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The Authentic Lived Experiences of Young Mothers

How Empowered Young Women Mother Within and Against the Institutions of Childhood, Gender and Motherhood

By limiting our focus to predisposing factors and preventative strategies when studying teen pregnancy, we oversimplify and homogenize the lives of young mothers. We must consider the institutions of childhood, gender and motherhood when examining the lived experiences of young mothers. The dominant conception of children and youth in contemporary western culture is one governed by moral panic. This moral panic has polarized youth into an either or dichotomy, positioning them as innocent and in need of protection or delinquent and in need of punishment. Because young mothers are overtly resisting the construction of childhood innocence, they are positioned as a social problem, which results in their further marginalization thus affecting their lived experiences. Furthermore, due to the prescribed gender identities perpetuated through the heteronormative institution of masculinity, female adolescents (and males) are struggling between their authentic selves and the gendered identities represented to them through mass media, socialization, and schooling practices. This paper seeks to demonstrate how the act of becoming a young parent is more a reflection of the construction of gender then it is a result of single parent families, poverty, lack of sex education and/or contraception. Lastly, this paper examines how the patriarchal institution of motherhood—which deems the "good mother" to be white, heterosexual, in her thirties, middle class, able-bodied, married with a nuclear family, etc.—makes it impossible for young mothers to be regarded as "good" mothers.

Introduction: It Is Not the Young Mothers Who Have Failed Society; Rather It Is Society Who Has Failed Young Mothers

Most research on teen pregnancy and parenthood focus on predisposing factors (single parent family, poverty, victims of abuse, etc.) and preventative strategies

(sexual education, mentoring programs, prevention and intervention programs, etc.). While important, this universal approach negates the perceptions and lived experiences of young mothers themselves. Such research continues to oversimplify, underrepresent and homogenize the lives of young mothers as it fails to account for the larger political and social structures of which these women mother within and against. As a result of such prevention-focused research, young mothers are represented as "At-Risk" and in need of adult control and adult supervision. Such categorization ultimately perpetuates a moral panic discourse pertaining not only to young pregnant and parenting teens but also to adolescent females in general. In the following excerpt from his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* Stan Cohen defines moral panic as:

> A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to be-come defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereo-typical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions…. (qtd. in O'Brien and Szeman 69)

Cultural analysts Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman argue that, "regardless of its generally mythological origins, moral panic has real measurable effects in the form of individual behaviour, social behaviour, and governmental policy" (69). Research on young motherhood completed within this moral panic framework fails to consider the three main socially constructed institutions that govern the lives of young mothers: the construction of childhood; the construction of gender; and the construction of motherhood; all of which intersect to form young mother's identities as female adolescents *and* as mothers. Such one-sided representations result in further stigmatization, surveillance and control over the lives of young mothers; ultimately limiting not only their authority and autonomy, but also access to, and the availability of, supportive resources. This paper seeks to provide an alternative representation to the discourse on young mothers by examining—through the authentic voices of young mothers themselves—their positioning within the larger social structures that govern their lives; the affect these institutions have on their lived experiences; and how they mother in and through these structural constraints ultimately engaging in various forms of empowered motherhood.

The Social Construction of Childhood: Innocence and Protection to Delinquency and Punishment

In Western society, childhood encompasses the period of one's life from

birth to age eighteen. The dominant conception of children is that they are innocent and at the mercy of their adult caregivers. This myth of innocence, Henry Jenkins argues, has constructed "childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent, and in the end, waiting to be corrupted or protected by adults" (3). This myth of innocence is said to have been created and perpetuated by adult nostalgia which, according to Susan Stewart: "is the desire to recreate something that has never existed before, to return to some place we've never been, and to reclaim a lost object we never possessed" (qtd. in Jenkins 3). This myth of innocence continues to construct our understanding of adolescents; as children who were once regarded as the "future" are now deemed dangerous and even detrimental to the moral fabric of society. The teenage years are often represented as a wild and turbulent time where the preservation of childhood innocence is perceived to be, as Jenkins argues, dependent on adult authority. The government reflects this notion of childhood innocence as many recent policies have increased social control over its youth as they are perceived to be "spiralling out of control" (James and James qtd. in Wilson 94).

