Published in final edited form as:

Gend Soc. 2012 December 1; 26(6): 922–944. doi:10.1177/0891243212459073.

Early motherhood and the disruption in significant attachments: Autonomy and reconnection as a response to separation and loss among African American and Latina mothers*

Janet Jacobs and Stefanie Mollborn

University of Colorado

The literature on teen mothers is a vast expanse of research that to date focuses on the shifts in teen parenting trends, predictors of teen parenthood, the economic hardships that teen mothers face, and the social and psychological effects of teen parenting on the future of young mothers and their children (Barret, Roach, Morgan & Colbert, 1996; Driscoll, Sugland, Manlove & Papillo, 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Ketterlinus, Lamb & Nitz 1991; Lesser, Koniak-Griffen & Anderson, 1999; Turner, Grindstaff, & Phillips, 1990). These studies, while examining the numerous and varied dimensions of teen parenting within the United States, offer little in the way of a relational analysis of teen mother's lives as they transition from adolescence and childhood into young adulthood and early parenting. More specifically, the existing research fails to address how becoming a teen mother alters a young woman's relationships with her family members, romantic partners, and friends, and how these relational changes influence her sense of self. This gap in the research is especially significant for studies of African American and Latina young women whose rates of teen pregnancy continue to be higher than those of Asian American and White young women.

The research on teen parenting among young women of color has tended to overlook the relationship strains that teen pregnancy creates for African American and Latina adolescents, reinforcing instead the popular perception that teen pregnancy is an acceptable norm within communities of color and that teen mothers are typically embraced by their families and communities. Although a small number of studies have addressed the relationship strains between adult mothers and pregnant teen-age daughters in African American families (Burton, 1990; Kaplan, 1996;), there is an absence of research on the disruptive impact of teen mothering on multiple attachments, including siblings and extended family members, and on the social networks that typically support adolescent girls.

To fill what we consider this important gap in this literature on teen motherhood, we conducted a qualitative study of 48 African American and Latina teen mothers living in the Denver metropolitan area, a region where teen birth rates are well above the national average. Among the primary goals of our research was to explore the relationship between teen parenthood and the socio-emotional development of adolescent mothers. In particular we sought to understand the consequences of early motherhood for childhood attachments and the shift in relational connection that young mothers experience. Based on an analysis of life history narratives, the findings of our research suggest a complicated and relationally difficult transition to parenthood for African American and Latina girls who, as teen mothers, experience rejection and a loss of acceptance within the family and the larger relational community. Faced with ruptures in significant childhood attachments and strains

*This research was supported by a an innovative seed grant from the University of Colorado

in the mother daughter bond, we found that young mothers develop strategies of accommodation to cope with the disruptions to connectivity and the demands of forced autonomy that are the result of early motherhood. Using a relational paradigm of women's development, these findings are interpreted through the frame of self-in-relation theory as this theoretical perspective has been informed by the study of race and ethnicity.

Methodology and Sample Characteristics

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 18 African American and 30 Latina young women living in the Denver metropolitan area. Between 2008 and 2009 participants for the study were recruited from two sites: a high school for teen mothers and a city hospital clinic where young mothers received prenatal care and medical services. These sites access different populations. Participants from the school were typically younger and were by definition enrolled in school. They received child care, bus passes, and other material support from the school. Despite the excellent support provided by the school, many of these young mothers appeared to have fewer personal and family resources than those from the clinic. Participants from the clinic were frequently older (18 or 19 years old), more often stayed at home or worked rather than attending school, and received less support from public services.

We recruited participants through flyers that were posted at the sites and given to participants to share with friends. School or clinic staff also handed out flyers and described the study to teens they identified as eligible. To be eligible for the study, participants must have had a child before turning 20. Nearly all participants were enrolled in the study through onsite recruitment and each respondent was given a \$35 gift certificate for her willingness to participate in the study.

Our participants gave birth to their first child at ages ranging from 14 to 19; the average age at first birth was 17. The average age of their oldest child was 1½ years. At the time of the interview, most participants had babies or toddlers, but a few had older children. Almost all of the respondents were living with their children and most were living with other adults, including parents, siblings and/or other extended family members. A small number of respondents who were no longer adolescents were living either on their own or with partners.

