

KRISTIN LUKER

DUBIOUS
CONCEPTIONS

THE POLITICS
OF TEENAGE
PREGNANCY

"The best social policy book ever written on teenage
childbearing in the U.S."

—William Julius Wilson

Kristin Luker

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TEENAGE PREGNANCY

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DUBIOUS CONCEPTIONS

TO JOAN DUNLOP

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Scholarly books are simultaneously an intensely personal and a deeply collective enterprise. They are personal products, since a single mind ultimately must decide what to leave in and what to leave out and a single mind must stand behind what has been written. But the raw material that becomes a book is, if the author is as lucky as I am, profoundly shaped by the acumen and generosity of numerous friends, colleagues, and experts. Most impressive to me is the way in which this generosity is sustained, even in the face of a new social movement that is busily trying to erect boundaries around “intellectual property.” Like all academics, I have great respect for the hard work involved in getting something as evanescent as an idea down on paper, and the notes and bibliography of this book clearly show how indebted I am to the written scholarship of others.

But among the most valuable parts of academic life are the impromptu discussions, the shared ideas, the suggestions for new sources of data, the willingness to read yet one more draft of a chapter. This book has, if anything, profited even more from this second, invisible kind of scholarship. I now understand better than ever why scholars often make a point of declaring that they alone are responsible for any errors in their book: it is a way of acknowledging that the book the reader holds was actually produced by a great many people, but that the final decisions—for better or worse—are the author’s own.

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1

THE PROBLEM

AND ITS

HUMAN FACE

At the Eileen Sullivan Daycare Center, in the sunny playroom for toddlers, young David Winters sits entranced in front of a colorful bead-and-wire toy.¹ His chubby fingers tease the beads up and across the bright red, blue, and green wires, his solemnity lightened by rare and dazzling smiles as he conquers a particularly tricky corner in the game.

Born a month prematurely, David has gone on to flourish at the Sullivan Center after a rocky start. Across the street, in the high school to which the daycare center belongs, David's mother, Michelle Brown, is taking her algebra exam. If all goes well and Michelle gets the B she hopes for, she may well succeed at being the first member of her family to graduate from high school. And if she does, she has every intention of crossing that auditorium stage three months from now, dressed in her graduation robes and holding baby David in her arms.

Meanwhile, beyond the walls of the school and the daycare center, Michelle and her baby are at the heart of important and troubling questions that are being asked by people from all walks of life. In the United States, although teenagers give birth to only 12 percent of all babies, they represent about a third of all unmarried mothers. These young mothers are somewhat less likely than older mothers to start prenatal care on time, and are slightly more likely to have low-birthweight babies and complications during pregnancy and childbirth—all of which are factors associated with medical and sometimes developmental problems in their children.²

Michelle is not sure she's old enough to get married, though she never

considered herself too young to have or to raise David, despite the fact that she was only seventeen when he was born. She did think briefly about having an abortion, but both her mother and grandmother were adamantly opposed; and truth to tell, Michelle was secretly happy they were. Their support, combined with her own experiences and those of many of her friends, makes her sure that she can successfully handle being both a young mother and a student. Being a wife is another story, though.

Michelle's reluctance to marry is strengthened by some harsh economic realities. The father of her baby works full time at McDonald's, but his minimum-wage salary of \$684 a month just won't support the three of them. He's a diligent and even desperate worker (he competed against more than a hundred other applicants for his job), and he's been promised a promotion to manager. Even managers don't get medical benefits at McDonald's, however, and David's health still calls for frequent and expensive visits to the pediatrician. Although Michelle squirms under what she sees as the shame attached to welfare, she can't afford to give up the money (and especially the medical services that come with it) in order to marry.

Michelle and David's situation illustrates a host of important questions about age, sex, and marriage. To many people over forty, the idea of pregnant teenagers walking openly down school corridors, not to mention the existence of high school daycare centers, is something that outstrips the imagination. Until the mid-1970s visibly pregnant *married* women, whether students or teachers, were formally banned from school grounds, lest their swelling bellies cross that invisible boundary separating the real world (where sex and pregnancy existed) from the schools (where they did not). The idea that a pregnant *unmarried* woman would show herself not only in public but in schools, where the minds of innocent children could be corrupted, was more unthinkable still.

And what role does David's father play in all this? Like many of the fathers in discussions of early pregnancy, he is largely invisible to the public eye. We do know that most fathers are relatively young themselves (about 80 percent of teenage mothers have a partner who is within five years of their own age).³ And we also have reason to suspect that this young man's faithful visits to the neonatal intensive care unit during David's lengthy stay there and his eager willingness to be a good father mark him as more typical than the stereotype would have it. Still, some twenty-five years after the most recent round of feminist activism, most people focus on teenage mothers instead of on young parents, so our knowledge about such men is

surprisingly limited. This book will try to focus on both men and women as much as possible, but the available data force us to speak more often and with more authority about young women. The focus on young women in a book about early pregnancy should not, however, be taken as “natural.”

