
“It Doesn’t Matter if You’re 15 or 45, Having a Child is a Difficult Experience”

Reflexivity and Resistance in Young Mothers’ Constructions of Identity

The research literature and popular media predominantly establish single young motherhood as a social problem. This problem characterization of young mothers enables negative identity inferences about those for whom the category is potentially relevant. This article provides a discussion of the ways in which members of this problematic social category locally construct the meaning and relevance of the category to their own identities. Discussion groups of young mothers were recorded and analysed, revealing discursive practices by which young mothers construct the category, resist negative inferences, and establish more positive category associations. Participants negotiated the meaning and relevance of the category “single young mother,” using strategies that both reinforce and undermine cultural ideologies. In so doing, they accomplished identities for themselves that allowed for an evaluation of “good” mother—an accomplishment that entailed a reworking of the cultural repertoire for understanding motherhood.

Introduction

Category membership as a resource for identity

Within mainstream psychological and public health research, the phenomenon of “single teenage mother” is frequently treated as a social problem in need of remedy. Studies cite rising incidence rates, review prevention and intervention strategies, and relate the significant risks of being and having an unmarried teen mother (e.g., Akinbami, Cheng, and Kornfeld, 2001; Coren et al., 2003; Letourneau, et al., 2004). Some of these risks include low educational achievement, poverty, disrupted identity formation and diminished life direction (Akinbami et al., 2001; Coren, et al., 2002; Letourneau, Stewart, and Barnfather, 2004). Children of young mothers are also reported to be at

an increased risk for maltreatment, intellectual deficiencies, behavioural problems, and violent offending (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Belsky, and Silva, 2004; Letourneau et al., 2004). While this body of research has been criticized for confounding the disadvantaged circumstances of low socioeconomic status with mothers' age, for ignoring the potential benefits of parenting for adolescents, and for essentializing adolescent mothers in terms of deficiency, the social risks and harm associated with being and having a young mother continue to be promulgated by mainstream academic and media accounts (Kelly, 1996, 2000; Macleod, 2001; Phoenix, 1996; Raeff, 1996). The more negative depictions dominate conventional knowledge of the social category "teenage mother," and the attributes of being poor, uneducated, and incapable have been established as stereotypical associations.

As a social category, "teenage mother" is inference-rich and serves as a cultural resource by which to interpret and account for a young mother's conduct (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1995; Sacks, 1992). Whether one claims or is cast into membership, social categories are bound with activities, predicates, rights and obligations that members are expected to possess or perform (Widdicombe, 1998). We belong to numerous social categories that reflect our relationships and roles (e.g. daughter, student, cashier) as well as our gender, age, ethnicity, social class, etc., although all are not salient or relevant in every social interaction. Contextual and situational cues relate to the likelihood of a particular category being relevant. When one's membership in a particular social category is relevant, reliance on what is conventionally known about that category allows for subtle interactional work (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Sacks 1979). If a one is oriented to as a young mother, then what is known about young mothers is used to understand that individual's contribution in an interaction. The meaning and consequence, i.e., the social force, of one's contribution to a social interaction will be understood according to relevant social categories. In this way, social categories are integral to one's identity.

At times invoking our member status in a particular social group or category, i.e., our category membership, can be advantageous. We can use category membership to develop a sense of belonging or to authenticate claims (Davies and Harré, 1990; Van Langenhove and Harré, 1995). Orienting to one's status as a mother, for example, can be a way to legitimize giving advice or advocate for social change. Invoking category membership can also be disadvantageous. Associated features can be detrimental to those for whom the category is potentially relevant (Widdicombe, 1998). Conventional knowledge about category members can be used to position subjects as incompetent or without entitlements, producing exclusion and marginalization (Morgan, 2002). As well, the transgression of ideologies that bound categories can be used to warrant complaints or aggression (Stokoe, 2003). For young mothers, unfavourable category associations can occasion claims about the inappropriateness of taking on motherhood, questions about a mother's competency, and the deprivation

of power to make decisions for herself and for her children (Clumpus, 1996; Croghan and Miell, 1998).

The current study

The current study examines the narratives and discussions of young mothers as an enterprise in which they construct their identity as members of a potentially problematic category. Reflecting on their experiences and understandings, these young women negotiate the meaning and relevance of the category "single young mother," using strategies that both reinforce and undermine cultural ideologies. In so doing, they construct identities for themselves that allow for an evaluation of "good" mother—an accomplishment that entails a reworking of the dominant cultural repertoire for understanding motherhood.