This social dominance is further heightened with regards to teen mothers in particular whose sexual behaviour renders them delinquent and threatening to the "moral fabric of society" (Wilson 95). In her work titled "An Inappropriate Transition to Adulthood," Corinne Wilson argues that teenage mothers are the epitome of a failed childhood as their sexual behaviour boldly indicates that they, and youth in general, are not as innocent as adults would like to believe. Young mother's visible resistance to the myth of innocence disrupts the social construction of childhood thus disturbing the level of control adults want to have over youth. In order to regain power over the "uncontrollable," society has created categories like "at risk" and "delinquent" (with teen mothers as acting prototype for female adolescents) in order for adults to determine whether they should protect their child's innocence or punish their delinquency. The following statement made by Wilson illustrates the tensions that arise as a result of such a binary:

> The identification of certain "at risk" groups of children reproduces tensions between protection and punishment, deserving and undeserving. Teenage mothers are "undeserving" of adult status, "undeserving" of protection (by the very fact that they have engaged in sexual activity) and "deserving" of "punishment" through the prolonging of their childhood status. (98)

Because these young mothers are overtly resisting the construction of childhood innocence, they are positioned as social problems and as threats to society. This results in their further marginalization thus affecting (usually negatively) their lived experiences.

In her article "It Doesn't Matter if You're 15 or 45, Having a Child is a Difficult Experience," Tanya Darisi writes: "Social categories are integral to one's identity" and that neither categories nor identities are fixed, rather they are negotiated and managed through our interactions with others. She states: "If one is oriented to as a young mother, then what is known about young mothers is used to understand that individual's contributions in an interaction. The meaning and consequence, i.e., the social force, of one's own contributions to a social interaction will be understood according to relevant social categories" (Darisi 30). Childhood in western culture is positioned in opposition to adulthood and as a result, children are often regarded as "becomings" or "little adults." Their "incompleteness" renders children and youth powerless as adults determine *when* they are competent and responsible *enough* to be relieved of adult control and surveillance. Due to such societal perceptions young mothers are often left powerless as they cannot seek agency in either identity; as they are perceived to be unsuccessful children—since they failed at being "innocent"—and (as will be explored later) they are equally perceived to be unsuccessful adults and mothers. It is not enough however, to explore the social construction of childhood and how the myth of innocence dictates young mother's existence and experience in the wider social order. Within "childhood" children are further constructed according to their prescribed gender and therefore we must also consider how young mother's female identity intersects with their identity as a child and as a mother.

The Construction of Gender: The "Can-Do" Girl vs. the "At-Risk" Girl

Thus far I have demonstrated that the moral panic of contemporary society has polarized youth into an either/or dichotomy—positioning them as innocent and in need of protection *or* delinquent and in need of punishment. Within the social construction of childhood remains a further construction, one that dictates children's daily experiences. If society is to engage in any form of moral panic, it should stem from the gender straightjacket we force upon children. In his film *Codes of Gender,* media and communications analysis Sut Jhally argues that there is nothing natural about gender identity: "We don't just pop out of the womb with our gender identities imprinted in our genes. It is part of a process whereby we learn to take on certain attributes that we think our appropriate to our understanding of ourselves in gendered terms. Due to the

prescribed gender identities perpetuated through the heteronormative institution of masculinity, female adolescents (and males) are struggling between their authentic selves and the gender identities represented to them through mass media, socialization, and schooling practices. As one youth stated "these roles [gender roles] are arbitrary constructs of patriarchal culture, yet they're simply accepted as truths by the masses" (S. Asher Hanley qtd. in Sonnie 38). These gender roles are further significant as they dictate how "adults view children, understand and meet their needs, and define their welfare as gendered individuals" (James and James 66).

