

Outcome Measures of African American Adolescent Mothers

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Abstract

Despite a decline in births, adolescent pregnancy continues to be a concern for parents, policymakers, and social service providers. Although the future of young mothers in general has been proven to be bleak, some research suggests that the negative impact of adolescent pregnancy is less severe in African American families. Hypotheses have been formulated in prior literature to explain this phenomenon but a dearth of research focuses on understanding the individual and social determinants of healthy outcomes. Aspirations and goal attainment have been identified as possible protective factors. Since a large number of adolescents still become mothers, it is imperative that determinants of healthy outcomes are thoroughly investigated.

Introduction

Adolescent childbearing is a chronic concern, particularly in the African American community (Black Women's Health Imperative, 2001). Adolescents are responsible for almost 500,000 births in the United States annually (Ventura et al, 1998). The pregnancy rate of African American teens aged 15–19 is 170.4 per 1000 teens compared to 94 and 148.7 per 1000 for whites and Latinas respectively (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). Birth rates for adolescents have declined since 1991 (Ventura et al, 2000), but the United States still has the highest adolescent birth rates in the industrialized world. Adolescent pregnancy has been and continues to be a well-justified concern for parents, policymakers, and social service providers.

In reviewing literature on the consequences associated with adolescent childbearing, the young mothers, their children, and society at large are all negatively affected. However, some research suggests that the negative impact of adolescent pregnancy is less severe among African American families. This article reviews literature related to the impact and outcomes of African American adolescent birth. Further, it discusses the relevance of aspirations and goal attainment for African American young mothers and ends with policy implications as well as future directions for research.

Impact of Adolescent Birth

National policy makers have raised concerns about the health and socio-economic implications of teenage pregnancy (Alexander & Guyer, 1993). Adolescent mothers experience more problems with pregnancy and delivery than their older counterparts: They are more likely to endure a high-risk pregnancy in which the life or health of the mother or fetus is jeopardized by a disorder coincidental with or unique to pregnancy. Care of high-risk mothers and their infants is very expensive and requires the unified efforts of medical personnel, private insurance, public funding and social services

(Lowdermilk, Perry & Bobak, 2000). Teen mothers have high rates of premature and low birth weight babies, with mothers under age 15 twice as likely to have premature or low birth weight infants (Hayes, 1987).

Furthermore, economic implications for the adolescent mother and her child are also of great consequence. Research indicates that adolescent mothers are more likely to experience unemployment and poverty as an adult and to be financially dependent on government welfare programs (Hayes, 1987). Adolescent mothers are often relegated to lower-paying and less skilled occupations, resulting in lower overall lifetime earnings (Hayes, 1987). Children born out of wedlock constitute the majority of children receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). However, other studies indicate that socioeconomic disadvantage and lack of prenatal care may be more harmful to infants than the age of their mother (Baldwin, 1993; Geronimus, 1992). For example, Geronimus found that infants born to African American adolescents have better prenatal outcomes than infants of older African American mothers. She proposed the weathering hypothesis, which assumes the effects of social inequality on health may compound with age and lead to growing gaps in health status through young and middle adulthood, which in turn affect fetal health. Further, this hypothesis suggests that maternal age be reexamined as not only a developmental indicator for adolescent mothers but also as a reflection of the ways in which social inequality, racial bias or discrimination may, on a population level, affect differentially the health of black versus white mothers (Geronimus, 1996).

The economic deprivation perspective has been given enormous attention by researchers of African American family processes, specifically single-mother households. Fifty percent of African American female-headed households live below the poverty line, which makes them the most impoverished group in America (Taylor et al., 1990). As with the general population, earning potential and opportunity are linked to the adolescent mother's level of academic achievement. On average, teen mothers complete fewer years of school and are less likely to earn a high-school diploma or to go on for post-secondary education than women who delay childbearing (Hayes, 1987). Recent research, however, indicates that many of the negative outcomes of adolescent motherhood such as low educational achievement precede rather than stem from early parenthood (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, in press). Educational success, however, is still widely recognized as a promising route to self-sufficiency, psychological and economic well-being, and other long-term benefits for adolescent mothers and their children (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan, 1987).

Additionally, there is much evidence that adolescent mothers are at risk for adverse psychological and behavioral problems that can affect the mother's life course as well as the infant's health and development. Adolescent mothers display higher levels of parenting stress, are less responsive, and less sensitive in interactions with their infants than older mothers (Passino et al, 1993). Adolescent mothers may be less competent to parent because of their lack of emotional development, parenting experience, and parenting skills (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1989). Consequently, children of adolescent mothers suffer more physical, intellectual and emotional difficulties (Culp, Culp, Osofsky & Osofsky, 1991). A recent study, however, revealed

that maternal age at birth was not related to negative developmental outcomes among a sample of low school achieving, urban African American adolescents (Zimmerman, et al., 2001). These results are consistent with previous research findings. Furstenberg, Hughes and Brooks-Gunn (1992) found that most of the children born to teenage mothers did not have deleterious outcomes, despite early disadvantages. The literature thus far suggests that the outcomes of African American adolescent mothers and their children are somewhat atypical, being slightly better than expected. Further research is clearly needed to address these differences.