Analytic framework

Discursive psychology informs the analytic framework of this study, which draws on the varied work of Antaki and Widdicombe (1998), Davies and Harré, (1990), Edwards (1998) and Sacks (1979), as well as the feminist scholarship of Kitzinger (2000) and Stokoe (2004). In the psychology of selfhood and identity, discursive psychology focuses on the linguistic practices by which identities are constructed and the social functions of these constructions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In this framework, identity is regarded as an emerging product of socio-cultural interactions (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Harré, 1991). It becomes a complex, dynamic process accomplished through several, often overlapping, relations and systems. This constructionist orientation assumes that the self and identity are negotiated and made meaningful through a cooperative enterprise of people in relationship with others (Gergen, 1987).

Categories too are made meaningful through our interactions with others. They are constructed through an ongoing discourse of characteristics, features and generalized expectations that become associated with a group of people (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1995). This means that identities and categories are not fixed or absolute; they are negotiated and managed in our everyday talk. As such, they can be taken up or they can be resisted.

Data source

Participants in this study are all unmarried young mothers who are conventionally identified as "at risk": they live with low incomes, marginal social support networks, and in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods of ethno-racial diversity. They participate in a literary program for young mothers offered by an organization that distinguishes itself in its focus on positive community development and empowerment. The program is held at residences and drop-in centres for pregnant and parenting teens. Participants in the program have reported that social assistance is their primary source of income. Many also have experienced violence, abuse, and homelessness. They self-identified as Black or Caribbean-Canadian, Latin, mixed heritage and white.¹

The program includes weekly book groups or “reading circles” that encourage participants to be reflective and explore challenging issues through reading contemporary fiction. Discussions involve many different topics, such as how a heroine’s attempt to resolve a conflict could be applied to a problem they are having, or how prejudice surfaces in the story and in their own interactions with others. The book group discussions were recorded for my Master’s thesis research and excerpts from these discussions are used in the current analysis. Participants were introduced to myself and the research project a week before data collection was scheduled. They were informed about the purpose of the research and that an upcoming session was going to be recorded. On the day of data collection, informed consent had to have been provided by each participant in attendance before recording proceeded. Each book group had approximately seven to ten attendees, although every attendee did not necessarily participate in the discussion. All names that appear in excerpts are pseudonyms. For this article, I selected excerpts from two discussions about stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice in which participants oriented to the category “single young mother.” During these discussions, participants revealed personal experiences with prejudice and stigmatization.

As I engage in this description of those whose discourse will be the focus of this research, it is not without the awareness that to do so necessarily positions them, setting expectations and meaning for their interactions prior to the observation of their own discourse. My emphasis on these young women’s negotiation of the identity category “single young mother” reflects an interest in the cultural constructions of motherhood and the impact these have on the daily lives of women for whom they are relevant. My analysis is both informed and constrained by my own experiences negotiating motherhood and other ostensibly incongruent identities. However, I make no claims to speak on behalf of the women whose reflections form the basis of this study. “Single young mother” is made relevant by their contributions to the book groups, which constitute and are constituted by this identity. My intention is to bring their discourse within the broader realm of conceptualizing motherhood, speaking to both the diversity and shared experiences of those who confront this powerful and influential cultural mechanism.

Findings

In the original study, I investigated and provided a detailed analysis of the ways that the category “single young mother” was variously made meaningful by conversational participants (Darisi, 2005). In that analysis, there was careful attention to the turn-by-turn organization of talk, the indexical use of discursive strategies and to the rhetorical implications of the accounts, according to the methodology of Discourse Analysis (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Here, I present the general findings, summarizing the analysis around participants’ negotiation of their identities as single young mothers. First, I provide an example of participants’ construction of the category “single young mother” and the ways

that the category is taken to inform judgements about, and treatment of, young mothers. I then provide examples of the ways in which the negative inferences and positions made available by this category are resisted.

Negotiating motherhood

Participating in the ongoing discourse of single young mothers

The following excerpts are taken from a book group discussion held at a community agency that provides housing and resources for pregnant teens, single young mothers and their babies. Alysha, Lydia, Teresa, Amy and Jackie are young mothers; Gail is the group facilitator. The group was asked about the stereotype associated with single young mothers. As the discussion proceeds, Gail asks for clarification and writes the group's responses on a flip chart. This first excerpt provides those responses.