One study entitled "Understanding Teen Pregnancy from the Perspective of Young Adolescents in Oklahoma City" (Bird et al.), which sought out non-parenting teenagers perspectives of teen parenting (although the study failed to gain the perspectives of parenting teens themselves) concluded that the primary reasons [given by youth] for teens wanting a baby were: to prove they were men and women and had therefore achieved adult status; wanting and needing someone to love; as a means to "prevent loneliness" and/or "maintain a relationship with a boyfriend" (Bird et al. 252). Now although these may be the authentic conclusions of the youth studied, and I am in no position to declare whether youth have been influenced by the rampant negative and simplistic portrayals of teen parents in popular culture, what I can argue is that if these conclusions are accurate, and many studies have presented similar findings, such conclusions can be attributed to the individuals positioning within the institution of gender. As social practice theorists like Pierre Bourdieu argue "human beings act and make decisions within particular contexts created by our past actions and decisions in social worlds already shaped by broader racial, *gender*, and class relations (Kelly 11, emphasis mine). Given Bourdieu's line of reasoning, the act of becoming a young parent is arguably no less a reflection of the construction of gender than is the "Boy Code" (William Pollock) or the "Cinderella Complex" (Colette Dowling). According to William S. Pollack, a clinical psychologist and the director of the Center for Men, boys are silenced by the boy code: "the old rules that favour stoicism and make boys feel ashamed about expressing weakness or vulnerability" (Pollack 3). And, according to C. J. Pascoe, author of *Dude You're A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School,* performances of heterosexuality are absolutely central to a man's masculine identity (Pascoe 3). Therefore, the sexual activity of males is reflective of normative gender roles. Colette Dowling believes the institution of gender has embedded a sense of incompetence into the subconscious of females, resulting in what she deems the Cinderella Complex; a "women's unconscious resistance to independence" and a need for male acceptance and companionship (Dowling qtd. in Orenstein 91). If young women are having children in the hopes to secure a male partner as the youth suggested in the

study, then they too are performing normative gender. Furthermore, could adolescent females be choosing to have children because they figure they were going to have children anyways? After all, mothering in Western culture is just another facet of essential femininity. Corinne Wilson makes an interesting comparison in her work when she states: "Motherhood is traditionally at the heart of female identity; however, early motherhood is often described as an experience of lost opportunities (Wilson 96). In other words, girls grow up believing that motherhood is the heart of their identity as females—and yet when they fulfill their gender destiny they are condemned; positioned as both failures of childhood and "motherhood."

The authors of the above-mentioned study went on to discuss the programmatic responses to their findings which involve "providing options and benchmarks for achieving womanhood or manhood that did not involve having a child" (Bird et al. 252). If gender is a reason for the decisions of these young women, as I have just argued, than it is *extremely* problematic to simply create "different benchmarks" for femininity and masculinity. Why are we not encouraging youth to create *personal* benchmarks of which they strive to obtain rather than continuing to encourage gender performances? Moreover, why are we not working on closing the gap between adulthood and childhood at least in terms of the hierarchal power dynamics that govern the relationships between adults and children? Would youth be so eager to become adults if we granted them opportunities for agency and authority in childhood?

According to Statistics Canada there has been an overall decline in the teenage pregnancy rate over the last quarter-century. A research co-ordinator at the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada attributes such a decrease to sex education, accessible contraception, and increased educational and employment opportunities for females (*CBC News*). The study also found that the number of youth who are sexually active has remained the same over the past 25 years with 50 percent of all 16- and 17-year-olds being sexually active. Similarly, a meta-analysis study that focused on such prevention strategies as contraception and sex education, concluded that female adolescents knowledge of, and access to, these services did not reduce pregnancies among women aged between eleven and eighteen years (DiCenso et al.). Therefore, contrary to what many adults would like to believe, youth have not taken up abstinence, and yet, teen pregnancies continue to decline. It is likely then that young women are realizing that a future of child rearing is no longer their only "destiny," and that this *realization* and possible gender shift (more females in the public sphere) is responsible for the decrease in teen pregnancies.

