Teen Mothers and Their Teenaged Children
The Reciprocity of Developmental Trajectories

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This article reports on the fifth wave of a multigenerational study of teen mothering. Two paradigm cases reveal how teen mothers' agency and development are linked with their teenaged children's development in a world shaped by poverty and limited resources. Teens with attenuated relationships and without anchors of hope and behavioral expectations for the future face an existential void that sets them adrift. Teens with well-developed parental relationships, family routines, and behavioral expectations have a stake in the future. This emic view shows how teens respond to the challenges of adolescence shaped by mothers' agency, family practices, class, and culture. **Key words:** *adolescent mothers*, *agency*, *family research*, *high-risk children*, *longitudinal research*, *mothering*, *multigenerational research*, *teenage mothers*

I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing and fighting! (Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale III:2)

Even in Shakespeare's day, before the term *adolescence* was widely used, the period between childhood and adulthood was apparently fraught with peril and conflict. Shakespeare's words anticipate the fears and hopes of many contemporary parents that their children survive adolescence without becoming parents, hooligans, or otherwise affronting their elders. While parents may share the

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bard's fantasy that teens awaken into mature, well-adjusted adults, real solace rests in the knowledge that teenagers do not remain teenagers forever.

Teens continue to defy the "ancientry" by having sex in spite of policies to prevent and control teen sexuality.[1] Although teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined in the United States since 1991, our rates remain the highest in the industrialized world.[2] Other countries have reduced their rates by ensuring access to health and contraceptive services at little or no cost and by providing comprehensive sexuality education that emphasizes responsibility, not abstinence.[2,3] Our misguided policies *and* the trenchant nature of US poverty, including the wide divide between the wealthiest and poorest citizens in the United States, contribute to these international disparities. Compared to their European peers, low-income teens in the United States enjoy far fewer educational and employment opportunities and have less reason to avoid parenting.[4] As we learned firsthand from our nursing practice many years ago, early childbearing occurs disproportionately among poor and minority teens, and the social disadvantages that limit girls' options

before pregnancy shape their life course after they give birth. The interpretive study reported here has followed teen mothers for 16 years; the latest wave of the study examined how teen mothers' agency and long-term development are linked with their teenaged children's development.

Policy makers, clinicians, and researchers in the United States share a keen interest in understanding the impact of early childbearing on young mothers and their children.[5-7] Early research framed teen mothering as an off-time event that jeopardized mothers' and children's health and well-being; correlations between young maternal age and health, education, economic, and parenting outcomes confirmed this view.[8] Much of this research, however, overlooked the disadvantages that predisposed teens to become mothers in the first place. As innovative techniques were used to adjust for mothers' prior disadvantage, evidence began to accumulate suggesting that the negative outcomes usually attributed to early parenting had been greatly exaggerated, and are more accurately attributable to socioeconomic status than age at first birth.[9-15] Longitudinal studies have also found that a substantial proportion of teen mothers do not experience serious adult problems.[16-19] What shapes teen mothers' developmental trajectories over time is not entirely clear but girls with more adverse childhood experiences are more likely to experience psychosocial problems as adults.[20]

Qualitative researchers have also turned their attention to early childbearing. Burton[21,22] discovered that motherhood offers a rite of passage to adulthood for girls who grow up in impoverished neighborhoods with inferior schools and poor job prospects. In the context of disadvantage, mothering motivates girls to become more responsible and offers a compelling reason to reinvest in school, avoid risky situations, and decrease unhealthy or antisocial behavior.[23-26] These and other studies draw attention to teen mothers' ongoing challenges and hardships as shaped by family relationships and legacies, unreliable and fragmented community resources, and punitive social policies.[5,6,27-30]

Most qualitative studies are based on 1 or 2 interviews during pregnancy or soon after the birth and rarely include family members or teen mothers' partners. This ongoing study addresses some of these limitations. Every 4 years for 16 years, the first author has followed a small cohort of teen mothers and their families to examine how they understand their lives and parenting practices, and the factors that shape mothers' and children's trajectories. Findings from the first 2 waves of the study were first published in *Advances in Nursing Science*[31,32] and were among the early studies that disputed the claim that teen mothering "risks the future."[8] Three patterns were identified at Time 1 (T1): some mothers inherited a diminished future; others invented a future from an impoverished past; and a third group pressed into an open future.[31] The notion of a "narrative spine" was introduced at T4 to describe variations in how mothers' lives unfolded over 12 years.[29] The identity and practices of mothering that had first anchored the self of some mothers contributed to the development of moral agency and a coherent life story. Mothers who lacked a strong connection to the baby, and a strong maternal identity, showed a less developed narrative "spine" and diminished agency. Four years later (T5), I (L.S.) revisited the families to explore how parents were making sense of their lives and their parenting practices now that their children were 15 to 17 years old.