For similar reasons, this book focuses largely on blacks and whites. Despite the fact that the U.S. Census gathers data on a number of races, and despite the fact that pregnancy among teenagers has been a national concern for the past two decades, reasonably comparable data exist only for whites and African Americans. More problematically, “race” is a social rather than a biological category and as such is defined differently in different historical eras.⁴ Furthermore, the National Center for Health Statistics and the Bureau of the Census, which provide the data that underlie studies such as this, use different systems of racial classification.⁵ Thus, for the sake of accuracy, the discussion that follows will center on blacks and whites (providing data on other groups where possible), but readers should keep in mind that this dichotomy only partly reflects the rich tapestry of modern America.

The changes that have occurred over the last twenty years are more far-reaching than most people, even those most intimately involved, can appreciate. For example, Michelle and David raise questions not only about sex, age, and marriage but about other issues that Americans are currently struggling with—issues such as poverty, dependency, and the difficulties of getting ahead in the increasingly competitive global economy. More subtly, they raise questions about “family values,” about the relationship of individuals to the community, and about the competing claims of rights and obligations in this new economy. For example, have doors already been closed to David because his mother is a teenager and has not married his father? Has an inevitable sequence of life events—premature birth, impaired health, failure in school, poverty, perhaps even a tendency to violent behavior—been set in motion for David by his mother’s behavior? In the opinion of many people, David’s future is already blighted and his right to participate as an equal in the pursuit of the American dream has already begun to diminish, all by virtue of decisions in which he has had no say. The little boy whose imagination is fired by a colorful bead-game is, in the eyes of many, already well on the way to a life of trouble and failure.

A great number of Americans think that children like young David are being lost in a particularly painful and troubling fashion which has important implications for the larger society. One way of reading the story of Michelle

and her baby is to say that David's future is being compromised by the selfishness of his mother, by her inability to put the long-term needs of a vulnerable baby before her own longings and desires. According to the most generous interpretation, Michelle is doing this out of youth and ignorance. The liberal view of Michelle's actions—from having sex in the first place, to not using contraception when she does have sex, to not getting an abortion despite the fact that she is young and poor, to trying to raise David without bothering to marry his father—is that she is simply too immature to appreciate the consequences of her actions. The harm is being done unwittingly, and Michelle is as much a victim as David.⁶

This view has the virtue of protecting Michelle from moral censure for her actions (when advocates speak of “babies having babies,” they imply that Michelle cannot be held to the standards expected of adults any more than David can). At the same time, however, it denies her the status of full personhood, exempting her from the obligations of being a moral actor held accountable for the choices she makes. In turn, people deemed incapable of making meaningful moral choices often find themselves the targets of those who would make choices for them. The problem is that Americans have a rather mixed history of doing bad things to young or otherwise vulnerable people “for their own good,” of confusing an unwillingness to make the “right” choice with an incapacity to do so.

A darker reading of Michelle's actions and motives exists alongside the narrative of the young mother as innocent victim who unwittingly harms her baby. According to this reading, Michelle is the calculating, knowing, “rational actor” of neoclassical economics: she coolly assesses the costs of having a baby, analyzes the benefits of welfare, and “invests” in a course of action that will get her what she wants. This view at least has the virtue of granting her the status of a real decisionmaker whose choices must be taken seriously. But when looked at closely, the dilemma of early pregnancy highlights the limitations of rational-actor theory as a useful way of looking at human behavior. Part of what makes economic theories of human interaction so elegant and parsimonious is that all motives are reduced to the easily observed ones of the marketplace. Passion, conviction, altruism, and morality become, in this view of the social world, either “externalities” or “revealed preferences” and are reduced to the status of “utilities.”⁷

Yet careful scrutiny makes it clear that the rational actor of neoclassical economics is not an *individual* in the generic sense of the word, but rather a *male individual*: the concepts of “work” and “family” have assumptions

about gender deeply embedded within them. In the nineteenth century, American society came to rely on a cultural division of labor whereby men went out into the marketplace and engaged in the kind of selfish, disconnected, amoral, and autonomous behavior lauded in economic theory. Bruised and tattered by the harshness of this dog-eat-dog world, they then came home to the pious, altruistic, caring, connected, and profoundly moral world of women where the values of the marketplace were held at bay and older, more humane values were honored.⁸

