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Reconceiving "young motherhood"

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This chapter explores the understanding of 'young motherhood' for the millennial, and post-millennial 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' seminal work in the UK entitled 'Young Mothers' was specifically with teenage mothers. Her work marked the early critique of much ensuing negative policy and media attention toward teenage pregnancy and parenthood which extended across the latter decades of the 20th 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 is noticeable that the term 'teen' mother has been increasingly replaced with 'young' mother in policy and media. The word 'young' brings with it a less specific age parameter which 'teen' neatly contained, and can be seen used with reference to mothers up to their late 20s. The timing of first motherhood in western nations has been delayed in recent decades due to changes in personal life-goals and societal expectations. Education has been extended, and participation in the workforce and financial security is expected before starting a family. Such a preparatory trajectory may continue until the late 20s, hence motherhood before these years is increasingly viewed as 'early'. As a consequence, socio-political expectations are that women will control their fertility until socio-economic 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 25 (such as the Universal Credit welfare payment in the UK with age banded amounts); normalized in general public perception, seen in media that refer to mothers in their 20s as young (Kale, Benson); and internalised into women's expectations for self, for example pregnancy being seen as 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 from 35 years (Yoldemir 240). Therefore, there remains a very narrow window where it is deemed appropriate, and indeed possible, for women to have children. Such 'governmentality,' (whereby citizens are controlled through myriad means, political, policy, social expectations and personal goals), favours and promotes certain ways of being and problematises those outside this way of being. Teen mothers have consistently been 'othered' over recent decades, and now it seems this is being extended to mothers in their 20s.

There is, however, an alternative view to this critical view of the term 'young mother'. Many women who begin motherhood in the teenage years prefer and appropriate the 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 the understanding or expectation therein. This chapter considers the genealogy of this evolving terminology, and the meaning and

consequence for younger women's pregnancy and parenting decisions in the early 21st Century.

Marking out 'young mothers' as a distinctive group is one of the latest social turns in western cultures regarding who is (and therefore, who is not) *fit to parent*. Pam Alldred discusses the concept of fitness to parent. She observes how families that are viewed as different are more likely to be seen by authority as problematic. Such families are pathologised and are therefore subject to increased scrutiny. She discusses how 'fitness to parent' is powerful as a moral discourse, yet it 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 beginning with the economic, turn to moral, then developmental and return to the economic by the end of the century. The economic re-turn persists in the early 21st century.

In the early 20th 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 childbearing of the lower classes, or, similar to recent neoliberal discourses of avoiding social exclusion, in improving economic circumstance before starting a family. In the mid 20th Century focus turned to marriage 'out of wedlock', a religious moral turn. Unmarried young mothers-to-be were often sent away by their own families or communities through 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 over-represented 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. Therefore single motherhood became more visible. It was a growth in women's employment rather than financial welfare which 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 state because the nuclear family, where it is assumed there is one or more working parents, makes no financial demands on the state (Fraser 591). Teenage mothers are less likely to be married, or even co-habit with their partner. Although this does not necessarily mean that they are single. There are many ways of being family, or growing as a family, that are perhaps more prevalent for younger parents, but evident at any age. Supportive extended family practices have been observed to both enable a teenaged parent's growth in parenthood, and highlights 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. For example, an inter-generational approach to family where the parenting teenager remained with her family (Furstenberg 64, SmithBattle 32); a 'visiting union', a couple, unmarried and living in separate households but committed to the relationship, and any children from the relationship (Clark 155); or 'living apart together', a family model observed by Duncan (589). None of the young mothers in my study were living with their partner, although they went to great lengths to