Previously I mentioned the creation of "At-Risk" youth within the construction of childhood as a means for adults to regain control over the lost innocence of today's young people. Adolescent girls, according to Anita Harris, are further

governed by the "girlhood dichotomy" which Harris believes is a result of the state's regulation of females; particularly the regulation of their sexuality (24). Opposed positioning situates females as either "Can-Do" girls or "At-Risk" girls; as exemplars of success or failure. The discourse surrounding teen pregnancy continuously portrays young mothers negatively thereby situating them within the "At-Risk" category, or in other words as problems to the state. And problems, by definition, must be fixed. Such positioning fails to account for the structural disadvantages (i.e., poverty) many of these young women face and, as a result, their success or failure is regarded as a personal choice rather than a reflection of their circumstances. "Young women are *imagined* as having a range of good choices before them and therefore those who 'choose" poorly have no one to blame but themselves" (Harris 30). The myth of choice governs how they are seen and treated thus controlling how they live—their reality. This constructed reality limits their agency, authenticity, and autonomy as young women and as mothers. In failing to represent the voices of the very subjects of the research, these quantitative studies fail to see how teen mothering for many young women becomes a source of empowerment often turning these supposed "At-Risk" girls into "Can-Do" girls. If success is as patriarchy dictates, a "mainstream experience for girls," one would think the government would encourage their transition from "At-Risk" to "Can-Do" and thus provide them all the support necessary for a smooth transition. In the process of this transition however, these young ladies begin to *realize* and *resist* the dominating patriarchal state. Not only do they resist the girlhood paradigm which seeks to gain control of them early in order to prepare them for the private sphere, these young women also resist the institution of motherhood; the demise of many women.

The Construction of Motherhood: Mothering and Motherhood

"It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives … it creates the dangerous schism between 'private' and 'public' life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities … it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (Rich 13). The "it" Adrienne Rich is referring to is the institution of *motherhood*; the "ideal" motherhood created and sustained by a patriarchal state with the intent to sustain male superiority and female subordination. The act of *mothering,* on the other hand, is the unique experience of raising children and *should* be a potential site of power for women and children.

The "good mother" image, controlled by patriarchy, is represented in popular culture as an unattainable model of perfection which, according to Andrea O'Reilly, includes the following characteristics: white, heterosexual, middle-class,

able-bodied, married, 30-something, in a nuclear family and mothers full time. Additionally, as Adrienne Rich writes: "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (42). In this institution mothers are not women or even individuals, they are only mothers. "Mother" is how women come to define themselves and it is how society recognizes and treats them. The woman who existed before she became a mother *appears* to exist no longer. But as Susan Maushart would argue, that woman exists behind "The Mask of Motherhood":

> The mask of motherhood refers to a repertoire of socially constructed representations … an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and all knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience.… [It] is what keeps women silent about what they feel and suspicious about what they know. It divides mother from daughter, sister from sister, friend from friend.… It pits male parents against females.… (461)

This mask, according to Sara Ruddick, causes many women to mother inauthentically as they begin to mother against their own morals and beliefs in order for their children (and their mothering) to be socially accepted: "Inauthenticity constructs and then assumes a world in which one's own values do not count" (103). Given the limited scope of acceptable mothering under the institution of motherhood and the fact that young mothers meet very few if any of the aforementioned "Good Mother" qualities, young mothers are naturally labelled as "bad" mothers. Because they overtly mother against societal standards of the "good mother," many young moms mother authentically as they have no mask to hide behind. Although the label of "bad mothers" may encourage more authentic mothering and this may act as a source of empowerment, it also further marginalizes them, thereby defining their lived experiences.

According to Lindsey Rock, discourses of the "Good Mother" prevent the girl-mom from speaking unless she speaks in the terms of the married, white, middle-class "Good Mother" (26). Because such a feat is impossible, the concerns and needs of young mothers often go unaddressed or misrepresented (i.e. the discourses fuelled by the "At-Risk" mentality often result in prevention-only-strategies) ultimately limiting their opportunities for agency, autonomy and authority. Furthermore, this bad girl approach to young mothers leads to their isolation, and further disconnects them from society; thereby reducing possible support networks.

In order to resist the subordinate positioning of young mothers perpetu-

ated through the hegemonic discourses, the following sections will, through the authentic voices of young mothers, provide a more positive and realistic portrayal of young motherhood.

