



Struggling with motherhood and coping with fatherhood – A grounded theory study among Thai teenagers



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ABSTRACT

Objective: to gain a deeper understanding of Thai teenage parents' perspectives, experiences and reasoning about becoming and being a teenage parent from a gender perspective.

Design: an exploratory design using grounded theory methodology. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. An interview guide was developed, a pilot study was undertaken, and interviews were performed on two different occasions: once during the second trimester of pregnancy and again when the infant was 5–6 months old.

Setting: a province in the western part of Thailand.

Participants: the selection of a heterogeneous group of teenage parents-to-be continued until saturation was reached, as describe by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in all $n=50$. Inclusion criteria for participants were that they were heterosexual couples, under 20 years of age, cohabiting, and expecting their first child.

Findings: the core category '*struggling with motherhood and coping with fatherhood*' comprises descriptions of the process from when the teenagers first learned about the pregnancy until the child was six months old. The teenagers had failed to use contraceptives which led to an *unintended parenthood*. Their *parenthood* became a *turning point* as the teenagers started to change their behaviours and lifestyle during pregnancy, and adapted their relationships to partner and family. *Family commitments* was a facilitator, through support given by their families. Finally, *becoming a parent* describes ways of dealing with the parental role, by engaging in parental activities and reestablishing goals in life. Most of the teenage parents reproduced traditional gender roles by being a caring mother or a breadwinning father respectively.

Key conclusions: 'struggling with motherhood and coping with fatherhood' referred to the parents' stories about how they struggled and coped with life changes and their parental role when they became unintentionally pregnant, accepted their parenting, and finally became parents. After becoming parents, the main concerns of most of the teenage parents were being a caring mother and a breadwinning father.

Implications for practice: this study contributes a deeper understanding of Thai teenage parents' experiences of becoming and being a parent and might improve health care professionals' adaptation of care for teentranatnage parents and inspire them to tailor their care specifically to teenager's needs from early pregnancy to parenthood.

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Introduction

Teenage parenthood continues to be a concern in many countries. In Thailand, the birth rate among teenagers increased dramatically from 31.1 to 53.8 per 1000 teenage women during the years 2000–2012 (Termpittayapaisith and Peek, 2013). The proportion of both male and female students who reported always using a condom during intercourse was below 30% ($n=26,430$) in 2011 (Bureau of Epidemiology, 2012). Pregnant teenagers also have an increased incidence of obstetric complications as well as poor neonatal outcomes for their babies (Qazi, 2011; Liabsuetrakul, 2012).

Thai law approves requests for legal abortion only in cases of rape, serious complications for the mother, or expected physical deformity or mental retardation of the child. Many rural women remain fearful of the consequences of sin or 'bap' if they were to undergo an abortion, and therefore choose to continue with an unintended pregnancy (Whitaker and Miller, 2000). Since the end of 2014, legal medical abortion is possible under the strict control of the Ministry of Public Health, but teenagers under the age of 18 need parental consent.

Teenagers need a large amount of time for their education and social life, which are significant parts of their growth and development. Becoming a parent is a major developmental transition and brings an avalanche of both positive and negative experiences to a couple's life together (Meleis, 2010). As parents, teenagers must devote time and effort to taking care of their child (Hockenberry and Wilson, 2011). Teenage parents thus experience conflicting needs. Teenage parents are often unemployed or have insufficient income, and therefore must rely on their families for basic necessities, such as food and housing (Chirawatkul et al., 2011). Moreover, 91.4% ($n=879$) of Thai teenage mothers felt an inner conflict and were frustrated because they had to act as daughter, mother and student at the same time. In addition, 7.4% ($n=3114$) of the teenage mothers reported being a single mother (Chirawatkul et al., 2011). Simultaneously, teenage fathers may be preoccupied with their own developmental issues relating to achieving independence from their parents (Logsdon, Ratterman (2002). Consistency in parenthood provides the basis for the infant's development and its sense of trust. Research indicates that positive experiences of becoming a teenage father enables the young father to express his sense of masculinity and identity. Being a father is described as a process of maturing (Premberg et al., 2008).

In Thailand, men are often referred to as 'hua nah kropkrou' (leader of the household) (Coyle and Kwong, 2000). Asian men can be exemplified by the Philippines, where men are metaphorically referred to as 'the pillar of the home' (Hoang and Yeoh, 2011). In Thailand, a good mother is expected to make personal sacrifices for her baby (Liamputtong et al., 2004). Chirawatkul et al. (2011) reported that 68.7% ($n=879$) of Thai teenage mothers accepted that women were responsible for childrearing, and 78.5% agreed with the assertion that women are more sensitive and patient than men. Thus, Thai mothers have been subjects both internally and externally to expectations to do housework and take care of the children.

In Thailand, studies in the area of teenage motherhood have explored female experiences during pregnancy, early motherhood and childrearing (Neamsakul, 2008; Pungbangkadee, 2008; Muangpin et al., 2010; Phoodaangau et al., 2013; Sriyasak et al., 2013). The knowledge about teenage parenthood is limited in the existing literature. With this study we intend to contribute to the understanding in this area. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of Thai teenage parents' perspectives, experiences and reasoning about becoming and being a teenage parent, from a gender perspective.

Methods

An exploratory design was chosen and grounded theory methodology was employed. Grounded theory explores social processes and is helpful when developing a preliminary model to explain human interactions in society (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Participants and Setting

Inclusion criteria for participants were that they were heterosexual couples under 20 years of age expecting their first child. The selection of teenage parents-to-be ($n=50$) continued until saturation was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This means, the researcher compared sequentially events until no new concepts or properties of categories were obtained (Charmaz, 2006). One teenage couple dropped out in the second interview due to the baby's death. Participants were selected from cohabiting, pregnant couples who resided in a province in western part of Thailand, who visited the district hospitals and Primary Health Care Centres in this province. This rural area was chosen since it has one of the highest adolescent birth rates in Thailand (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2014).

Data collection and analysis

The interview guide was developed based on our research objective (Table 1). Three pilot interviews were undertaken to test and, if necessary, modify the questions in the interview guide, in a group similar to the sample. At all interviews, conducted by the first author in Thai, the researcher initiated a conversation with a general question such as: 'Could you please tell me the story of how you became a teenage parent?' All the semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Names and places were changed. Taking theoretical sensitivity into consideration (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the interview questions were modified throughout the study according to the emerging concepts (Table 1). Examining the data from different angles enabled us more easily to develop a preliminary model. To gain richer data, some new questions were added to the interview guide based on the findings from the pilot interviews, such as questions about preparing for parenthood, and support from other people, friends or teachers.

The first author originates from a rural area of Thailand and has extensive experience as a nursing instructor. To enhance self-awareness and minimise bias, a reflective journal was used throughout the data collecting process and analysis to remind the researcher of bias and to enhance the study's rigour (Charmaz, 2006). Being a woman, interviewing male participants could imply difficulties in taking the other's perspective. The first author has undertaken research within the area of teenagers and has led parental classes, with both men and women. These experiences were beneficial for the ability to listen and talk with men becoming or being teenage parents. Further, all the co-authors have earlier experience of doing and publishing research on families, using grounded theory. These experiences have led to an awareness of the importance of data variation and an open mind when analysing the empirically generated findings.

Data were collected from the same participants on two different occasions. The first interview was conducted during the second trimester of the mother-to-be's pregnancy. The participants decided on the location of the interview, with most choosing to be interviewed in a separate room in their own home. Six couples were interviewed in a quiet place in the antenatal ward for the first interview. The second interview was undertaken when the child was around 5–6 months old. For the second interview, all of the participants were interviewed in their own homes.

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