

REFLECTIONS ON TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD: CONTEXT AND VOICES OF TEENAGE MOTHERS RESIDING IN THE SALT RIVER PIMA-MARICOPA INDIAN COMMUNITY

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This article presents reflections on motherhood from teenage mothers who reside in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. It provides a contextual description of the community that grounds the voices of the teenage mothers for the reader. Additionally, the article explores the perceptions of teenage motherhood through the voices of teenage mothers and discusses practice issues.

Introduction

I never intended to work in an American Indian community. The situation just presented itself when I was in graduate school. As a result of this experience, however, I became a more informed social work practitioner. And in my subsequent professional social work and teaching career, I have discovered that sometimes opportunities are presented to us when we least expect them—ones that increase our understanding of human behavior.

I practiced social work for eight years in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian community in southwest Arizona from 1983 to 1991. During this time, my practice emphasis focused on the youths of the community, their need for services, and their connection to their community environment. Because of my personal and professional experiences with the community, I asked the tribal council for permission to return to complete my dissertation on teenage mothers' own perceptions of motherhood and their lives. For nine months I interviewed and observed teenage mothers in the Salt River community. I interacted with and observed a young mothers group, made visits to their homes, had meals out with teenage mothers accompanied by their partners and infants, and conducted visits and interviews with extended family members. I also participated in many

community events, which allowed me to extend my network of social contacts.

During this time, my goal was to develop a better understanding of the insider perspective—what it means to be a teenage mother in the Salt River community. In the discipline of social work, we teach that in order to be an effective and ethical practitioner, you have to be sensitive to the dual perspective. This means recognizing and working with individuals in their reality, including their biological, social and cultural, and spiritual contexts. My interest in investigating an insider perspective of teenage mothers in the Salt River community evolved from my years of social work there. I began to see that Pima-Maricopa people sometimes view Anglo or outsider-defined "social problems" in their community as not being social problems at all. I also observed that they respond differently when creating solutions to these "problems."

Historically, researchers have presented hypotheses suggesting that when adolescents decide to become parents, the quality of life for both the teenage



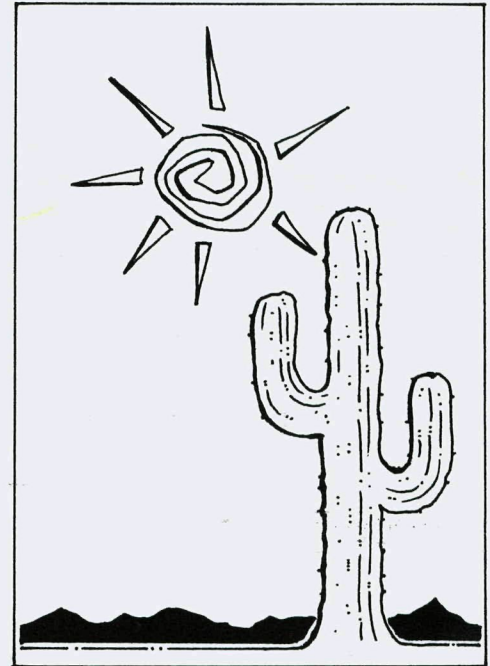
parent and the child diminishes (Brindis, 1993; Vinovskis, 1988; Zabin & Hayward, 1993). Outcomes frequently predicted for the teenage mother by social science literature are (a) decreased educational opportunities, (b) decreased employment alternatives, (c) greater dependence on economic assistance from the government, (d) poor pre- and post-natal care for the child, (e) increased risk of child abuse, and (f) weak peer and intimate relationships.

But do these hypotheses define the lives of teenage mothers in the Salt River community? My goal was to conduct a qualitative inquiry with teenage mothers to see if the outcomes suggested by traditional social science literature have meaning for these Pima-Maricopa mothers within the context of their own cultural and social environments. The narratives I present here seem to suggest that they do not; they represent a very different insider's perspective on the issue of teenage motherhood. However, I want the readers to be aware that what I write about here cannot necessarily be applied to other American Indian teenage mothers. These narratives are personal glimpses of how particular young women from a single American Indian community are dealing with their own problems in living and how their helping processes and support systems have been engaged (Medill, 1997).

