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Making Statistics Lie

Interrogating Teenage Motherhood in a Rural African-American Community

The focus of this paper is to analyze the ways that three African-American women from one rural community in the southern U.S. interrogate social languages constructed around teenage pregnancy, which are influential in the construction of public health policies targeting young women said to be "at risk" for this social problem. While the research literature acknowledges that young Black women may be aware of these social languages, my research question asks if and how they construct their identities accordingly. This paper first looks at the ways that teenage motherhood is constructed as a social problem in the research literature—according to particular "social languages." I then look at the way that three women position themselves within their community according to various social languages on teen motherhood. In particular, through narrative analysis I look at how the participants refer to these social languages to position themselves as certain kinds of women in their community.

> I got my vision, I got my dreams, and there are days when I feel down like I really can't make it, I can't go no further, I'm nothing…. But it's like I have goals—I want to be something different from what I have right now … I can become what statistics have designed me to be, a nothing, or I can make statistics a lie…. (Polakow, 1992: 73)

Introduction

In Valerie Polakow's (1992) study of young African-American women's perceptions of themselves as teenage mothers, one participant reflects on the tendency of medicine and the media to represent her as being yet another number in a long line of young women who have become teenage mothers. Under this rubric, she is variously represented as a burden to the U.S. political

economy, or as another wasted life in the Black community (Merrick, 2001; Polakow, 1992). Being a statistic, in this context, means fulfilling negative outcomes constructed by dominant society—constructed through a prism of race, class, and gender. The image of teenage motherhood is also linked to government surveillance of the bodies of women deemed "less valuable" in our society (Collins, 1999) and to a public health preoccupation with stemming the tide of teenage pregnancy through pharmaceuticals (such as Depo Provera, Implanon, and previously Norplant) used to combat this social problem (Roberts, 1997).

However, what might it mean to "make statistics lie," as one young woman speaks of herself with reference to teenage pregnancy? Might making statistics lie mean not falling prey to one's circumstances at hand, or if one does become pregnant at a young age, not having the same outcome as might be deemed normative for the situation of teenage pregnancy? The focus of this paper is to analyze the ways that three African-American women from one rural community in the southern U.S. interrogate a dominant discourse on teenage pregnancy prevalent in the media and influential in the construction of public health policies targeting young women said to be "at risk" for myriad social problems. While the research literature acknowledges that young Black women may be aware of this discourse constructed around teenage pregnancy (Elise, 1995; Williams, 1991), my research question asks if and how the women constructed their identities along the lines of this hegemonic model.

In this paper I will first briefly review the literature written on teenage motherhood as a social problem. In particular, I look at the way that teenage motherhood is constructed by social scientists as a social problem. "Social languages," or "prevailing ways of thinking about the world and our lives," (Rose, 2003) are used by social scientists to explain why or how a young woman may come to be a teenaged mother. However, they are not only bandied about in the academy or in the public health and policymaking setting. As narrative resources, social languages are also reflected in the stories that ordinary people tell about their lives and the world around them. Whether economic or culturally determinist, social languages were used as resources by three women in telling their own (and others') stories of teenage pregnancy and its purported outcomes.

In the second part of this paper I examine how the three women take up the reviewed social languages to position themselves and others as certain kinds of women in the community. Key to my analysis, however, is the prioritization of the women as narrative actors in telling their own stories. They do not just willy-nilly take up a social language and apply it to themselves and others. Rather, the three women work these languages as a "part of accomplishing matters of ongoing local interest" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, p. 95)—strategically positioning themselves as "outliers," or in contrast with, "those statistics" said to be found within their community.

Social languages of teenage motherhood

Economic determinist language

Represented as a social problem, teenage motherhood is often depicted as a passive response to oppressive socio-economic/environmental constraints (Anderson, 1990; Dash, 2003; Musick, 1993; Wilson, 1987). Within an economically determinist social language, teenage pregnancy in the urban Black community is said to be the result of a past history of slavery and sharecropping (Dash, 2003), and a present rendered almost hopeless by the demise of the industrial sector and a resulting lack of jobs (particularly for African-American men) (Anderson, 1990; Wilson, 1987).