Goal Attainment

Acquiring self-regulatory competence is an important developmental task which enhances human functioning across the life span (Bandura, 1997). Goals enhance self-regulation through effects on motivation, learning and self-efficacy and motivate people to exert the effort necessary to meet task demands and persist over time. Goals can affect how people process information and also direct an individual's attention to relevant task features as well as behaviors to be performed and potential outcomes (Schunk, 2001). One can assume, therefore, that goal setting and attainment are an important positive driving force that enhances the outcomes of young adolescent mothers and their children.

King's theory of goal attainment (1981), a theory applicable to adolescent motherhood, is a transactional model based on a conceptual framework of three systems. The *personal system* relates to the individual; the *interpersonal system* involves the individual's interaction with surrounding groups; and the *social system* depicts the individual's relationships with society (King, 1999). This theory underscores the importance of the environment in goal attainment. Furthermore, it defines the context in which individuals can set goals and evaluate their achievement.

Significance of Aspirations and Goal Attainment

The importance of aspirations and goals for adjustment during adolescence is generally manifested in two different ways. First, goals and aspirations provide a standard to help adolescents weigh the degree to which different choices will help or hinder their achievements. Second, as a motivational force, goals and aspirations influence the degree to which adolescents expend effort on tasks that facilitate achievement. For adolescent mothers forced to confront the challenges of parenthood, aspirations and goals may provide protection as they serve as a guide through difficult choices and a buffer against discouragement and stressors they experience (Camarena, Minor, Melmar & Ferrie, 1998).

A number of studies on adolescent motherhood provide empirical support for goal attainment theory. For instance, in the Baltimore study of Furstenberg et al. (1987), successful mothers attributed their success to the "dreams" and "ambitions" they had and had been able to attain. In another study, adolescent mothers described having children as a positive force that helped them alter their course from a self-destructive path toward a more productive and hopeful one (Arenson, 1994). Additional research focusing on

adolescents' perceptions of motherhood provides more compelling evidence that premature pregnancy and parenthood may play a pivotal role in enhancing ego strength, feelings of hope and overall resiliency (Williams & Vines, 1999). For example, Arenson (1994) examined the stories of adolescent mothers and found they possessed remarkable fortitude and commitment to children and a desire to optimize financial security through goal setting, hard work and further education. These studies offer balance to the negative repercussions of adolescent pregnancy and parenting by underscoring a more positive, hopeful view of adolescent mothers' strengths and perceptions, upon which appropriate interventions can be built to further enhance their outcomes.

Educational achievement and attainment in American society have well-established links to positive life outcomes. The limited life chances faced by many adolescent mothers could reasonably influence these young mother's to adopt lower standards of educational success and achievement, yet most adolescent mothers display mainstream motivational values (Kalil, 2002). In a study of adolescent mothers, Quint, Bos and Polit (1997) found that 66% were inspired to go to college or achieve post secondary education. Farber (1989) found that parenting teens with fewer resources and support were less confident that they could achieve their aspirations. Young mothers had a clear sense of goals that were attainable when they were aware of access to resources and supports. On the other hand, in a related study investigating life aspirations of adolescent mothers, researchers found clear evidence of resilience and focus within the lower SES mothers while there was evidence of resignation and vulnerability within middle-class mothers (Camarena et al., 1998). These findings provide a possible explanation for why African American adolescent mothers, who are more likely to have lower SES backgrounds, may have better than expected positive outcomes.

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A recurring theme that emerged from studies reviewed was the importance of the social environment and family support in the lives of young mothers. Family support has been identified as a factor in successful parenting for teen mothers (Burke & Liston, 1994). Similarly, Cooley and Unger (1991) found that family support was indirectly related to maternal educational attainment and parenting skills. Additionally, health and social service programs may also provide the support that young mothers need (Zimmerman et al, 2001). Studies have shown positive outcomes such as the enhancement of the social environment and parenting skills among adolescent mothers who were visited by nurses in their homes as an intervention (Olds, Henderson & Kitzman, 1994). Further, aspirations of young mothers are reinforced by having attentive listeners and positive models who support and validate adolescent mothers' emerging visions (Horowitz, 1995). Although the connection between support and positive adjustment is well established, adolescent mothers appear to receive less consistent support for aspirations and plans than for other aspects of their experience (Camarena et al., 1998).