This report presents the results from the fifth wave of the study. Consistent with the interpretive approach, I did not set out to reinterview families from experience-distant theories. I did, however, begin with a historical understanding of each family and the hermeneutic premise that the "world" is already given and intelligible to human beings, families, and researchers.[33-35] The lived world is not equivalent to the empirical world that surrounds us, but is the meaningful "world" that is differentiated by our concerns or meanings. A brief example illustrates how the

lived world is consonant with our concerns and prefigures our perceptions, emotions, actions, and thought. Upon entering a child's hospital room, a parent is drawn to the child's expression, the nurse notices the monitors, and the janitor sees the overflowing garbage can. Kierkegaard[36] claimed that if we lack concerns (eg, commensurate with being a parent, nurse, or janitor), then nothing stands out as salient or meaningful, and this absence of meaning leads to a flattened or leveled existence. For Kierkegaard, life commitments save us from nihilism; they define the self and transform the lived world: they give direction to our lives, shape our priorities, and provide expectations and landmarks for how to be (eg a parent, nurse, or janitor). They also make it possible for us to experience great loss and joy. This view of the self-world relation guided all studies in this series.

DESIGN OVERVIEW

This longitudinal research is based on the hermeneutic approach.[33-35] The study began when teen mothers' first-born children were 8–10 months of age (T1, 1988–1989); families have been reinterviewed at 4-year intervals for 16 years. Young mothers who were less than 19 years of age, single, African American or white, and raising a first-born, healthy infant were recruited from several programs in a metropolitan area on the West Coast as long as a grandparent (of her child) also agreed to participate. Teens' partners were invited to participate with teens' permission. The original sample consisted of 16 teenage mothers, 19 grandparents, 3 male partners, and 1 sibling of the mothers. Mothers and grandparents were invited to participate in all subsequent waves of the study; partners were invited with mothers' permission. First-born children were included at T4 and T5. I have been the sole interviewer over the entire study. Each followup was approved by the appropriate university institutional review board. (For sample descriptions at each wave of the study, see previous publications).[29,31,32,37]

Participants and setting at Time 5

Ten families participated at T5, including 10 mothers, 1 partner, 9 grandparents, and 8 index children. (One of the mothers was classified as a grandmother at T1 but having adopted her daughter's 2 children years ago, she is now classified as a mother. Her daughter's demographic characteristics are included in the sample description of mothers.) Mothers ranged in age from 31 to 35. Six of the families are non-Hispanic white and 4 are African American. All but 2 mothers had completed high school. Of the 8 high school graduates, 3 had received additional training or education and 1 had completed college. At T5, 5 mothers were married and 5 were single. One mother had 1 child, 3 had 2 children, 3 had 3 children, 2 had 4 children, and 1 had 5 children. Two mothers had given birth to an additional child in the previous 4 years. Four mothers were working full-time; 5 were working part-time (2 provided childcare in their homes); and 1 was a full-time homemaker who was caring for 3 foster children in addition to her 2 children. Family income ranged from less than $10,000 for 2 families to over $75,000 for 4 families. Two single mothers were receiving welfare benefits and 3 families resided in subsidized housing.

At T5, teen mothers' offspring were 15–17 years of age. Four of these teens were girls and 6 were boys; 2 boys did not participate. Three teens were living with both parents, 2 teens were living with mothers and stepfathers, 2 teens were living with single mothers, and 3 teens were living with single mothers and grandmothers.

Study procedures

Adults gave their consent; parents consented for the teens after they assented to the study. Data for the T5 study consisted of detailed narratives elicited during separate and joint interviews conducted in participants' homes (or by phone with 3 participants). Two visits were made to the mother's or couple's home. On the first visit, I asked parent(s) to describe life events that had occurred since

they were last interviewed (Life History Review) and stories of difficult and meaningful parenting situations (Coping Interview). I also asked them to describe the teen, and his or her friends, interests, activities, and schooling as well as discussions they had had with the teen about sex, drugs, or alcohol. The second visit occurred within 4 weeks of the first visit to conduct a second Coping Interview, followed by the Family Routines Interview, when I asked the parent(s) and teen to discuss their daily activities, routines, and celebrations. The Teen Interview was conducted privately with the teen and began with asking him or her to select a few pictures of varied scenes that "represent something about you." After the teen described what the pictures evoked for him or her, I asked the teen to describe his or her relationships and activities with family, peers, and school. One visit was scheduled with grandparent(s) to conduct a Life History Review and a Coping Interview. The latter interview elicited meaningful and difficult situations in being a parent and grandparent. All interview guides were used in previous studies and were modified slightly to reflect children's older ages. Interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. In appreciation of their time, children and grandparents received $15; parents received $30.