This social language links the development of Black teenage motherhood to economic changes in the U.S. For instance, in his investigative journalism report on teenage motherhood, Leon Dash (2003) links the phenomenon of teenage motherhood in urban African-American communities with the growth of the sharecropping system in the rural south. Teenage motherhood is explained as an accommodation to a changing economic landscape, in which young Black women had as many children as they could to meet the labor demands needed to successfully participate in a system requiring a sheer volume of workers. A shift to a post-industrial mode of production has resulted in a decreasing value for laboring bodies, as children are no longer valued for increasing output. However, the remnants of this economic imperative remain alive in the minds of the Black community, with the rural custom of early childbearing almost unconsciously reenacted as a cultural pattern of survival (Dash, 2003).

Cultural strategies language

Alternatively, teenage motherhood is depicted as an active, rationally motivated reaction to environmental constraints—in which a young woman seeks to survive, or adapt, to her circumstances by aptly playing the lousy hand she's been dealt (Battle, 1995, 2005; Geronimus, 1996, 2003; Stack, 1974; Williams, 1991). Elaine Bell Kaplan (1997) refers to this social language as a "cultural strategies perspective." A cultural-strategies social language is notably referenced by Carol Stack (1974) in her ethnographic study of family life in The Flats, a predominantly African-American community in the Midwestern U.S. In *All Our Kin* (Stack, 1974), teen mothers are represented as actors, creatively responding to their social circumstances to achieve status in their communities through one of the only paths left open to them—motherhood.

Arline Geronimus's (1996, 2003) work also references this social language, representing teen mothers as rational decision makers—who decide to have children while young as a way to adapt to future negative health outcomes. Citing a statistic that the infant mortality rate for teenaged girls in Harlem is half that of older mothers, Geronimus (2003) writes that "common sense" theories that put forth that teenage motherhood causes social problems and poverty have it backward. On the contrary, teenage motherhood is one way

for young women mired in poverty to gain a sense of agency and to achieve something tangible for themselves. As rational actors in a world of poverty, poor teenage mothers are represented as amateur economists conducting a cost/benefit analysis of their circumstances, realizing that they may derive substantial benefits within their community by having a child.

Intersectional language

Finally, an intersectional social language views teenage pregnancy through multiple lenses of race, class, and gender inequality (Kaplan, 1997; Kunzel, 1994; Merrick, 2001). This social language represents teenage motherhood as a response to structurally oppressive conditions—emotionally, in terms of one's relationships with others (family members, friends, and intimate relationships); economically, in terms of access to job opportunities; and racially, in terms of access to social capital. These mutually implicating forms of oppression intersect in the lives of young women and are integral to the experiences of young mothers.

Elaine Bell Kaplan (1997) proposes a theory of poverty-of-relationships, whereupon teenage motherhood is seen as a strategy used by young women to make up for emotionally impoverished relationships. From this perspective, young women have children in order to form a connection with someone else. Having a baby is a way of forming a loving relationship—something that might be missing in a young woman's relationships with others. Teen mothers, thus, are depicted as resisting an oppressive reality by attempting to take control of their circumstances.

Social languages of teenage pregnancy may reflect, in part, socio-historic circumstance. But they are also imbued with the researcher's own agenda, whether the researcher is out to "prove" that teenage mothers are just like everyone else or deviant from the norm, survivors adapting to impoverished circumstances (both economically and emotionally speaking) or cunning women out to exploit "the system." As dominant narratives on teenage motherhood, these social languages, in their own right, situate young women with particular identities in relation to teenage pregnancy.