Following a semi-structured interview guide, we collected life history narratives of the young mothers. During the course of the interviews, we asked respondents to describe their experiences with early pregnancy and teen mothering. The open ended questions focused on which relationships were most important to them and who they turned to for emotional support and guidance throughout their pregnancy and transition to parenthood. We also asked the participants to talk about what was most difficult for them in their lives and how they viewed and understood their relationship to their children. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half and were conducted under conditions of confidentiality. In most cases, the respondents were eager to talk and share their life experiences with us, having few other places where they could openly and honestly share their feelings and perspectives on the paths their lives had taken and the challenges they had encountered along the way. As the interviews progressed, we became aware of the deep emotional responses that our study engendered among the teen mothers, as they recalled and re-lived the fears, tensions and joys of early motherhood. We thus became aware of the trust that our participants had placed in us as researchers and our responsibility to represent the emotional complexities of their demanding lives.

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and imported into the NVivo qualitative software package. Both authors read entire transcripts and identified important themes that emerged from the data. Our analysis thus addresses a number of important findings that illuminate the relational world of teen mothers and the socio-emotional dynamics that influence the psycho-social development of adolescent girls whose lives are transformed by early child-bearing. Among the most important of our findings are those that relate to the relational losses that result from teen pregnancy and the attending separation from adult mothers and other early childhood attachments. Beginning with a discussion of self-in-relation theory and the significance of the mother-daughter bond to girls' development, we elaborate on the loss of empathic attachment and the emergence of autonomy among teen mothers.

Self-in-Relation Theory and the Rupture in the Mother Daughter Bond

Starting with the early writings of Nancy Chodorow (1974) and Alice Miller (1991), the interdisciplinary paradigm of self-in-relation theory has sought to explain the ways in which female development is informed by the importance of relationship and connection in a young girl's life. Within the self-in-relation framework, the psycho-social development of girls is explained through the principles of connectedness and empathic attachment, a relational dynamic that underlies gender differences in personality formation. According to this perspective, a girl's sense of self is shaped by the emotional exchanges that take place between mothers and daughters and that lay the foundation for future developmental aspects of women's personality (Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1991; Miller, 1991). Self-in-relation scholars conclude that while separation, autonomy and independence are the "natural" path toward adulthood for boys and young men, connectedness and interdependency are normative for girls and young women, as Carol Gilligan (1982) explains in her path breaking work, *In a Different Voice*:

... relationships, and particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation... Thus males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation. (1982:8)

With regard to the teen-age years in particular, the self-in relation school maintains that adolescence is a crucial time of development for girls who, unlike boys, are seeking paths toward separation and autonomy (an individuated self) while, at the same time, valuing connectedness and relationality. The research in this field (Stern, 1990; Kaplan, Gleason & Klein, 1991) suggests that girls have a complicated (and sometimes paradoxical) view of the meaning of independence and autonomy. In resolving the competing needs of separation and attachment during adolescence and young adulthood, young women seek ways to "act independently" while maintaining an emotional reliance and bond to their mothers and other maternal figures (Stern, 1990; Kaplan, Gleason & Klein, 1991). When such bonds are strained or severed, however, the adolescent girl may experience a rupture in attachments that has detrimental consequences for healthy social-psychological development. The findings of our study suggest that teen mothers from diverse backgrounds often experience such ruptures not only with their mothers but with other early childhood attachments, including siblings and extended family members. Thus, as they negotiate the difficult challenges of early pregnancy and child bearing, they are coping with separation from the socio-emotional bonds that are at the core of the adolescent girl's relational self.

