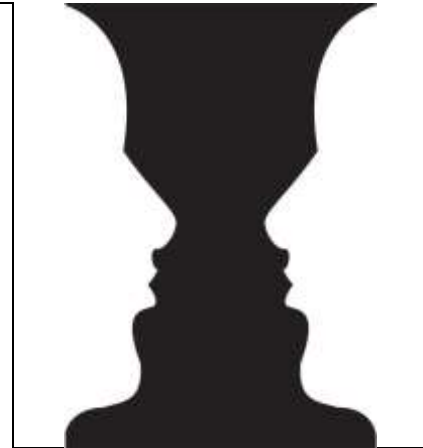

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Capitalizing on new theoretical perspectives on adolescent mothers for improving social policies and assistance

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Abstract

This article analyzes the scientific and public discourses regarding adolescent motherhood vehiculated since the '50s until present times. If the dominant discourses are based on several common typifications of the adolescent motherhood “problem”, mainly as a socio-economic and moral issue, a new strand of novel, revisionist studies, several of constructionist inspiration, redefine our understanding of adolescent motherhood. These new studies bring enlightening and rich contributions regarding the difficulties of adolescent mothers, especially from vulnerable populations, and their social conditions. The new theoretical directions that emerged include mothers’ voices in research, rejecting a deficit and individualistic approach of the “problem” and pleading for paying much more attention in the scientific analysis to mothers’ social context, while also recognizing their fragile but existing agency. Overall, the new research directions identified in the revisionist studies facilitate a better understanding of the lives and needs of these mothers and their families, which can inform social policies and assistance, including socio-educational and awareness programs that aim to discourage early pregnancy, while also opening new avenues of research. Contextual constructionism and its approach to social problems offer us the theoretical premises needed to put social science at work for real life in the spirit of public sociology, meanwhile capitalizing on the constructionist approach, in the benefit of vulnerable populations.

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Keywords

Adolescent motherhood; Vulnerable groups; Contextual constructionism; Social problems; Social policies;

Introduction

Adolescent mothers have managed to maintain the interest of the scientific community, policy makers, and general public worldwide in the last 70 years. The academic and public preoccupation for adolescent motherhood can be traced in the United States, starting in the '50s, according to some authors (Reiss, 1993; Dillon and Cherry, 2014; Linders and Bogard, 2014) and to the latter '70s and '80s, according to others (Vinson, 2012). Such an interest comes from various rationales, ranging from its associations with cyclical poverty (Cherry and Dillon, 2014) and the consequent necessity of state intervention (Daguerre and Nativel, 2006), to the moral values regarding motherhood, family, gender and age. There are two main different ontological and epistemological views of adolescent motherhood in the extant specialized literature: one that approaches the issue as a social problem, based on a rather positivistic, functionalistic and objective approach and definitions, and the other one that has conceptualized it more as a social construction. The two strands of research are mostly disconnected, with just a few exceptions, such as Ghițiu (2012).

The objective of this article is to identify some of the new theoretical perspectives and empirical arguments on adolescent mothers that are put on the table by the so-called “revisionist” studies (Macleod, 2014, p. 133), mainly constructionist, that can be used to inform and improve social policies and assistance for adolescent mothers, especially from vulnerable groups, including prevention, educational and awareness programs aimed at a reduction of early pregnancy rates. Constructionist studies mainly illustrate how the discursive practices of different social groups collectively shape the image and perceptions of these mothers, based on several typifications, which in turn are influenced by different sets of moral values and interests. The new theoretical perspectives that will be discussed in this paper have the power to transform the dominant, negative and simplistic discourses about these young women. Using a social constructionist perspective to improve mothers' social situations involves recognizing the existence of an external, objective reality. This idea is central to contextual constructionism, a research ontology that supposes the study not only of the claimsmaking process but also of the social conditions in which the claimsmaking emerges (Best, 2017). Using the lens of contextual constructionism allows us both to understand the intricacies and “hidden” sides of the construction of adolescent motherhood, but also to place adolescent mothers' lives into a socio-material, immediate reality, shaped by the peculiarities and standards of well-being of the times that we live. These times prove to be challenging for adolescent mothers, for reasons such as medical and psychological considerations, the fragile agency and decision making capacity of teens, associated with a limited life experience, financial dependency and the lack of incomes (Daguerre, Nativel, 2006). Also, health problems, as discussed by medical specialists,