Vicious Cycles and Second Chances: How Motherhood Changed Their Life for the Better

> *Andre and my unborn child are my reason to live, my reason to wanting to finish school and become something. Whenever I feel down, or feel I can't do something, I just look at my son and there's my inspiration to get through it all.*
>
> —Selena, mother to one-year-old Andre

Many researchers of young motherhood have concluded that parenting provides an "impetus to take up education, training and employment" (Duncan 307). Out of the eleven women I interviewed and/or received testimonials from, four dropped out of school to spend time with their older boyfriends who were not enrolled in school, six dropped out due to drugs and the "party lifestyle" and one fell behind in school as a result of drug and alcohol use. All eleven mothers have since returned to school, are getting good grades and now have high aspirations for their futures. Selena's words (above) reflect the perspective of most of the mothers in YPEP, as motherhood was, for many, their reasons for going back to school: "I never did as good in school as I have since I became a mom, because it matters now. Before it didn't at all" (Bridgette, 18, Appendix B. 1); "It has taken me years to realize the importance of completing my education, not only does it add value to myself, but my son as well" (Selena, 21, Appendix E.1); "School is so important for later life. I want my kids to be able to depend on me so if anything happened to Adam they would be okay—I could support them. I could be independent. That brings me peace of mind" (Kristen, Appendix Q.4). Although it is wonderful that these young women are passionate about pursuing their education, it is of great concern that many of them did not value themselves enough as women and as individuals to "better themselves" prior to becoming a mother and/or a partner.

Countless studies have concluded that, by age eighteen, children have spent far more time in front of the TV engaging with *popular culture* then they have in school (O'Brien and Szeman 13). With the influence academic institutions have on children's perceptions of self, others and the world in general, it is reasonable to conclude that popular culture plays a significant role in our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live. Cultural theorists and media analysts Stuart Hall concluded that the media's constructions and representations of gender (as well as sex, class, age and race) influence and

encourage specific performances. Many theorists akin to Hall have concluded that girls are taught (through the media, socialization and schooling practices) to seek self acceptance and validation in male approval; thereby generating self worth as an external characteristic of which girls are to obtain (and maintain) rather than an internal one of which they are to develop. The fact that nine of the eleven young mothers interviewed discussed skipping class and even dropping out to be with their boyfriends may illustrate how their female identities influenced the level of importance they attributed to their education. Male attention is crucial to girl's identity formation thus encouraging girls to perform "sexual availability" and "weak passiveness" in order to construct feminine identities. Jenny, of whom I speak about more in the following pages, claims to have become very sexual due to her need to be accepted by others: "I got into the wrong crowd … started rebelling in order to be like my new friends and to be accepted. I started wearing lots of makeup and dressing slutty … and having sex with whoever I wanted to" (Appendix A.1). Having spent some time reflecting on this period in her life, Jenny has concluded that her sexual behaviour and drug use all stemmed from a need to feel accepted: "I knew that they [the male drug dealers] were using me but I was just happy I had friends even though they weren't real friends" (Appendix A. 1-2). As adults invested in the well being of children and youth it appears, that rather than focusing our energy on sex education and pregnancy prevention programs, we should focus not only on developing youth's critical thinking skills (i.e., media analysis), but, and more importantly, we should encourage healthy self-esteem and self-initiated goals rather than gender inspired goals.

Jenny's Victorious Battle between Childhood and "Motherhood"

Jenny spoke candidly about her life before children, and how a move to a new school combined with low self-confidence and a need to please others led her into the "wrong crowd" and into a "party lifestyle", one that consisted of heavy drugs and alcohol. This "rebellious attitude" resulted in a disrupted home life, ultimately causing Jenny to move from her home into a youth shelter. The new confidence associated with her party lifestyle and the freedom from her "controlling" parents turned Jenny from a people-pleaser and follower to a leader. In the following anecdote Jenny speaks about her then boyfriend and how the autonomy she experienced when with him led to their relationship; "Then I met Frank, the kid's dad, who owns a house and I can live there for free and get drugs for free. He wouldn't be using me because he already had everything [a house, car, and money]. I was kinda using him. For the first time in my life [I thought] I'm going to use somebody" (Jenny, Appendix A. 2). Jenny "broke free" from the institution of childhood—specifically from her

controlling parents who tried to preserve her innocence—however, she then became trapped within the institution of motherhood.