Over a decade ago, Elaine Bell Kaplan (1996) studied the conflict that African American mothers and daughters experience with an adolescent pregnancy. Challenging popular perceptions that teen motherhood is accepted and condoned in African American families, her work revealed the strains in the mother daughter relationship that arise out of teen pregnancy and the long term effects of early mother hood on the mother-daughter bond. Similarly, our findings suggest that among both African American and Latina teenagers, pregnancy is rarely condoned by the family and instead leads to ruptures in the maternal relationship that begin when a pregnancy is first disclosed. As the life history narratives of the respondents reveal, these disclosures often take place during a time when the young woman is already under significant emotional distress, as she anticipates the life changes that the pregnancy will bring. An African American respondent who gave birth to her child during her senior year in high school, therefore described the emotional turmoil she experienced when she first realized she was pregnant:

It was a shock. I was like, "What?" It was kind of like I had to sit down. I didn't cry. I wasn't like, sad, but it was just like almost how everybody says, "Oh my God, my life is over!" That's what came into my head. "Oh my goodness, everything is over with! What am I gonna do?".... I was on the track team to go to State my senior year and now that kind of pumped the brakes on everything.

It is during this time of fear and confusion that the respondents most often turned toward their mothers for guidance and support, even as they felt apprehension over disclosing the pregnancy to their families, as one African American respondent explained:

Oh I was so scared...I didn't tell my mom right away, but we were at K-mart and my mom was like, "You don't need pads [sanitary napkins] yet." I was like, "No," And she was like, "Oh all right" So then she just acted like nothing was wrong. And then we got home, she was like, "Go pee in this cup!" I was like, OK. And I did it, like nothing was gonna happen. And then next thing I heard, she was yelling at somebody, like to the Dad, and she was saying "My daughter's pregnant and you need to get over here right now, if you don't do what you're supposed to do then you will never see another day!" Ok, I thought, "Oh my God, this is bad!" She wasn't OK.

Another participant, a Latina teen mother who also became pregnant during her senior year of high school described her reaction in this way:

I thought I wasn't gonna be pregnant till I was like, 30. I didn't want to be pregnant until I was 30. I didn't want to have a kid. I wanted to finish my studies first....When I found out it was kind of a weird feeling. It was a feeling that, "Oh I don't know if I am ready for this," and a feeling that "Oh I kind have to be ready for it now. I didn't tell my Mom until three months into the pregnancy. She felt sad. She was disappointed. Probably because I'm her only daughter and because she wanted me to finish my studies and get married before I had a baby. It was really hard telling her and it changed our relationship, though she is a little better now that my son is born.

As these accounts reveal, the responses of the participants' mothers ranged from anger to sadness and disappointment, reactions that are often tied to the adult mother's concerns for her daughter's future and the knowledge of the struggles both she and the family will face (Kaplan 1996). In the absence of maternal empathy, the young women in our study typically turned to other primary attachments to cope with feelings of loss and abandonment. But like the mother-daughter relationship, such attachments changed when the respondent became pregnant, further separating the adolescent mother from the emotional ties that, prior to her pregnancy, had been a source of connectivity.

Race, Ethnicity and the Loss of Multiple Attachments in Early Motherhood

Over the last two decades, in response to critiques by scholars of race and gender, self-in-relation theory has expanded to include perspectives on the importance of race and ethnicity for the relational development of African American and Latina girls (Hill Collins, 2000; Segura & Pierce, 1993; Spellman 1988). The research in this field has highlighted the importance of family and kinship ties in diverse communities, focusing on the significance of multiple nurturing figures who, in addition to the biological or adoptive mother, shape the relational context through which the young girl's personality is formed. In this regard, Patricia Hill Collins (2000), drawing on the work of Rosalie Troester (1084) and Carol Stack (1974), discusses the importance of othermothers and "fictive kin" within the Black community who traditionally share in the care-taking and nurturing of children. Among these extended family members are grandmothers, aunts, and sisters, as well as non-biological caretakers with whom the child forms significant emotional attachments. Similarly, Segura and Pierce (1993) elaborate on the norms of non-exclusive mothering in the Chicana/o family, stressing the importance of aunts, sisters, and fathers in the socio-emotional development of children. As these theorists point out, the relational selves of African American and Latina girls emerge out of a complex social network of caretakers rather than within the more narrow emotional realm represented by the mother-daughter dyad.

In keeping with the research on race, ethnicity and the relational self, the findings of our study strongly confirm that African American and Latina adolescents form significant attachments with a varied number of adult figures who serve as nurturers, role models, and empathic caretakers in the young girl's life.¹ Early pregnancy and child bearing, however, places strains on these relationships. Accordingly, teen mothers in our sample experienced ruptures in almost all of the significant areas of their relational lives, including connections to fathers, siblings, grandparents, as well as ties to friends, the baby's father, and the baby's paternal grandparents. These disruptions create a sense of isolation and loneliness during a vulnerable time in adolescent development and lead to feelings of shame and self blame that arise out of experiences of familial rejection.