constitute an important point of view in designing social policies that tackle adolescent motherhood. Some of these medical problems are exemplified in Ban Al-Sahab et al (2012): “adolescent pregnancy, more so than for older women, tends to be more dangerous for both mother and child. Pregnant adolescents are in greater jeopardy of obstetric complications during pregnancy, such as anemia, toxemia, eclampsia, and hypertension (...) In addition, babies born to adolescent mothers experience health problems. They are more than twice as likely to be premature or of low birth weight (...). These two factors increase an infant’s immediate risk for perinatal mortality, and later in childhood, they lead to a number of adverse conditions including chronic respiratory problems, mental retardation, and dyslexia” (Ban Al-Sahab et al., 2012, pp. 228-229). These problems have justified until now state intervention (Daguerre and Nativel, 2006) mainly through different social policies and social assistance instruments.

In this context, the article begins with a brief review of the constructionist approach of social problems and contextual constructionism. The next section analyzes the main academic and public discourses that emerged after the ‘50s regarding adolescent motherhood, especially in the United States. In these discourses, adolescent mothers have been portrayed mainly as immoral, irresponsible, poor and incapable. Also, in these discourses, adolescent motherhood was typified mostly as a socio-economic and moral problem. These discourses have resulted in the widespread stigmatization of adolescent mothers and in the exclusion of mothers’ voices and problems from research. The article continues with a discussion of the new, emergent theoretical perspectives on adolescent mothers that can be used for reducing the rate of early pregnancies and, overall, for improving the social policies and assistance that address their needs. These new revisionist research directions are based on contributions of authors such as Fearnley (2018), Bekaert and Bradly (2019), Barker et al. (2019), Geronimus (1991, 2004). Many of these works are inspired by the constructionist paradigm (such as Arney and Bergen, 1984; Vinson, 2012; Breheny and Stephens, 2007, 2010; Linders and Bogard, 2014, Bekaert and Bradly, 2019). These scholarly contributions have contested the “demonization” of adolescent mothers, criticizing the individualistic approach of their problematic situations and their exclusion from research, pleading for attaching much more importance to their social context in research. Conclusions are further drawn on how this new strand of research might inform social policies and assistance designed for adolescent mothers, also opening new avenues of research.

The constructionist approach of social problems and contextual constructionism

The constructionist approach of social problems involves a redefinition of the nature of social problems, based on the principles of the constructionist paradigm. Berger and Luhmann (1966) put the basis of constructionism in their 1966 theoretical treatise on the sociology of knowledge, according to which “social order is a human product, or, more precisely, an ongoing human production” (p. 69) or a constantly constructed order, based on several mechanisms through which people function collectively. This vision does not exclude, but on the contrary, incorporates the idea that reality is “a quality appertaining to

phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition” (p. 13). According to Berger and Luhman, day to day activities are shared with others, learned by a series of typifications and coded into language. A social knowledge stock is thus constantly accumulating, being further used to practice our social interactions. When institutional order is passed to younger generations, an entire process of “explaining” and “justifying” this order is needed, termed “legitimation” (p. 111). According to Berger and Luhman (1966), through these processes, the members of a society build their own nature that is socially reproduced, meanwhile “humanness is [a] socio-culturally variable” (p. 67).

The constructionist approach of social problems was initially proposed by Spector and Kituse (1977), in their book “Construction of Social Problems”. In this work, the authors proposed a turn from the functionalist approach to a constructionist and interpretativist one, redefining social problems as what people seem to know or do about the respective problems, referring to these activities as “claimsmaking activities”. Their definition of social problems was: “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector and Kituse, 1977, p. 75).

