

# **Comparative Research on Adolescent Childbearing: Understanding Race Differences**

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Teen childbearing rates are significantly higher among African Americans than among Whites. While per 1000 White females, ages 15 to 19, bore a child in 1994, the comparable rate for African American females ages 15 to 19, was 118 per 1000 (Child Trends, 1994). A significant body of research has developed attempting to account for the differential rates. Some of this literature more closely examines racial variations in the factors leading up to teen motherhood (for review, see Moore, Simms, & Betsey, 1986). For example, differences have been noted in the onset of menarche (Harlan, Harlan, & Grillo, 1980; Miller and Moore, 1990), the age and frequency of sexual initiation (Zelnik & Kanter, 1980; Bauman & Udry, 1981), the type and consistency of contraception utilization (Zelnik & Kanter, 1980), the incidence of pregnancy (Moore, Wenk, Hofferth, & Hayes, 1987; Zelnik & Kanter, 1980), and the way in which the pregnancy is resolved (Henshaw & O'Reilly, 1983; Moore, Wenk, Hofferth, & Hayes, 1987; Bachrach, 1986). Besides documenting where along the process of becoming a teen parent the differences appear, research has also attempted to better understand the reasons for the differential rates (see Hayes, 1987 for review). Overall, these studies conclude that traditional measures of socioeconomic status explain a great deal of the race difference in adolescent parenting rates, as well as the proximate factors leading up to motherhood (e.g., sexual activity, contraception use, and pregnancy rates) (Hayes, 1987). Thus, teen parenting is largely understood as the result of social inequities and limited life options (Furstenberg, 1991; Ladner, 1988; Hayes, 1987; Fischman & Palley, 1978)

Despite the strength of socioeconomic explanations, most research demonstrates that these standard measures do not fully explain the differential rates -- leaving any explanations for the persistent racial gap up for debate. While work suggests a cultural interpretation of the remaining difference, the current paper argues the gap may, in fact result from differential social opportunities that are not captured by standard socioeconomic measures. That is, conventional measures of socioeconomic status (e.g., parental education, income, and occupation) do not have similar meanings for African Americans and Whites, and as a result controlling for them methodologically proves problematic. Two adolescents, one African American one white, whose parents have similar education, occupation and income levels, do not share social contexts with similar opportunities and resources.

This article first discusses more fully the above stated problem with racial comparisons in the teen pregnancy literature. Recent innovative approaches to studying the neighborhood influences on adolescent behavior are then described, and it is argued that research on adolescent childbearing would benefit from the ecological framework used in these studies. Finally, using the social contextual framework, this paper summarizes reported race differences that are not captured by standard socioeconomic measures..

## **Why "Controls" are not Controls: The Limits of Comparative Research**

Arguments concerning the limitations of the comparative approach generally, are also germane to research comparing African American and white adolescent mothers (see Azibo, 1988, Dodson, 1988, Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman, 1982, and Taylor, Chatters,

Tucker, & Lewis, 1990, for reviews of several problems with a comparative research framework). In the case of adolescent parenting, and specifically concerning the measurement of socioeconomic status, there is a great deal of evidence that conventional measures of social class are not adequate proxies for opportunity, and importantly, do not tap equivalent opportunity structures for Whites and African Americans.

For example, while both African Americans and Whites benefit from increased levels of education and income, the returns to income and educational advances are smaller for African Americans (Duncan & Hoffman, 1991; Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Bound & Freeman, 1992). African Americans are more likely to be underemployed than Whites (Dodson, 1988), and African Americans with similar occupations to Whites, earn less (Dodson, 1988; Malveaux, 1988). Moreover, racial discrimination in employment and educational domains are not captured by these socioeconomic measures either, further limiting their use as proxies for real opportunity.

Measures of employment and income stability and poverty duration are also absent from conventional social class variables. Point-in-time measures mask the finding that black poverty is relatively long lasting, whereas white poverty is more temporary and event driven (Bane, 1986; Duncan & Rodgers, 1988). Furthermore, job security for African Americans, especially African American women, is such that in times of recession African Americans lose their jobs sooner and have a more difficult time recovering them (Malveaux, 1988). Thus, static measures of socioeconomic status do not capture the different income trajectories of White and African American adolescents. Yet, past experience with poverty as well as future projections of economic well-being are potentially quite relevant to understanding why teenagers become parents.