Among the biggest losses in attachment that the teen mothers describe are those that involve extended family members, especially grandparents. Like the adult mothers in the study, grandmothers frequently expressed disappointment and/or rage which, although softening over time, intensified the participants' feelings of loss and abandonment. A young Latina mother who gave birth to her first child at 15 described her grandmother's anger and the break in attachment that resulted from her pregnancy:

It's very interesting because my grandma on my dad's side, she's very religious, very Catholic. I talked to her on the phone, and she was wondering how it happened and she was so upset. I just found it so weird, because she's really Catholic and she's telling me to get an abortion. I was just like, "I don't really know right now," because I was still not very far along. And I already knew what I was going to do, but I didn't really want to tell her because my grandma, I didn't want to hurt her. And then I guess my Dad told her. I guess she was really upset, because I visit her every summer and that visit, she just scolded me the whole time. She was just like, "you have just messed up your life. You're so young. You could still have all this, a life ahead of you, and you're having a baby."

¹While this finding is true for our sample population of African American and Latina young women, because of the demographics of our respondent population, we are unable to compare this finding to teen mothers from other ethnic and racial backgrounds who may or may not have formed similar attachments with a diverse set of adults.

Although ruptures in the relationships with grandmothers were most common, a portion of the teen mothers, especially those with Latino backgrounds, spoke of rejection by grandfathers as well, as the following account illustrates:

The only one who made me feel really bad was my grandpa. He was like, “Oh well, you’re pregnant, you’re really young, you know it’s wrong.” It was kind of hard. For a really long time I was my grandpa’s only grandchild. For ten years, I was the only grandchild. I was really close to him. So I kind of took it hard, because I was close to my grandpa, but I was younger. And then once I got pregnant, it kind of changed....we really don’t talk any more. He talks to my daughter more than to me. It’s awkward now. I can’t talk to him like I used to talk to him, cause I am not his little girl any more.

In addition to loss of connection to grandparents, separation from fathers and siblings were another dimension of relational disruption that the teen mothers reported. An African American respondent poignantly recalled how both her father and brother distanced themselves from her once her pregnancy became known:

When my dad found out, he was heart broken, you could tell. My dad’s one of those people that keeps his emotions inside, so he really doesn’t talk to you or express anything but you could tell he was really heartbroken and so didn’t talk to me for awhile. My big brother was mad, because he was like, “I knew you was pregnant!” so he didn’t talk to me for a while...I was just shocked that my big brother knew or sensed or felt that his little sister was pregnant. He wanted me to be such a lady or so much—you know. I don’t know if he was thinking, “Oh no, all my friends are going see my 19 year old sister got a baby,” I don’t know what it was. But my big brother, it hurt him. I’m pretty sure why it hurt him, I’m his little sister. He didn’t want nobody to get his little sister pregnant. And my dad, because my dad has always been quiet our whole life as far as expressing his love or his feelings for us. But I could tell he didn’t want no one to get his daughter pregnant.

Among the respondents who had sisters, strains in the relationship most often developed early on in the pregnancy, with both younger and older sisters expressing disappointment and anger with their pregnant sibling. Here an African American respondent, 17 years old, reported the reaction of her younger sibling:

My sister hated me, the whole time I was pregnant. Cause she looked up to me, and I was doing so good in school, and she was like, “Why?” She really hated me. She didn’t talk to me the whole time.

A Latina teen mother similarly described the rage of her older sister who was 25 when the respondent became pregnant at 15:

My sister was being real mean to me. She’d talk stuff to me, a lot of things and I couldn’t handle it....I was babysitting her stepson and she was like, “Don’t be having babies because you’re too young to have a baby.”....It always hurt me. She would always try to pick a fight with me cause I was young.