A Sense of Place

Our sense of place or environment influences our behavioral decisions throughout our life span. Therefore, I believe it is important to provide a description of the community from which these teenage mothers' narratives have emerged. The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian community was established as a federal reservation in central Arizona in

1879 by Rutherford B. Hayes. The reservation is located on approximately 55,000 acres of land surrounded by middle and upper middle class, non-American Indian communities. The community is a relatively closed one that is identified by distinct geographic features and social boundaries.



Geographic Features

I am always aware of the distinct geographic features that identify Salt River as a community. I can tell I am entering the community by the absence of asphalt, high-density neighborhoods, high-rise structures, or demarcation of individual homeowner space. I also notice the presence of many acres of open space, different types of housing structures, and the natural desert landscape untouched by professional landscape architects. The view of Red Mountain to the northeast, a striking natural monument, is unobstructed for everyone in the community.

In 1993 about 12,000 acres remained

under agricultural cultivation despite the surrounding intensive urbanization trends (Arizona Department of Commerce, 1994). The crops still being grown in the community influence how community members behave. In winter months when onions are grown, the smell permeates the air. Cotton is also grown, and residents use cotton fields to identify home locations. Melons are grown in the spring and summer. I collected watermelons with community youths to eat during social activities. Occasionally immigration vans could be seen parked near the fields to round up undocumented workers from Mexico who resided in the community, sleeping either in the fields or with a community member who had befriended them.

Another distinguishing geographic feature is the canal system that runs through the community. These water canals serve the residents of surrounding suburban communities. But they also create a potential drowning danger to community members who swim in the canals. One popular canal swimming hole is referred to as the "frying pan" because it is totally exposed to the Arizona summer sun. A system of pipes and pumps runs through the community to regulate the flow of water, and the Salt River periodically flows through the community, depending on annual precipitation. When the river is flowing, certain community members are forced to deal with flooded roads to their homes or to community buildings.

The land not used for agricultural purposes encompasses desert, planned HUD neighborhoods, the tribal administrative and service complex, the recreation center, multiple churches, a tribal school, a large shopping complex, a gaming establishment, and a large public access road. When I worked in the com-

munity I never got over my sense of being in a rural community even though it was surrounded by dense suburbia. I could drop off clients in the evening in a more remote part of the community and find myself realizing how dark it was because there was no reflected light. Or I would be in awe at how much cooler the community was because of the absence of buildings and endless pavement and because of the presence of the canals and crops. Families would sleep outside their homes at night in the summer to be comfortable because many of the homes do not have air conditioning.

The Social Structure

Social work students in higher education are taught to consider "the nature versus nurture" argument in the classroom. At some time in their educational process these students generally agree that the social environment of individuals does shape who they become. The social structure that I observed during my years in this community depends primarily on relationships within and among families. Everyone is related and everyone shares a knowledge of community family history. Family members continue the tradition of identifying themselves with "all their kin or relations," which includes the entire tribe in a literal sense, depending on the situation. Members of the community who do leave often return, because they miss their families or because it is difficult to survive economically and psychologically without support from family. During my years of practice in this community, I observed that support can mean sharing everything from expenses and parenting responsibilities to transportation, food, and housing.

Tribal members spend time with each other in their own homes or at orga-

nized community events, which include seasonal sports leagues. People also engage in social activities with the churches in the community. Annual community events include a Fourth of July celebration, a Veterans Day celebration, community potlucks, and Christmas and Easter activities. Tribal programs have breakfast sales to raise money for special events. These sales serve as community social events because they allow community members and tribal employees to visit with one another. Funerals and births also play a significant role in the social structure and processes of the community. I observed that these two events encourage disconnected families to reunite or visit throughout the mourning process or pregnancy.

Because of limited access to public transportation and because not every family has a car, trips to and from the grocery store, the mall, or the Indian hospital also become social activities. Characteristics of community members I observed include generosity with resources, a reserved approach to non-community members, a different sense of time and career, and an ability to live in conditions that some would consider substandard. Perhaps these characteristics have enabled the community to maintain itself while trying to compete with the outside world.