Method

> Our whole lives are dominated, though it is not always so clearly translatable, with the question "How do I look?" …[I]t is not that we are all so self-obsessed, it is that all things eventually relate back to ourselves, and it is our own sense of how we appear to the world by which we chart our lives, how we navigate our personalities that would otherwise be adrift in the ocean of other peoples' obsessions. (Grealy, 1994: 72)

What might be the concerns of teen mothers, or other community mem-

bers, in their own representations of teenage pregnancy? Lucy Grealy (1994) writes of the individual concern with self-representation, as well as how they are perceived and represented by others. A narrative perspective views acts of representation as key to the way that we make meaning of our lives. While several researchers have noted that teenage mothers are well aware of the social languages used to describe them (Lustig, 2004; Merrick, 2001; Williams, 1991), an analytical gap remains in the literature on the ways that young women and other women from within communities "at risk" situate themselves with particular identities in relation to social languages on teenage pregnancy.

Narrative approach

As part of a larger study on the gender socialization of rural African-American women in a North Florida community (Gubrium, 2005), I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 women, ranging in age between 18 and 61 years old. The purpose of the larger study was to document the narrative contours of the growing-up stories of rural African American women. I was especially interested in how the women constructed their experiences in relation to commonplace troubles such as narcotics addiction, intimate partner violence, teenage motherhood, and related health problems. While all of the participants in this study spoke during points of their interview about motherhood, with many speaking of teenage motherhood, the three participant narratives presented in this paper serve as exemplars in representing the different kinds of orientations toward teen motherhood to be found within the interviews. Their accounts bear witness to the narrative possibilities that can grow from contending with dominant images of teenage motherhood and the self-identifying imperatives of which they and women like them deal with on a daily basis. Their narrative orientations and representational work are the focus of my analysis here.

Participant perspectives

While the three participants were aware of negative constructions surrounding teenage motherhood, not all of their narratives were rooted in a "frustration at the lack of opportunities" in their lives (Elise, 1995). Indeed, one woman positioned herself as succeeding as a result of her experience as a teenage mother. Three outcomes of teenaged motherhood are presented in this paper to structure the three women's narratives on teenage pregnancy. One participant speaks of what it means to fall into a cycle of teenage pregnancy. Here, the participant is concerned with representing herself as a statistical outlier in her community. Another participant speaks of "breaking the cycle" of teenage pregnancy, to represent herself as a different kind of woman than that of her mother and two older sisters. In this context, she situates herself as a successful woman within the context of the American Dream and contrasts her own experiences with prototypical model of teenage pregnancy said to be all too commonly realized within her family and community. Finally, a third

participant goes beyond either model—while she may have fallen into a cycle of teenage pregnancy, technically speaking, her story is not constrained by this cycle. Rather, she reworks social languages that might vilify her experiences as a teenage mother, centering her own achievements on a locally realized, Afrocentric Dream.

Falling into the cycle of teen pregnancy: Being a statistic

Participants were not so want to label themselves as statistics, as "being a statistic" connotes falling into a cycle of teenage pregnancy and is laden with negative images in dominant society. For example, within the rhetoric of population control, statistics (as those ever teeming masses) are those who are not able to control their own sexuality, much less their own lives. As potential statistics, women at risk for teenage pregnancy may not be able to control themselves and, therefore, should not be given the right to control their own (reproductive) bodies. It is in this way that temporary and permanent forms of sterilization are cast as a panacea in the fight against over population. Correspondingly, African-American women said to be "at risk" for teenaged pregnancy are reduced to negative stereotypes linked to Black female sexuality. They are consistently represented in the media and within social problems literature as "welfare queens" and "jezebels," eager to exploit "the system" while contributing to its doomed failure (Collins, 2000; Hartmann, 2002; Lubiano, 1992).

One way to analyze what it might mean to be a statistic is through an analysis of what participants claim that they are not. In a context of distancing themselves from the said norm, several participants in my larger study described themselves in contrastive terms—constructing their own identities in contrast to this prototypical character cast as typical for their community. Dorothy Smith (2003) applies the term "contrast structure" to describe the way an individual might contrast her own behavior with that of another individual, to show that her own behavior is anomalous.

