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'Planned' teenage pregnancy: Views and experiences of young people

The Government's attempts to reduce the UK's high teenage pregnancy rate have largely focused on 'unplanned' accidental teenage pregnancies, due to a lack of research and knowledge about teenagers who 'plan' their pregnancies. By providing detailed information on motivations for 'planned' pregnancy, this report adds new knowledge to the field of teenage pregnancy. A key conclusion to draw is from this research is that 'planned' pregnancies, among even young teenagers, do exist in the UK.

Rates of teenage births in the UK are the highest in Western Europe and the cost to the Government of pregnancy amongst those under 18 has been estimated at over £63 million a year.

There is marked variation throughout England in teenage conception rates. Fifty percent of under-18 conceptions occur in the 20% of census wards with the highest rates (SEU, 1999). These variations have been linked to specific population groups such as looked after children and care leavers (Biehal et al., 1992), young offenders (Hobcraft, 1998), and children of teenage mothers (Kiernan, 1995; Ermisch and Pevalin, 2003). There is also strong and growing evidence linking high teenage pregnancy to low educational attainment, particularly in areas of poverty and disadvantage (Wellings et al., 2001; Botting et al., 1998).

Research

Although there is growing evidence of 'planned' teenage pregnancy, less research has explored the reasons behind this. Although there appears to be a commonly-held, near-mythical, belief in the right-wing press that young women intentionally become pregnant to gain access to local authority housing, there exists research to the contrary that suggests that young women are not actually aware of what they are entitled to from the system until they become pregnant (Allen and Bourke-Dowling, 1998), and are also more likely to be living with their parents (YWCA, 2005). The limited research in this area draws

most explanation from the link between poverty and disadvantage and 'low expectations' (SEU, 1999; Arai, 2003; Turner, 2004). With low expectations and a perceived lack of life options, young people from more deprived areas seemingly have less incentive to avoid pregnancy and hold a more fatalistic view towards 'falling pregnant', as opposed to seeing it as an outcome they have a choice about.

'Unplanned' pregnancies

The primary focus on 'unplanned' pregnancies has led some researchers to suggest that the government has a rather limited view of young motherhood. The policies, according to Arai (2003), lack imagination and focus on improved access to contraception and better sex education. While this is necessary, current policies do not tackle the fact that intentions, planning and decision-making around pregnancy are complex. It could be that most women, even very young women, do actually make decisions about when they have children. Current policy fails to recognise that some young women will become pregnant because they feel it is the right decision for them, regardless of the services available and guidance offered (Geronimus, 1997).

Qualitative study

This article summarises a recently-completed qualitative study by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA) looking at what influences young people's decisions to 'plan' a pregnancy. In-depth

interviews were conducted with 41 young women and 10 young men who reported a 'planned' pregnancy.

The main two objectives of the research were:

1. To explore the decisions behind 'planned' teenage pregnancy.
2. To assess the policy implications of the findings.

A deeper insight into 'planned' teenage pregnancy will be of value to practitioners working with young people and young parents (in recognising the motivations for pregnancy and identifying specific support needs), as well as policy-makers.

Method

Young people were selected purposively (i.e. non-randomly) for the in-depth interview. Young people were selected for interview according to the following criteria:

- ♦ Reported a pregnancy that was 'planned' (see later for precise definition)
- ♦ Either pregnant or already a parent of a child less than one year old
- ♦ Aged 19 or under prior to the 'planned' pregnancy
- ♦ Varying geographical location and rural/urban classification
- ♦ Volunteered for interview and gave their contact details

The 'London Measure of Unplanned Pregnancy' or LMUP questionnaire (devised and validated by Barrett et al., 2004) was integral in ensuring that only those who 'planned' their pregnancy were interviewed.

This 'screening' questionnaire asked questions relating to contraception use, timing of pregnancy, intentions towards pregnancy (just before becoming pregnant), whether they wanted a baby (just before becoming pregnant), whether they improved their health just before pregnancy (e.g. by taking folic acid), and the extent to which they had discussed pregnancy matters with their partner (just before becoming pregnant).