Critical arguments against constructionist studies emerged in the 80s, one of the most notable being Woolgar and Pawluch’s “ontological gerrymandering” (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985). Gerrymandering refers to “making problematic the status of certain states of affairs selected for analysis and explanation, while backgrounding or minimizing the possibility that the same problems apply to the assumptions upon which the analysis depends” (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985, p. 216). This selective objectivism and realism lead to theoretical inconsistency (Holstein and Miller, 1993), at the ontological and epistemological levels. Woolgar and Pawluch critique has given impetus to the reconsideration of the role that “social context” and “social conditions” should play in the constructionist analysis (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003, p. 188). Currently, the debate on the role of social context has changed from whether to include social conditions in the analysis to “how to gain analytic purchase on the relatedness of social facts which are themselves social constructions” (p. 189).

In this context, Best (2017, 2019) advocates for contextual social constructionism, or, in Holstein and Gubrium’s words, (2003, p. 190), for a “cautious version of contextual constructionism”. Best (2017) criticizes the objectivist definition of social problems, generally framed as conditions that are considered widely undesirable and difficult, and caused by individual actions or lack of actions and affecting a large number of persons. These definitions state that “the essence of social problems lies in the objective social conditions and that some conditions are problems” (p. 3). Two main problems exist in this approach, according to Best (2017): ignoring the subjective nature and the fact that “the objective conditions that people define as social problems have relatively little in common” (p. 5), including no common causes or effects. According to Best (2017) “contextual constructivists – make assumptions about social conditions in order to better understand how social problems claims emerge and evolve” (p. 347), which involves the necessity to analyze context and how it influences claimsmaking. In other words, Best (2017) considers that researchers should “locate claimsmaking with its context” (p. 348), study social

practices through which social problems come to be recognized as such and use various sorts of evidence, including official statistics. Holstein and Gubrium (2003) also offer directions for advancing the constructionist analysis, in the spirit of contextual constructionism. The authors consider that research should address “both how social realities are constructed and what comprises these realities in the social words under consideration” (p. 191), by proposing an “analytics of interpretative practice” (p. 194). This “technique” supposes leaving aside the foundationalist or ontological horizon, by “analytic bracketing” (p. 198), assuming that the reality is both the result of the members’ construction procedures and a “resource” from which it is formed. Another proposal for improving the constructionist analysis is recognizing the existence of an external reality (the context or social conditions) which comes from Bogard (2003). She considers that social activities are our interpretation of the world, including the natural world. Still, her ontology includes the existence of an external real world, such as those of the ecosystems, that exists independently of our awareness and is able to constrain us; its denial is labelled as “prescientific” and “pre-Copernican” (p. 208). According to Bogard our world is built and rebuilt, interpreted and reinterpreted continuously, in complex ways. Through this process, we transform the natural world into the social world, through “social objects, patterns and objects” (p. 209). According to Bogard (2003), constructionism analyses social problems in terms of the claimsmaking activities of the society members, while rejecting that this construction (or of any other social problem) could be reduced “to a battle over claims versus facts” (Linders and Bogard, 2014, p.150). The claimsmaking process is dependent on the claimsmakers’ agendas and is directed towards persuading others. In order to be considered a “real public issue” (Bogard, 2003, p.1), some of the social actors must convince others of its importance. In consequence, the claimsmaking activities are “fluid, subtle and complicated as are the responses to these social actions” (Bogard, 2003, p. xii).

