's First Nations and an important pillar to building the future of Canada.

The purpose of this paper was to critically review the development of teen motherhood as a social issue in North America. In doing so, it discussed how teen motherhood has been socially constructed as an issue that is viewed significantly differently than it was previous the late 1970s. The paper outlined the changes in North American acceptance or disapproval of adolescent sexuality, the historical change of focus from illegitimate births to unmarried mothers to one of lone teenage mothers understood to be pathologically incapable of tending to themselves and their children. What we found is an over-determination of the issue resulting in social avoidance. Also critiqued is how the contemporary view on teenage mothers reflects modern Western beliefs regarding childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and how this is deeply gendered. Social and cultural structures define what is considered "normal" adolescent behaviour. It recognized that the transition from moral sanctions to sanctions belonging to the health and social sciences were not mutually exclusive, but that the former set of concerns (moral transgression) where overlaid with the latter, newer set of concerns (economic, health, and psychosocial). The paper closed with a reporting on a brief and informal content analysis of a small set of documents reflecting First Nations perspectives on childhood, early parenting, and social scientific views. The content analysis helped to show that, while many First Nations hold similar views as Western cultures on women, adolescents, childhood, and motherhood, they also demonstrate significant differences with regard to supporting culturally appropriate ways to express and support teenage motherhood.

In closing, the authors wish to reiterate and emphasize that this article emerged from the context in which, until very recently, there has been little discussion in First Nations research on the understanding of teenage motherhood. Rather than attempting to establish that teenage motherhood in First Nations communities is or could be an issue, this article seeks to help initiate discussions about conditions facing First Nations teenage mothers without presenting a negative moral perspective. The main focus of any ensuing discussions should be on the well-being of First Nation teenage mothers, their children, families, and communities.

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