Amy: *That they're whores...*

Gail: Whores?

Lydia: *That they don't know who their baby's father is and they're-*

Alysha: *They're, uh, they don't know how to raise their kid and-*

Gail: They don't know-

Alysha: *They waste their money on drugs and not formula...*

Gail: Waste money on drugs.

Alysha: *Well, not on drugs, but they waste their money on-*

Lydia: *Foolishness*

Gail: Anything else?

Lydia: *They live off of welfare and they don't do nothing with their life*

Alysha: *They're not in school and they probably don't live at home; they got kicked out...*

Gail: Uneducated.

Alysha: *But mostly is that they're- they're like sluts and stuff, I think...*

Gail: So these are all negative things, right?

Anne: *And they're also not prepared to take care of a child...*

Alysha: *Yeah.*

Gail: Okay, not good mothers.

Alysha: *That we don't know that—I mean they don't know anything.*

Good mothers are defined through discourses of children's needs and of adult responsibilities and relationships (Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd, 1991; Raeff, 1996). In constructing the generalized expectations associated with single young mother, these participants invoke behaviours and attributes anathema to the moral order of motherhood. The first descriptor, "whores," reinforces the regulatory framework of female sexual reputation (Kitzinger, 1995) in which promiscuity distinguishes the "bad girls" from the good. Following this descriptor, single young mothers are defined through failures to meet the needs of their

children (“they don’t know how to raise their kid”; “they waste their money on drugs and not formula”), including the taken-for-granted need of providing an identifiable and available father (“don’t know who their baby’s father is”). Participants relate an understanding of the stereotyped view in which single young mothers lack care and concern, and participate in selfish indulgence (whether “drugs” or “foolishness”). In addition to a characterization which strongly implies “not good mothers,” single young mothers are also presented as not good adults. They are expected to fail as contributing members of society (“live on welfare and don’t do nothing with their lives,” “not in school”) and as members in a family network (“got kicked out”).

These associations relate the category to disentitlements of both knowledge and experience (MacMartin, 2002), meaning that young mothers are expected not to know or not to do certain activities by virtue of being members in a particular category. This disentitlement undermines category members’ status as mothers in that it denies them a core attribute of motherhood—the knowledge of how to rear and nurture a child. In their account of the stereotype, members of this category are positioned as having neither the skills, disposition, nor virtue to adequately mother their children. By relating the deficiencies of “not good mothers” with single young mothers, this characterization enforces common cultural representations of the “good” mother as well as the exclusion of the single and young from that representation.

In this first excerpt, conversational participants maintained the social-problem storyline associated with single young mothers. However, they also avoided implicating these associations and expectations as anything personally meaningful—note the regular absence of self-reflexive pronouns (“I,” “we”). In the last line of the excerpt, Alysha makes conspicuous a conversational need to maintain an other-ness quality to the construction of the stereotype with the self-initiated, self-repair that changes “we” to “they” (“That we ... I mean they don’t know anything”). This repair attempts to dissociate the group from a sense of collective identity within this negative construction (a strategy also noted by Prettyman, 2005).

The next excerpt offers an example in which participants’ own identities are made relevant. Jackie and Teresa work together to construct a typical experience of being on the bus with one’s child, establishing the meaning and relevance of such an experience for a young mother.

Jackie: *They even watch your child’s head ... you’re holding onto your child and you’re like walking by and sitting down and it just kind of moves a bit—it’s like “You’ve got to watch their head! Hold onto their head!”*

Teresa: *I know.*

In this account, a young mother is told with imperative force: “You’ve got to watch their head! Hold onto their head!” Supporting an infant’s head is a skill learned early in the experience of child care. To command a mother

to do something that she should already know disentitles her, positioning her as unskilled and undermining her status. Jackie implies, however, that such a command is unwarranted when she minimizes the provoking movement with the descriptors "just kind of" and "a bit." In her formulation, Jackie appeals to a common understanding. Her use of the second-person pronouns "you" and "your" is colloquial, which avoids the reflexivity of "my" and the formality of "one" yet establishes a sense of a shared general experience (Houghton, 1995). The commonality of this experience is taken up by Teresa, who supports Jackie's account ("I know") and co-constructs the meaning of the event with her completion of Jackie's next turn. Teresa also employs the first person plural, "we," thereby implicating the relevance of negative expectations and associations for herself and the other participants.