Mainstream scientific and public discourses starting with the ‘50s

Starting with the ‘50s, the scientific and public discourses regarding adolescent motherhood were mainly aimed at correcting adolescent pregnancy, conceived as an inferior moral, social, physical and health condition (Breheny and Stephenson, 2010). Based on such discourses, tropes such as “children having children” and “adolescent pregnancy as an epidemic” that needs “prevention” (Belsky and Draper, 1987, p. 20) have appeared and were constantly alimented (Reiss, 1993; Vinson, 2012; Dillon and Cherry, 2014; Bonell, 2014). Plenty of studies have analyzed and discerned the main typifications of the adolescent pregnancy “problem” within the amalgam of public and scientific claims about the topic. Most commonly, adolescent pregnancy was typified as a socio-economic and moral issue.

Typification as a socio-economic issue

In the United States of America, in the ‘80s, two scholars at Pennsylvania State University, Belsky and Draper (1987), based on their research on adolescent pregnancy, suggested a

particular policy response to the adolescent pregnancy problem: the payment of periodic installments to teenagers for not becoming pregnant. According to the authors, this policy solution was inspired by China's controversial one child policy: "but what if we follow totalitarian China on one child family - followed part of China's lead, and employed the carrot even if not the stick, might it prove feasible to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy and parenthood among unwed, uneducated, and impoverished adolescents in the United States?" (p. 23). Belsky and Draper (1987) also "revealed" that "the costs contribute to a "massive federal deficits", that require us "to protect our country from foreign threats" (p. 24). In the current research landscape, this socio-economic typification is still present. For example, Cherry and Dillon (2014), in an extensive, meritorious and eclectic volume, that mixes more positivistic approaches with postmodern, constructionist approaches, conclude with reference to the situation of teenage mothers in the US, that "this is an irrefutable crisis among US teen moms and their children; a crisis that everyone acknowledges and agrees is a crisis. A crisis that everyone agrees requires a public response" (p. 3). In the justification of such conclusions, Cherry and Dillon subscribe to the argument of a dark professional, social and economic perspective for teen mothers, an argument that is frequent in the actual vocabularies of adolescent motherhood: "adolescent mothers and their children will face challenges that may limit their educational achievements, impede occupational success, and it will increase their chances of living in poverty" (Cherry and Dillon, 2014, p. vi). Ban Al-Sahab et al. (2012) provide "exact" figures of teenage pregnancy cost in Canada considering that: "teen childbearing, therefore, incurs a great economic burden on society. Estimates in 2004 from the United States put the cost at \$9.1 billion dollars". Cherry and Dillon (2014), referring to childcare, state that "there is also concurrence that the medical costs related to mothers who do not receive prenatal care far exceed the cost of providing prenatal care" (p. 3). These examples of typifications confirm Bonell's (2014) view, according to which the main argument in the construction of adolescent pregnancy as a social problem (in the US, in Bonell's analysis) was of economic nature. Overall, socio-economic arguments were and still are common in the public discourse regarding adolescent motherhood. These mainly refer to the high social costs for sustaining adolescent mothers and their children, on one hand, and on the other hand, the cyclical, intergenerational poverty transmission, a risk considered high especially for people of color and ethnic minorities in the US and for adolescents from vulnerable populations, in general.

Typification as a moral issue

Besides the socio-economic arguments, moral, but also religious or political typifications, were embedded in the scientific and public claimsmaking process concerning adolescent motherhood. Arney and Bergen (1984) conducted an analysis of Reader's Digest and the American Journal of Public Health issues from 1940 to 1980 using a Foucauldian framework of knowledge power and observed the multiplicity of typifications of the problem and how subsequent discourses changed over time. According to Arney and Bergen, before the '60s, adolescent motherhood was conceptualized and presented as a moral issue: mothers

