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# A study of how self esteem relates to teen pregnancy

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**ABSTRACT**  
**SOCIAL WORK**

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B.S.W. Clark College, 1988

A Study of How Self Esteem Relates to Teen Pregnancy

Advisor: Dr. Mamie Darlington

Thesis dated: April, 1991

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship of self-esteem to teen pregnancy. The Hudson's self-esteem scale was administered to 13 female students at St. Luke's Area III Learning Center. These students were either pregnant or were teen parents.

The findings were that 38.5 percent of the students have high self-esteem, 46.1 percent have moderate self-esteem and 15.4 percent have low self-esteem.

**A STUDY OF HOW SELF ESTEEM RELATES TO TEEN PREGNANCY**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted to the Faculty of Clark-Atlanta University**

**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for**

**the Degree of Master of Social Work**

**BY**

**Jennifer Catrena White**

**School of Social Work**

**Atlanta, Georgia**

**April 1991**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy has reached epidemic proportions, and accounts for about one-third of all out-of-wedlock childbirths. Nationally, 3,909,510 babies were born, and of that number 10,588 babies were born to mothers under 15 years of age, and 478,358 babies were born to young women 15-19 years of age (National Center of Health Statistics, Inc. 1989). In the state of Georgia 27,920 young women between the ages of 10-19 became pregnant and 18,924 babies were born. In 1990, in metropolitan Atlanta, 8,956 young women between the ages of 10-19 became pregnant and gave birth.

The problems associated with teenage pregnancy include a number of divergent negative outcomes such as: (1) higher rates of infant mortality; (2) higher rates for birth defects often associated with biological immaturity and poor nutrition; (3) greater rates of mental retardation in children born to mothers under the age of 20; (4) increased rates for spinal injuries, head injuries, asphyxia, and possibly, epilepsy, which may be related to the low birthweight often found with this group of children; and finally, (5) the increased potential for a reduction of intelligence (Bolton, 1980).

For Black adolescents the expression of sexuality and sexual relationships

are important issues. On the average, black adolescents tend to become sexually active one year earlier than white adolescents. They are therefore less well informed about contraception, not very positive about its use, and do not use it effectively (Chilman, 1983; Children's Defense Fund, 1986b; Gibbs, 1986b). As a result, black teenage females have higher rates of unintended pregnancy and birth rates than white females. Teens trying to cope with parenthood often begin to experience psychological problems for males and females. These problems include anxiety, depression, anger, feelings of helplessness, and psychosomatic symptoms. Reinforced for social and interpersonal skills, young black females may become sexually active, often an unintentional route to premature parenthood that may foreclose their educational and career opportunities (Gibbs, 1986b; Ladner, 1971, Stack, 1974).

#### Significance/Purpose of the Study

I chose teen pregnancy because of my interest in the subject for many years, and because of my experiences with this population during my field placement at St. Luke's Area III Learning Center. There were several students there who were either pregnant, had been pregnant, had a child or children, and who were at-risk for pregnancy. Many of the girls appeared from the researcher's observation to have positive feelings about themselves, yet their lifestyles and

environments were dysfunctional.

The focus of this study was to determine if self-esteem has any relationship to teenage pregnancy. If self-esteem does affect teen pregnancy, then in what way? Having self-esteem is what everyone seeks, (especially teenagers). They are constantly seeking approval from others to prove that they are someone special. There exists a need to enhance self-esteem so that the adolescent can function effectively during this period. If having low self-esteem is the cause of teen pregnancy, enhancement of self-esteem should begin before teens become teens. Positive self-esteem is essential to the healthy development of teenagers.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-esteem relates to an individual's feelings about his/her worth and dignity, while self-image refers to a person's conception of himself/herself/. Body image is a person's attitude and feelings towards their body. The individual's overall evaluation of herself or himself is her/his self-concept (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1990).

Wyne, White, and Coop (1974) state that William James believed that man was sensitive enough to feel himself thinking and to separate mental thoughts from physical feelings. Freud relates his theory of the ego as a person's innermost feeling. This reveals a sense of dignity and worth which develops into self-confidence. Theorist Carl Rogers believes that personality revolves around an individual's feelings of herself. If a person feels good about herself, she will reflect a positive attitude and a sense of self-motivation.