Part of the cultural schizophrenia of our own time is that this old division of moral labor is breaking down. We have come to expect women to emulate competitive, “selfish” male behavior in the workplace but to carry on their traditional roles of altruistic nurturers everywhere else.⁹ Michelle and the problem of early pregnancy highlight these dilemmas in particularly compelling ways. At some level we intuit that teenage mothers are doing things that in another time and place would be acceptable and often praiseworthy, because they are just doing the same things that earlier generations of women did from time immemorial. Teenage mothers often get pregnant because they *aren't* being rational actors who put self first—they may have sex to please a man, and they may fail to use contraception because the man either actively objects or makes it difficult by complaining that a condom reduces his pleasure. And filled with images from movies and magazines, young women may read a man's unwillingness to use contraception as a tacit commitment to the consequences, namely a baby. Teenage mothers, like other mothers, have also been known to get pregnant hoping that the pregnancy will solidify a partnership, making a couple out of two individuals. Many of them choose to forgo an abortion because they have moral objections, and because they feel a commitment to this new person in the making. Most poignantly, in the vast majority of cases, giving birth while still a teenager is a pledge of hope, an acted-out wish that the lives of the next generation will be better than those of the current generation, that this young mother can give her child something she never had.¹⁰

It is teenagers' unwillingness (or inability) to be rational actors that frustrates concerned adults: these young mothers seemingly refuse to think ahead and see how young they are, and how poor, and how dubious a prospect for marriage and fatherhood most of their young men are. Yet the thought of women being self-centered rational actors in the intimate realms of sex, childbearing, family, and home is a rather chilling one.¹¹ And one that few people really accept, no matter how militant their views in other

areas of life. If some Americans are uneasy at the thought of eliminating all welfare for unwed teenage mothers, and if Republican congressmen suggest creating orphanages on a vast scale as a backup remedy, it is because they suspect that even the most draconian changes will have very little effect on what really happens in bedrooms and in abortion clinics, except, as economists say, “at the margin.”¹² Even the most militant conservatives would be hard pressed to imagine a scenario in which a passionate midnight embrace is interrupted at the last moment when the young woman insists that her partner don a condom because, after all, their state has just eliminated welfare benefits for mothers under twenty-one.¹³ These competing views of family and marketplace, of men and women, of rationality and morality, of rights and obligations are very much front and center in nearly every aspect of American life these days. Teenage mothers and their babies reflect and illuminate these cultural and social wars because they pose so pointedly the contradictions inherent in our ways of thinking about them. To the extent that we view young mothers as young *women*, we want them to be sensitive to the needs of others, altruistic, committed to relationships and to nurturing the next generation. Yet to the extent that we see them as *poor* women, we want them to be careful, forward-thinking, attuned to the market, and prepared to invest in themselves, not in others. We want them to be both more and less selfish, in a society that is constantly redefining what “selfish” means. And because they are women, their lapses from “good” behavior are seen as enormously threatening. Just as women who have abortions call into question the boundaries of self and other, of motherhood and marketplace, so, in a more subtle way, do teenage mothers.¹⁴

These tensions between self-supporting work in the marketplace and the needs of the family, between self and other, fuel a growing uneasiness over welfare. In a country with a long (though ambiguous) history of attention to vulnerable children, many citizens have come to accept unquestioningly the notion that some amorphous “we”—be it the community, society, voluntary agencies, or the government—have a moral obligation to make sure that children born in less-than-ideal circumstances are not condemned to failure before they can walk. But many of these same citizens are rightly concerned about how difficult and costly it is to help children like David. And some people worry that helping mothers like Michelle will merely produce a great many more babies like David.¹⁵

The public’s apprehensions about poverty and dependency are in turn

almost always intertwined with questions of race, given America's complex history on the matter. Many readers, in their mind's eye, will immediately see Michelle and her baby as African American, and this is understandable: the public quite commonly thinks of African Americans as prone to bear children at early ages and out of wedlock. The image is not false—but it's not entirely true, either. African Americans, who make up only about 15 percent of the population of teenage girls, account for more than a third of all teenage mothers. And whereas six out of every ten white teenagers who give birth are unmarried, among black teenagers the ratio is nine out of ten.¹⁶

But although African Americans do account for a disproportionate share of births to teenagers and unmarried women, unmarried African American teenage mothers are not, statistically speaking, typical unwed teenage mothers. In 1990, for example, 57 percent of all babies born to unmarried teenage mothers were born to whites.¹⁷ And since 1985, birthrates among unmarried white teenagers have been increasing rapidly, while those among unmarried black teens have been largely stable. (Women of all ages—both African Americans and whites, married as well as unmarried—have been having more babies since 1988.)