were considered to have a moral problem if they were transgressing social norms about family and marriage, used as instruments to safeguard the population from the possibility of divorce and social deviance. In that period, the child's destiny was not part of the analysis. Arney and Bergen showed that, in time, the moral discourse was transformed into a scientific, technical one, in which "the concepts 'unwed mother' and 'illegitimate child' – of moral nature - dissolved into 'a single new concept: 'teenage pregnancy'" (p. 11). This transformation involved a change in "the structure of power surrounding the pregnant adolescent" (p. 15) that became an efficient instrument to discipline pregnant young women "no longer (...) by moral exclusion, but rather by scientific inclusion" (p. 11.), given the omnipotence of the scientific discourse to create "taxonomies" (p. 17). Similar conclusions are drawn by Macleod (2014), who also used Foucault's concept of power knowledge to explain how the current scientific literature, through the research questions that it generally addresses, makes of the pregnant teenager a subject of academic analysis. Similarly, Bonell (2014) in his comparative research of the social construction of adolescent pregnancy in the UK and USA, revealed how researchers, as important and "legitimate" claimsmakers, typified differently adolescent pregnancy, at the intersection of "a combination of political, religious and research design factors" (p. 255). Linders and Bogard (2014) also elaborated a comparative study of how adolescent pregnancy was socially constructed, this time, in the USA and Sweden, analyzing the period of 1970-1980. Their conclusions point out that the differential approaches to this problem in the two countries "are not best explained by differences in the condition itself (i.e., different teen pregnancy rates) but rather by the historical trajectory of claimsmaking surrounding and constructing teenage pregnancy as a problematic social condition" (p. 152). According to this research, in the US, the focus on spectacular aspects of the problem, rather than on statistics according to which teenage birth rate was declining after the '50s, conflated the problem, furthermore presented it wrongfully as a novel public concern and typified it in incoherent ways and scopes. The available typifications were often contradictory, labeling the problem as either public or, on the contrary, individualistic and relating it to an amalgamation of factors, from "cultural degeneration to structural obstacles, from lax morals to rational responses to difficult circumstances, and from too much sex education to too little sex education" (p. 150). By comparison, in Sweden teen pregnancy was not pictured as spectacularly and visibly as in the USA, according to Linders and Bogard. In the context of a welfare state that offered more equalizing conditions to all its citizens, there were fewer concerns with the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In consequence, the public and scientific discourses were calibrated differently, with a more consensual focus of claimsmakers, centered on the distinction between "good" and "bad" sexuality (p. 152), "where «good» refers to maturity and conditions of equality, and «bad» [to] all forms of coercive, unsafe, and irresponsible sexual behavior" (p. 152). According to Dillon and Cherry, between the '20s and the '50s, the adolescent mother was mostly seen as a matter of juvenile deviance, later on, towards the '80s, her portrait being constructed predominantly in medical and moral terms and the issue itself being framed as a "psychological problem" (p. 3) "an epidemic" (p. 3) and a moral threat to the family. Breheny and Stephens (2010) also provide a classification and analysis of the distinct types

of discourses coagulated in the claimsmaking process around adolescent motherhood, discoursed classified as of public health, economic, ethnical and eugenics nature.

Problems posed by the mainstream scientific and public discourse

Several problems have resulted from the dominant, socio-economic and moral typifications discussed; these problems revolve around the stigmatization of adolescent motherhood, an over-estimation of an individualistic approach and an underestimation of the social context, together with a lack of attention towards mothers' voices in research.

