

Issues of social exclusion and teenage pregnancy



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The UK is widely quoted as having the highest levels of Teen Pregnancy in Western Europe (EPPI, 2006).

The topic of teenage pregnancy has been high on the agenda throughout the Labour government and continues to be a focus for the Coalition. With teenage parents facing comparatively adverse social and health outcomes, it is also identifiable that teenage parents are often excluded from education, training and employment, particularly when they are already socially disadvantaged (SEU, 1999). However, the evidence is contradictory as to whether these adverse outcomes are purely related to the age of conception or are, more likely, a combination of social factors and the impact of decades of structural economic policy. I choose to research the topic because of my intense dislike for Charles Murray.

I am interested in aspiration and I wanted to explore this in relation to teenage parents and social exclusion, to challenge the statistics that present a teenage parent as wholly unlikely to live a (subjectively) successful life. According to data from the Office for National Statistics, 41, 325 girls under 18 in England and Wales became pregnant in 2008, a decline of 3. 9% from 2007, while the number of pregnancies among the under-16s fell 7. 6% to 7, 577 (The Guardian 24/02/10). Though the decline is far short of the government's pledge to halve teenage pregnancies by 2010 it must be accepted that the strategy is working to a degree. But for me, the scale of the numbers still illustrates this issue will manifest itself in my day to day work.

I wanted some comfort that I could work with the numerous young people I encounter in this situation and offer some hope – to draw a capitalist analogy that I am sure Conservatives would approve of; they always say it is easier to sell the product when you believe in it yourself. For me the hope lies in the emergence of the term and the (perceived?) reality of social exclusion. The idea of Social Exclusion has emerged from the changes in our society. “

Murray argues that changes in patterns of family formation threatens the orderliness and prosperity of society” (MacDonald, 1997, pg 10).

Yet Teenage Pregnancy rates have not altered that significantly since the sixties. To me this clearly indicates that it has society that has changed, that society and structure has created social exclusion and that there remains hope for teenage parents. My research was derived from the experiences of the subjects and therefore based upon empirical evidence. I aim to compare this with theory established by various sociological writers.

The research was conducted in various professional locations – Youth Centres, Sure Start Centres, my office and other professional’s offices. It was conducted over the course of three weeks, coordinated so to keep the previous subjects responses fresh in the mind for the next. I adopted a semi-structured framework, employing a list of pre-defined (though different for the young people and the professionals) questions that are attached in my appendix. From this semi-structure I allowed for the conversation to flow, and to a certain extent, allow the respondent to take me where they wanted to go in relation to the subject. Research methodology I have a strong network of both young people and professionals who work with them which helped negate the potential stumbling block of access.

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This made the process of choosing relevant, current and open participants relatively straightforward, but this in itself brings some potential issues. I find it appropriate to talk about the professionals and the young people separately as the interviews necessitated a different methodology. For the professionals I was able to call upon my authority's Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator (who had just been made redundant), the Children in Care Coordinator, the Safeguarding Officer, a Connexions Worker specializing in working with Teenage Parents, A Choices Clinic Worker and the Coordinator of Street Talk (a Sexual Health outreach project in the voluntary sector). Having met all of these individuals previously, and worked with the majority, I felt confident in being able to instigate a frank discussion and this made the question of location simpler.

Either theirs or my working environment (though not their offices to avoid the interruption of phone calls and emails) was utilized and this was a conscious choice – to ensure a level of professionalism was maintained, that the conversation had a purpose. In my preparation I had stressed the importance of booking our meeting as a professional one, to ensure there were no time pressures and had established whether they were comfortable with my chosen recording method of a Dictaphone. The potential issue I had to avoid was losing the purpose of the conversation – of familiarity overbearing – but adopting a semi-structured approach, with a set list of pre-defined questions ensured this could be overcome. Although one respondent did request that I not appropriate confrontational comments directly to her. That she felt the conversation could generate such honest vitriol I found encouraging but that the comment was a direct result of the Dictaphone

being switched on I recognize could have been a negative. The theme of my research with professionals was one of despair at government policies, and one of practical realizations of the influence of economics upon these.