After four years and the birth of two children in what turned out to be an "emotionally abusive" relationship, Jenny finally got the strength to break free. When I asked Jenny why it took four years to leave Frank this is what she said:

> *I wanted to leave him but you know that show Intervention[1] every time they are talking about the person's past they mention how their parents split up and how upset it made them [the children] so I was afraid it was inevitable that they [the children] would be on drugs. So I finally made the decision in my head to stay with him for Molly [daughter] not for me.* (Appendix A. 3)

I find it horrifying and yet not at all surprising that a television show that perpetuates patriarchal family ideals (i.e., the nuclear family) aided Jenny's decision to stay with an abusive drug addicted partner. Compounded with the media's influence, Jenny's mother further reinforced such patriarchal ideals. Even after Jenny repeatedly explained to her mother the devastating realities of their relationship, including Frank's emotional abuse, his worsened drug and alcohol habit, and his complete lack of parenting, Jenny's mother encouraged her to stay "for the children" and to "make it work" or else she would "be on her own"; in other words, Jenny would be forced to live on the streets with her children (Appendix A.5). The reinforcement of the institution of motherhood through both the actions of her mother and what she witnessed daily in the media led Jenny to believe that raising her children in a nuclear family overrode the negative effects of parental drug use and emotional abuse. Jenny truly believed she was doing what every "Good Mother" is supposed to do; she was living *for* her children. For four long years Jenny relinquished herself and her children to fit the ideals of patriarchal motherhood: "Like rape is too strong of a word but I was in a relationship against my will; he wanted it but knew I was just staying in it for her [Molly]. It's like I handed him over my body and said, here have me, do whatever you want with me as long as Molly is happy" (Appendix A. 3).

Eventually Jenny packed up and left Frank and her parents let her move back in, however they soon began controlling Jenny in much the same way Frank did as they perceived her to be an incompetent child:

> *My parents were starting to treat me the same way Frank was treating me. They were controlling me, dictating me and emotionally abusing me. And I finally realized that's why they wanted me to stay with Frank—they couldn't see how wrong it was—they are just like him. I didn't realize until*

PTF[9] started coming to this class [YPEP] and we were talking about good and bad relationships that I realized how bad they treated me. I just thought it was normal. The whole year I was there (at home) they refused to let me leave. I wanted to go to PTF and they wouldn't let me move there. I tried leaving one time and they stopped me. They threatened me, manipulated me, controlled all the decisions I made. They treated me like a child. I didn't get the chance to leave until my parents went travelling. I packed my bags, left a note on the kitchen table and left. They had replaced the burden he [Frank] was. I had traded him for my parents. (Jenny, Appendix A.5)

Although Jenny's situation may seem extreme to some, motherhood theorizers including Rich, Maushart, and Ruddick have all argued that far too many women mother at the cost of their authentic selves while mothering within the institution of motherhood, and in Jenny's case, mothering within the institution of childhood. As Adrienne Rich asserted in her book *Of Women Born:* "Between a patriarchal State and the patriarchal family as guardians of children, there is little to choose" (Rich xxxiv). For four years Jenny felt like she had little choice but to stay with Frank; but once she reasoned life without him was better than life with him she left and never looked back: "Even after I left him my life was the exact same except he wasn't in it. If I could do it before him I could do it after him" (Jenny, Appendix A.4). Although indirectly, Jenny realized and resisted the control and constrain forced upon her by both the institutions of childhood and motherhood and she is an empowered women and mother as a result.