communicate how he was involved and committed to his young family. For example, one young mother states: '*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'* (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 social views of teenage motherhood. Such theory suggested normative linear progression through psycho-social 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 parenthood. Children are viewed as 'socialisation projects' in preparation for future social and economic participation in society (Mayall 270). As more knowledge is deemed necessary before participation in the workforce, the child, adolescent, and now young adult is increasingly 'scholarised' (Qvortrup 4). Currently, in the 2020s 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. This is a discourse that sees young people 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, motherhood in the teens and early 20s becomes 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…'*. Although this appeared to be more of a rite of passage to adulthood and autonomous decision-making, rather 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', previously thought to occur in the teenage years, continues into the 20s (Cohen, Breiner & 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 might be translated into not making significant life decisions, such as having children, until cognitive control is attained. However, an alternative view is that this represents a life-course understanding of brain development rather than reserving certain life decisions to specific ages. As we can see, definitions of adolescence are ephemeral. Timing and length of adolescence has varied historically and varies 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, independent role 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 a 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, rebuilding of adversarial relationships with parents, and re-assessment of romantic relationships. They demonstrated a reflexivity through motherhood that also led to re-engagement with further education, the workplace and career plans. 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'.* Although this trajectory was not always easy due to the inflexibilty 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, political focus turned from single motherhood to age. Charles Murray, American political scientist, brought moral, economic and developmental discourses regarding 'fitness to parent' together by suggesting that *young* women who have *'illegitimate'* children and become dependent on the state lack personal responsibility because they willingly have children and remain unmarried, are *unwilling to work*, become *inappropriately sexually active* at an early age and *rely on welfare* that cost tax-payer's money. His solution was the reconstitution of the nuclear family and the re-assertion of the role of the father within it (Murray 23-52). Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister in the UK, influenced by Murray's thinking took a similar stance. She stated that withdrawing welfare benefits was the only way to re-establish the traditional norms of married parenthood; and withdrawing the 'reward' would dis-incentivise single parenting (Hills 5). Teenaged parents are less likely than older parents to be married and living in a nuclear family arrangement, and more likely to be legitimately drawing on state benefits. This

firmly placed teenage motherhood in an economic discourse, viewed as undeserving of welfare support.

The economic discourse of teenaged parenthood in western countries continued across the end of the 20th into the early 21st century. In the UK, the New Labour government introduced a 10-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 their chances in the workplace. Despite the fact that many mothers, at all ages, combine motherhood and education, as well as many other roles such as carer, work, community group membership etc. A linear socialisation approach was very much apparent in this policy. Concerns in neo-liberal parlance were no longer couched in judgmental tropes of family breakdown and benefit dependence but marketed through the 'caring' discourse of helping teenage women reach their full potential and raise their aspirations (so long as this aspiration and potential was in education and work). The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy in the UK could be read as a reworking of familiar discourses from the early 20th century pertaining to 'responsible' parenthood, and the obligation toward being a financial contributing citizen. The assumption that motherhood hinders potential, fails to recognise the socio-cultural 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 as previously discussed is a catalyst for re-engagement 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 lap top and was telling me yeah (he needs) to go get a job...that he's on about getting a job, and going housing..'.

Such a singular and narrow life-path which 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 center around economics but not necessarily in the individualistic manner policy-makers presume. Economics are considered in a relational network such as maximizing on free childcare from grandparents whilst it is available (Mulder 64). Decisions may also be based on a realistic appraisal of 'career' opportunities, where parenthood, sooner rather than later, represents less loss of earnings as the young women are not yet established in the workplace (Phoenix 5), nor expect a highly-remunerated career trajectory. All the young women's in my study expressed worries, concerns and 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, amongst 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. Contrary to the dominant political exclusion narrative Phoenix' (249) work highlighted that teenage motherhood represents social inclusion for the young women. This inclusion comes through gaining a respected role in the local community as a mother. Early child-bearing is a logical response to family and cultural worlds that are largely invisible to middle class professionals (SmithBattle 88).

The socio-political assumption is that teenaged parenthood incurs poverty. Much emphasis has been placed on intergenerational teenage motherhood, and a cycle of poverty (Furstenberg, Levine & Brooks-Gunn 57). This faintly echoes the eugenics discourse from a hundred years earlier, regarding immaturity, risk for future generations, and undercurrents of controlling the fertility of the poor. However contrary to these assumptions research presents a counter-narrative whereby pre-existing socio-economic conditions account for the adverse effects of teen mothering. Poverty precedes, rather than leads to, teenage pregnancy and parenthood (SmithBattle 416). A 'poverty cycle' is not caused by nor perpetuated by teenage parenthood but by lack of socio-economic opportunity that spans generations. This brings broader socio-political responsibility into play to counter the effects of poverty such as work opportunities, minimum wages, employer responsibilities, social housing, infrastructure provision, and yes, welfare provision. Short-termism and meritiocratic politics prefers to locate 'the' solution in the individual rather than looking to wider social justice policy that would prevent and tackle the consequences of poverty. There is increasing political desire to mold citizens rather than tackle the conditions of their lives (Aldred and Fox 221). Lee SmithBattle, through her long-term engagement with teen mothers and their families in the US increasingly calls for a reduction in social inequities upstream as crucial in light of the grim reality that inequalities in income, wealth and opportunity grow ever wider (SmithBattle 93).