Of the six professionals interviewed, three responded with a dramatic one word answer (before then expanding) to the question of why teenage pregnancy was on the government agenda - " Economics". Statistics were thrown at me about the various outcomes for teenage parents all signifying that the average teenage pregnancy is likely to require costly and regular interventions from the state, and ones which the current Coalition government appear to be loathe to make. Recurring subjects were also apparent in social housing, ' ghettoisation' and aspirations; themes which will be explored in more detail later on. Interviewing the young people I found a more difficult proposition - not least because it seems even professionals targeting this area have difficulty engaging teenage parents. Please note this is more a criticism of the professionals approach and ability than of the young people. I held one group sessions, and four with individual teenage parents (although two of these were completely informal, unstructured and unrecorded in order to capture the moment).

Of these sessions only two males were represented which because of my discussion later on I find personally disappointing and recognize as an imbalance when addressing the issue. The group sessions were coordinated by a Connexions worker, and I had to rely on her obtaining initial voluntary consent and setting the environment. This was a massive misjudgment, and I recognize I should have provided rigid guidelines on both the environment and in obtaining permission for me to speak to the participants beforehand.

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The setting proved to be a Sure Start Centre and their children were present, which I do not feel were significant impactors – indeed these were the two elements I did provide guidance on and felt they were conducive to an open conversation – a familiar setting (these parents are engaged with services) and yes a distraction but, in hope, a welcome one. The issue for me was the presence of two Sure Start staff and two Connexions Workers.

Although they were situated in the background I felt this was intrusive and had the potential to make the young people feel their responses were being monitored not just by me. Indeed, when one participant responded to the question of future aspirations quite negatively the Connexions Worker interjected “ but you are going to college to do that hairdressing course though, aren’t you? ” Their presence made me feel uncomfortable let alone the young people and made gaining informed consent all the more difficult. How can a young person who may have issues of self esteem say no to not just one youth worker, but a whole team of professionals from different organizations? Whilst I introduced myself effectively and offered each participant the opportunity to walk away, there must have been fears for the confidentiality of any disclosures. If best practice is to “ guarantee the participants confidentiality – they are assured that identifying information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study” (and I believe that in this instance identifying information stretches much further than names, but to attitudes that are identified and professionals then make decisions based upon) [<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/ethics>].

php] then this is clearly a major failing of my research. However, perhaps I am too critical, perhaps the established relationships the professionals have with those women meant they felt free and able to communicate. In the future though I feel I will take on the more challenging task (due to access) of identifying a 'no treatment control group', participants who do not have access to programs related to the area of study [<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/ethics.php>]. I feel that my strengths in communication, in making young people feel at ease compensated somewhat for this situation but it is not one that sits well with ethical viewpoint. And this brings me to another issue – research felt at odds with my nature as a youth worker.

I find it hard not to address issues that were brought up, to challenge and motivate, but this was neither my purpose nor my position. The over-arching theme of my conversations with the young people was, disappointingly, a lack of hope, a feeling of their lives (if not the Childs, as I will explore later) being trapped in a negative cycle. Quotes such as “I can't see myself ever getting a job” would easily fuel the vitriolic fire of Charles Murray but for me, identify a young person let down by their government and stripped of aspiration. These young people recognized the ideal, most seemed to hold a suppressed want for it, but felt it was beyond their reach. They seemed to identify this with the moment they became teenage parents but I felt strongly this to be an outcome (of a wave of regressive policies) and not a cause.

Links to wider theoretical debates Perhaps because I have always found thinking strategically a difficult proposition I find it hard to make a sweeping generalization about how teenage pregnancy relates to social exclusion. I prefer to see that exclusion is both a cause and consequence of teenage parenthood. Simple economics seem to illustrate that an individual is more likely to be socially excluded from active participation in society by teenage parenthood, and the EPPI report (2006) outlines poverty and poor academic performance as potential contributing factors to teenage pregnancies.

However I agree with this reports finding that the relationship between these factors is complex, with the potential dislike of school feeding risky behaviour and vice versa to the point of a chicken and egg scenario. In fact the Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator I interviewed stressed the most compelling and consistent factor was family breakdown - stating that this was evident in over 80% of the cases she worked with - a factor that does not solely impact upon the socially excluded.

