The pregnancy project: a view of the present stigmatization of teen mothers

Abstract

The topic of single mothers is often one that is very controversial. In particular, the phenomenon of teen mothers is one that often is encompassed by stigmatizing attitudes and barrages of stereotypes. This paper reviews Erving Goffman's view of stigma and stigma management as well as research looking at the nature of stigma and stigma management encountered by teen mothers. This information is then applied to an analysis of the movie The Pregnancy Project that is an adaptation of the book of the same name. Both are based on the true events of an experiment conducted by a high school girl. The findings support the fact that teen mothers continue to face stigma and prejudice and actively fight the negative labels.

Introduction

Currently, single mothers, whether teen mothers or not, are often stigmatized by both peers and society as a whole. In order to understand the nature of this stigma today, this project analyzed the movie *The Pregnancy Project* that highlighted the experiences of a young woman that pretended to be pregnant for a school project. Information gathered from the analysis of the movie was compared to research on the stigma faced by single mothers and Erving Goffman's foundational concepts of stigma and stigma management. The findings suggest that the attitudes towards teen mothers in pop culture today have not shifted from the generally negative view that was noted in prior research.

Literature Review

The Definition of Stigma

Throughout the sources analyzed, no other definition of stigma was referenced as heavily as Erving Goffman's view as presented in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1963). Goffman (1963) defined stigma as "…an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 3). This definition encompasses a fundamental aspect of stigma, that stigma is based less on the attribute itself and more on how the aforementioned attribute affects the relationships of the person that faces the stigma. In other words, this means that individuals who face stigma are often avoided or ostracized by peers and general society due to their negatively viewed traits. Link and Phelan (2001) describe stigma using Goffman's (1963) original definition and adding the element of discrimination into it. An example of discrimination in relation to the description of stigma stated by Link and Phelan (2001) was " In our reasoning, when people are labeled, set apart, and linked to undesirable characteristics, a rationale is constructed for devaluing, rejecting, and excluding them. Thus, people are stigmatized when the fact that they are labeled, set apart, and linked to undesirable characteristics leads them to experience status loss and discrimination" (pp. 370 – 371). In other words, Link and Phelan (2001) explain that individuals can be discriminated and demoted in status based on their stigmatized traits and how they can cause others to exclude them from their lives. Major and O'Brien (2005), also follow Goffman's original definition. They write that stigma is " An attribute that marks them as different and leads them to be devalued in the eyes of others." (p. 395). Along with this, Goffman (1963) identifies three types of stigma that are: 1) " abominations of body" or physical abnormalities; 2) " blemishes of individual character" or something

that is seen as having character problems such as being " weak willed" or dishonest; and 3) " tribal stigmas" or stigmas based on lineage (e. g., race, class, gender, religion, etc.).

What is Stigma Management?

When conceptualizing the concept of stigma, the question of how the individuals attempt to handle the stigmatization is always in question. Goffman (1963) categorizes stigma management into three different categories. The first category is " correction of the stigma" or an attempt to show that they do not fit the stereotypes of the stigmatized group. Another management technique that is a form of the correction of stigma is distancing. Distancing allows those who would normally be considered discredited to avoid the harsh judgments of society against their attributes. Individuals who distance themselves often try to develop other skills that are not usually thought to be achievable by people who face the stigma. Major and O'Brian (2005) emulate Goffman's idea of " distancing" and show that in some instances, people will simply strive to remove the stigma from their lives, focusing on attributes that are considered acceptable in their societies. The article explained an interesting study that involved subjects taking difficult math exams. The data showed that many people that didn't understand some concepts of the test completely omitted them, deciding to distance themselves from the situation instead of attempting to " correct" their own knowledge and try to complete the problem.

A second strategy Goffman (1963) identifies is embracement. Those that face stigmatization might " embrace" the negative label. The individual that utilizes this method of management might attempt to embrace the stigma in order to make the stigmatization useless against them. These individuals find comfort in being distinguished from others due to the negative labels casted unto them. This is found to be the least common, as an individual often becomes defensive when faced with stigmatization, causing the mentality of embracing the stigma to be very rare in stigmatized groups. Goffman (1963) also explains a third form of stigma management, the strategy of " hiding" the stigma. Hiding stigma usually entails an individual taking on traits found generally outside of the stigmatized group in order for the stigmatized trait to remain hidden to others, or simply not demonstrating the stigmatized trait. A common example of hiding could be an individual who was of a stigmatized sexual orientation simply not allowing peers or other family members to know of their orientation. By not demonstrating the stigmatized trait, the individual can avoid harsh criticisms and stigma regarding it.

Stigma and Stigma Management by Single/Teen Moms

Much of the research on the experiences of single mothers relates to the concepts of stigma and stigma management (Seccombe, K., James, D., & Walters, K, 2009; Usdansky, 2009; Ellis-Sloan, 2009). Seccombe, K., James, D., & Walters, K (2009) shed light on the personal accounts of many single mothers that had to become part of the welfare system. A common theme throughout this article was the fact that many of the mothers received comments from people that often called them " lazy", contrary to the fact

