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## “Our lives aren't over”: A strengths-based perspective on stigma, discrimination, and coping among young parents



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### ABSTRACT

The current study conducted interviews and focus groups with twenty-four diverse 16-25 year-old parents to elicit in-depth narratives about experiences related to parenting status. Parents were recruited from a case management program in the Southwestern United States supporting high school graduation and workforce employment (for mothers and fathers, respectively). Young parents disclosed experiences of shame, stigma, and discrimination associated with perceptions about their “fitness” to be a parent and moral judgment. Themes arose that revealed the positive, adaptive ways that participants coped with potentially deleterious experiences with a focus on their role as a parent and role model for their children. Our findings highlight positive meaning-making and resiliency of young parents when confronted with discrimination and systemic barriers, with many participants focusing on the benefits of parenthood within a unique developmental context. Further, implications for program development, provider trainings, and public policy and advocacy efforts for young parents are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

Adolescent and young adult parents in the United States (U.S.) represent a unique cohort within a changing social environment of ongoing evidence of decreasing rates of adolescent pregnancy attributable to the myriad pregnancy prevention programs enacted in previous decades (Killoren, Zeiders, Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Nonetheless, early childbearing remains a public concern, especially in communities of color, due to the associated elevated risks and adverse outcomes, including poorer health, delayed educational and vocational goal attainment, and increased rates of poverty later in life (Aparicio, Pecukonis, & Zhou, 2014; Dehlendorf, Marchi, Vittinghoff & Bravemen, 2010; Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). In 2014, birth rates for Hispanic and non-Hispanic black teens were over twice the rates for non-Hispanic white teens (Romero et al., 2016). Approximately, one in three Hispanic teen girls and four in 10 non-Hispanic black teen girls reported becoming pregnant at least once before the age of 20, rates far higher than the national average (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2016a). To address continued disparities in rates of pregnancy and later outcomes among under-served, disadvantaged communities, we must deepen our understanding of the experiences of young parents from communities with disproportionately higher teen birth rates. Specifically, we must explore the social, psychological, and structural forces that can undermine young parents seeking to realize full adult potential, as well as the

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protective factors that can counteract barriers and help pave the way for successful outcomes as a parent and young adult. (Aparicio et al., 2014; Clayton, 2016; SmithBattle, Loman, Chantamit-o-pas, & Schneider, 2017).

Young parents represent a unique intersection of identities (i.e., parenthood, adolescence) which engenders very specific assumptions, expectations, and stereotypes. As they integrate multiple roles as adolescents/emerging adults (e.g., son/daughter, student) with that of parent, they may face unique challenges without yet acquiring skills or resources to adaptively cope, especially without scaffolding or support (Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, Jahromi, & Zeiders, 2015). Research has found that young maternal age remains one significant predictor of adverse parent-child outcomes, even when controlling for socio-economic status (Lewin, Mitchell, & Ronzio, 2013). However, such adverse outcomes may be better explained by insufficient support from the co-parent, family, and peers (Hirst, Formby, & Owen, 2006; Shah, Gee, & Theall, 2014), poor access to healthcare (Ganchimeg et al., 2014), and socio-economic and social stress (e.g., discrimination) (Huang, Costeines, Kaufman, & Ayala, 2014; Willie, Powell, & Kershaw, 2016).

Becoming a parent during adolescence has been linked to low parental educational attainment and limited social mobility, which is more commonly observed in low-income communities with greater proportions of ethnic/racial minorities (Aparicio et al., 2014; Assini-Meytin & Green, 2015). Such social disparities may have lasting effects through intergenerational “transmission” of class disadvantage for young parents and their children (Roksa & Potter, 2011), highlighting ethnic minority parents as an especially important target for intervention and support. There are assumptions that becoming a parent in adolescence is generally ‘unintentional’ or ‘unwanted’, rather than reflecting the reality that some pregnancies are planned or that parents may experience the pregnancy with “positive ambivalence” or neutrality (Hirst et al., 2006). Assumption that early childbearing is unplanned or undesired can lead some to characterize the decision to bear children as reckless and not worthy of support and empathy (Macvarish, 2010).

Substantial literature has documented widespread social stigma of young parents and associated with social isolation and poor mental health outcomes (Gordon et al., 2016; SmithBattle & Freed, 2016; SmithBattle et al., 2017). Discrimination coupled with poor social support among ethnically diverse young parents has been consistently linked to depression and increased stress among ethnically diverse adolescent and young adult parents (Cox et al., 2008). Given the potential consequences of discrimination and stigma on parental functioning, it is imperative to continue to deepen our understanding of their experiences of stress and discrimination specifically as it affects young ethnic minority parents from low income communities, as well as explore how young parents adapt and cope with such adverse experiences (Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Hodgkinson, Beers, Southammakosane, & Lewin, 2014; Kulkarni, Kennedy, & Lewis, 2010; SmithBattle, 2007).

### 1.1. Stigma and discrimination among young parents

New parents commonly experience multiple stressors including financial burden, role restriction, and social isolation. Young parents are also tasked with attention to education and career, challenges that may be compounded by the responsibilities of new parenthood (Huang et al., 2014). There is strong evidence that adolescent parents, unlike their adult counterparts, experience stigma and judgment from social networks crucial to healthy psychological development (Gordon et al., 2016). While stigma may be driven by pre-conceived negative perceptions about early pregnancy, when directed toward low income minority youth, it can be further complicated by racial and class stereotyping and presumptions about the capabilities of adolescents to assume the responsibilities of parenthood (SmithBattle, 2007). A recent report by the National Women's Law Center (2017) highlights the influence of lack of support, stigma, and overt discrimination on school disengagement and drop-out among adolescent mothers and calls for training, program development, and public policy to minimize repeat pregnancy and improve academic outcomes.

As adolescence is marked by a significant focus on social approval and acceptance, the weight of additional stigma may prove particularly detrimental for young parents' mental health and development, and ultimately, the availability of sufficient social support later in life (Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek, 2010). Further, interviews with former teen parents found that the psychosocial consequences of stigma related to early childbearing continued well into adulthood, such as feeling they need to do “more” or “better” to be accepted, “defying social class and/or parental expectations” and missing a “sense of youth” or ability to participate in youth-related activities (Hirst et al., 2006, p. 64).

### 1.2. Sources of resiliency for young parents

While cumulative experiences of perceived prejudice and discrimination may undermine the strength of supportive factors (e.g., positive connections), not all young parents and their children experience deleterious outcomes (Hirst et al., 2006). For instance, some view pregnancy as a positive catalyst for change, leading to vital self-transformation and increasing motivation to complete their education (Cherry, Chumblor, Bute, & Huff, 2015; Mantovani & Thomas, 2015). In their study, Hirst and colleagues reported that young parents perceived some benefits to early childbearing including closer relationships with their children due to smaller age gap; opportunities for long, successful careers as mothers; having time left “to enjoy life” after children have left home; and, having more energy and youthfulness while childrearing (Hirst, Formby, & Owens, 2006, p. 64). Understanding the potential “resiliency” and coping within a backdrop of social judgment, discrimination and stigma is essential to promoting the well-being and success of all young parents (Cherry et al., 2015; SmithBattle & Freed, 2016; Solivan, Wallace, Kaplan, & Harville, 2015).

While previous research has examined experiences of young parents confronting stressors related to parenting status, there remain questions as to how young parents perceive such adverse experiences and how they learned to adapt and cope (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016). A deeper understanding of how young parents receive support and manage stresses related to young parenthood will help inform the development of strengths-based interventions, particularly for ethnic minority parents (Huang et al., 2014; Kulkarni et al.,

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