Humanistic psychology develops the concept of self-esteem to the furthest degree. Tate (1978) suggests that establishment psychology is perceived as often neglecting or denying that which makes man human: his values, attitudes, feelings, aspirations, beliefs, ... Elkins agrees by stating the following:

To those subscribing to the viewpoints of humanistic psychology,

... the self and how one sees oneself are more important determinants of healthy personality and personal effectiveness than the sex drive, repressed memories of early childhood and environmental stimuli ... the unique and personal meanings which a person's experience has for himself-is the only reality he knows. His phenomenal field, of which the self is a major part, is the crucial variable in determining how a person will react to the world. Uniqueness of individuals is one of the main focuses in humanistic psychology. No two people share the same thoughts or feelings. Humanistic psychology focuses on the individual's attitude and feelings.

Another concern is that of the development of self. Individuals should always work towards improving themselves and their surrounding. Elkins (1977) states that the effects of high self-esteem: "If a person sees himself as a worthwhile, useful, lovable, competent human being, he/she will be able to lead a happy and productive life". An individual must be able to believe in herself and feel that others believe in her if she is to develop a healthy personality. Individuals who understand their being and fully utilize their personal resources are generally those who are confident and hold a positive outlook about their lives.

As stated before, self-esteem is the feeling regarding self-worth whereas

self-concept refers to the individuals overall evaluation of herself, including self-esteem and self-image. If a student has a high sense of self-esteem, her self-concept will also be high. The two at times relate, self-concept is learned as a result of experience.

Individuals who have experienced a series of rejection or neglect may soon believe the negative perception of others. On the other hand, those who experience success continually will become confident and show that assurance around them. Once the perception of self is formed, she will begin to react accordingly. The student with high self-esteem will be open and willing to learn. The student has good interaction with peers and adults and learns to develop meaningful relationships with others. Yet, students with low self-esteem are usually afraid of rejection or being hurt. Their fear is compensated through anger, hostility or inappropriate behavior.

### Self-Esteem and the Adolescent

The transitional period of the adolescent should be considered in discussing self-esteem and its development. Adolescence is generally considered the period of human growth where the individual moves from childhood to adulthood. Adolescent years, which range from age thirteen to eighteen, mark a period of emotional, mental and physical growth. This period is usually marked by

frustration and conflicts due to the changing conditions of development. Ellis and Davis (1982), point out theoretical views of adolescent self-esteem. They compare several theorists who explain the adolescent years. One writer, Sullivan (1953), separates the adolescent years into the early phase and late phase, where she names three concerns as dominant in the adolescent years. These areas are: (a) a need for sexual release and a general satisfaction of lust; (b) a need for intimate relations and friendship; and (c) a need for security and a lack of anxiety.

Elkins (1961) points out that the organization of self-concept is achieved during the early adolescent years. The team of Douvan and Gold (1966) concluded that the adolescent's personality remained relatively stable despite periods of instability and emotional fluctuation. Ellis and Davis (1982), stated that the multidimensional nature of self-concept across adolescence appeared to expand with periods of both stabilization and reorganization. Across the age span there was a slight reorganization in how individuals related to peers, and a major reorganization of self-concept, (Ellis and Davis, 1982). There is a need to enhance self-esteem so that the adolescent can function effectively during this period.

Approaching the adolescent pregnancy problem from the point of self-esteem, Abernathy (1974), has suggested that the pregnant adolescent suffers from chronic low self-esteem level which has been compensated for through the

pleasant feelings associated with being sexually sought after.

Still another avenue to the growth of self-esteem has been pointed out by Rainwater (1970), who has offered the general notion that pregnancy serves the lower socioeconomic status female by establishing her "legitimacy" as a mature female, and this same pregnancy serves the additional role, for the lower socioeconomic status male, of establishing masculinity as well. This growth in self-esteem with the onset of pregnancy, then, would seem to be a mutually beneficial one for both parties.

The strengths of many lower SES minority adolescents are so that they would not survive the challenges of the more difficult aspects of their life. Bolton (1980) states that these strengths are able to extend into the area of sexuality in the same manner as the strengths of any adolescent which allow that adolescent to defer sexual gratification until some less risk-filled period in his/her life.