Participants strategically took up contrast structures in narrating their life course to present themselves as living "outside the box"—taking a different course in life than the status quo and, in the context of this paper, distancing themselves from a cultural model of teenage pregnancy said to be traditionally found in the Black, rural South (Dougherty, 1978). Wanda's narrative, in which she positions herself as a "different kind" of woman, is an exemplary representation of this contrast structure.

At the time of our interview Wanda was 39 years old and had one teenage daughter. Taking a look at her story we may see how she positions herself as an outlier, falling outside the statistical majority of women in her community. Wanda represents herself as a woman steeped in morality and responsibility, contrasting herself with her depiction of other women in her community. During our interview she spoke of her sexual relationships as being few and far between—primarily taking place subsequent to adolescence with one longtime boyfriend, who is also the father of her daughter. In contrast to her

own behavior, she characterizes the common young woman in her community as sexually active.

> *The myth that I, the myth that you mostly hear…you understand what I'm trying to say … at a certain age, most Black teenagers are [having sex]. The pregnancy rate was very high. But my momma, she always tell me, "you carry yourself in the way, as a lady would carry herself. Your body is your temple. You respect yourself and the way you respect yourself is you make someone else respect you … especially men."*

While Wanda refers to teenage sexuality and childbirth as a myth, she also relates that the rate of teenage pregnancy in her community was very high when she was growing up. Going against this norm, she speaks of herself as taking her mother's lessons to heart, guarding her sexuality and respecting her body by not sleeping around. She is thus able to claim herself as an outlier in her community, by following dominant norms of monogamy and controlled reproduction. She signals a contrast between herself and other young women in her community, speaking of their lack in self-respect and morality in getting pregnant while teenagers.

Wanda's story references Kaplan's (1997) poverty-of-relationships theory, in which young women in her community are sleeping around because they are not taught to respect themselves, are not loved by their mothers (or do not receive the valuable lessons that she did from her own mother), and, thus, are starving for a loving relationship. In contrast, Wanda speaks of having an extremely close and loving relationship with her mother, as well as with her three brothers. She describes her pregnancy experience with much relish, as a time in life when she was especially spoiled by her over-protective brothers. Indeed, those young women facing a void of loving relationships in their lives might have resorted to pregnancy as a way to fill an emotional gap in their lives or to boost their self-esteem.

Wanda concludes her narrative by foregrounding her own perspective on mothering. Continuing her contrast structure on teenage motherhood, she separates herself from the other young women in her community in response to my question on what she considered to be important successes in her life. Wanda replied that while other young women in her community found themselves in the situation of being mothers as teenagers, often having several children while young (she noted: "Their children was about grown before I even had my first one!"), she spoke of being especially proud to have "escaped" this outcome. Women as statistics are those who fail to escape the cycle of teenage pregnancy.

Breaking the cycle and living the American dream

Several participants positioned themselves as "breaking the cycle," speaking of themselves as accomplished because they did not fall into a cycle of teenage

pregnancy. These participants also used contrast structures to distance themselves from other women in their community, whom they cast as unsuccessful women due to the burden they faced as young mothers. However, in addition to being "outliers" in their community—they also positioned themselves as successful women due to their ability to fulfill a part of the American Dream.

The American Dream is based on a positive development course, rooted in capitalist notions of individualism, accomplishment, and what are usually thought of as white, middle-class values (Gullette, 2003). While the basic storyline of the American Dream may be similar across the U.S., the plot of the story is also linked to local realities—influenced by intersectional contingencies faced by the participants. Serena, a 21-year-old single woman with no children, spoke of "breaking the cycle" of teenage pregnancy when she referred to her three older sisters and mother as "falling into the cycle" of teenage pregnancy—all at the age of 17. In contrast, she emphasizes her own still intact virginity. Her story is exemplary as she represents herself as a successful young woman poised to achieve the American Dream primarily because she was able to break this cycle.