Furthermore, examinations of residential segregation and location demonstrate that African Americans and Whites of similar socioeconomic status live in neighborhoods of different quality. This place segregation (Logan & Molotch, 1987) suggests that the same socioeconomic characteristics buy entry into different quality neighborhoods depending on race (Logan & Alba, 1993; Villemez, 1980). For example, the average poor white family is more likely to reside in a census tract with middle class and affluent families than with other low-income families, whereas there is relatively less interclass sharing of census tract residence among African Americans; in fact, the average low-income African American family resides in a tract that is 30% poor (Massey & Eggers, 1990). In addition to lower levels of concentrated poverty, white neighborhoods are also characterized by better quality housing, lower crime rates, and better quality services (Massey, Condran, & Denton, 1987). In order to understand the differential opportunities available to African American and White teenagers, it is important to take into account these differences in neighborhood quality.

Taken together, this group of findings suggests that African American and White teenagers experience quite different social contexts, even once matched on conventional characteristics of socioeconomic status.<sup>2</sup> More expansively defining socioeconomic opportunity to include the resources and opportunities available within an adolescent's immediate neighborhood environment allows for a better understanding of the factors leading to higher rates of teenage childbearing among African Americans.

### **Beyond Socioeconomic Comparisons: The Role of the Neighborhood**

A more critical focus on the social contexts in which adolescents live, rather than reliance on individual social class variables is one important step toward a more informed understanding of differential childbearing rates by race.<sup>3</sup> The study of the immediate

social context is consistent with recent interdisciplinary work on "neighborhood effects" (Jenks & Meyer, 1990; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Furstenberg, 1990; Eccles et al, 1993; Corcoran, Gordon, Laren, & Solon, 1992), that has been informed by ecological approaches to studying human behavior in the field of psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Jessor, 1993). The general framework of this work suggests that in order to understand an individual's behavior it is important to view the person as part of a complex system of interacting environments (e.g., families, schools, and neighborhoods). Such an approach allows for the examination of normative as well as structural influences on teen childbearing.

Yet, thus far literature on "neighborhood effects" has not carefully delineated social structural effects of neighborhoods (e.g., lack of opportunities due to fewer resources, lack of services, lower quality institutions) from normative effects of neighborhoods (e.g., peer influences, role modeling) which may themselves be the result of restricted opportunities (see Jencks & Meyer, 1990, for a review of the research on "neighborhood effects"). One reason for this is that existing data sets rarely include both individual and neighborhood characteristics, preventing the disaggregation of normative and institutional influences (Logan & Alba, 1993; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). Thus, there is a need both for increased theory development in this area, as well as the development of new data sets that can address the various ways in which neighborhoods exert their influence.

Despite the relatively early stage of this work on "neighborhood effects", research thus far does suggest ways in which to capture the social environment more completely than conventional measures of social class permit.. While these measures do not always allow opportunity arguments to be differentiated from normative explanations, they do, nevertheless, provide richer accounts of the social environment. Several studies have attempted to capture this social context by measuring neighborhood quality (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Crane, 1991; Eccles et al., 1993; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Massey, et al., 1987). Hogan & Kitagawa (1985) find, for example, that within a sample of African American adolescents, both birth control use and pregnancy rates vary substantially by neighborhood quality. In addition to employing traditional measures of socioeconomic status, Hogan and Kitagawa develop an index of social class which includes variables such as housing quality and labor force history of parents. Moreover, adolescents living in "ghetto" areas are compared to those in high, medium, and low quality neighborhoods as determined by the social class index.

Research on neighborhoods indicates that both real and perceived opportunities for employment within the neighborhood may also influence adolescent sexual behavior. Crane (1991) tests such an hypothesis in his analysis of teen childbearing rates and high school drop-out rates in neighborhoods defined by 1970 data. Employing the social class index developed by Hogan and Kitagawa and adding to it a variable measuring the number of high status workers in a teen's neighborhood, Crane finds that the likelihood of living in the worst quality neighborhood was much higher for African American adolescents than white adolescents. Moreover, there is a significant reduction in teen childbearing as the number of high status workers in a neighborhood increases, and importantly the relation is not linear. That is, even a small number of high status workers decreases substantially the rate of childbearing among adolescents. These findings suggest that higher quality neighborhoods may not only increase actual opportunities for adolescents, but also change the perception of opportunity. Although not addressed in Crane's work, both actual and perceived opportunity might also be affected by the race of

the high status workers in the neighborhood (Henly, 1993). The impact of same-race high status workers might be greater than the impact of other-race high status workers. That is, areas where the high status workers are also African American may show more significant drops in pregnancy rates for African American teens. This hypothesis, however, remains to be investigated.