### Black Adolescents and Self Esteem

Black children and adolescents develop their self-concept and self-esteem from the reflected appraisals of parents, relatives, and peers in their own communities (Spencer, 1982). Before the 1970's, many clinical and empirical studies found that Black youth had negative self-concepts and low self-esteem (Clark and Clark, 1940; Goodman, 1964). Yet, more recent studies of nonclinical

samples of black youth have been continuously found that their self-concepts and self-esteem are as positive if not more so than whites.

Gibbs (1989) states that clinicians are more likely to find evidence of negative self-concepts and low self-esteem among black youth referred for behavioral or psychological problems. While assessing the self-concept or self-esteem, the clinician must be aware of the sources of their esteem, parents, peers and environment. For example, studies find that athletic ability is a major source of esteem for black male adolescents, while physical attractiveness and social skills are very important assets for black females (Cauce, 1986; Mancini, 1980).

Gibbs (1989) finds that:

Intellectual achievement is valued in some settings, while in other settings it is demeaned. High achieving students predominantly black high schools are often ridiculed as "brainiacs" and accused of acting "like white folks". Boys who are physically small and girls who are precociously mature may become targets of sarcasm and humor, sometimes developing over-compensatory behaviors as a result.

### Summary

Self-esteem is how an individual feels about himself/herself, her dignity, her worth. Many theories have been developed to define self-esteem, yet they all find that it deals with how one feels about himself/herself. For black adolescents their peers, family and environment determine whether or not the opinion they have of themselves is positive or negative. As pointed out, this information is crucial to clinicians treating black youth.

### Theoretical Framework

Erikson, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Piaget and Sigmond and Anna Frued have a specific view as to why adolescents behave the way they do. By examining each theorist's view, there may be an explanation as to why teenagers become pregnant and if self-esteem is directly related.

Erikson thinks of each stage in life as a crisis. Adolescence is the identity crisis stage. This is a period when young people are trying to find autonomy. No longer do they look to their parents to choose friends for them, they choose their own. They also find pastimes that appeal to them and begin to build meaningful emotional ties away from home. Adolescents find a value system based upon their family ties. All of these factors have a hand in the choices a teen makes about sexual activity. If they choose friends who are sexually active, peer pressure and wanting to be liked and accepted may push them to become sexually

active before they are ready. Crain (1985), states that Erikson feels the adolescent is presently preabsorbed. The adolescent is concerned with who she is, how she appears in the eyes of others, and what she will become. They do become sexually attracted to others and even fall in love, but such attachments are most often efforts of self-definition.

Kohlberg developed a theory of stages in moral development. He based his theories on the moral dilemmas of others. Stewart, Pelmutter and Friedman (1988), found that Kohlberg felt that people are concerned with getting rewards and avoiding punishments. I chose two stages that would relate to my study.

The first stage is the preconventional stage. For instance, Julie (15) should not have sex with Harim (16), because she is too young and may become pregnant. On the other hand, it may be argued that she should because she has professed her love and will lose him, if she does not. The next stage is conventional moral reasoning. At this stage, people feel that moral behavior is following social rules and conventions, and the focus is on conforming to social order, family obligations and caring for other people. At this stage, people reason that Julie should have sex with Hakim because she loves him and he will approve of her doing it for him.

Carol Gilligan theorized that women define themselves through relationships with others (Pillari, 1988). For a female adolescent, intimacy

coincides with identity, as she comes to know herself through relationships with others. Females get a view of themselves through their peers, parents and teachers. They have a tremendous amount of influence on her and the decisions that she makes in life. At some time in life, this could be damaging. She looks to others for self-definition and never to herself.

Piaget touched slightly on the role of formal operations in the adolescents social life. At this time, they grasp ideals such as justice and love. Crain (1985) finds that Piaget feels that adolescents enter a broader world yet ----- the world of possibilities ----- and egocentrism reappears.

The egocentrism is brought to view when adolescents' role models are thought to provide visible behavior for examination by children. When this role-modeled behavior is emulated, the child is either reinforced by society for engaging in similar behavior or, through an identification with the model, is vicariously self-rewarded for being like the person identified with (Adams and Gullota, 1989).