Responsibility lards Serena's story of breaking the cycle—she speaks of herself as responsible sexually, reproductively, and morally. She begins her story, describing her only romantic relationship thus far in her life—with a young man from her town who she began to see when she was 16 years old. Even though she never had sex with her boyfriend, she relates that town gossip got to be too much for her, with community members constantly speculating about her sex life. Serena said that she decided to end her relationship with her boyfriend after three years because her own self-respect was more important to her. Through her story of chastity, she foregrounds her precipitous move to change what was almost surely bound to be her fate—nipping the cycle in its bud, so to speak. In other words, through her own rendering, she works against a theory of poverty-of-relationships, as she speaks of "not needing a man" to boost her self esteem. On the contrary, she presents herself as a young woman who possesses confidence about her own capabilities in spades.

Serena describes her relationship with her three sisters, contrasting her own chaste behavior with that of her sisters' sexually active behavior.

> *When I say I'm different from my sisters, I mean [my community] was saying I was pregnant and … gonna be pregnant and different stuff. I was like "noooo. I guarantee you I'm not gonna be pregnant at a young age." Cause all my sisters did get pregnant at age seventeen. My mom got pregnant at the age of seventeen. So, with me growing up, I seen to it that, I was gonna break that cycle.*

To a certain extent, Serena's narrative pathologizes the cycle of teenage pregnancy in her family. Describing herself (or any other woman in her community, for that matter) as potentially "at risk" of becoming pregnant, she takes

up a cultural strategies social language, in which her community expects that after three years of being in a relationship that she would surely choose to have sex with her boyfriend. "What other options did she have?" she has members of her community asking her. In contrast to other young women in her community, whom she describes as having "limited options," she speaks of herself as a "different" kind of woman, out to achieve the American Dream.

> *I'm gonna do stuff with my life. I'm gonna be somebody. Round her, most [women] are staying in apartments ["the projects"], which, I'm young, and I'm in an apartment. With me saying I'm different…. I guess it would be with [my sisters and other young women] getting pregnant at a young age … and [me] graduating with honors and different stuff.*

Serena's determined claims follow a path to the American Dream, but one tailored to a reality circumscribed by intersecting oppressions. She assembles a success story for herself in which she graduates with honors, does not get pregnant while a teenager and, thus, is able to do something valuable in life—writ large in a dominant political economy that measures a poor, Black woman's achievements in life based on her ability to support herself without state intervention. Notably, while Serena admits that she lives in a government-subsidized apartment like many other women in her community, she also emphasizes the fact that she is still young and still has much to do in life. She further noted that unlike the other apartments around her, hers is the only apartment not "sharing walls" with those around her. Metaphorically speaking, Serena's morals and behavior are like her apartment's walls—separate from the other women in her community.

In the end countering both a cultural strategies social language, which would hold that she might actively use pregnancy to adapt to difficult life circumstances (as a local form of empowerment), and an economic determinist model, which would hold that her socio-economic environment would lead her to rely on men and reproduction to secure a positive identity for herself in her community, Serena instead relies on the American Dream, rooted in individual aspiration and self-reliance (a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps type of model), to firmly establish herself as different from the other women in her community in breaking away from an oppressive cycle of teenage pregnancy.

Working the cycle through an Afrocentric dream

I was first struck by a participant's use of the metaphor of "being a statistic" in my research on gender socialization when I interviewed Quanda, a 26-year-old woman with two daughters. When asked to talk about the birth of her two daughters, Quanda spoke of running away from home when she was in high school and eventually becoming pregnant for the first time, saying that she was actually happy to get pregnant because she knew that her mother would not allow her to live at home if she was pregnant. Analyzed from a poverty-of-re-

lationships perspective, Quanda could be seen as using her pregnancy to attract attention from her mother and to form a loving connection with another person (her baby daughter). When asked about the birth of her second daughter, four years later, Quanda spoke of herself as a statistic for getting pregnant again. As a statistic, she represented herself as one of many women in her community who are not able to adequately control their reproduction.