The multiple choice answers were scored according to how they related to 'planning' (e.g. in Question 1, maximum points (2) were awarded for 'I/we were not using any contraception'). The majority of the young people who were interviewed scored between 8 and 12 (with 12 being the maximum possible score of 'planning'). Although this questionnaire was used in identifying the majority of the female interviewees, a small proportion (6 out of the 41) were approached based on the recommendation of a project worker. Interviewees reported a 'planned' pregnancy between the ages of 13 and 22 years inclusive (with a mean age of 17.1), and all were White British.

Results

The main themes generated from the analysis of the interview data were as follows:

- Interpretations and experiences of 'planning' a pregnancy
- Motivations for 'planning'
- Reflecting on the decision to 'plan' a pregnancy
- The reasons given by young fathers for 'planning'

Interpretations and experiences of 'planning' a pregnancy

The degree of 'planning' ranged across five explanations, from being very obvious and clear-cut to positive ambivalence towards falling pregnant. All young women were aware of contraception, and in no instances was pregnancy the result of an accident or mishap.

Consciously 'planned'

This involved clear two-way conversations within a stable relationship, with steps taken to encourage conception and have a healthy pregnancy.

"I was 18, but I was trying for a year and a half - he was very much planned. We first wanted a baby when I was 17... And we decided we wanted a baby quite early on." (Female, 18)

A discussion, but limited

In these instances there were brief conversation between partners, with more uncertainty towards the decision-making process.

"It should have been more serious than it was. It was just like, well, I really want a baby and it was

me that like, initiated and it and then, just tried - we didn't really talk about it much." (Female, 17)

Partner not involved in the 'planning'

Sometimes the young woman took the lead in the decision-making, with no involvement of their partner. Some young fathers reported not feeling in control of the outcome, even if they were aware of their partners' views.

"Yeah, I wanted to be [pregnant] for ages - Oh, well - we both wanted a baby kind of, but he wanted to wait a bit longer - but I just wanted one right now - And I got what I wanted!" (Female, 17)

'Planning' for a specific reason

Some instances of 'planning' were for a specific reason, such as the disappointment of a miscarriage or due to the fear of not being able to conceive. There is a need for further research in to how feelings of guilt regarding miscarriage could lead to a subsequent 'planned' pregnancy.

"I think - because we realised the effect of losing the baby had on us, we realised that - you know - we only found out I was pregnant a week or two before it happened, and I was like, oh - I'd really like another baby and M [partner] felt the same." (Female, 15)

'Positively ambivalent'

Some young women seemed not to mind whether they became pregnant or not, although were clearly not avoiding the possibility of pregnancy. Here we use the term 'positively ambivalent'. Pregnancy was often viewed as something beyond their control, although also as a positive outcome.

"Don't ask me why my body got pregnant - that's up to my body. I wanted a baby, so I was happy, but it was the right time otherwise my body wouldn't have had one." (Female, 16)

Motivations for 'planning' a pregnancy

The vast majority of the sample described their motivations for 'planning' a pregnancy in terms of their background and the situation they were in at the time, rather than reasons specifically relating to babies. Their responses split into two broad themes: childhood and background factors, and individual 'needs' and preferences for 'planned' pregnancy.

Childhood and background factors

Although not always stated explicitly, it was clear that the young people's childhood and background had, in some way, provided a foundation for their decision to become pregnant.

Choosing to become pregnant was perceived to 'correct' their deprived childhood and alter their lives for the better. The young women spoke candidly about their unsettled background, their

dissatisfaction and various problems associated with school. This was in stark contrast to the sense of purpose and future associated with their child. This feeling of being unsettled was due to issues such as parental separation, difficult relationships with family (including violence), and moving location frequently.

"It was very confusing because my mum and dad split up when I was three-and-a-half, so I had the heartbreak from there and that screwed me up a bit - and that's how I became with J [father of baby] - 'cos I was so screwed up, I didn't know where I was going, really." (Mother, 16 - Age at first 'planned' pregnancy)

Mothers often reported bad experiences at school. Three key issues were frequently mentioned: dissatisfaction with work and teachers, bullying and truancy and poor educational attainment and direction.