The stigmatization of the adolescent mother

The intersectionality of socio-economic and moral, but also political, health and religious typifications has contributed to a negative portrayal of teen motherhood in the public perception. In the scientific literature, common terms in depicting adolescent mothers were concepts such as “unsuitable mother” (Breheny and Stephens, 2010, p. 306) and “dubious parents” (Breheny and Stephens, 2007, p. 113). Elaine Bell Kaplan (1988), discussing Black teenage mothers, criticizes their portrayal as being part of a “growing underclass” (p. 2). According to Bell Kaplan, the typification of young, Black mothers into this category that includes poor, long term unemployed society members, such as drug dealers, incriminates explicitly this population. Several authors reveal that the adolescent mother is presented in the scientific discourse with hostility, in a stigmatizing manner (Wilson, 2004; Fearnley, 2018; Bekaert and Bradly, 2019; Barker et al., 2019) with “girls in most countries who become pregnant” being “treated like juvenile delinquents or criminals” (p. 6), presented as irresponsible and reckless (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019) and as “at best, naïve and, at worst, personally deviant and deficient” (Macleod, 2014, p. 142). According to Macleod (2014), the dominant portrayal of the teen mother is “a person who is: ignorant of basic sexual and reproductive knowledge; prone to risky behavior; psychologically or cognitively deficient; from a poorly functioning familial background; undereducated; an inadequate mother; responsible for perpetuating poverty and welfare dependency; at risk for health complications and HIV” (p. 133). Ban Al-Sahab et al. (2012) consider that “teen mothers in Canada have multiple negative characteristics, including lower household income and more physical and sexual abuse experiences than average-aged mothers” (p. 229), meanwhile “girls with good self-esteem and a sense of responsibility (...) tend to avoid adolescent pregnancies” (p. 229). Other “negative traits” of adolescent mothers are linked to risks of taking part in “dangerous activity”, such as cocaine ingestion, using weapons, smoking and not eating well (Ban Al-Sahab et al., 2012, p. 229).

In time, these recurrent discourses have reverberated into a negative portrayal of adolescent mothers, that directly produces the stigmatization of these mothers, this stigmatization and perceived shame being signaled in several studies (for example, Breheny and Stephens, 2010; Barker et al., 2019; Connolly et al., 2012). As long as the stigmatization and discrimination are embraced by the family, the general public and the social and medical specialists that are supposed to provide social assistance and medical

care, respectively, helping them to manage their life in a satisfactory manner becomes a more complicated task.

The underestimation of the social context

Another problem that can be observed in the prevalent scientific discourse and in mainstream research is the circumvention of the broader societal contexts that intervene in adolescent mothers' lives (Lyra and Medrado, 2014; Smith et al., 2018). Lyra and Medrado (2014), for example, signaled that "rarely are authors concerned to define clearly which problems exactly are directly related to pregnancy in adolescence" (p. 113). Instead, many studies mostly depict the "problem" as an exclusively individual one (Macleod, 2014, Dillon and Cherry, 2014; Breheny and Stephens, 2010; Breheny and Stephens, 2007; Cherrington and Breheny, 2005; Luker, 1996). Conceiving motherhood decisions as being exclusively individual, and linking them only with age means ignoring "the social structures that shape, confine and influence the choices women make" (Petropanagos, 2010, p. 57). For example, Baldwin (2019) problematizes the extent to which mothers "choose to" delay pregnancy, evidencing that, individual and agentic decisions on motherhood are powerfully shaped by collective and expected norms of behavior reflected in well-articulated life course expectations, thus by uncontrollable factors. This argument illustrates that the "right time" for motherhood is rather socially constructed (Baldwin, 2019).

The absence of mothers' voices

A different problematic aspect (imputed both to constructionist and non-constructionist works) is the absence of mothers' (Miller, 2003), but also fathers' (Lyra and Medrado, 2014) and families' views and experiences in the analysis. According to Miller (2003), in the case of constructionism, its exclusive focus on public claims leads to an "incomplete understanding of social problems construction", by excluding the voices of the subjects themselves (p. 8). Ignoring the mothers' voices hampered plenty of valuable descriptions, explanations and meanings of the mothering experience of young women, while also suggesting that their absence in research is due to their complete lack of agency. Moreover, this "omission" has conflated the negative depiction of adolescent mothers in the public imagination.