Their Stories

It is in this physical environment and social context that the following three teenage mothers live their daily lives. I could share the stories of ten teenage mothers here, but space limitations force me to select a representation of the teen mothers I interviewed. I selected these narratives as they are representative of the common voice of the teenage mothers I interviewed. They are all growing

up in the Salt River community and have seen their siblings and cousins grow up in this community. They have heard the stories about their parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents also growing up in Salt River. To more clearly see how the narratives reflect a different perspective on the "problem" of teenage motherhood, readers must step outside of their own cultural preconceptions. As professionals we have the ethical responsibility of developing the capacity not only to see the dual perspective, but also to develop solutions with the clients from their lived perspective. This is (to use a worn-out cliché) easier said than done because we all have the propensity to respond to situations from our own biological, psychological, social, and cultural perspectives. Bear this in mind as you read the stories of these young mothers. Their names have been changed to guarantee them anonymity.

Oceana

Oceana is an 18-year-old mother who has a three-year-old daughter and an infant son. Her parents are divorced. "My mom and dad they have had eight kids together, and they stayed together for a long time, until after my first child was born." Until the birth of her second child she lived with her boyfriend and her daughter in her mother's home. She started living in her boyfriend's home when she was 15. For her, living with him was not an issue, and it was not an issue for either of their parents. They moved to the home of the boyfriend's aunt just before the second baby was born because her mother's house was too crowded. Oceana had dropped out of school at the end of ninth grade when she was six months pregnant. She reported that her school attendance was always sporadic. Although she completed

her GED in 1995, she expressed some disappointment about not getting her high school diploma. "After I got the GED I felt sad because I wanted to be an architect at first and then I didn't finish high school." She took a computer course at a local community college and she is employed part time and is planning to return to work full time. She sees herself in a beginning supervisory role and likes her job.

Oceana met the father of both her children when she was 14. He is Pima and "Mexican," a gang member who had a child from another relationship. He smoked marijuana and frequently drank alcohol. Oceana recalls, "I partied after I had my first baby, maybe like once or twice on the weekend, but I didn't leave her alone with other people, only his mom or my mom." Her boyfriend is not employed but he is attending a technical training school. Oceana is uncertain about what type of certificate he is trying to obtain.

When she became sexually active with her boyfriend, she reports that "they didn't really use birth control" although sometimes they used the rhythm method. "We really didn't think I could get pregnant; well we didn't really care about it then. The new baby was kind of on purpose. I don't see marriage in the future but I do see myself staying with the father because I am so in love with him, he's my friend." Oceana's father "whipped" her the first time she got pregnant, but her mother has always helped her take care of the children.

Oceana believes that the biggest problem on the reservation is gangs and violence. She worries about her children's future and wants to raise them to know they are American Indian. "I love my kids and want them to be okay." She participates in community sweat

lodges and wants to learn the Pima language. She plans to get a trailer and has two trailer sites picked out. Her goal is to use her "claims" money to get her family set up. I see the strengths in her social history: the support of her mother, the community acceptance of her role as mother, her ability to plan for the future, and her belief that her life will "work out." She is accepted in the community as a mother, a partner to someone, and a daughter. No one from the community has stigmatized her as a failure or someone without a positive future. An alternative view could be that her life pattern has supported all the consequences of teenage pregnancy that the traditional literature suggests. But I have discovered that it is critical to contextualize client life scripts within their own frame of reference, in this case the Pima-Maricopa community. Oceana is not depressed, she is not socially isolated, and she sees that she has time to make a life for herself and her children.

Kris

Kris is 17 and she is full Pima. She has a daughter who is nine months old. She lives with her maternal grandmother in the community. Previously, she lived with her mother and stepfather until she was 13, and then she remembers running away because her stepfather believed in using physical discipline on the children and she was afraid of him. Kris shared: "Well, he punished us, he paddled us and stuff like that, he tried pushing us around and stuff, but I wouldn't let him, I told him he couldn't push me." At 13, Kris was placed in a community adolescent shelter and was released into the custody of her maternal grandmother when she became pregnant. In addition to being placed in the tribal residential youth home, Kris has been in jail, has been in

and out of a state substance abuse program, and has had a tribal caseworker. She does not believe that any of these services have "helped her really."

She reports that she did not talk with her mother for a couple of years because of her stepfather. Kris's biological father committed suicide when she was two or three years old. "Sometimes I think about him. Who was he? What was he like? Would things be different?" Kris has a biological sister who is one year older and also a mother. "We talk about the kids together and spend time with each other; we watch each other's kids."

Kris dropped out of school when she started running away in 7th grade, but she did receive a high school diploma from the alternative school in the community. She is planning on college but is not sure what she will eventually do. She got a job working part time at the tribal day care facility, which allows her to take her daughter to work for a nominal weekly fee. She enjoys her job working with other people and is "happy" that she is close to her baby all day long.