that many of them also had jobs. Supporting this notion of debunking the basis of thought behind the perceived " lazy" mentality, one woman named Coreen mentioned that she was a fulltime university student that simply needed the money to help her pay food and her apartment. Along with this, this woman was only the mother to one child. By proving this, Coreen " corrects" the perceived stigma, showcasing that the stereotypes do not apply to many single mothers. Is laziness truly defined as making sacrifices for your child? Is laziness also synonymous to attempting to take on school while managing a job? Additionally, much of the research points out that many of these mothers have complicated and work driven lives that could not be lived if they did not work and fight for their children daily (Seccombe, K., James, D., & Walters, K, 2008, Usdansky 2008). In addition to single and teen mothers being seen as " lazy", research finds that many single and teen mothers were seen as those who relied on welfare to support their families (Seccombe, K., James, D., & Walters, K, 2009; Usdansky, 2009). In addition to this, Ellis-Sloan (2014) notes again the stereotype of " lazy" teens relying on welfare to take care of their children. Sloan (2014) describes that stereotypes of the welfare teen stemmed from the idea of " perverse incentives" given to the teens (p. 8). These people believed that teen mothers were encouraged to have children to be put onto welfare and earn money without having to work for it, again contributing to the stereotype of being " lazy".

To correct the stigma of teen mothers having this mentality, Seccombe, K., James, D., & Walters, K (1998) stated that only six percent of welfare recipients were under the age of 20. This means that in order to provide for

their children, these young women had to go and search for jobs and means for funding their lives. The women researched said things such as " They say you're lazy and don't want to work…I have worked in my time and I will work again." (p. 854) and " There are people like me who use it to make ends meet while they are preparing themselves to support themselves." (p. 856). These quotes allowed the reader to observe how these mothers corrected the stigma regarding them as " lazy" by offering personal anecdotes showcasing their often undermined work ethic . In addition to this, one very interesting form of stigma correction is summarized by Kelly (2006). A policy was developed in Ontario that required teen mothers to enter school and earn education or simply be put off of welfare. This policy lessened the power of the " lazy" stereotype against teen mothers. Ellis-Sloan (2014), also found that the women used the strategies of distancing and correcting. For example, Ellis-Slone (2014) notes that many women utilized a sort of distancing technique that Goffman (1967) defined as " defensive orientations". This form of distancing involved the women attempting to save face by emphasizing the fact that they used contraception and did not know why they still conceived children. In other words, the women tried to lessen the chance of encountering stigmatizing attitudes by showing that they did not *purposely* attempt to conceive children, but that failed contraception was at fault.

Analysis

Type of Stigma Observed in *The Pregnancy Project*

The primary form of stigma observed in *The Pregnancy Project,* was that of Goffman's (1963) " blemish of individual character". Gabby's teen pregnancy was seen as something that was damaging to her character and also something that trumped every other positive trait or achievement.

Examples of some things said:

- " What a waste of a life."

- " Your whole life will be thrown away, stay away from each other."

- " She isn't exactly an example of good character."

- " You're not the same person anymore"

Gabby's peers and teachers saw the baby as something that destroyed the person that she was. Gabby was no longer seen as the straight " A" student, but instead as a weak and ruined person.

Examples of Stigma Management – Distancing and Correcting

Gabriella's primary form of stigma management was distancing and correcting. She used her high grades as an example of how being a teen mother does not have to be the end all.

- " What will stop me from going to college?"

- " Having a baby does not mean I have to drop out of school."

- Gabrielle attempts to distance herself by maintaining her high grades, but the stigmatization continues.

- " I'm not going to give up on living my life."

Examples of Stigma Management – Embracement

Gabriella at first attempted to distance and correct herself from the prejudicial attitudes faced by her peers. Although this is true for the very beginning of the film, she begins to embrace the stigma towards the end and begins to internalize all of the pain felt.

- " I'm a Latina kid raised by a single mother, no one expects much from me." Gabby embraces the stereotype head on.

- Gabby begins to hang out with another student that is actually pregnant and almost begins to believe everything that she is told about what being pregnant at a teen means.

- " Everyone told me that I couldn't amount to anything. I sometimes believed that it was true even though I wasn't really pregnant."

- At the end of the film, Gabriella saw the negative stigma as a gift because she had put herself in someone else's shoes.

- " I am just damaged goods now."

- " And now…Everything they say is real and it bothers me." Tyra, a young woman in the film that was actually pregnant. Her experience differed

from Gabby in that she embraced the stigma from the very beginning of her pregnancy.

Conclusion

Throughout the analysis conducted of *The Pregnancy Project* , many forms of both stigma and stigma management faced were observed. In comparison to prior studies of stigma and how teen mothers are affected, the movie portrayed a similarly hostile environment laced with racial discrimination and general lack of support from general society and peers alike. One idea that prevailed throughout the research and in *The Pregnancy Project* , was the idea of single motherhood being a character " flaw" that overshadowed all other achievements made by each teen mother along with proving them to have " wasted their lives". Based on information and phrases presented in the film, stigmatizing attitudes have remained hostile towards single mothers. Though the protagonist Gabriella tried to understand and dispel the negative connotation towards teen pregnancy, in the end she simply took off the fake belly in a touching emotional catharsis. While this was indeed a step forward in discouraging the demonization of teen mothers, Gabriella soon after stated joyously that she did not " ruin her life". This demonstrates that she had indeed internalized the message that she was ruining her life, and also showed she was only glad to have escaped the " hell" that was teen pregnancy. Gabriella did not attempt to disprove others when they blamed her pregnancy on being a Latina, she embraced it and attempted to understand how teen mothers were treated, taking the stigma as a blessing and educational opportunity rather than a chance to dispel stereotypes and

prejudicial attitudes. While *The Pregnancy Project* helped to fill an

informational gap in literature concerning modern pop culture views on teen

pregnancy, it also demonstrated that they have stayed at a stagnantly

vitriolic level.

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