The work of Charles Murray has popularized the notion of the underclass - a holly separate class, separated by their cultural outlook. The term has come to stand for the shining beacons of the socially excluded and as teenage parents are a specifically targeted group for this theory it is only appropriate that I spend some time analyzing this term in relation to teenage pregnancy. I particularly enjoy Bagguley and Mann's rewording of Murray's unholy trinity of the underclass - Idle, thieving bastards (in MacDonald, 1997, pg 7) - but it is not too distant from his message. Illegitimate births are the leading inclinators of an underclass" (Murray, 1990, pg 17) Why the focus on single mothers? If the nuclear family is seen as the ' ideal', and indeed it is still held

up as the social norm, then I have to question why government policy targets the mothers and not the absent fathers.

As a youth worker I can see an improvement in this historical trend – dad’s packs, Haynes manuals etc – but it is still an imbalanced, institutionally sexist situation. The emphasis is still with the female for contraception and with the female for the consequences. Surely this undercurrent impacts upon aspiration – male and females are not even at the same starting point. The overwhelming majority of Teenage Parents I interviewed were no longer in a relationship with the other parent.

When asked about hopes for the future each said they wanted marriage, a family, but felt this was nigh on impossible. “ Nobody wants to take on someone else’s kids”. They saw an ideal (and this was true also of their views on employment) but thought it was unreachable. Perhaps the most resounding sound bite I heard from all the interviews was that “ Aspiration is the best form of contraception” and for me this rings true. The underclass is defined as welfare dependent, morally irresponsible and deviant. They are ‘ behaviourally poor’ (Green, 1992: 77 in Macdonald, 1997, pg 5).

This definition and the inclusion of behaviourally poor I find quite interesting – particularly when related to teenage parents. Of those I interviewed I asked each an add-on question not featured on my list. What are your hopes for your child? Without fail each responded with a positive story – perhaps not my middle class aspirations but certainly not illustrating a life confined to poverty. Many spoke of a stable family, of university and of secure employment.

That did not necessarily marry with their own hopes and aspirations, but it at least pointed to a will to break the ' cycle'. Perhaps their own aspirations are a reflection of the numerous professional interventions (which I and the professionals I interviewed seemed to believe are affected by a knowledge of statistics and general work weary attitudes) and media coverage. Runciman (1990: 388 in MacDonald, 1997, pg 2) stated that there is an underclass is as clear as that there is an upper class. " The term must be understood to stand...for those members of society [who are] unable to participate in the Labour market at all" The key term here is unable and that brings to me questions of why? We are not taking about being physically disabled from taking point so what prevents them - agency or structure? Whilst everything that is a youth worker about me screams a more liberal viewpoint, the practical side of my head, sees living examples of a potential underclass in my work, indeed in my research.

I see people, who appear to choose not to work, but I find the concept that they are unable very difficult - again the youth worker in me has to hope that given the right conditions and some intense support and guidance an individual can make that choice. Indeed as discussed in my research I found it difficult not to attempt to offer this support. However I can only argue that the causation stretches beyond these individual choices, that in some individuals (those that Murray would so swiftly label the underclass) choice has been stripped away by the impact of the government structure; to a point where some feel nothing but hopelessness, they feel unable to participate. Whilst the Labour government endorsed the ' Third Way' of thinking, that exclusion is a by-product of economic change, of an ever

increasing gap between the rich and the poor, I cannot endorse this as accidental. Capitalism is a conscious choice and deliberately causes exclusion.

Our governments cannot be said to have been naive to the effects of stripping away entire industries: “ The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value in the world of things” (Karl Marx, in Elster 1986, pg 37). There are clear practical examples of this when looking at a map of Britain, a map of where (typically northern) cities and towns were founded on now faded industry and comparing this to a map of (to use one potential signifier of social exclusion) teenage pregnancy ‘ hotspots’ (The Guardian 24/02/10). I am always inclined to take things back to the root cause – indeed I am a believer that it is hard to solve a problem without an understanding of it’s origin – and for me this seems the most sensible solution. Perhaps it is not popular in the current political climate because discussing the underclass and focusing on agency and cultural outlook allows room to ignore the real causes of poverty, a concept which would suit some members of the upper class (the ones with the true power) very well. However I do not dispute that over time structure impacts upon agency, upon the cultural outlook of an individual and I subscribe to MacDonald’s assertion of the liberal left viewpoint – “ seeing the structural influences on the growth of an underclass as antecedents to adaptive cultural behaviour which further entrenches the social exclusion of the group(s) involved” (MacDonald, 1997, pg 17). What concerns me is that structure moves so slowly.