In this second excerpt, the greater reflexivity suggests that participants do see themselves positioned by the negative expectations associated with single young mother. While they may have initially avoided positioning themselves when characterizing "not good mothers," the attributes and disentanglements associated with "single young mother" are not irrelevant and may be disadvantageous to their social interactions. When asked how they respond to the comments they encounter on the bus, some answered: "I get mad," "I ignore it," and "I say something"—all accounts of their refusal to take up the undesirable positions made available to them in the actions of others.

Resisting an undesirable identity

Resistance may be a grand and orchestrated event. Or it may be a mundane practice, involving the subtle and complex use of discursive strategies that challenge and subvert an opposing view (Croghan and Miell, 1998). For individuals within marginalized groups, resistance can be accomplished through indirect strategies and delicate management of meaning (Houghton, 1995). While the social-problem characterization resonates in participants' construction of the category "single young mother," these young mothers do not take up this storyline as a legitimate resource for their own identity as mothers. They accomplished their resistance through treating the category more as a topic for discussion and by casting it in terms of stereotypes and discrimination.

As can be seen in first excerpt, participants regularly employed the third-person plural when speaking of category members, making the category an object of discussion and not a resource for identity. In the one instance "we" was used, it was immediately repaired. Retaining "we" would be problematic because it identifies conversational participants as members of an undesirable category, the "not good mothers." "They" is less threatening to participants' identities and accomplishes a dissociation with the negative identity inferences were made available. "They" also turns attention towards generalized others, a practice consistent with the common understanding of a stereotype.

The facilitator contributed to participants' resistance of the negative identities made available by the category "single young mother" by ensur-

ing the discussion was framed in terms of stereotypes. She initially asks “so what’s the stereotype” and later summarizes, “Okay so this is a stereotype,” then explicitly linked these to discrimination and prejudice. Couching the accounts of “single young mother” within the discourse of stereotypes lessens the inferential impact of participants’ description and undermines its value as an authentic representation of category members. In employing “stereotype” to characterize the account, these young mothers can say that single young mothers are whores, bad mothers, and uneducated because they are talking about over-generalizations of a category which do not reflect particular knowledge and which form the basis for unfair judgment. It is also advantageous in that it diminishes participants’ responsibility for being originators of the features and characteristics they associate with single young mothers; these can be treated as views held to exist out there in the world, independent of the speaker. Furthermore, employing “stereotype” to characterize an account makes available negative inferences (such as being ignorant or prejudiced) about those who hold these stereotypes to be representative.

In the next excerpt, the stereotype is used to contrast the accomplishments of a young mother in an attempt to revise category associations and reposition category members in a more favourable way. Jackie suggests an alternative storyline:

You have to have people who have shown that they are not the stereotype ... like I guess from personal experience—now I know I’m the exception to the rule Gail—but, you know, I came from you know a middle, upper middle-class background. I have very supportive family members. My son’s father did disappear; I did drop out of high school before I got pregnant. I have finished doing high school, I did my GED.... I’m now taking care of my son, working full-time, taking a course. These are things that—that stereotypically—I should not be able to accomplish and that the fact that I can, along with a lot of other women who are just, you know, just as capable....

Jackie’s solution to overcoming the social impact of negative category associations is to provide disconfirming evidence (“you have to have people who have shown they are not the stereotype”). To accomplish this task, she positions herself as both exceptional and exemplary. She accounts for being exceptional in her circumstances by invoking an “upper middle-class background” and “supportive family members” as a contrast with the association that young mothers are poor and at odds with their families. Conversely, she constructs herself as exemplary through circumstances that meet category expectations: “my son’s father did disappear” and “I did drop out of high school.” However these circumstances are positioned as inconsequential to her success as a young mother, as she juxtaposes the stereotype with her own accomplishment. Specifically, she lists activities (“I did my GED,” “taking care of my son,” “working

full-time" and "taking a course") in direct opposition to the expectation that single young mothers are unable to care for their children and are non-contributing members of society. By not being/doing the stereotypical category associations, those attributes and behaviours indicative of "not a good mother," she establishes a position as a good, caring mother.