Kris has had only one boyfriend; he is the father of her baby. They met when they were both in the community residential youth home. She remembers: "The whole day the first time I had sex with him, we had run away from the youth home, we didn't use protections, we really didn't think about it, but I was ready to become a mom." During the period of months I spent interviewing Kris, her relationship with her boyfriend changed significantly. When I first interviewed her, he was in jail for stealing cars, drug trafficking, and "gang banging." She was anticipating his release so they could move up north together "off the reservation." During my second interview with Kris, her boyfriend had been released from jail and had gone

north without her, where he met another young woman with whom he began to live. In the second interview she was very tearful about their relationship ending, but by the third interview she stated that she was "ready to get on with things." Before they ended the relationship she said the following: "I waited for him this whole time, but if he goes to prison for life or something I'd have to let him go. I'd still be his friend and stuff, but I can't be worried about him with my daughter."

The realism reflected in this statement and Kris's mature behavior demonstrate to me her commitment to her child and a future outlook. Kris plans to keep working, to travel away from the reservation, and to go to college. She thinks she might have another relationship, one in which she "could talk, be happy, where we could understand each other, where there was no physical or mental abuse." She wants her daughter to have "a good life, to go to school, and to get a job if she wants to. I want her to be happy she is Pima, to see her daddy and know her family."

In getting to know Kris, I discovered a young woman who sees her life as a teenage mother as it is, not from a deficit perspective or through rose-colored glasses, but exactly where she is in her present life script. She also has personal and familial strengths, which include her awareness that she needs to support herself when she turns 18, her awareness of her baby's needs and development, and her close relationship with her sister and maternal grandmother. Kris's story could be seen in alternative ways from an outsider's viewpoint. But for Kris it is just her life, one that is working for her.

Martha

Martha was 15 years old at the be-

ginning of the interview process and turned 16 by the end. She has one child who is four months old. Martha lived with her mother and father until the age of one, when her mother was killed by a drunk driver; then she lived with various extended family members on her mother's side until she was about eight, at which point she went to live with her father and stepmother. Martha has lived with her father and stepmother sporadically for the last seven years between her therapeutic placements, runaways, jail time, and living with her boyfriend.

She completed the 6th grade, but then in 7th grade she began ditching school with a cousin and they started drinking and doing drugs. Martha said "We'd just like go and eat and go to her house and party, we didn't care. I started using drugs when I was 12, alcohol and weed, and then when I got older, like this past couple years I was doing crystal." Martha has been in three placements within the last 18 months, all of which were for substance abuse. She was placed on antidepressants at one facility but did not take her medication regularly and reports that she still gets depressed.

Martha became intimate with her child's father at the age of 14, without first talking about the possibility of pregnancy. He was not her first sexual experience; her first sexual experience was at the age of 13. She states: "In the beginning we talked about protection, but I didn't think about pregnancy; umm ... sometimes like now I wish I had waited. It's hard, it's okay." Martha lived with her boyfriend during her pregnancy and the two plan to get married if the tribal court will grant her emancipation on her 16th birthday. Her parents approve of this plan.

Martha has a limited employment history but does plan to get a job. It has

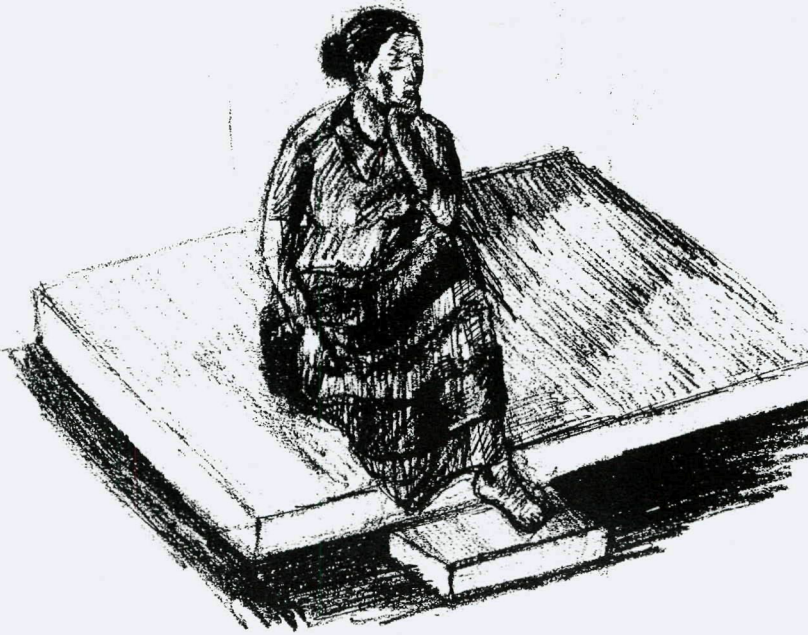
been hard for her to work because her home situation has been unstable for so long. She does receive a social security check and will continue to receive it until she turns 18. She reports that she uses "some of the money to buy the baby things, like everything she needs and then I buy stuff for myself. I want her to have everything."