"I just didn't like school ... I didn't like the people there ... I just hated that environment - I hated being there ... it was horrible. I would just rather have been out doing other things! Working even or doing stuff at home... I just didn't like going to school... Like, one: I didn't want to go to school, and two: I was just determined to have a baby. I was just going to have one - it was going to happen." (Mother, 13)

Their childhood and background experiences within the local neighbourhood and immediate family had also impressed upon young people that teenage pregnancy was very 'normal'. Teenage parents were highly visible in these environments and local people tended to support young people's decisions over pregnancy.

"Most people I know, they got a kid. It's not like I'm the only one my age - it's fine. It's normal. My mum was the one asking when we were going to have one, but I was like 'whoa, wait a bit!', but then we had [baby daughter]. But, round here, it's not young - I don't think it's young." (Father, 18)

Being brought up themselves by teenage parent(s) was also an influence.

"I always wanted to do just what my mum did - it worked for her! She never wanted anything else, and that was the same for me. It's hard, but [daughter's] a good baby and I'd rather do this all day than work - well, it's still working but you know what I mean." (Mother, 15)

The lack of other opportunities locally was also a factor:

"I see being a mum as a job ... if I wasn't a mum I don't think I'd even have a job so it was probably a good decision for me personally." (Mother, 18)

Individual 'needs' and preferences

Some young women strongly felt a 'need' to change their lives and viewed having a child as a way to do so. This was the most commonly reported reason for 'planning' their pregnancy. It was normally

related to escaping negative situations or insecurities. Becoming a mother was seen as providing this new identity and purpose. Reasons for wanting to change their lifestyle included escaping a difficult home life, a need for a 'proper' and loving family of one's own, gaining a purpose to their life, and a desire to prove their capability.

“ I had a really, really bad childhood - I was in care and my parents aren't very good parents so I just thought a baby would give me that stability and also give me something that would love me unconditionally - never thought it would leave me and - 'cos it'd be mine - nobody could take it away ... I was the only kid at the age of 9, planning to have a baby... I was desperate for [baby son] and I've enjoyed him so much ... [He] gave me my purpose and my place in life, and my goal.” (Mother, 13)

Some young people had a real love of babies, and experience of caring for them, and this was a strong motivation for 'planning'. Being involved and surrounded by babies led them to want a child of their own, perhaps earlier than their peers, partly because they felt comfortable in the maternal role.

“ I baby-sat all the time ... everybody said I'd be a good mum, the amount of children I'd looked after, and I knew exactly what I was doing when I got pregnant.” (Mother, 18)

Others wanted to 'get it (motherhood) over with young' to ensure they were a young parent and still able to enjoy life after their children had grown up.

“ It sounds really awful, but so that I can get on with my life. You know - in a way, if you like, get them out of the way!” (Mother, 16)

Reflecting on the decision to 'plan' a pregnancy

In asking young people to reflect on their life before and after 'planning' their pregnancy, a range of interesting responses were revealed.

The majority of interviewees reported feeling happier now, compared to before becoming pregnant. This was due to feeling more fulfilled, having a new purpose and role, and becoming more confident. It was also common for interviewees to say that they would be in a worse situation if they had not had their child. Other benefits were feeling closer to their family. More interviewees than expected reported having more money and living in better accommodation since becoming a parent. Often this was due to leaving the family home, becoming independent, and learning to manage money better. Some interviewees reported being surprised at this improvement, because they were not expecting it, indicating that it was not a motivating factor.

However, despite many young women saying they felt better-off, a significant

number of interviewees felt worse-off in these areas of their lives. This seemed to be governed by their relationship situation, and where they moved to. Also, some interviewees reported feeling isolated from their friends, due to having a child. This was reported by young single mothers more, and resentment was often displayed at the fact the father of the child could still have a social life. These feelings of isolation were exacerbated by being placed in accommodation they did not like. Additionally, some young women were surprised and often overwhelmed by the strain and hard work bringing up a child. Again, this was worse among those who were raising their child as a single parent.