Children imitate those around them. Adolescents model themselves after people they most want to be like. If that person has the reputation for being notorious and they are exposed to her/him on a daily basis, as impressionable as adolescents are, the person is attractive and fun. An adolescent female who is in constant association who is pregnant or has been on many occasions and has

several children, may hear her friend boast of the benefits (government assistance, housing, etc.). this makes the thought of having children alluring especially if her home life is dysfunctional. It is a way of escape.

Adams and Gullota (1989) state that Sigmund and Anna Freud believe that females experience the Electra Complex. The female child replaces instinct for her mother with a new love, her father. This occurs when she finds that the male genitals are not present. She blames her mother and shifts her love to the father. Penis envy, directs the daughter toward identification, in a sexual way, with males.

According to Sigmund and Anna Freud, adolescence is a turbulent stage because of the dramatic physiological changes occurring at this time (Crain, 1985). They feel that sexual and aggressive drives, which were dormant during the latency stage, now threaten to overwhelm the ego and its defenses. The genital zone is infused with great sexual energy and the adolescent is troubled by Oedipal fantasies. The teenager may find it difficult to be around his or her parents.

### Summary

Each theorist has a different view on adolescence. Erikson builds his theory on the identity crisis stage when autonomy is being sought. Kohlberg developed a moral view based on two stages - the pre-conventional and conventional. Carol Gilligan studied adolescence from a female view. The

female comes to know herself through relationships with others. Piaget defined adolescence through formal operations in the adolescents social life.

### Definition of Terms

Self-esteem: the way an individual feels about his/her worth and dignity.

Self-image: the conceptualization of ones-self.

Body-image: a person's attitude and feelings toward his/her body.

Self-concept: how one evaluates himself/herself overall.

Adolescence: the stage of moving from childhood to adulthood.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Research Design

The design used in this study was a descriptive design. Such a design may examine single variables one at a time, or may consider how a variable is distributed at each level of another variable (Grinnell; 1988). Descriptive designs describe a population's characteristics. They do not generate or test explanations of phenomena in the population (Grinnell, 1988).

#### Sampling

The data for this study was collected through a nonprobability availability sample. According to Grinnel (1988), it is the simplest of the four nonprobability sampling procedure and is sometimes called accidental sampling. In essence, the researcher used the first available appropriate sampling units. The sample was 13 female teens at St. Luke's Area III Learning Center, which is a part of EXODUS, Inc.

EXODUS, Inc., was established in 1971 to reach out to young people with problems and reduce the number of dropouts. In 1974, EXODUS joined with the Atlanta Public Schools to create the Cities in Schools Program - to bring the service resources of the city in the schools (EXODUS, Inc./Cities In Schools,

1990).

Cities In Schools provide education and social services to approximately 800 troubled Atlanta youth annually. According to EXODUS, Inc. (1990), EXODUS/Cities In Schools has three goals:

1. To provide accredited alternative education opportunities for high school dropouts and dropout prone youth.
2. To serve as a model for other communities looking for solutions to the high school dropout problem and to assist in setting up CIS projects.
3. To serve as a laboratory for testing projects and ideas that will enable students to learn and grow.

#### Data Collection

Hudson's Self-Esteem scale was used to measure self-esteem. There were 25 questions that provided statements to measure self-esteem. There were statements that wanted to know if they felt beautiful; if they felt ugly; if they felt that people would not like them if they know them well; if they felt they were likeable; and if their friends think highly of them.

The respondents were expected to respond to these statements by answering by number; (1) rarely or none of the time; (2) a little of the time; (3)

some of the time; (4) good part of the time; (5) most or all of the time. Hudson's scale has a system that changes certain questions by replacing them with a different score. For instance, question 3 needed changing, it may have a score of 1. The score of 1 must be changed to 5 according to his scale. Those teens who scored highest were determined to have the lowest self-esteem and those who had a low score, had the highest self-esteem.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**PRESENTATION OF RESULTS**

My findings were not what I expected. I found that 46.15% of the students had moderate self-esteem, 38.46% had high self-esteem and 15.38% had low self-esteem (See Table I). I was expecting to find that the majority of the teens had low self-esteem. From the questions that were asked, the black students had higher self-esteem than the white students. From past research, this population was expected to have low self-esteem.