Finally, among the significant other attachments that the young mother is at risk for losing are her friendships with other girls and the relationship with the father of her child. Contrary to media representations of teen age girls forming “pregnancy pacts” or social networks that encourage one another toward early parenting, the findings of our study indicate that many of the young women who become pregnant find themselves socially isolated by their peers and former close friends who, rather than support the pregnancy, express disapproval and withdraw from the relationship. In one case, a Latina respondent recalled how difficult it was for her to attend school once her pregnancy became known, with the other girls

referring to her as a “slut” and “gross.” Another respondent reported that many of her close girl friends stopped talking her when she became pregnant and a third participant described how things changed with her best friend:

My Friend was so mad when I told her. She was my best friend. She was so mad and I could never hang out with any more. It's hard to go to the movies or just be together. We had been best friends forever. I was really surprised but she was so mad at me, and now she is not my best friend any more.

At the same time that the adolescent mother is at risk for the loss of friendship and peer support, she may also be coping with the break-up of the relationship with the baby's father. At the time of our interviews, nearly 70% of the respondents in the study were no longer in this relationship, although, in a number of cases, the father maintained a connection to the child for whom he provided some type of economic support. For the most part, however, pregnancy led to a rupture between the young mother and the father, resulting in an emotional loss for the young mother for whom the father had been a significant emotional attachment. This aspect of teen parenting is especially painful for the adolescent girl, as the baby's father shifts his attention away from her and the new born child, even if he had at first been encouraging and supportive of the pregnancy. Here a 17 year old Latina respondent discusses the feelings of romantic rejection that often accompany pregnancy and early mothering:

Me and her Dad had been together for three years and I knew I was young but I felt like, O.K., I'm O.K. to take care of a baby. So we planned on having her. He was really happy. We both wanted to have a girl. We were both really excited....But I could say that when she was first born, he didn't want to be in her life at all, really. The first month he was there, he was really excited and all that. The second month, he just started—he actually likes to party a lot and stuff so he started going out and partying. I was telling him I needed him to be there with me, and he didn't want to. So the third month, I broke up with him, when she was three months old.

In a number of cases, the break with the father also led to strains with the father's parents who, prior to the pregnancy, had been a source of connection and attachment for the participant, frequently assuming the role of fictive kin or god parents. In the following account, a Latina respondent explains the hurt and anger she felt when the paternal grandparents questioned the paternity of the child, at the same time that the baby's father began to pull away:

I met all his family and they treated me fine but when it was time for my daughter to be born, his [the father's] father was like, “Let's get a DNA test.” I was like, “You guys are stupid. Your son was the first person I ever slept with. I got pregnant the first time I did anything, and you guys are gonna sit there and tell me something?” And what really made me mad was they never got the DNA test, and then when I had my daughter, they came in the room and they were like, “Oh. She looks just like our family!” It made me mad and hurt my feelings so much and basically they were trying to say---I don't know, somebody who would sleep with everybody. That's not how I am. And to this day, they've still never done a DNA test...and when she was born, he [the father] would hold her, but he wasn't ever really there. He would always be out partying and all that. And then when he finally left, he would only call sometimes.

Coping with Loss and Empathic Abandonment: Teen Motherhood and the Development of Autonomy

Thus far in the analysis, we have considered the ways in which teen parenthood shapes the relational world of teen mothers, particularly as pregnancy and child bearing places strains on the socio-emotional bonds in the adolescent girl's life. Our discussion now turns to the ways in which young mothers manage this crisis of attachment, finding ways to develop a sense of autonomy while maintaining, at least in part, the relationships that have been put at risk as a result of early parenting. In this analysis, we first turn to the literature on relational-cultural theory (Jordan and Hartling, 2002) to explore the impact of hardship and emotional loss on the connectivity and resilience of adolescent girls.

In positing new ways to think about the meaning of relationship and connection in women's lives, advances in self-in-relation theory have sought to investigate how social hardship and adversity shape relationships among women and girls whose social lives are informed by poverty, racism and stigma. Teen mothers, who are particularly vulnerable to these destructive effects of social marginalization, thus provide an important lens through which to consider the role of adversity in shaping the relational challenges of the developing self. Previous research on African American and Latina women suggest that, in the face of rejection and devaluation by the dominant culture, women and girls in communities of color often turn to family and community networks as a source of relational affirmation (Hill Collins 2000; Sparks, 2002; Segura & Pierce 1993). As our findings suggest, however, with the adolescent mother, these social ties often become unavailable, further intensifying her isolation and damaging the relational bonds on which her sense of self relies (Whitehead 2001).

