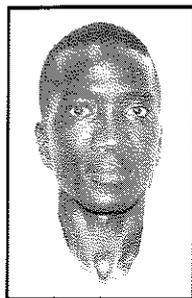


## PERCEPTIONS OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN ADOLESCENTS

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**ABSTRACT**

*Teenage pregnancy has been viewed as a social problem that has implications for the development and empowerment of women in South Africa. This study sought to determine the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of a group of South African adolescents regarding teenage pregnancy. The sample consisted of 221 adolescents (118 female, 103 male) aged between 13 and 19 years (M age = 15.75). A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data. The results showed that both males and females held a negative attitude toward teenage pregnancy. Pressure from males to engage in sex and reluctance to use contraceptives were perceived as the main cause of teenage pregnancy. The participants believed that teenage pregnancy brought shame on one's family and problems for the teenage mother. Possible approaches of intervention are discussed.*

**OPSOMMING**

*Tiener swangerskappe word beskou as 'n sosiale probleem wat implikasies vir die ontwikkeling en toerusting van vroue in Suid-Afrika inhou. Hierdie studie was daarop gerig om die persepsies van 'n groep Suid-Afrikaanse adolessente vas te stel, aangaande die oorsake en gevolge van tienerswangerskappe. Die steekproef het uit 221 adolessente (118 vroulik, 103 manlik) tussen die ouderdom van 13 en 19 jaar (G. ouderdom=15.75) bestaan. 'n Selftoegepaste vraelys is gebruik om die data te versamel. Die resultate het getoon dat beide manlike en vroulike deelnemers 'n negatiewe houding teenoor tienerswangerskappe ingeneem het. Druk tot seksuele betrokkenheid deur die manlike geslag en onwilligheid om voorbehoedmiddels te gebruik deur beide geslagte, is gerapporteer as die hoofoorsake van tiener swangerskappe. Daar is ook aangedui dat die deelnemers glo dat tienerswangerskappe skande oor die familie bring en probleme vir die tienermoeder veroorsaak. Moontlike benaderings vir intervensie is bespreek.*

**BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

The rate of teenage pregnancy in South Africa has reached alarming proportions. According to statistics released by the Medical Research Council, one in three girls will be pregnant before the age of 20. More and more teenagers are becoming sexually active with children as young as 13 experimenting with sex. With few teenagers using contraceptives or protection to prevent pregnancies, in one year more than 17 000 babies

were born to mothers 16 and younger. Of that number, 4 000 were born to mothers under 14. Considering that abortions have been legalised in South Africa since 1997, the real figure of teenage pregnancies is probably much higher than the official statistics.

In view of these astounding statistics, there is a need to investigate what teenagers think about teenage pregnancy. This study was undertaken to determine the attitudes of teenagers toward teenage pregnancy. Teenagers' perceptions regarding the causes of teenage preg-

nancy and the beliefs pertaining to consequences of pregnancy were also investigated.

## **LITERATURE STUDY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Research on teenage pregnancy in South Africa has followed the international trend of conceptualising teenage pregnancy as a social problem with the attendant negative consequences (Macleod, 1999a:1-7). One of the major deleterious effects of teenage pregnancy is considered to be disruption of the teenager's education that often accompanies pregnancy. Several studies have found that many teenagers who fall pregnant do not plan on returning to school (Mkhize, 1995:1; Mosidi, 1992:1). Thus, the career prospects are severely restricted, potentially limiting the teenager to lower socio-economic status.

A second issue that has been identified in the literature is that teenage pregnancy can pose a health risk to the teenager and her baby. Research findings indicate that obstetric outcomes for teenage mothers are poorer than for adult mothers, with induced hypertension, premature labour and anaemia considered to be significant complications in the teenage group (Boult & Cunningham, 1992:154; Goldberg & Craig, 1983:863). Another problem associated with teenage pregnancy is relationship difficulties that the pregnancy may bring. The teenager may experience ostracism, isolation, and rejection by her family members and outsiders (Dlamini & Mackenzie, 1991:28; Ntombela, 1992:1; Zama, 1991:1).

