

TAKING FORWARD THE FEMINIST AND CRITICAL PROJECT ON THE POLITICS OF REPRODUCTION

Macleod, Catriona (2011) **“Adolescence”, pregnancy and abortion: Constructing a threat of degeneration**. London & New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-55338-4 pbk. Pages 184.

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“Teenage pregnancy” and parenting together with abortion remain stigmatized in South Africa and are controversial topics globally. Recent headlines of newspapers reporting on teenage pregnancy are testimony to the emotive and moralistic discourse that the image of a pregnant schoolgirl continues to inspire in the local public imagination. Consider for example the image of disaster and despair encapsulated in a national newspaper’s loud title “Pregnancy tsunami” in an article on the pregnancy at local schools (**The Times**, 21 February 2011 - front page). Well-known critical and feminist psychologist, Catriona Macleod has for many years been invested in unpacking these dominant discourses – not only in the public domain but more importantly among scholars and policy-makers in this terrain – to expose the way in which apparently evidence-based and learned responses to teenage pregnancy are intertwined with a wide range of social stigma and serve to reflect, legitimate and rationalize continued racist, gendered and classed discourses and practices. For the most part hers has been a lone feminist and critical voice in the South African field of “teenage pregnancy”, as she reflects in a recent paper, the feminist “engagement that there has been is a whisper in relation to the plethora of public health, medical and psychological writings on ‘adolescent pregnancy’” (Macleod, in press).

Serving as both a compendium of her previous work but also a deepening and strengthening of her argument, this book is a solid contribution to the field of theorizing and deconstructing dominant responses to teenage pregnancy, abortion and young motherhood / parenting. At the same time it is also strongly invested in confronting a thorny developmental psychology issue, that of the normative assumption of the stage of adolescence between childhood and adulthood which she shows is pivotal to the discourse of a threat of degeneration that frames social responses to teenage pregnancy. Macleod has long provided a rigorous critique of the knee-jerk assumptions of adolescence as a coherent, discrete, essentialised and universalized stage of human development. In this book she really comes into her own, bringing together a critique that

locates the construction of adolescence as not only steeped in stereotypic gender norms but also powerfully located in the postcolony, as inseparable from racist and colonialist white constructions of the black other. The ambivalent space that adolescence occupies, played out in responses to teenage pregnancy in schools and communities, as evidence from recent research suggests (see for example, Bhana et al, 2008, 2010; Mkhwanazi 2010; Ngabaza, 2011) is nowhere better unpacked with its all its complexity than in this book. This valuable critique of the stage of adolescence in the larger task of challenging rigid and essentialist frameworks of human development cannot be under-estimated.

Macleod's primary argument is neatly framed at the beginning of the book and is woven tightly through each chapter that follows: "Public discussion of 'teenage pregnancy' and abortion, for the most part, construct a threat of degeneration, in which young women are positioned as contributing through their sexual and reproductive status, to social decline" (p. 5). Macleod shows convincingly that such a threat, indeed the overall negative and othering responses to "adolescent" pregnancy, abortion and parenting, is built on a further social construction, that of the normative assumption of the stage of adolescence as transition, which she argues contains "the seeds of its own destruction" (p. 5) since it is "inhabited from the inside by paradoxes (child / not child; adult / not adult) that require constant work in order to arrive at merely temporary resolution" (p. 5). The book proceeds to illustrate how such normative discourses are racialised, classed, gendered, framed by cultural and traditional discourses, and deeply rooted in colonialist ideologies which conflate the development of the individual with the development of "civilization". Macleod unpacks with crystal clarity the ideology of "civilization" versus "the primitive" that was endemic to colonialist discourse, and that continues to frame current constructions of the adolescent as depicting "a threat of degeneration".

The book includes 8 chapters which unpack the arguments in different but related terrains, build on each other and take the reader through a comprehensive scrutiny of the historical and contemporary context of public and academic discourse and practice on teenage pregnancy and abortion. The first chapter constitutes a "setting of the scene" which is wonderfully clear in articulating the central arguments of the book as well proving an accessible and instructive overview of the theoretical framework of social constructionism and the analytical tools of discourse analysis. The second chapter unpacks the theoretical framing of the arguments, in particular an elaboration of the invention of adolescence as a discrete developmental stage representing a transition between childhood and adulthood as well as laying bare the internal paradox implicit therein. Chapter three goes on to unpack in a practical way the way in which this discourse and paradox is played out in three different terrains: sexuality education; the construction of teenage pregnancy and motherhood; and the termination of pregnancy. It is particularly important that Macleod includes a focus on abortion in this chapter and others, since while there has been a proliferation of work on teenage pregnancy and parenting, work on abortion remains relatively marginal in South Africa, possibly reflecting the deep ambivalence in which both researchers and the public have responded to the legalization of abortion in South Africa. In chapter four the author elaborates on the invention of "teenage pregnancy", arguing that it has been set up as inevitably and unquestioningly signifying a social problem and is made intelligible and normative through the adolescence as transition discourse. The chapter reminds us of how "new" the very concept of teenage pregnancy is, and provides