Confronted with both social adversity and the loss of connectivity, the teen mothers in our study sought strategies of accommodation to repair and sustain significant attachments, while also forging pathways to independence and autonomy. In particular, the findings indicate that, for the teen-age daughter, repairing her relationship with her mother became an important goal for meeting economic, social, and emotional needs. Because the majority of the young women were living with their mothers during pregnancy and after the birth of their child, finding ways to re-connect and rebuild the mother-daughter bond were deemed essential by the respondents who, even with the tensions in the maternal relationship, saw their mother as the one person who mattered most to them during this difficult time. Our findings here confirm that just as in past generations, for the teen-age girls in our study, maternal attachment remained central to the young mother's sense of self in her transition to early parenthood (Apfel & Seitz, 1991). In the following account, a Latina respondent who first became pregnant at fifteen, offers this perspective on both the conflict and attachment that characterized the mother-daughter relationship:

...when my mom first found out I was pregnant, she pulled me out of school because she said, "It's not nice. You are only 15. You can't be pregnant in school." So she just pulled me out of school right then. I just had to literally live day by day....The first couple of months, it was easy to hide. I didn't gain too much weight and she [my mom] always made sure I'd eat and stuff, make sure everything was ok. Towards when I started to show, she didn't want to tell anyone and we had arguments. From there I just moved out. Up to five months she was great about it. After that, we stopped talking for awhile but then I went back and tried to make everything okay...My mom's my mom and she's always going to be there. If he [the father] hadn't taken responsibility that was his choice. But my mom was always going to be there. If I needed her help, she was going to be there.

In most cases, it was after the birth of the child that the mother-daughter bond began to be repaired. Such repair was often predicated on the daughter's ability to function in the absence of maternal empathy. In order to stay in the relationship with their mothers, the daughters reported that they typically withheld their feelings of sadness and rejection, as one African American respondent explained:

It's not like we can talk like this [the interview] and I can express how I feel. Because I appreciate everything my mom does for me, because she could have easily kicked me out when she found out I was pregnant and not have cared. But, at the same time, it's like we don't have anybody else, we have to deal with each other. It's like, Oh God, we're just different, that's all.

Although the daughters frequently described their mothers as emotionally withdrawn, unavailable and angry, the teen mothers nevertheless sought out ways to re-connect to their mothers and other members in the family through their new role as parent and caretaker. As such, the resilience evident in so many of the narratives of teen mother's lives can be explained as a response to forced autonomy in which connection is made possible by accommodating the loss of maternal empathy while demonstrating an ability to care for one's self and one's child. Many of the participants reported that they were working hard to succeed in order to prove a skeptical family member wrong. Familial disapproval was thus a catalyst for self reliance. By demonstrating to their mothers and other significant attachments that they were able to function both as parents and as young adults, the teen mothers were able to successfully repair at least part of the relational ruptures that their pregnancy had caused.

This finding on the daughter's accommodation to a non-empathic parent challenges the traditional self-in-relation perspective on maternal "empathic failure and relational violations" (Jordan & Hartling, 2002:49). The existing research on the relational self suggests that, when faced with situations in which relational survival relies on "strategies of disconnection" (Jordan & Hartling, 2002:49) and the suppression of emotional authenticity, girls who adopt these strategies may question their self worth and turn away from "growth fostering relationships" (Jordan & Hartling 2002:50). Our findings suggest a somewhat different outcome for teen mothers whose accommodating strategies result in relationship repair through the emergence of a relation-based autonomy that contributes to rather than undermines the self-esteem of the teen parent who, in the months following the birth of a child, was able to regain the approval and affection of her family by acting independently. One teen mother described this re-connection to her mother in this way:

Me and my mom was close, was cool but the way she reacted [to the pregnancy] just broke me to pieces. But now she's fine. It all changed a lot after she [her daughter] was born. They were telling me, "You're doing the right thing by going to school, taking your daughter to day care, what's best for you, looking for a job, wanting to go to college." They saw that I changed a lot and they saw that I'm doing the right thing.... To me it was just like, "Wow, I can't believe I'm doing such a good job. It brought it to a whole different level." I struggled. I don't think anybody would have went through what I went through. They hardly saw me from struggling to being a strong person. So everything changed after that.