It takes time to change the outlook of a generation, to completely erode the livelihoods of a community, but even longer to do this for the better - to restore them. What concerns me even further is the potential for such an outlook (if it exists) to be passed from generation to generation, from teenage parent to child. Although, as discussed, aspirations for the child seemed to be unaffected in my research, I fear for the impact of the subconscious. Green industry aside (and I question the long term possibilities of such industry) there is no apparent replacement for the unskilled manual work lost during Thatcher's years. That structure represented the aspirational (or should I just say middle to upper class) and did not move to support the cultural outlook of the working class to develop in synergy, leaving whole communities disenfranchised with politics and structure and becoming increasingly insular. It represented a " political, social and economic apartheid" (Frank ' Field, in MacDonald 1997, pg 14) and demonstrated the inequalities of capitalism.

It is more important to focus on the social rather than moral factors - joblessness is involuntary, it is not because individuals want to be, but because there are no appropriate jobs. However I believe that cultural responses develop to structural causes. The agency affected, it becomes the only easily available influence on individuals and further entrenches the exclusion. With today's' government imposing further sanctions on the poor - for example the ' mandatory community task force' whereby those on long term benefit must complete four weeks of unpaid work or lose benefits - as a punishment (this may be branded as a motivational tool and I search for a different word but none comes) edging us closer to the American 99er

system, e run the risk of further disenfranchising the youth and fostering a 'lost generation'. The hope is clear - that "the habits and routines" of working life (The Guardian 07/11/10) will inspire a cultural response in individuals. What is not clear is how an oppressive stick will serve better than (or without) the carrot of realistically obtainable work.

Once more with a Conservative government the emphasis is on people to find this motivation from within, to develop an opportunistic nature whilst opportunity is stripped away. As Douglas Alexander, the shadow work and pensions secretary states in the same article "without work, it won't work". I believe it is very hard to quantitatively analyze a cultural outlook, which for me seems to define the sociological argument (in the sense that cultural outlook is the major impactor on securing, or even searching, for employment; and much rather than the more practical government definition add-ons of access to services). I'm sure most field workers can quote anecdotal evidence of young people as the underclass but it must be remembered that youth is a period of transition (in particular teenage pregnancy! , leading me to question whether research on cultural outlook can stand the test of time. There is an element of the following quote that resonates with me on this point: "The concept of the underclass is a recurrent political and social scientific myth...because of its inherent theoretical, methodological and empirical flaws [it represents] a demonstrably false set of beliefs." (Bagguley and Mann 1992: 122, 125 in Macdonald pg 2) A constant theme that emerged in my research subjects and has an undoubted relationship with teenage pregnancy and social exclusion is that of social housing.

Several of the professional respondents talked of the potential for the ‘ghettoisation’ of the socially excluded, trapping them in localities that are commercially abandoned and where services are unavailable, effectively narrowing their worlds. When social housing was sold off en masse in the eighties, it was not replaced with new builds. Because this was obviously to some degree subject to income of individuals it meant that social housing is now effectively grouped together in the poorest neighbourhoods. This has the potential to lead to a territorialism – the smaller an individuals’ world becomes the more protective of it they become.

A smaller social circle leads to a decrease in opportunity to mix with different classes and different aspirations, and accordingly so does the opportunity for potentially positive influence. The classic Murray stereotype of a teenager seeking to obtain a free flat by becoming pregnant ignores the reality of the situational context of that flat. These flats are generally in the poorest neighbourhoods, leaving teenage parents immediately cut off from most services, employment opportunities and often their social circle. The potential for new negative influences is apparent, and this can be a factor upon the exclusion of teenage parents.