**Table 1: Percentages for Self-Esteem**

<b>Frequency</b>		<b>Percent</b>
High (5)	$5/13 * 100$	38.46
Moderate (6)	$6/13 * 100$	46.15
Low (2)	$2/13 * 100$	15.38

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

My findings were that 38.5 percent of the students have high self-esteem, 46.1 percent have moderate self-esteem and 15.4 percent have low self-esteem. These results were surprising in that the literature reflects the general belief that this population has low self-esteem. Due to the small sample, and the fact that these terms were in an alternative program, one might assume that they represent a special group. They voluntarily continued their education in spite of their pregnancies.

#### Recommendations

Only 13 subjects were used. If more students had participated, I could have had a wider range of this populations' feelings. I suggest that someone who is unfamiliar with the participants should administer the questionnaire. More ethnic groups and people of different socioeconomic levels could be used to get a wider variety of levels of self-esteem. I would further suggest that the other academic participate in such a study.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK**

With the 21st century quickly approaching, social workers will need to find new and innovative ideas for dealing with teenage pregnancy. Hopefully, with this study, we will fill the need for more school-based, hospital-based and neighborhood clinics that will provide not only contraceptives, but continued education on sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, and provide ongoing individual counseling and groups for youth-at-risk.

The above programs are needed for all children at all socioeconomic levels and race. All of our youth are at-risk. Most teens can talk easier with their parents about a date than about sex. As, social workers we enlist the support of church's to reach people. For instance, teaching parents how to talk with their teenager(s) on all issues could be done through the church. Our church's are filled with professionals who can contribute at all levels (teaching, counseling services, etc).

School systems throughout America must stop being so rigid in their policies on sex education. It has not been proven that sex education has an effect on teen pregnancy negatively or positively. As social workers who will be employed in schools, it is one way of reaching the teens in great numbers. Also,

it must be taken into account that children are becoming sexually active at earlier ages, therefore, they would need to be taught during elementary and middle school years. They may need to be reached even earlier.

Television, with its continuous promotion and glamorization of sex must also do its part to help alleviate the problem. For years with various advertisements, T.V. makes sex seem chic. For impressionable youngsters, this looks "cool" and they find it alluring. Television, with its power of persuasion, could run ads that state sex is not for children, it is for adults. It could also tell teens to stop listening to their peers about sex and go to someone who has the facts i.e., a counselor, a doctor or a parent.

As social workers, we must empower our communities to advocate to the networks for better television and cleaner television. We must advocate for less sex and violence. One can see that social workers have a long road ahead. It will not be easy to convince people that in order to save themselves, they must be a part of the change effort. The task will take vision, focus and long hours of commitment. The involvement of teenagers is a must. They are the future, our future. Their choices and actions greatly impact society.

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## APPENDIX A

### Hudson's Self-Esteem Scale

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Race \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire is designed to measure how you see yourself. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer each item as carefully as possible by placing a number by each one as follows:

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. A little of the time
3. Some of the time
4. Good part of the time
5. Most or all of the time

1. I feel that people would not like me if they really knew me well. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I feel that others get along much better than I do. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I feel that I am a beautiful person. \_\_\_\_\_
4. When I am with other people I feel they are glad I am with them. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I feel that people really like to talk with me. \_\_\_\_\_

6. I feel that I am a very competent person. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I think I make a good impression on others. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I feel that I need more self confidence. \_\_\_\_\_
9. When I am with strangers I am very nervous. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I think that I am a dull person. \_\_\_\_\_
11. I feel ugly. \_\_\_\_\_
12. I feel that others have more fun than I do. \_\_\_\_\_
13. I feel that I bore people. \_\_\_\_\_
14. I think my friends find me interesting. \_\_\_\_\_
15. I think I have a good sense of humor. \_\_\_\_\_
16. I feel very self-conscious when I am with strangers. \_\_\_\_\_
17. I feel that if I could be more like other people  
I would have it made. \_\_\_\_\_
18. I feel that people have a good time when they  
are with me. \_\_\_\_\_
19. I feel like a wallflower when I go out. \_\_\_\_\_
20. I feel I get pushed around more than others. \_\_\_\_\_
21. I think I am a rather nice person. \_\_\_\_\_
22. I feel that people really like me very much. \_\_\_\_\_
23. I feel that I am a likeable person. \_\_\_\_\_

24. I am afraid I will appear foolish to others.

\_\_\_\_\_

25. My friends think very highly of me.

\_\_\_\_\_