As this account helps to illustrate, the teen mother understands her transition to motherhood as a shattering of the mother-daughter bond and the struggle to repair the broken ties through a process of painful but growth building autonomy. Here as elsewhere in the study, respondents report that such transitions, while emotionally difficult, resulted in the re-establishment of significant ties to mothers, as well as sibling and other extended family members, who became more supportive as the teen mother sought to manage the emotional, financial and time constraints of early mothering. Thus, the development of teen mothers

reflects a model of psycho social maturity (Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983) in which some measure of autonomy and independence is achieved through relational adjustments that reflect the changes in connectivity that were brought on by early parenthood.

Finally, it should be pointed out that teen mothers, in the absence of other empathic ties, often turn to their own children for the more traditional empathic bonds that typify “growth in relationship.” In this regard, the majority of teen mothers in our study developed deep emotional connections to their babies and toddlers, often seeking to ameliorate the loss they experienced with their own families. An African American respondent, 17 years of age and now a mother of two, offers this reflection on the relational dynamic that has developed over her first two years of mothering:

It was difficult adjusting, but now I really enjoy it. I definitely don't regret it, having to put somebody else before yourself, like their needs always come first....Seeing them grow up. Being able to see their first steps and each milestone, like the first time they laugh, the first time they walk. Just knowing they couldn't do any of that stuff without you guiding them. Just knowing they love you. Like my kids have been with me through everything. They don't just up and leave and turn their backs on me. They're right there, all the time. I don't know how many times my toddler comes up to me and just hugs me and wants me to hold her. It's nice. They need you.

Conclusion

In expanding the field of relational-cultural studies, the findings of our research provide a number of significant insights on teen motherhood and adolescent development among young women of color. When faced with ruptures in important emotional attachments under conditions of social adversity, African American and Latina teen mothers seek out ways to sustain the mother-daughter bond (and other significant emotional ties) by accommodating the loss of empathic attachment through the development of independence and autonomy. This strategy for survival appears to provide a source of self worth for the young mother and the means by which she regains maternal love and approval. Contrary to the expected effects of forced autonomy and accommodation on adolescent girls, this relational adjustment to attachment and loss does not appear to impede the establishment of relational ties between the teen mother and her own child. Rather, the research points to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of a young girls' autonomy on connectivity. In this regard, the findings suggest that the loss of one empathic bond, and the attending separation that such a loss implies, may positively impact the need for and establishment of other empathic bonds that are found within the relational dynamic of teen mothering. In addition, this finding would appear to have particular relevance for young women of color who are coping with the strains of early motherhood and the social adversities brought on by racism and poverty. Our research has thus highlighted the need to look beyond the mother-daughter relationship to better understand the relational dynamics of adolescent development among this group of teen mothers. Bringing insights from the scholarship on race, ethnicity and the self-in-relation thus provides a better understanding of the relational effects of teen parenting on African American and Latina young women.

In drawing these conclusions from our analysis, it is important to point out that this perspective on relationship strain and the emergence of autonomy, while offering an alternative view of the role that independence and personal agency play in girls' development, should be approached with some caution. Upon completing the in-depth interviews with the teen mothers, we were struck by the deep sense of isolation and loneliness that these young women experience. Although the majority of the respondents have, to varying degrees, succeeded in re-establishing ties to their mothers and other

significant attachments, their every day lives remain challenged by the hardships and emotional tensions that teen parenthood incurs. While a few young women reported that they would not change their lives if they could, the vast majority of the respondents spoke of how difficult their lives had become and a longing for the childhood they had left behind. Thus, for these teen mothers, pregnancy and childbearing were clearly experienced as an abrupt shift from adolescence to adulthood, an emotionally stressful transition in which the gain in autonomy was tempered by the loss of attachment and connection. Although our findings suggest that teen mothers develop a positive sense of self and show an inner emotional strength and resilience, such findings must be placed within the larger context of forced autonomy in which the strains and emotional pain of relational and social adversity underlie this path toward independence and self reliance.