convincing evidence for the way in which “scientific method is used to position young women as threatening social order and community stability” (p. 73). Chapter five provides a powerful reflection on the way in which social framings of abortion do exactly the same, thus arguing that the threat of degeneration is implied not only through a young women’s pregnancy “but also through the possibility of her terminating her pregnancy” (p. 91). In Chapter six, Macleod elaborates on her argument that these dominant discourses on teenage pregnancy are raced, classed and cultured. She illustrates how “the threat of degeneration is not colour or ‘culture’ blind” but that it is particularly “black” and marginalized teenagers who are constructed as posing such a threat (p. 107). Chapter seven turns to a more practice-oriented terrain, which in a Foucauldian framing, Macleod terms “managing the threat” and indeed proceeds to outline the disciplinary and punitive framework enmeshed in these apparently caring practices. Reviewing predominantly the writings of some South African researchers that make recommendations about sex education and abortion, Macleod exposes the (inadvertent perhaps) assumptions of the “adolescent in transition” discourse and the “injunction to manage risk” which is implicit in this work (p. 129). Particularly refreshing in this chapter is the use of a popular media example in which “real” (manufactured for public viewing of course) voices of counsellors are presented and deconstructed to illustrate the underlying discourse of the threat of degeneration as well as a construction of adolescents as in transition, vulnerable and “at risk”, in need of guidance and discipline to contain their unruly behaviours. In the final chapter the author brings the arguments of the book together, providing a succinct synthesis of what has been covered and makes the important argument for a shift from “teenage pregnancy” to “unwanted pregnancy”, basically calling for a shifting of the gaze on individualised, essentialised notions of deficiency to an acknowledgement of the “gendered and social space within which reproduction occurs” (p. 149).

The one area of silence that confronted me in reading Macleod’s articulate, clear and enticing work, is that of voices of young women and men themselves. While their experiences are framed and re-framed by both academic and policy-based researchers as well as the public panoptic media, and deconstructed here by Macleod, their silence looms loud for me. Macleod preempts this critique by expressly reiterating in her final chapter that her intention was not to present the experiences of young women themselves, but rather “to understand the macro-social and cultural environment of public discourse and practice within which these young women will experience their lives” (p. 130). Such an exploration within the framework that Macleod provides remains an important project both locally and internationally. And notwithstanding her disclaimer, one creative medium of bringing further challenge might have been a juxtaposition of such voices with the critical text, not necessarily in dialogue, but simply by way of reminding us of the centrality of the sensate and agentic bodies and minds of which the book speaks. But perhaps that is a task for the future. And certainly what this book does provide is an outstanding theoretical framework for any researcher, politician and/or practitioner to approach their research and/or practice and engagement with young people in a very different way.

Many times over the years I have had bright and committed young feminist scholars approaching me to supervise their work on teenage pregnancy. And indeed there is a current flurry of work on teenage pregnancy by young researchers, some of it floundering between a more empathetic approach yet inevitably sliding towards the moralizing,

patronizing gaze of the elder scrutinizing young sexualities and buying into heteronormative versions of family. A rigorous engagement with Catriona Macleod's book is sure to correct that! Indeed also a lesson for more established researchers and authors to be ever cautious of our knee-jerk reactions and the challenges of resisting hegemonic discourses on adolescence, teenage pregnancy and reproductive health in general. In Macleod's book there are no holy cows; some well-known feminists and certainly many well-meaning social scientists come up for scrutiny for their, albeit inadvertent, reiteration of the discourses on "adolescence as transition" and others that are unpacked in this book. Macleod reminds us of the importance and power of language, of how easily we can slip into repeating the very things we seek to challenge.

Having presented such a glowing report of this book and its impact, it comes as no surprise that barely hot off the press the book was awarded the prestigious international Distinguished Publication Award by the Association for Women in Psychology, based in the USA. This award is so well deserved, not only as an appreciation of the book itself, but also for the many years of admirable work and dedication that Catriona Macleod has put into feminist and critical psychology scholarship, in particular the body of work that challenges heteronormative and patriarchal global narratives on gender, sexuality and reproduction.

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