Some commentators, among them Charles Murray, who has long been a critic of welfare policies and their putative effects on illegitimacy, say that the rising birthrates among white unmarried teenagers presage the growth of a white underclass, which will take its place alongside historically disadvantaged African Americans. In essence, Murray argues that as racial differences become less important in the life of the country, Americans will separate into two new nations—no longer black and white, but married and affluent on the one hand and unmarried and poor on the other.¹⁸

So Michelle at her algebra exam and David at his bead game have come to represent a tangle of difficult issues—pertaining to sex, marriage, teenagers, race, dependency (as the condition of those who accept means-tested support from the government is conventionally labeled)—that confront the United States on the eve of a new century. If we queried a stranger on the street and a neighbor over coffee, we would not be surprised to find that they, like much of the American public, find early pregnancy a very serious problem. Or that they have concluded that doing something about “babies having babies” is one way of confronting these troubling issues.¹⁹

As with many issues that arouse a great deal of public worry and passion,

that of “teenage pregnancy” is complex in nature and a challenge to conventional wisdom. Not only are Michelle and David more likely to be white than black, but as a high school student Michelle is younger than the statistically typical teenage mother. The majority of teenage mothers—almost six out of ten—are eighteen or nineteen when their babies are born, and they are legal adults in most states.²⁰ Furthermore, although many people worry that pregnancy among teenagers has attained “epidemic” proportions, teenage women right now are having babies at about the same rate as they have for most of the century. The “epidemic” years were the 1950s, when teenagers were having twice as many babies as they had had in previous decades but few people worried about them.²¹ Even the teenage mothers who arouse the most concern—those who are under fifteen, the “babies having babies”—are simply doing what such “babies” did in the 1940s and 1950s, although they are more visible now than their counterparts were then.²²

Of course, it is true that in the 1950s almost all teenage mothers (in fact, almost all mothers) were married, at least by the time their babies arrived. But within the broader context—the number of babies being born to unmarried women—teenagers account for only a small subset of the problem. Two-thirds of unwed mothers are not teenagers, and in fact about one-fourth of America’s unwed mothers are actually “no longer wed” mothers—that is, women who once were married but are not at the time their baby is born.²³

Out-of-wedlock births are becoming more common around the globe. In Europe, the proportion of babies born out of wedlock has doubled and tripled in the past twenty years. Many people assume that this is because European welfare states support single mothers (and the poor overall) more generously than the U.S. government does. And this belief is prevalent in a more extreme form: some people believe that unwed mothers (especially teens) get pregnant and have a baby just to get a welfare check, and that consequently it’s not surprising that European countries have increasing rates. But all industrialized countries, including the United States, are cutting back on welfare provision as a result of the tightening global economy, and out-of-wedlock births have responded by *increasing*. In the United States, the real value of a welfare check has been declining since 1973, even as women of all ages were choosing more often to become single mothers.²⁴ In fact, the nation with the sharpest increase in the proportion of babies born out of wedlock has been England, which has instituted conservative, anti-welfare policies: in the early 1970s England had a lower proportion of

out-of-wedlock births than did the United States, but after twenty years of Thatcherism the figure has quadrupled.²⁵

Yet unmarried parents in England have not for the most part been teenagers. Throughout modern Europe, parenthood has historically been limited to older individuals, and teenage mothers have been found only in those countries on the periphery, such as Greece and Portugal. But the United States has always had an anomalous birth pattern. Compared to Europeans, Americans start their families at a younger age, and have done so for a very long time. In the 1950s, for example, there were more married teenagers in the United States, as a proportion of the age group, than in any other first-world country.²⁶

Similarly, the rates of abortion among women of all ages are much lower in most European countries than they are in the United States, despite the fact that (according to the limited data available) teenagers in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Scandinavia are about as likely to be sexually active as those in the United States. Although European teenagers have sex—and, like their American counterparts, are increasingly doing so outside marriage—they are much less likely to seek abortions, or to get pregnant in the first place.²⁷

Finally, despite what we all think we know about motherhood among teenagers and its effects on later life, having a baby as a teenager does not inevitably lead to abbreviated schooling and economic hardship, either for the mother or for the child. According to some older sources of data, pregnant teenagers *were* very likely to “truncate” their education, as the experts put it—but this curtailment resulted not so much from pregnancy per se as from the strictures that banned pregnant teachers and students from school grounds. Prior to 1975, when such policies were outlawed nationally, pregnant schoolgirls were “throwouts” more often than “dropouts.”²⁸ Now that secondary schools often have daycare facilities like the Sullivan Center, students who become pregnant in high school are increasingly likely to graduate and are beginning to do so at rates approaching those of nonpregnant teens. This is all the more surprising since the kinds of young people who get pregnant (and, in these days of legal abortion, *stay* pregnant) are usually the kinds of young people who are floundering in school long before a pregnancy occurs.

So if the easy assumptions about early pregnancy (that there’s an epidemic of early births, that unwed mothers and teenage mothers are one and the same, that being a teenage mother is a short, quick route to poverty)