In the next excerpt, she continues her discussion by directly challenging the assumption that women are innately prepared to have and, by implication, raise a child.

...they're so intelligent and they have so many wonderful opinions but people don't see that because they're not willing to get past the fact that they're quote unquote kids having kids which drives me insane honestly because the one thing that I've noticed is that it doesn't matter if you're 15 or 45, having a child is a difficult experience and nobody's ever prepared to have a child.

She first characterizes young mothers with laudatory phrases ("so intelligent" and "so many wonderful opinions") and undermines "kids having kids" as an appropriate characterization. She then makes the claim that age is inconsequential, that "it doesn't matter" to a woman's preparation for child rearing. Although an age at which bearing children is problematized, "45" is firmly within our cultural conception of adulthood and is accepted as an age at which a woman has the experience and maturity to mother her children. Jackie contests this conception, positioning "15" and "45" as equivalent in an attempt to undermine not only the disempowerment of young mothers but also the conventional understanding that women come with a natural skill to care for children ("having a child is a difficult experience" and "nobody's ever prepared to have a child").

In both these excerpts, Jackie attempts to revise category-based inferences and to challenge typical assumptions by refusing to support age and relationship status as necessary conditions for good mothering. The social force of her account is that it establishes what counts as peripheral and what counts as the central attributes of a good mother. The middle class background and supportive family members didn't prevent her from becoming a young mother. The absence of her child's father and disruption in her education didn't occasion an inability to meet her responsibilities. Age and relationship status are unwarranted considerations; adult responsibilities and meeting children's needs, however, remain at the core. Her resistance is directed against the boundaries around motherhood in which "young" and "single" preclude one from obtaining the status of "good mother."

Conclusion

We well recognize that motherhood is a powerful and influential cultural mechanism (Silva, 1996; Smart, 1996), involved in the attribution of

knowledge, abilities, and obligations belonging to women (Glenn, 1994). Motherhood before the age of 20 deviates from normative expectations and frequently makes available negative attributions. However studies such as this one, which have allowed young mothers' own voices and perspectives to dominate analysis, have concluded that young mothers are invested in the good mother identity, subverting and refusing to take up the discourse of "teenage mother." Although frequently up against a background of poverty and stigmatization, they demonstrate the desire to do the best for their children (see McDermott and Graham, 2005).

In the current study, conversational participants used book group discussions to create an alternative spaces in which to resist conventional knowledge about "single young mothers" and formulate a more positive identity. Their version of the features and attributes assigned to the category was aligned with the social-problem characterization. Yet while this characterization seemingly makes available negative inferences and subject positions, speakers actively resisted and undermined this version as a legitimate resource for knowledge about single young mothers. The context of discussing stereotypes allowed them to establish an indeterminate otherness to the category and to cast associated features and expectations as over-generalizations based on ignorance and, therefore, not representative of actual young mothers (and themselves, in particular). Furthermore, book group participants negatively positioned those who hold stereotypical associations by implying ignorance and poor judgment. Stereotypical associations were made to be an inappropriate resource for making inferences about the kind of mothers or women they were.

Resistance can be understood as a strategy of resilience as these young mothers work to establish a place for themselves within the maternal story (McDermott and Graham, 2005). Jackie's speech is a way of accomplishing empowerment in that she overcomes the voices of others to establish an alternative discourse. In this storyline, young mothers are repositioned as good mothers and promoted as intelligent, competent, and caring. From the wrong side of a normative ideal, stereotypical category associations can serve as a place from which to make the move from "other" to "I," with discursive resistance as a strategy to move ideological boundaries.

This article was developed from my Masters thesis research, for which I gratefully acknowledge the guidance and support of Linda Wood, Department of Psychology and Clare MacMartin, Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph. I also thank Linda Wood for comments on an earlier draft. A version of this paper was presented at the at the Association for Research on Mothering conference on Young Mothers in May of 2005.

¹The executive director of the organization expressed concern about disrupting the regular practices of the book groups, emphasizing that gaining trust and

acceptance could be a challenge. I acted as a participant in each of the groups I attended, taking my turn with each of the associated activities. I also attempted to be as minimally disruptive to the book groups as possible when collecting data. Demographic information about book group participants was thus not formally collected through the distribution of surveys but was obtained through conversations with participants and with the executive director.

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