Martha does not speak either the Pima or Maricopa language, but she did say that being Pima-Maricopa is important to her because "it's better, just the way I was raised, because before when I started like to get into trouble and didn't pay attention to like nothing in my culture, and then I started getting interested in the different beliefs I guess."

For Martha being a mother means living in and accepting her present situation. She has social and environmental support for the baby and herself, which makes it easy for her to cope with her role as a parent and her future role as a wife. She does not see herself as being different from other teens in the community and has never felt ashamed by her status as a teenage parent. Martha reports that she is happy to have a baby and so is her family. She sees herself as living a dynamic, functional rather than dysfunctional life.

Conclusion

I stated in the introduction that the goal of this research was to develop a better understanding of the insider perspective—what it means to be a teenage mother in the Salt River community. Several conclusions emerge from the three narratives and the description of the community's grounded geographic and social structure that are supported throughout the research process. I hope that sharing my conclusions with other professionals and students will increase



their understanding of teenage motherhood for this group of American Indian teenage mothers and also increase their desire to learn more about the contemporary American Indian experience.

The first conclusion, from the perspective of a social work educator, is that the professional values and ethics we teach in the classroom have to be contextualized and practiced within each specific community's environmental and social contexts. The social work values of allowing self-determination for the client and not being nonjudgmental apply to all populations when professionals are developing strategies for change with their clients. If we discover as professional practitioners that the American Indian community has a different set of values around a life stage event such as motherhood then we need to develop change strategies within that accepted community value set.

The second conclusion is that when teaching students to work with teenage mothers from this community I would

focus on recognizing the strengths (Saleebey, 1997) of these young women and their family structures, which are (a) acceptance of each individual's choices and roles, (b) an ability to accept present life situations and to be content in the situation, (c) a willingness to share resources among nuclear and extended family members including earned income, housing, transportation, child care, and food, and (d) an ability to work collaboratively as a community to positively include the teen mothers and their children in the community. I would reframe the perceptions of students who perceive teenage motherhood as a dysfunctional role for the young American Indian women in Salt River. I would encourage the students to learn from the community not just about teenage motherhood, but about mutual support as a lived experience and about the traditions and culture of the Pima-Maricopa people. As an educator I see one of my primary roles as being a broker between different lived realities—someone who has to teach students how to step out of their preconceptions and into the biological, social, cultural, and spiritual realities of the American Indian communities. I suggest that students read newspapers from specific American Indian communities or newspapers that focus on American Indian issues and events. I would have students read literature written by American Indian authors, including fiction, which often draws on lived experiences for content. I would arrange for students to visit American Indian communities so that they can learn from people in the community and I would invite American Indian people into the classroom as the experts. Starting the helping process from an informed insider perspective allows the professional to create effective solutions to problems in

daily living.

The final conclusion is that the dual perspective of social work practice has to be operationalized differently in different practice settings. The provision of social work services to families in the community needs to be implemented to reflect the insider viewpoint of community social issues. Perhaps the adults in the Pima-Maricopa community could begin to discuss, through a formalized process, their perceptions of teenage motherhood and their position on the dissemination of information regarding family roles, reproduction, and contraception. Their input on the issue of teenage motherhood could be utilized in structuring social services for the teen mother, the teen father, their children, and extended family members. This community involvement will further strengthen the voices of the community members. Our professional role is to work within the American Indian community to effect change that reflects the psychological, social, environmental, and spiritual context of the community. By acknowledging that there are different ways of helping in American Indian communities, we can become more effective helpers. □

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