New theoretical perspectives

In response to the deficit view on adolescent mothers mostly advanced by the dominant public and scientific discourse worldwide, several studies, many using the constructionist lens (such as Arney and Bergen, 1984; Vinson, 2012; Breheny and Stephens, 2007, 2010; Linders and Bogard, 2014), have analyzed teenage motherhood, its labeling as a social problem, together with the social conditions, norms and public discourses that shape the destiny of adolescent parents. Constructionist studies are complemented by non-constructionist contributions, such as Bonell, 2014; Lyra and Medrado, 2014, Wilson, 2004; Aparicio et al., 2015, Barker et al. 2019; Bekaert and Bradly, 2019, Macleod, 2014. These

studies have contested both mothers' absence in research and their widespread, negative representations. Such alternative explanations on the "phenomena" questioned the existing public representations of teenagers and asked whether these are used to detract attention from more complicated and unresolved social problems (Lyra and Medrado, 2014, Linders and Bogard, 2014; Macleod, 2014). The new theoretical perspectives can be considered part of the "counterclaims" that emerged on behalf of the scientific community that circulate in the ongoing social construction of adolescent pregnancy. Overall, these new research directions formulate several theoretical views and empirical arguments that could be used to improve the understanding of the social context of adolescent mothers and the meanings they give to their own lives. In this form, these new research directions can be used to improve social policies and assistance programs that target this, most often, vulnerable group, as well as to transform the ongoing discursive practices on the matter.

Several authors (Macleod, 2014, Breheny and Stephenson, 2010) suggested taking into account, in research, the socio-demographic characteristics of pregnant teenagers, such as their socioeconomic level, living conditions, health care options, family structures and relationships, in response to conceptualizing adolescent motherhood as an exclusively individual "problem". For Breheny and Stephenson (2010), adolescent motherhood is a multifaceted concept and "a complex issue reflecting individual, familial and structural forces" (p. 307). As Bonell (2014) explains, the effects of teen motherhood are "mediated by, and contingent on, how society responds to teenage mothers and their children via health and social care, education, training and welfare provision". For Breheny and Stephenson (2010) ignoring these aspects equals ignoring "the ways in which social forces impact differentially on young women dependent on their social location" (p. 307). Bell Kaplan (1988, 1996) also unveils the collective and moral dimension of the adolescent motherhood "problem". Firstly, she contradicts the thesis that Black families promote early pregnancy and childbearing, on the contrary, her research illustrating that teenagers' mothers were against their daughters' pregnancies, based on individual and collective moral values, that once broken, jeopardized their own reputation and that of their family. Secondly, Bell Kaplan shows how limited personal and professional horizons of poor adolescents make them look to pregnancy avenues to gain self-affirmation, self-efficacy and self-respect, but also opportunities to form a new family, meanwhile trying to escape the existing, many times difficult one. In this context, Bell Kaplan emphasizes the need to study adolescent pregnancy in conjunction with the institutions of "gender, class, and race inequalities", which involves abandoning or minimizing the individualistic approach of adolescent motherhood and reconceptualizing it as a systemic, social, structural phenomenon.

Also, several studies have responded to the lack of the inclusion of the mothers' voices in the current research (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019; Rolfe, 2008; Bereheny and Stephens, 2010; Barker et al., 2019; Connolly et al., 2012; Aparicio et al., 2015). The studies that have included mothers' experiences signal several convergent conclusions, depicting them in more positive terms. For example, in various studies, teen mothers appear to perceive themselves as responsible (Rolfe, 2008; Aparicio et al., 2015) and good citizens (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019) and valuing school, (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019). Also, they

associate motherhood with “hardship and reward”, “growing up and being responsible” and with “doing things differently” (Rolfe, 2008, p. 299). Also, in some studies (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019; Rolfe, 2008) adolescent mothers were found to be willing and struggling to formulate counternarratives to their “incrimination” and stigmatization in ongoing discourses of claimmakers. Their positive self-evaluations unveil dimensions of their self-perceptions that can be integrated in the social programs that address their needs. Also, these insights can be used in the elaboration of the profiles of the populations that are at risk of becoming teen parents and could be capitalized on in prevention and educational campaigns. Also, according to several works, adolescent mothers “exercise” their agency (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019; Aparicio et al., 2015), understanding the decision to continue a pregnancy is per se “an expression of agency” and one of “empowerment” (Bekaert and Bradly, 2019), that involves a parental positive approach to parenthood. This agency, even considered fragile in the case of young persons, more so from vulnerable populations, might be also used to educate young women and men, but also their families, to make wise life decisions.