Regarding the causes of teenage pregnancy, a review of the literature shows that a number of contributory factors have been identified (Macleod, 1999b:8-16). Research studies indicate that ignorance of contraception and conception is a major factor in teenage pregnancy, with many teenagers lacking understanding of the relationship between menstruation, coitus, fertility and conception (Mayekiso & Twaise, 1993:21; Richter, 1996:1). Other factors that are considered to be important are peer pressure to engage in sex (Preston-Whyte & Zondi,

1989:47; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1996:1), poor self-identity and low self-image (Pond, 1987:1), family disorganisation (Boult & Cunningham, 1992:159) and breakdown of cultural traditions (Bodibe, 1994:1; Mkhize, 1995:1).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

With the rate of teenage pregnancy escalating in South Africa, it becomes important to seek an understanding of the views of teenagers regarding teenage pregnancy. Few studies in South Africa have sought to determine the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of teenagers regarding teenage pregnancy in terms of causes and consequences.

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study was to:

- Ascertain the attitudes of teenagers toward teenage pregnancy.
- Determine the perceptions of teenagers pertaining to the causes of teenage pregnancy.
- Determine the beliefs of teenagers pertaining to the consequences of teenage pregnancy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

A quantitative research design was used in the study. The design was used in order to ascertain the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of teenagers pertaining to teenage pregnancy.

### **Sampling**

The simple random sample method was used to select five high schools located in the greater Mafikeng area of the Northwest province of South Africa. The schools were selected from a list of high schools in the area that have exclusively black pupil enrollment. Thereafter, a class from each school was selected using the simple

random sample method. The classes selected had, on average, an enrollment of 40 pupils with males and females almost equally distributed. The total sample consisted of 221 adolescents (118 female, 103 male) with ages ranging from 13 to 19 years (M age = 15.75).

## Measures

The research instrument consisted of a self-administered questionnaire divided into two sections. The first section sought biographical data about the participants. The second section measured attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of the participants with regard to teenage pregnancy. Participants were asked to indicate their response to two items, one measuring their personal attitude and the other their cultural group's attitude toward teenage pregnancy. There were 10 items that were used to measure the perceptions regarding the causes of teenage pregnancy. Lastly, eight items were included to measure participants' beliefs about consequences of teenage pregnancy.

The validity of the items was established on the basis of a survey of the literature on teenage pregnancy (see Macleod, 1999a:1-7; 1999b:8-16). Furthermore, a group of 10 psychology honours students who were requested to assess whether or not the items included in the instrument were actually relevant, indicated agreement. Items on the questionnaire were in a yes-neutral-no format in order to gauge the affirmative or negative responses of the participants.

## RESULTS

The results of the study showed that the overwhelming majority of the teenagers held a negative attitude toward teenage pregnancy with 77% of the females and 85% of the males regarding it as wrong. Sixty seven percent indicated that they considered teenage pregnancy wrong in terms of their culture.

Regarding perceptions pertaining to the causes of teenage pregnancy, the items that had the highest rating were pressure by boys/men on girls to have sex (66%) and refusal by boys/men to use condoms during sexual

intercourse (65%). Other items were also rated as contributing to teenage pregnancy were: having sex without considering consequences such as pregnancy (57%), girls choosing to get pregnant (56%), being ashamed to use contraceptives (50%), fear of parental reaction to contraceptive use (49%), not trusting contraceptives (43%) and falling pregnant unintentionally (40%). Fewer teenagers reported that teenage pregnancy was caused by teenage girls seeking to prove that they could bear a child (23%) or the belief that occasional sex could not lead to pregnancy (19%).

As far as beliefs about consequences of teenage pregnancy is concerned, the following results emerged: 69% of the respondents believed that teenage pregnancy brought shame on the teenager's family, while 68% reported that a teenage mother faced more problems than an adult mother. The same number of teenagers believed that a teenage mother could not be a good mother. Over half (57%) indicated that teenage pregnancy was not something to be proud of, while 49% believed that a teenage mother could not be as successful as an adult mother. Finally, 48% of the respondents indicated that a teenage mother was less likely to get married (48%) and regretted having a child (45%).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study are consistent with other studies that have found most teenagers in South Africa are not keen on bearing children at a young age (Craig & Richter-Strydom, 1983:452; Richter, 1996:1). It seems that most school going teenagers have the desire to complete their studies and view teenage pregnancy as disruptive in attaining this goal. The data of the present study indicate that such a negative attitude toward teenage pregnancy is shared by both male and female teenagers. Contrary to the hypothesis that African culture places a high value on fertility and that this presumably influences early conception (Preston-Whyte & Zondi 1989:226), the majority of respondents in the present study considered teenage pregnancy as culturally wrong. It may be that while fertility is still valued in African society, adolescents do not consider teenage pregnancy as the appropriate manner to prove fertility.

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