Agency and Empowerment

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu concluded from his work on social power relations that human knowledge is reflexive. He believed that certain situations—often those we perceive as unfamiliar or uncontrollable—encourage humans to engage in self-reflection and self-questioning; leading them to examine their positioning within the larger social context. In her work, "Young Mothers, Agency and Collective Action: Issues and Challenges," Dierdre M. Kelly references the theory of Pierre Bourdieu in order to demonstrate how young women experience agency due to their *new* positioning as mothers: "More space opens up for agency-as-invention when individuals encounter unfamiliar circumstances or are confronted by events that prompt self-questioning" (11). Both the arguments of Bourdieu and Kelly are evident in Jenny's experiences. It was not until Jenny left Frank and moved back home that she realized and reflected on her mistreatment. And as discussed earlier, it was not until Jenny became a mother that she

also reflected on her experiences with the drug dealers. For the first time, Jenny, as a mother, experienced *authentic* agency as she began to discern her needs from the needs of the people and the institutions that controlled her life; her mothering became her very source of empowerment. According to post-structural feminist researcher Browyn Davis:

> Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one's identity. (qtd. in Kelly 11-12)

Jenny's final words in our interview together beautifully sum up Davis' analysis of agency:

> S: *Where would you be today if you hadn't had your children?*
> J: *Well, that's a tough question to ask. Because if I could go back eight years with the brain that I have now I would have accomplished all the things I am now setting out to do. But if I went back eight years to the brain I had then I would have did everything the same because I didn't know any better. Only now I know better.*

Jenny has now recognized the multifaceted dynamics that governed her life as she reflects on what constrained her and why she was a victim of such constraints. She further recognizes that such reflection was made possible by her experiences. Therefore her agency stems from her realization and her continued resistance to her "powerful others." According to Andrea O'Reilly, if mothers are to empower their children and therefore engage in anti-sexist child rearing, they must first be empowered themselves. Jenny has decided to not only resist her positioning with the institution of motherhood but also her children's positioning within the institutions of gender and childhood:

> *I'm going to teach my son to respect women and I'm going to teach my daughter to be independent and to love herself. And I'm not just going to give the "sex talk" like all parents do; that does nothing for the kid except teach them that all relationships are about sex! What about teaching them how to treat each other? How both people need to be respected and feel equally loved? Sex is such a small part of it! But parents make such a big deal about it. They need to know how relationships work, like what's*

abusive, emotional abuse or physical abuse. That's what really matters!

Jenny demonstrates her awareness of how powerful the institutions are in governing individual's lives and perspectives. She recognizes the constructions of femininity and masculinity and how they influence male and female relationships. There is no question that Jenny is an empowered mother and her children are empowered as a result. I question though whether she would be as enlightened or as empowered if she was one of her *masked* married counterparts.

The Negative Effects of Negative Discourse: Problem Parents Result in Problematic Policy

As empowered and authentic as young mothers like Jenny may be due to their positioning outside the institution of motherhood, no mother is free from the difficult and often unappreciated "mother work." During my interviews with the three young mothers I made sure to ask what the most difficult thing about motherhood was for each of them. Of course, having been a mother for the past six years I had a few assumptions as to what they may share with me. For example, I expected them to tell me about the incessant crying of their newborn babies, or the late night feedings, or the lack of sleep, and I wish they had, because what they shared with me made my assumptions seem rather insignificant. The most difficult part of all three of their mothering was in fact society's perception of them:

> *The most difficult thing for me would be society's view of us. It's hard for me not to worry about what people think and a lot of what people think about us young moms is negative. I get a lot of people staring at me, especially when I go to pick up Brandon at daycare. The moms never talk to me, they all huddle together and chat and then just stare at me. It's so uncomfortable.* (Kristen, Appendix C)

How do the stereotypes of the ideal mother affect you as a young mom?

> *Well, when I go out with Kyleigh and people always look at me bad. They just think I'm a bad mom, or that I'm too young to have kids. [They] think I should be married.* (Bridgette, Appendix B.2)

Do you think you are judged more than other mothers because you're a young mom?

> *Ya, because people try and tell me things like what to do. Like I'm doing it*

> *I'm learning by myself. Like all moms don't know everything. They could*
> *be forty and have a baby and be going through the same things as me but*
> *they look down on me like I'm not a good mom but I am!* (Bridgette,
> Appendix B.2)

With all the struggles of being a *new* mom *and* a female adolescent, it is very telling that these young mothers articulate society's negative treatment as the hardest to overcome. It is no wonder these young mothers feel such pressure and surveillance as much of the discourse perpetuates them as incompetent mothers. Consider the conclusion Josefina J. Card made in her review of the "problem" of teen pregnancy in the United States: "Adolescent parenting results in a loss of human potential" (258) and thus needs to be prevented immediately. From her research it does not appear that Card worked with or spoke directly to young mothers and therefore her conclusion is solely based on her opinion and that of the "experts" of whom she referenced. We are all entitled to our own opinion; however it is opinions like hers that produce much of the policy pertaining to young parents and that is truly problematic.