Other important key findings of the revisionist studies refer to the meanings that motherhood has for teen mothers from vulnerable groups, that are linked to their own, difficult lives and needs. These meanings are generally related to mothers’ struggle to look for a new purpose that gives sense to their lives (Aparicio et al., 2015; Pryce and Samuels, 2010; Connolly et al., 2012; Haight et al., 2009; Kaplan, 1988, 1996). In Aparicio et al. (2015) teenage mothers from foster cares have strengths and “agency directed though self-renewal and being a good parent” (p. 44). Referring to young mothers in foster care, Aparicio et al. consider: “motherhood gave them a sense of purpose, someone to be, that was important, someone whose responsibility it was to care for another life. Becoming a mother is likely to be a moving experience for any woman. However, for a foster child who does not often feel important, does not often feel needed by or loved by others, becoming a mother carries immense meaning and is a chance to give and receive love” (p. 52). Such conclusions are worth taking into account also when dealing with non-foster young mothers that might identify with similar experiences, and taken into account that research has commonly described their difficult family relations, starting with their childhood. In a similar logic, parenthood is thought by young mothers to be a facilitator of a new family formation (Bell Kaplan, 1988, 1996; Aparicio et al., 2015), which makes the mothers look for “additional relational opportunities” (Aparicio et al., p. 52), in terms of relations with their own family and that of the father. These types of conclusions and other similar ones illustrate that adolescent mothers possess a series of strengths that could be used, in multiple forms, to help these adolescents to plan and live their lives in a satisfactory manner. The psychological literature, especially, is enabled to design strategies that can anticipate solutions and programs able to respond to the socio-emotional needs of adolescent mothers, especially those with a problematic social and familial context, in order to help them to discern the challenges that they face and those life courses that could satisfy their needs of love, responsibility, respectability and self-fulfillment.

Conclusions

The analysis of the dominant typifications of adolescent motherhood embedded in the scientific and public discourses vehiculated since the '50s has revealed several problems posed by these discourses, mainly stigmatization and an overemphasis on an individualistic research approach, but that has excluded mothers' experiences. The new growing stream of research, called revisionist, often adopting constructionist lens, brings enlightening and rich contributions to understanding the problems of adolescent mothers, their social conditions and the claimsmaking process. The inclusion of adolescent mothers' voices in current research is challenging and alters the dominant representations of the young, adolescent mother as irresponsible, immoral and with a clear destiny of poverty; having the potential to "recreate" her image in the public imagination in a more sensitive manner. The rejection of the deficit and individualistic approach of adolescent motherhood, the inclusion of the social context with its omnipotent social norms, the recognition of a delicate, but existing agency, the understanding of her oftentimes marginalized, powerless position, and unveiling subjective meanings of motherhood, offers a broader understanding of teen mothers. Therefore, the new research directions identified in the revisionist studies facilitate new perspectives for a better understanding of the lives and needs of these mothers and of their families, which can inform social policies and assistance, aimed both at discouraging early pregnancy rates and at improving the lives of those that are already teen mothers. Such novel research approaches and discourses have the potential to inspire more effective claimsmaking strategies for the implementation of social justice (Linders and Bogard; 2014, Bogard, 2003), that can materialize in effective social policy making. Research in social sciences that embraces polyvocality, non-deficit and holistic perspectives can contribute to a "public sociology" centered on contemporary standards of emotional and material wellbeing, while also using constructionist lens. Contextual constructionism and its approach of social problems offer us the theoretical premises needed to partially "reconcile" the divergent and disconnected two main strands of research in teen motherhood, the positivistic and the constructionist one, or at least, allow us to capitalize on new research findings in the benefit of vulnerable populations, putting social science at work in real life.

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