

DECONSTRUCTING “TEENAGE PREGNANCY” / ABORTION

Macleod, C (2011) **‘Adolescence’, pregnancy and abortion: Constructing a threat of degeneration**. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-55338-4 pbk. Pages xi + 168.

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Social anxiety regarding the “problem” of “teenage pregnancy” is rife in South Africa. Frequent media frenzies claim that “teenage pregnancy” is increasing and that young girls are deliberately becoming pregnant in order to access Child Support Grants. Questions ring out: why do teenagers become pregnant? And how can we stop teenage pregnancies? Amidst this volatile mix of public opinion and alarmist calls, **‘Adolescence’, pregnancy and abortion** provides a much needed interrogation of representations of “teenage pregnancy” and abortion in the context of adolescent reproduction. Weaving together an impressive analysis of scholarly research, media/internet representations and public discourse, Macleod deconstructs the multiple ideological assumptions and discursive strands which underpin contemporary debate, public opinion, scholarly work and public health interventions pertaining to “teenage pregnancy”/abortion.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one situates the study as a social constructionist analysis of discourses of “teenage pregnancy”/abortion. Macleod moves away from the usual questions of cause, consequence and modes of prevention and signals her intent to focus instead on the ideologies which shape research questions, interventions and popular discourses regarding “teenage pregnancy”/abortion. Chapters two to seven provide a series of deconstructive analyses in which Macleod unpacks commonsense ideologies underpinning understandings of “adolescence”, outlines the challenges posed to normative ideas of “adolescence” by the phenomena of “teenage pregnancy”, sex education and adolescent abortion, traces the construction of “teenage pregnancy” and abortion as “social problems”, interrogates the intersections between race and notions of “teenage pregnancy”/abortion and analyses the role of health service providers in calculating and managing risk in relation to the sexual/reproductive health of young people.

Chapter two contextualises the analysis of “teenage pregnancy/abortion” in relation to the broader idea of “adolescence”, which is argued to be a recent historical invention. The chapter outlines three key ideologies of adolescence, namely: (1) the notion of adolescence as a transition, (2) the construction of an “imaginary wall” between adolescents and adults and (3) the definition of adolescence as an individual process

divorced from social processes. According to Macleod, the notion of adolescence as transition maps onto broader notions of human development as a movement from primitive to civilized and is, as a result, haunted by anxieties of social decline or what Macleod calls the “threat of degeneration”. The paradoxes and inconsistencies of the “adolescence as transition” ideology are unpacked more closely in chapter three.

Chapter four traces the invention of the idea of “teenage pregnancy” as a social problem dating back to the late 1960s. Macleod shows how the various ideologies of adolescence outlined in chapter two underpin constructions and discussions of “teenage pregnancy” within social science and public health research agendas. The idea that research practices *are* social practices is powerfully illustrated in this chapter. Through careful consideration of available research, Macleod shows that there is little clear-cut evidence supporting claims that “teenage pregnancy” results in a disruption of schooling and socio-economic disadvantage, automatically confers detrimental health risks to the mother, results in poor child outcomes or is linked to welfare dependency. Research on “teenage pregnancy” is shown to privilege age as key explanatory variable, rendering young women visible as “objects of scientific scrutiny” (p59) and rendering other factors (such as class and social situation) invisible.

Chapter five explores the construction of abortion in the context of adolescent pregnancy as a threat to personal and social decline and as a new “social problem”. Similarly to research on “teenage pregnancy”, Macleod finds no clear evidence of the detrimental effects of abortion for young women *in particular*. Once again the problems of relying on age as key explanatory variable (to the neglect of other factors) is exposed. In chapter six Macleod explores the ways in which discourses of “teenage pregnancy”/abortion are racialized, with black and ethnic minority young women (eg Hispanic, Coloured, Asian) usually emerging as particularly “problematic” in westernised public representations. Chapter seven explores the role of health service providers in calculating and managing risk in relation to the sexual/reproductive health of young people. Macleod draws on limited interviews with health service providers and shows how assumptions about young people and the imperative to manage risk infiltrates interventions relating to sex education and sexual/reproductive health.

In the final chapter Macleod summarizes the key arguments of the book and attempts to sketch a way forward. She argues chiefly for a shift in signification from “teenage pregnancy” to the notion of “unwanted pregnancies”. The argument is that this shift will highlight contextual factors, avoid pathologizing young pregnant women, undo the “imaginary wall” separating adolescent women from adult women and allow the recognition that women in similar situations face similar difficulties around reproduction regardless of age. Macleod also makes recommendations regarding service provision, in particular the increased availability and accessibility of contraception, the acknowledgement of the importance of gender dynamics and power relations in relation to sex/reproduction (particularly in designing sex education interventions), increased accessibility and affordability of termination of pregnancy services and broader interventions aimed at improving women’s access to education, health care and adequate childcare.

The strengths of the book lie in its superb deconstruction of dominant societal representations about “teenage pregnancy”/abortion, showing their reliance on problematic ideologies of adolescence and racialized threats of social decline. Chapter

five is particularly excellent, and convincingly illustrates that much social science and public health research on “teenage pregnancy” is founded on problematic ideologies that shape research questions, methodologies and scientific interpretations. **‘Adolescence’, pregnancy and abortion** provides an exemplary example of critical social constructionist work and its potential to shift research grounds / agendas and undo taken-for-granted assumptions. The limitations of the book lie in providing answers to the questions it opens up and in translating the implications of its powerful deconstructionist analysis into alternative visions and practical solutions. This is not unique to the book but is a common problem of critical deconstructionist analyses. What the book does do is succeed in unravelling ideological assumptions and revealing discourses of “teenage pregnancy”/abortion as mechanisms of social control which are raced, classed and gendered. For this it deserves to be widely read.