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Studies suggest that if adolescent mothers stay in school, they are as likely to graduate from high school as their non-parent peers (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990). However, there is a dearth of research that examines how perceptions of the school psychological environment predict educational motivation among adolescent mothers. Kalil (2002) found that a statistically significant predictor of a decline in educational expectations

among adolescent mothers was related to their perception that teachers devalued them intellectually by underestimating their abilities due to their status as adolescent mothers. She suggests that the negative experiences adolescent mothers encounter at school could lead to their withdrawal from educational pursuits, which ultimately could affect their future economic stability.

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Altogether, studies imply that aspirations and goal attainment are vital components of an adolescent mother's adjustment. If we are to ensure optimal outcomes for adolescent mothers we need to understand the importance the role that aspirations and goals play in promoting positive outcomes in adolescent motherhood.

Outcomes of African American Adolescent Mothers and Children

Furstenberg et al's longitudinal Baltimore study is a primary source of information on the outcomes of children born to adolescent mothers (Brooks-Gunn, Guo & Furstenberg, 1993). Findings from this 20-year study, involving over 300 African American adolescent mothers and their children, indicated that 60% of the children overcame early social and economic disadvantages, and they were relatively successful as young adults. Further, their mothers showed much more promising functioning than short term studies had predicted (Furstenberg et al, 1987). Over 33% of the mothers had received some education past high school; 75% were employed; and approximately 25% had achieved middle-class standing by means of marriage, employment or a combination. Similarly, in another 20-year follow up study of adolescent mothers enrolled in the Young Mother Program, 62% had achieved economic self-sufficiency and a high school diploma (Horwitz, Kleman, Kuo & Jekel, 1991). The success of mothers in this study and that of Furstenberg et al. (1989) appeared to depend on a number of factors including the grade level when the adolescent became pregnant, size of the family of origin, whether the family of origin was receiving public assistance, and, most important, the adolescent and her family both having high expectations and aspirations. Especially in the Baltimore study, the protective role of aspirations and goals was linked to long term positive outcomes for mother and child (Furstenberg et al, 1987).

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Summary and Implications

Review of prior literature suggests that African American adolescent mothers do not have as many deleterious outcomes as might be expected. Theoretical literature on the protective roles of goal attainment and aspirations help explain positive outcomes of adolescent motherhood for African American mothers. Despite these positive outcomes, two key longitudinal studies suggest that although the economic and educational outcomes of these young African American mothers were somewhat better than expected, among some psychological and family functioning appeared bleaker over the long run (Furstenberg et al., 1987; Horwitz et al., 1991) depending on several important indicators (e.g., grade level at time of pregnancy, level of expectations, etc.). Further research is needed to clarify these differential outcomes and how they interact (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, in press). Furthermore, there is evidence of class differences in aspirations and

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goals within adolescent mothers, with young mothers of low socioeconomic status viewed as being resilient and focused, whereas middle-class mothers viewed as resigned and vulnerable (Camarena et al., 1998). However, a relatively small and homogenous sample makes it difficult to generalize from class data in this study to other adolescent mothers. This clearly suggests the need for study replication with a larger and more diverse sample.

Adolescent mothers' perceptions of teachers and the school environment were significant predictors of their educational expectations. These findings support and extend research that indicates social and family support is highly salient in the outcomes of adolescent mothers. According to Camarena et al. (1998), a "push" from people who care can be an important source of motivation and hope for working toward life goals (p.134).

Theoretical literature on goals and aspirations as well as the findings of supporting research studies imply that policies should emphasize and encourage African American adolescent mothers to achieve goals and should support their aspirations. The establishment of ties with mentors within and outside the school environment to include public health and community nurses and social workers may be a good starting place in empowering adolescent mothers to achieve. Mentoring relationships have been found to be an important factor in promoting goal attainment in adolescents (Darling, Hamilton & Niego, 1994; Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Klaw, Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2003), particularly mentoring relationships characterized by bonds between an older, more experienced adult and a younger protégé (Klaw, Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2003). Mentor relationships that arise from within African American adolescents' informal social networks play a significant role in helping young mothers stay in school through an improvement in the young mother's academic attitudes and behaviors (Zimmerman et al, 2001); mentors also can serve as concrete examples of educational and occupational achievement, qualities that adolescents may want to emulate (Klaw, Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2003).

Health and social service programs also can play an important role in enhancing positive outcomes of adolescent mothers (Zimmerman et al, 2001). Although programs such as Women Infants and Children (WIC) provide nutritional support to adolescent mothers, an earlier study suggests that visiting nurse services in the homes of mothers may enhance their social environment and parenting skills (Olds, et al., 1994).

Despite the numerous teen pregnancy prevention programs, a large number of children continue to be born to young mothers. Society at large ought to consider ways of changing stereotypical negative perceptions of adolescent childbearing and work towards promoting positive outcomes for both mother and child. This implies that more research is needed to examine the relationship between goal attainment and aspirations and the trajectories in outcomes of adolescent mothers. Professionals concerned with adolescent achievement need to be cognizant of the importance of goals and aspirations.

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