As a final note, despite the fact that these young women were mostly experiencing poverty and disadvantage, they were mainly positive about their decision to 'plan' their pregnancy. Reflecting as new parents, the majority of young women felt like they had made the right decision and that things had turned out more favourably than they had imagined. The extent to which these positive reflections will be sustained is still open to question (as most women interviewed had a child less than one year old). These positive accounts, however, do not diminish the importance of those who had regrets, and there are learning points here regarding prevention and education. Also, it is possible the regrets were under-reported by some young women, for fear of insinuating that their child is unwanted.

Young fathers: Reasons for 'planning' unique to young fathers

It is interesting to note that although there were similarities between the responses of young mothers and young fathers, some views and experiences were unique to young fathers. Here are some examples of their accounts:

'Planning'

Some young men were not very active in the 'planning' stage, and reported agreeing to have a baby at their partner's suggestion. They then got used to the idea and started wanting a child. It seems that their partners had a big persuasive influence.

“ She [mother of child] just said 'why don't we have one?', and then at first I thought 'nah, it's too soon', but then I thought it'd be quite good, and I thought it wouldn't happen for ages anyway... But, it was like, two months and she was like 'I'm pregnant', which was cool, cos... I really wanted to be a dad by then.” (Male, 18)

Lack of a 'father figure'

The vast majority of interviewees did not have a steady 'father figure' when they were growing up, and most interviewees said that this had affected their decision. They wanted to be a better father. This was the reason that was most explicitly linked to

'planning' a pregnancy.

“ I think I wanted to be a parent young, y'know, so I could be a good dad. I didn't have a dad, so I wanted to see if I could do it, and give him [son] more than what I had really. I don't know if that's much of a reason, but... it's what I always thought really - and luckily it happened, really quickly for us.” (Male, 19)

'Not sure' of reasons

Interestingly, many young fathers could not answer questions relating to why they wanted to become a young dad. This could be due to communication issues, or perhaps they had never thought about this specifically before.

“ I don't know, there wasn't a reason really. We just talked about it, she wanted one, and then we had one. It was simple really. I couldn't tell you why. It just happened, and it was good, but it wasn't like, anything deep.” (Male, 16)

Reflecting

A greater proportion of young fathers regretted their decision compared to young mums. Some fathers were upset due to splitting up from their partner and not being allowed to spend time with their children. Some interviewees felt used by their ex-partner so that she could have a child.

“ Well, I never - I'm not allowed to see J [son] anymore, so in a way I wish I never had got involved with her [baby's mother]. It's been nothing but trouble and now I wish I'd had one with someone I was gonna stay with. I want J, but the father always gets the worse deal, doesn't he?” (Male, 18)

Discussion

The study raises a number of specific issues for concern which are considered worthy of further deliberation. Key implications for practitioners and policy-makers include:

- ♦ There are several different types of 'planning', which included situations where the father was not fully involved in the decision. Working with young men about the prospects and responsibilities of fatherhood appears necessary
- ♦ Stopping the use of contraception was often seen as placing the prospect of pregnancy in the 'lap of the Gods'. Although all the interviewees were aware of the purpose of contraception, many did not fully recognise the possibility of pregnancy if they stopped using it. There was also a lack of awareness of issues surrounding fertility
- ♦ Several young women mentioned an earlier miscarriage as a significant factor in their subsequent choice to 'plan' a pregnancy. This was commonly due to a belief that they may not be able to have children and may mark a need for improved support after miscarriage
- ♦ Those 'planning' their pregnancy may have specific support needs, different to those becoming pregnant unintentionally; they may

have a 'head-start' in preparing for parenthood. Nonetheless, some young people who become pregnant intentionally may have unrealistic expectation of the realities and responsibilities of parenthood

- ♦ A minority of the sample openly regretted the decision to become pregnant. Worse finances and housing, isolation and the sheer hard work were overwhelming for some. Sharing these experiences may help other young people make better-informed decisions
- ♦ Nonetheless, it must be recognised that most young people interviewed perceived their 'planning' as a highly rational decision. With negative experiences in their childhood and background, and a desire to change their life for the better, becoming a young parent was perceived (so far) to be a highly positive influence in their life