However, when asked how she would describe herself as an adolescent, Quanda constructed an identity contrary to that of the passive teenage mother, who suffers a low self-esteem as the result of becoming a mother at such a young age: "I was nice…. Easy to get along with … I ain't have no low self esteem about me having a baby. Cause I put my baby pictures and stuff all over my locker. Everything." Especially in relation to dominant images of young Black mothers, who are usually constructed as "unfit" in the media (Collins, 1999), teen mothers are found to use professionally taken studio portraits to present a counter-hegemonic depiction of themselves—as good mothers despite the odds (Lustig, 2004). I noted this same phenomenon during my interview with Quanda, which took place at her house, where she displayed photos of her two daughters all over her living room walls and tables. Thus, she did not present herself as a mother ashamed of her children or what she had become. Instead, her story was rooted in an Afrocentric logic holding that a woman's value in her community is integrally linked to her capacity to mother and to place the well being of others above one's own well being (Burgess, 1994; Collins, 1998; Daly et al., 1995; Dougherty, 1978; Hill, 2005). In contrast with Serena's American Dream of getting ahead in life through self-reliance, perseverance, and individual pursuit, Quanda constructs a story of achieving the Afrocentric Dream through a story that links her success as a woman with her accomplishment as a dedicated mother to her children. She works the cycle of teenage pregnancy, with young motherhood serving as a clincher for her positive life outcomes.

Quanda spoke of herself as becoming more independent and assertive after the birth of her first daughter: "Even though I was young with a baby, I ain't regret it. 'Cause I was happy. I think that kept me out of a whole bunch of trouble too, having a baby. I don't care what nobody say!" Quanda provides a contrast between the usual construction of a teenage mother as "in trouble" or "at risk." The birth of her first child actually turned her life around—she describes herself as achieving more through the valuable lessons of responsibility she learned as a young mother. Highlighting her burgeoning responsibility, Quanda went on to talk about the leadership award that she received in her senior year of high school (after her daughter's birth).

> *The state troopers gave me an award for outstanding achievement, turning my life around. Like, this for a teen who done had a baby, ran away from home, had a baby, got her own place, still came to school everyday, this and that and then. So it's outstanding … from the juvenile justice*

> *system. Turned my life around where … I had got to my senior year. I was determined to do, oh yes! My whole eleventh and twelfth grade year, I had my own apartment. I went to school everyday. I walked my baby to daycare, right there, and then walked on to school.*

Quanda speaks of a changed identity for herself, from being a "follower" and "runaway" before she was a mother, to being a "leader" with achievements after she became a mother. Perhaps ironically, "the man" himself, the juvenile justice system, recognizes the way she has turned her life around—she has blossomed into a self-reliant, determined young mother who is on a recharged path towards a better life. Quanda counters a dominant narrative of statistical teenage motherhood, positioning herself as another kind of teen mother—a young woman achieving an Afrocentric Dream in which her achievements are very much rooted in her young motherhood.

Conclusion

The three women presented in this paper narratively represent themselves with identities culturally compatible with dominant and/or local meanings of success. They position themselves within an American Dream or Afrocentric logic, the key difference being that an Afrocentric logic foregrounds one's connections with another (in this case, with one's children) as crucial to one's success, whereas the American Dream relies upon individual achievement (a woman is an island, to undermine John Donne's famous quote) as a route to success.

Meanings of teen motherhood are not just a matter of internalizing social languages, which would indicate that participants simply reproduce a particular background of sexual behaviors, expectations, and experiences. Rather, it is part and parcel of participants' use of, and narration of, certain identities—to position themselves as particular types of women in their community. In this paper, we see that two participants position themselves with particular identities through the use of contrast structures—in "being different" from other women who may fall into a cycle of teenage pregnancy. Alternatively, another participant subverts the very social languages constructed around teenage pregnancy, which put forth that this social problem results in failed outcomes or is manifested through a compromised environment. The narrative analysis presented here demonstrates the variability of positions that may be constructed in relation to teenage motherhood.

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