References

- Apfel NH, Seitz V. Models of adolescent mother-grandmother relationships in Black inner city families. *Family Relations*. 1991; 40(2):421–429.
- Barret MS, Roach M, Morgan K, Colbert K. Adjustment to motherhood by single adolescents. *Family Relations*. 1996; 45(2):209–215.
- Burton, LM.; Obeidallah, DA.; Allison, K. Ethnographic Insights on social context and adolescent development among inner city, African American teens. In: Jessor, R.; Colby, A.; Shweder, R., editors. *Essays on ethnographic and human development*. University of Chicago; Chicago: 1996.
- Chodorow, N. Is female to Male as Nature is to culture?. In: Rosaldo, M.; Lamphere, L., editors. *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford University Press; California: 1974.
- Furstenberg, F. *Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teenage Childbearing*. Russell Sage Foundation; New York: 2007.
- Driscoll A, Sugland B, Manlove J, Papillo AR. Community opportunity, perceptions of opportunity, and the odds of an adolescent birth. *Youth and Society*. 2005; 37:33–61.
- Gilligan, C. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press; Mass: 1982.
- Greenberg MT, Siegel JM, Leitch CJ. The nature and importance of attachment to parents and peers during adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 1982; 12(5):373–386.
- Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge; New York: 2000.
- Jordan, JV.; Surrey, JJ.; Kaplan, AG. Women and empathy: Implications for psychological development and psychotherapy. In: Jordan, JV.; Kaplan, AG.; Miller, JB.; Stiver, IP.; Surrey, JL., editors. *Women's Growth in Connection*. The Guilford Press; New York: 1991.
- Jordan, JV.; Hartling, LM. New developments in relational-cultural theory. In: Ballou, M.; Brown, LS., editors. *Rethinking Mental Health and Disorder*. 2002.
- Ketterlinus RD, Lamb ME, Nitz K. Developmental and ecological sources of stress among adolescent parents. *Family Relations*. 1991; 40(4):435–441.
- Kaplan, A.; Gleason, G.; Klein, R. Women's self development in late adolescence. In: Jordan, JV.; Kaplan, AG.; Miller, JB.; Stiver, IP.; Surrey, JL., editors. *Women's Growth in Connection*. The Guilford Press; New York: 1991.
- Kaplan EB. Black teen-age mothers and their mothers: The impact of adolescent childbearing on daughters' relations with mothers. *Social Problem*. 1996; 40(3):427–443.
- Lesser J, Koniak-Griffen D, Anderson N. Depressed adolescent mothers' perceptions of their own maternal role. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*. 1999; 20:131–149. [PubMed: 10409993]
- Miller, JB. The development of women's sense of self. In: Jordan, JV.; Kaplan, AG.; Miller, JB.; Stiver, IP.; Surrey, JL., editors. *Women's Growth in Connection*. The Guilford Press; New York: 1991.
- Segura D, Pierce J. Chicana/o family structure and gender personality: Chodorow, familism, and psychoanalytic sociology revisited. *Signs*. 1993; 19(1):62–91.

- Sparks, E. Depression and schizophrenia in women: The intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and class, In: In: Ballou, M.; Brown, LS., editors. *Rethinking Mental Health and Disorder*. 2002.
- Spelman, EV. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Beacon; Boston: 1988.
- Stack, C. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. Harper and Row; New York: 1974.
- Stern, L. Conceptions of Separation and Connection in Female Adolescents. In: Gilligan, C.; Lyons, N.; Hanmer, T., editors. *The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*. Harvard University Press; Mass: 1990.
- Troester RR. Turbulence and tenderness : mothers, daughters, and 'othermothers' in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstone*. *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*. 1984; 1(2):13–16.
- Turner RJ, Grindstaff NP, Phillips N. Social support and outcome in teenage pregnancy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 1990; 31(1):43–57. [PubMed: 2313076]
- Whitehead E. Teenage pregnancy: on the road to social death. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*. 2001; 38:437–446. [PubMed: 11470102]