



Understanding multiple levels of norms about teen pregnancy and their relationships to teens' sexual behaviors[☆]



Stefanie Mollborn^{*}, Benjamin W. Domingue, Jason D. Boardman

University of Colorado Boulder, United States

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ABSTRACT

Researchers seeking to understand teen sexual behaviors often turn to age norms, but they are difficult to measure quantitatively. Previous work has usually inferred norms from behavioral patterns or measured group-level norms at the individual level, ignoring multiple reference groups. Capitalizing on the multilevel design of the Add Health survey, we measure teen pregnancy norms perceived by teenagers, as well as average norms at the school and peer network levels. School norms predict boys' perceived norms, while peer network norms predict girls' perceived norms. Peer network and individually perceived norms against teen pregnancy independently and negatively predict teens' likelihood of sexual intercourse. Perceived norms against pregnancy predict increased likelihood of contraception among sexually experienced girls, but sexually experienced boys' contraceptive behavior is more complicated: When both the boy and his peers or school have stronger norms against teen pregnancy he is more likely to contracept, and in the absence of school or peer norms against pregnancy, boys who are embarrassed are less likely to contracept. We conclude that: (1) patterns of behavior cannot adequately operationalize teen pregnancy norms, (2) norms are not simply linked to behaviors through individual perceptions, and (3) norms at different levels can operate independently of each other, interactively, or in opposition. This evidence creates space for conceptualizations of agency, conflict, and change that can lead to progress in understanding age norms and sexual behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Family formation in the United States has changed rapidly in recent decades. About 40% of births now occur outside of marriage, and Americans' ages at first marriage and first birth have risen steadily (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2010). Headlines regularly remind us that just half of American adults are now married (Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011). Since the mid-twentieth century, the life course has become more individualized, with greater diversity in the timing and ordering of life transitions (Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987; Settersten, 2004; Shanahan, 2000). Alongside these demographic shifts have come changes in *age norms* about the timing and ordering of parenthood and marriage. Survey data have found that a majority of older Americans do not find nonmarital childbearing to be morally acceptable, but

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Institute of Behavioral Science and Department of Sociology, University of Colorado Boulder, 483 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0483, United States. Tel.: +1 3037353796.

E-mail address: mollborn@colorado.edu (S. Mollborn).

most younger Americans do (Taylor, Funk, & Clark, 2007). Teenagers' behaviors are regulated by these changing normative messages. Even though the rate of sexual activity among U.S. teenagers has been fairly consistent for the past 50 years (Furstenberg, 2003), and although American teens have lately begun having sex at older ages and contracepting more consistently (Hoffman, 2008), teen sexuality, pregnancy, and parenthood continue to be major social issues today. Nearly 80% of adults in a national poll considered teen pregnancy to be an "important" or "very serious" problem in the United States (Science and Integrity Survey, 2004). Yet teen pregnancy occurs within a local social context that comes with its own norms—norms that can vary considerably from one place to another. These normative contexts surrounding teens may be important for understanding not only teens' sexual behaviors, but also the consequences of these behaviors.

Despite their importance, social norms are difficult for social scientists to conceptualize and measure. Like other sociologists, we define social norms as group-level expectations of appropriate behavior that lead to negative sanctions when violated (Marini, 1984; Settersten, 2004). As such, norms cannot be adequately captured by measuring the population-level prevalence of a behavior; most adults may drink coffee, but that does not mean tea drinkers face negative social sanctions (Marini, 1984). Although social norms are a social phenomenon in reference to a specific social group, extant quantitative research usually measures them at the individual level. Similarly, norms are theorized to be held by a particular reference group such as a friendship group or a family, but existing individual-level measures often leave the reference group unspecified. Our study addresses these limitations by measuring teen pregnancy norms at the group level and considering multiple reference groups simultaneously. Capitalizing on the multiple social contexts assessed in the Add Health survey, we assess the relationships between teens' sexual behaviors and both schools and peer networks. Our novel network-based measure of peer context captures the key influence of close friends while also considering the important "wider circle of friends" (Giordano, 1995). Importantly, our study is the first to compare the relative influences of school and peer norms, as well as norms perceived by individuals, concurrently and interactively. Sexual intercourse and contraception are interrelated behaviors leading to pregnancy that may be associated differently with norms, so we analyze both.

This research is important because in recent years, social norms have become an "elephant in the room" for researchers working to understand relationships between social contexts and individual behaviors: Most would agree that norms matter, but difficulties with conceptualizing and measuring norms have led to criticisms (e.g., Marini, 1984). We argue that measuring norms at the level of important reference groups and modeling their associations with behavior is an important first step in addressing these criticisms and working to understand the role of norms in shaping human behavior. Researching norms about teen pregnancy is also empirically important

because of its high prevalence in the United States, its negative consequences for young mothers, fathers, and children, and its concentration in already marginalized segments of the population (Furstenberg, 2007; Hoffman, 1998; Levine, Pollack, & Comfort, 2001; Pirog & Magee, 1997). To understand the implications of a teen pregnancy, we must think of it as a social phenomenon embedded in normative contexts that are linked to individual perceptions and behaviors. In this paper, we contribute to this situated conceptualization of teen sexual behavior by addressing the following three questions: *First*, how are school-level and peer-level average norms about teen pregnancy related to the perceived norms about teen pregnancy of individual teenage boys and girls?¹ *Second*, how are teen pregnancy norms at the school and peer network levels associated with teenage boys' and girls' sexual behaviors (sexual intercourse and contraceptive use) beyond their implications for individual-level norms? *Third*, do different levels of norms interact in their relationship with teens' behaviors?

2. Background

The idea that social norms are related to behavior has a long history (Durkheim, 1951[1897]; Merton, 1968). Although it was a core part of structural functionalist thought, the concept of norms was criticized in later decades for lacking adequate conceptualizations of agency, conflict, and change (Horne, 2001; Vaisey, 2009). Today, qualitative researchers tend to talk about culture rather than norms when articulating social processes (Fine, 2001), and demographers either infer norms from prevalent behaviors or struggle with measuring the group-level constructs of norms and sanctions using individual-level instruments such as surveys (Settersten, 2004). Extant research that directly measures norms instead of assuming their existence tends to assess individual-level embarrassment about a behavior, social sanctions, or ideal behaviors whose violation may not be accompanied by sanctions (Billari & Liefbroer, 2007; Settersten, 2004).

Pregnancy norms are part of an important subgroup of social norms that interests scholars of the life course: age norms (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965; Settersten, 2004). Age norms regulate the timing of a behavior's occurrence in the life course and its ordering relative to other life transitions like marriage and establishing financial independence. Norms regulating pregnancy are clearly age-graded—social norms do not typically discourage childbearing when it occurs in adulthood and after transitioning to marriage and financial independence.

Past research has documented norms discouraging teen pregnancy among U.S. adults (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008; Mollborn, 2009), and

¹ Ideally we would have included family and neighborhood norms as well as school and peer norms. Family norms' high correlation with personal norms prohibited their use, and residential census tracts contained too few respondents on average to meaningfully aggregate norms.

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