Conversely, in his research on teenage parents and policy, Simon Duncan argues that "[Teen] mothering often 'anchors the self, fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, reweaves connections, and provides a new sense of future'" (Smith Battle qtd in Duncan 316). However, he too recognizes that the moral panic perspectives akin to that of Cards are what influence *most* of the teen parent discourse, thereby resulting in *most* of the policy initiatives. He, along with Peter Selman draw on the notion of "scapegoating" to explain the gap between lived experiences and policy surrounding teen parents. They believe this "discrediting routine by which people move blame and responsibility away from themselves towards a target group" moves the attention away from the inequalities that produce the 'problem' to blaming the victims (Duncan 321). If we continue to position teen moms within the institution of patriarchal motherhood, the discourse pertaining to young parenthood will not only continue to oversimplify and homogenize the experiences of young parents (i.e. positioning them as irrational and poor decision makers) but will result in their further isolation, directly effecting and thereby limiting the policies created for them.

Conclusion: One Needs Not to Be Marginalized to Recognize and Resist; One Needs Only a Voice

This paper has illustrated the broader social and political structures of which teen and young mothers are positioned and how the institutions of childhood, gender and motherhood intersect and influence their lived experiences. I have also attempted to problematize the current discourse pertaining to young par-

enthood which positions young mothers as "at-risk" and thus represents them as problems in need of adult initiated and controlled solutions. Such homogenized and oversimplified representations fail to represent the complexities of their lived experiences thereby resulting in their further marginalization. This problem/prevention discourse then results in limited and/or ineffective policy; most of which can be attributed to the complete failure of accessing and representing the authentic perspectives of the young mothers (parents) themselves. Lastly, I demonstrated how these young women mother in and through these structural constraints ultimately experiencing authenticity and empowerment through their mothering. And, as noted in the last section, when empowered, the mothers are motivated to not only reach their goals but to motivate others to do the same, ultimately engaging in social and political activism.

With that said, I understand that there are multiple and intersecting variables that govern the lives of young mothers including their race and socio-economic status, and I believe all variables must be understood (at an individual level) in order for programs to properly serve the needs addressed by young mothers; not the needs attributed to them by society. My research reflected a very small, white, lower- to middle-class, sample size, over a short period of time and therefore much more work is necessary to reflect and deconstruct the institutions we are all subjected too. Even if the ethnographic portion of my research had been larger and longer however, my call to action would remain the same. The current discourse *must* address the complex and intersectional lived positioning of young mothers if society is ever to work in their best interests. So far, current public and political patriarchal policies work to sustain the "othering" of young mothers as they fail to gain the perspective of the mothers themselves. Government reports and documents rarely cite qualitative research and therefore policy makers (and society by default) only receive a one-dimensional view of teen parenting. Duncan attributes the superiority of such one-sided discourse to associations made between quantitative methods and "economic science, figures and machines, and *men*" (323). Although represented in the discourse as a catastrophic and life-ending event, or as some argue "a loss of human potential," the qualitative studies that have sought the perspectives of young mothers seem to draw the same conclusion: that teenage parenting for many is a positive experience, one that changes their life for the better. It is these conclusions that need to be reflected in the discourse as only then will policies and programs begin to work in the best interest of the mothers. In order to stop reproducing the "status-quo" both on paper and in our real lives *all* individuals—not just those on who are marginalized and positioned outside patriarchy—must resist and dismantle the patriarchal institutions. One needs not to be marginalized to recognize and resist; one needs only a voice.

[1]*Intervention* is a television series that airs on A&E. "Each program follows one or two participants, each of whom has an addiction and believes they are being filmed for a documentary of their problem. Their situations are actually being documented in anticipation of an intervention by family and/or friends."
[2]PTF (pseudonym) is a local shelter which houses and supports abused women and children.

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