Public and internalized personal justifications for delaying motherhood often begin in the psychological yet end up in the socio-economic. From not being developmentally ready to not being financially ready. The psychological argument draws on biological scientific evidence but fails to recognize life-course 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 where getting on with motherhood is a realistic appraisal of life opportunities and does not represent the presumed failure to achieve potential in education and the workplace.

Nevertheless, it is this 'economic science' of young motherhood that is the most enduring moral discourse (Goncalves 201).. The good citizen is economically self-sufficient. It is this discourse that extends across women's lives, beyond the teenage years, as economic considerations are wielded to further judgement and covert control on women's fertility into their late 20s. For example, there are echoes of previous political moves to 'dis-incentivize' single and latterly young motherhood evident in current parameters around welfare payments. For example, needing to live with parents and be in education to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) payments in the US (Molborn and Jacobs 7) or a lower rate of Universal Credit for those 25 years and younger in the UK (Bekaert and Bradley 5). Also, state intervention in young parent's lives is increasingly legitimized. For example, in the UK, the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) (an intensive health-visiting programme for first time young mothers during pregnancy and with their child up to two years old) began in the UK in 2006 as a service for teenage mothers, then in 2015 was offered to mothers 25 years and younger, and now in 2021 the wording is simply 'first time young mums'. Although holistic in its approach one aim of the program is to facilitate the young mothers' return to education and work. Familiar suggestions regarding the supposed 'drain on public resources' is evident in the emphasis on the cost benefit for the state of participating in this programme and 'breaking the cycle of disadvantage'. Such policy and practice both fuels and compounds 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.

Historically, societal attempts to control the fertility of the '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 20th century has led to teenage mothers currently experiencing regular overt negative judgement from both professionals and public (Ellis-Sloan 8, Fearnley 73). Furthermore, mothers in their early twenties are now reporting experiences of being scrutinized and judged by society leading to poor self-esteem and post-natal depression, in ways that echo the experiences of teenage mothers (Whitley and Kirmayer 345). In addition, where 'teenage motherhood' has very clear boundaries, 'young motherhood' is a more elastic concept which can be stretched to fit different agendas. As such more mothers can potentially be infantilised, leaving them open to judgement regarding their reproductive decisions. The 'motherhood mandate' (Russo 143-153), whereby 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 women are increasingly silenced in a desire for pregnancy and motherhood outside of narrowing socio-political parameters (Bekaert 9). I have written about how teenage mothers were silenced in expressing their desire for pregnancy and motherhood through wanting to present as good citizens and adhering to the dominant narratives of pregnancy avoidance in the teenage years. They gave me accounts of failed contraception, being convinced they were infertile or discovering their pregnancy too late for abortion. Nevertheless their desire for pregnancy occasionally became apparent in a short, almost imperceptible comment, such as: '*I wanted to get pregnant by him'* (Bekaert 6). For one young woman there was a long narrative of

taking 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'* and she described how he immediately face-timed his mum to let her know. This couple was not unsure about what to do, or 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 that has been reworked across the 20th century and continues in to the 21st 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 might be viewed as a positive trend that helps us consider how social and economic challenges experienced by teenage mothers are increasingly experienced by those who mother in their early 20s. This stigmatizing discourse around welfare 'dependency' is continuously levied against young mothers. In fact, far from welfare payments being an incentive toward motherhood, continuous economic reform represents a shrinking safety net of economic support pushing younger mothers further into poverty (Molborn and Jacobs 18). 'Young mother', encompassing teens and twenties, may facilitate conversations between mothers who may find similar experiences in terms of the barriers of exclusion, the forms of stigma and the failures of the welfare state to support them adequately. I maintain that we should be mindful of the continuous shapeshifting of societal control of women's fertility and

motherhood decisions. However, this 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 twist in the chronology, whereby mothers themselves appropriate the term that is being used to control and judge.

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