Chapter 15

Bringing Culture Back In: Deconstructing Teenage Pregnancy

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ABSTRACT

Teenage pregnancy in United States has strong cultural and historical connections. Unfortunately, in a majority of the studies, all debates and perspectives on teen pregnancy ignore these underlying cultural values and signifiers. Yet to allow a more holistic understanding of teen pregnancy, the behavior of these teenagers should be examined within the parameters of their cultural and historical backgrounds. Teen pregnancy needs to be deconstructed from a cultural angle. This chapter focuses on the African American population and provides an alternate perspective on the behavior and actions of teenagers and on their choice of early motherhood. The chapter uses interviews conducted with school nurses and school counselors affiliated with two public high schools to provide critical insights on teenage pregnancy.

INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy has been approached from three angles so far. According to the first, the conservative stance, teenage pregnancy is “evil” and “catastrophic” and needs to be controlled to avert a future disaster in terms of public health and economic and social conditions (Van Coeverden de Groot, 1991). While the humanitarian stance is more concerned with the welfare of the teenagers and how to improve their conditions (Craig & Richter-Strydom, 1983). The third stance, the revisionist literature challenges the issue of teenage pregnancy as problematic. It argues for the examination of values which pathologize teenage pregnancy (Preston-Whyte, 1991).

Historical analysis of teenage pregnancy indicates that teen pregnancy emerged as a social problem in the 1970s (Vinovskis, 1988; 1992). “Teenage unwed motherhood as deviant behavior can justifiably be viewed as a social problem…” (Seabela, 1990, p. 25). Pregnant teens were considered a technical and moral problem demanding in-depth scrutiny and measurement. Teen birth rates in 2014 revealed a substantial difference by age, racial and ethnic group and region of the country. Birth rates were higher amongst the Hispanic and blacks than their white counterparts. Hispanic adolescent females in the ages

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of 15-19 have 38 births per 1,000 adolescent females. Black adolescent females in the ages of 15-19 have 34.9 births per 1,000 adolescent females. While white adolescent females have 17.3 births per 1,000 adolescent females. To further clarify 8 percent of whites, 16 percent of blacks and 17 percent of Hispanics have children before the age of 20. Furthermore, substantial variation exists in adolescent childbearing geographically across United States. The lowest teen birth rates have been reported in Northeast and the highest in states across the southern part of the country (Martin, Hamilton & Ventura, 2015). Teenage pregnancy happens to be high amongst the black adolescent females and in the states situated in the southern part of United States (Martin, Hamilton & Ventura, 2015).

It would therefore, be appropriate, to comment that teenage pregnancy has a racial element behind it. Teenage pregnancy within United States is firmly “anchored in the historical and social power relations” (Macleod, 1999, p.212). In fact, authors Macleod (2003); Chilman (1985); Tabi (2002); Minnick and Shandler (2011) and Geronimus (1991, 2003) argue that teenage pregnancy should be viewed within the context of racism, social discrimination and sexism. In multicultural societies, such as United States, it is the culture of the dominant group consisting of white European Americans which may generally emerge (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005). The white European Americans use all forms of media, educational institutions and government to sustain and maintain their standards of acceptable code of conduct and behavior (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005). Therefore, all deductions, inferences and summations pertaining to teen motherhood are etched from the white European perspective. All political and moral debates on teenage pregnancy have been made from the context of a white racial framework. Absent are the traces of signifiers like “black” and “colored”, their traditions, cultures and historical beliefs and moral values when examining teenage pregnancy (with a few exceptions like Akella & Jordan, 2015; Macleod, 1999, 2002,2003; Geronimus 1991, 2003). “The process of cultural diffusion that has resulted from contact with Western culture and the urbanization process [has] had shattering effects on the traditional life of the blacks” (Seabela, 1990, p.80). A dichotomy can be created, with juxtaposition between modern and proper society and the traditional and cultural lifestyles of blacks within which the entire issue of teenage pregnancy may have been caught up.

To understand the reasons behind early motherhood and provide better insights, it is essential to examine the issue of teenage pregnancy within the historical and cultural frameworks of that society’s population group. This chapter contributes towards the literature on teenage pregnancy by examining teen pregnancy within the historical and cultural frameworks of the African American racial group in USA. It aims to provide an alternate perspective on this social issue, and why it continues to prevail in spite of gradual declining rates, in some parts of United States. The chapter uses critical theory to deconstruct the differences in European and African American interpretations on early motherhood. Interviews with school nurses and school counselors affiliated with two local community schools are critically analyzed to shed light on teen pregnancy.

BACKGROUND

Teenage pregnancy has gradually declined in United States, but it continues to remain a social problem that adversely effects teenagers, their parents and the community at large (Summers, Lee & Lee, 2017). Early pregnancy leads to health complications for the teenagers and their unborn children. Moreover, pregnant teenagers also face higher levels of hypertension, sexually transmitted diseases and poor weight gain leading to preterm births and unhealthy infants. Neonatal death rates are higher amongst the teen
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