Conclusions

The concept of 'planned' pregnancy in young people has rarely been explored in research. Where decisions in relation to pregnancy have been explored, these have mostly been following conception. A key conclusion to draw from this study is that 'planned' pregnancies, among people as young as 13, do exist in this country. This evidence supports those studies that also report 'planned' pregnancies among teenagers (Kiernan, 1995; Wellings et al., 2001, 2003; MacDonald and Marsh, 2002; Barrett et al., 2004), and provides the richest data to date by using a one-to-one, in-depth, qualitative approach.

This study shows that 'planned' teenage pregnancy has different motivating factors. It is clear that many of the young parents thought that they had effectively improved their lives, by becoming independent, gaining a sense of purpose, escaping poor family circumstances, and seizing a chance to right the 'wrongs' of their own childhood. However, this research also acknowledges young people's accounts of the challenges involved.

Given the disadvantaged childhood and background circumstances common to the majority of the sample, the decisions to become a teenage parent were seen by them to be reasonably rational. Pregnancy and parenthood offer these young women a chance to change their life for the better. Unlike most alternative ways of changing their life, such as education, training or employment, pregnancy is seen as an option totally within their own control. When asked to reflect, the vast majority were most adamant that pregnancy had been the right decision at this time in their life.

The policy context in England surrounding teenage pregnancy is oriented towards the prevention of unintended pregnancy, partly due to the lack of knowledge and evidence regarding the existence and reasons for 'planned'

pregnancy. Given that around one-third of all teenage pregnancies result in a termination (ONS, 2005), it is clear that a sizeable proportion of these conceptions were initially unintended. However, this research has reported evidence of 'planned' pregnancies and has highlighted the often rational, conscious decisions at work. Of the two-thirds of conceptions that do result in childbirth, it is simply not possible to know the proportion that was originally 'planned' or 'unplanned'.

This research casts some doubt on the argument posited in the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy that, "in practice, the first conscious decision that many teenagers make about their pregnancy is whether to have an abortion or to continue with the pregnancy" (SEU, 1999, p.28). For the teenagers in this research, it appears that decisions around pregnancy occurred prior to conception. In view of this and other policies, it is reasonable to conclude that the issue of intended or 'planned' teenage pregnancy has not received sufficient attention or recognition. This research provides a starting point for young people's issues and experiences around 'planned' teenage pregnancy to be heard.

At the very least, the experiences of those young women and men who 'plan' their pregnancies as teenagers need to be shared with practitioners working closely with such groups. These practitioners will include youth workers, Connexions PAs, teachers and social workers who work with young people before conception, as well as teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, teenage-parent support workers, midwives and health visitors who work closely with young parents or those pregnant. Understanding the primary motivations for becoming pregnant as teenagers will be of great interest to such professionals and could help young people to make better-informed decisions.

Finally, it is important to suggest further debate in to whether 'planned' teenage pregnancy should be considered a problem for today's society. The following quote gives the reader some food for thought:

“ So when a girl at 17 decides to go ahead and have a baby, there is no tragedy of lost opportunity other than the local checkout till waiting for her low-paid labour. Why is it that in Labour's crusade against teenage pregnancy, it can't recognise that some of these teen mums are making reasonable - even moral - decisions about what they value in life, and what they want to do with their lives? How did opting for baby and motherhood over shelf-stacking ever become a tragedy? So, let's just call a spade a spade. The government may have good reasons for wanting to reduce teenage pregnancy, but they are not to do with lost opportunities. They are more likely to do with the extra cost to

the state of the support required to ensure these vulnerable young mothers can do a good job of parenting their children. The government might, quite rightly, want to tackle entrenched inter-generational cycles of poverty, but the key to that is educational aspiration; teenage pregnancy is only a consequence of its absence.”

(Madeleine Bunting, The Guardian, 27 May 2005).

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