Other measures of social and economic opportunities available through a teenager's neighborhood are also of potential significance. For example, identifying measures of neighborhood crime, violence, and drug problems (Eccles et al., 1993; Massey et al., 1987) school context (Jessor, 1993; Furstenberg, Morgan, Moore, & Peterson, 1987), availability of college scholarship programs, access to youth services and programs (Eccles et al., 1993), and the availability of contraception and family planning services (Jones, 1985) are some community-level variables which would help to enrich our understanding of the opportunities available in a teenager's social context.

### **Race Differences in the Consequences of Teen Childbearing**

Attention to the social context also allows for a better understanding of the coping strategies used by individuals and families in order to adapt to events such as adolescent childbearing. Perhaps because problem-focused approaches dominate research on Black adolescents generally (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990), less attention has been paid to the existence of protective factors (Jessor, 1993; Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1990) that buffer the consequences of teen childbearing as well as assist in the avoidance of adolescent motherhood altogether.

The literature on race differences in the outcomes of adolescent childbearing demonstrates that African American teen mothers fare better than their white counterparts on a variety of dependent measures. While a preponderance of data suggests that teens do not plan to get pregnant, regardless of their race (Forrest & Singh, 1990; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Furstenberg, 1991; see Burton, 1990, and Dash, 1989 for alternative view), several indicators suggest that race differences do exist in the adaptation to a teen birth. The African American community has been found to be more accepting of teen childbearing once a child is born (Hayes, 1987). For example, the relatively high incidence of multi-generational families among African Americans (Beck & Beck, 1989; Wilson, 1986; Pearson et al., 1990) provides greater opportunities for extended families to have significant involvement in parenting. In fact, research suggests that African American families rely more on relatives and extended family networks than do white families (Hogan, Hao, & Parish, 1990, Hofferth, 1984). Grandparent involvement with the caretaking of teen mothers' children, independent of race, is associated with higher levels of education and income, greater access to child care, and better parenting skills for adolescent mothers (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1986; Stevens, 1984, 1988; Kellam, Adams, & Brown, 1982; Trent & Harlan, 1990).

Race differences also exist in the level of education teen parents receive. African American pregnant and parenting teenagers are significantly less likely to disrupt their schooling than pregnant and parenting white adolescents (Trent & Harlan, 1990; Rudd, et al; Scott-Jones & Turner, 1990; Moore, Hofferth, Wertheimer, Waite, & Caldwell 1981). Both African American and white teen mothers have high educational aspirations (Moore et al., 1986). The difference in educational disruption is due at least in part to the greater availability of family support for African American teen mothers.

Marriage is a less likely response to early childbearing among African American teenagers compared to their white counterparts, although white teen marriage rates have

been declining over the past three decades as well (O'Connell & Rogers, 1984). Despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, marriage is often viewed as a negative outcome in the teen parenting literature (Burden & Klerman, 1984; Moore et al., 1981) because the great majority of teen marriages end in divorce (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987), and married teens are more likely to disrupt their schooling (Trent & Harlan, 1990) and have less family support (Furstenberg & Crawford, 1978) Furstenberg et al.'s (1987) findings suggest living with one's family rather than marrying is related indirectly to greater financial well-being later in life, as long as the stay is relatively short term. A further reason why marriage is considered less positively for adolescent parents is because while teens who get married and stay married are faring better economically later in life, the vast majority of married teens get divorced and are no better off than those who avoided marriage in their teen years (Furstenberg et al., 1987).

This paper has argued that conventional measures of socioeconomic status do not, by themselves, adequately account for the opportunity differences that contribute to differential rates of adolescent childbearing between African Americans and Whites. It further argued that a focus on factors within one's social context or neighborhood, can better capture these different opportunity structures. Given that African Americans and Whites live in very different social contexts, regardless of socioeconomic status, it is not surprising that these two groups display different rates of teen pregnancy and parenting and unique responses to adolescent childbearing. Critically examining these disparate social environments can lead to a better understanding of the opportunity differences themselves, as well as the processes by which structural constraints translate into the behaviors that make teenage childbearing more likely.

## Notes

1 While the focus of this paper is on African American/White differences, similar criticisms arise with comparisons between other racial and ethnic groups.

2 Besides objective differences in the meaning of socioeconomic variables, there is also evidence for the existence of race differences in the perception of social class membership. That is, African Americans and Whites do not evaluate social class membership similarly (Dodson, 1988; Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman, 1982). Jackson and his colleagues (1988) argue that an African American in a relatively low-skilled position is assigned greater relative status by the Black community than his or her counterpart would be granted by the white community.

3 The term "social context" is used here somewhat loosely, as the immediate surroundings in which an adolescent interacts with other individuals and institutions. This social context is referred to as neighborhood, community, and social context interchangeably in this paper, however there is a need for further clarification in future research.

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