Data analysis

The original aims of each wave in the study were supplemented by lines of inquiry that emerged directly from the data. Codes were derived inductively and served as headings for organizing blocks of text into Interpretive Summary Files for each family. These files condensed a large amount of narrative data per family in 1 text file to uncover concerns, practices, relationships, family legacies, and meanings of the self and future. These files also made it possible to identify configurations in personal and family-level meanings and practices at each time period, to compare and contrast families as whole units, and to retrieve interview excerpts by searching for

code words. After Summary Files were completed, families were compared for similarities and differences in family relationships and parenting practices. Analysis at this stage required a holistic interpretation of paradigm cases and exemplars.[33] The second author had consulted on all prior studies and participated in validating and refining the analysis.

FINDINGS

Paradigm case analysis refers to a hermeneutic approach that aims to discover variations and patterns in self-world relations.[33] Paradigm cases are also useful in depicting variations and patterns. Two black, very-low-income families are presented in this article to reveal how the most vulnerable mothers and their children repeat the past or create a meaningful future. Trina provides an example of teens with attenuated connections and with few anchors of hope, landmarks of success, or expectations for the future. She is "thrown" into an existential void that sets her adrift. LaShan represents teens who dwell in a family world marked by clear behavioral expectations, responsive relationships, and coherent family routines. Both teens demonstrate a practical grasp of the lived world and respond in an intelligible way to the challenges and demands of an adolescence shaped by their mothers' agency, family meanings, and larger race and class divisions.

Repeating the past

Trina is 16 years old and lives with her mother Maya, her 2 younger siblings (ages 8 and 11), and Vera, her 53-year-old grandmother. As a twice-divorced mother, Vera supported Maya and her younger son with fairly stable work in blue-collar positions. When Vera's health declined before T4, she left her job, eventually lost her home, and moved in with Maya. Maya has had little contact with her father. She left high school in her senior year after Trina's birth. Except for a 3-month retail position, she has not worked outside the

home. At T5, the family resides in a 3-bedroom subsidized apartment in a safe complex and subsists on food stamps, welfare, and social security benefits. Knowing that her welfare benefits were to cease in a year, Maya expressed little concern for supporting her family in the future. Her complacency concerned me as I was drawn back into this family's world for the fifth time.

At T1, Maya and Vera agreed that Trina's birth had mended a strained relationship. They were not the only mother-daughter pair to grow closer after the birth, but Maya was unusual in never describing disagreements with Vera over Trina or her personal life. This conspicuous absence was a marker of Maya's weak identity as a mother, her thin agency, and her overreliance on others. Recalling how her early passivity contributed to her own "trial and error" life, Vera identified with and worried about Maya's submissiveness. She interceded in matters large and small to compensate for Maya's inertia. She reminded Maya to take her birth control pills and often intervened in Trina's care. Consider, for example, the day when she returned home from work to learn that 9-month-old Trina had been cranky all day. In the 8-hour period with Trina, Maya never determined why Trina was irritable even though Vera quickly resolved the situation by removing her tiny shoes. Maya's complacency figured into far more dangerous situations: when she moved from home to live with a boyfriend with a drinking problem and a prison record, Maya voiced no concerns for herself or Trina. Vera took charge by telling him that he would face her wrath if any harm came to Maya or Trina. When he destroyed the apartment a month later in a rage, he ran off to avoid Vera. The circular pattern of Vera's overinvolvement and Maya's disengagement persisted over the entire study, sustaining Maya's diminished agency.

At T2, Vera was exasperated with both her children as they were drawn into the drug culture and violence of their community. Her teenage son spent time in juvenile detention and Maya's string of bad relationships with men included a drug dealer. When I asked what Vera hoped for her children in 5 years, her stark reply—"I hope they're still alive"—reflected the precariousness of their situation. She had good reason to worry about Maya's and Trina's safety, since Maya had been physically abused by the drug dealer and had spent 4 days in jail for driving friends to a store to shoplift. In addition to Maya's poor choice of friends, Vera was frustrated by Maya's failure to seek work, enroll Trina in preschool, or demand that her landlord repair safety hazards. She felt impotent as "Maya sits back and lets things happen to her" and then "depends on me to fix everything." She also wondered if she had contributed to Maya's dependence.

At T2, Maya's arrested development and foreshortened sense of future was striking in her reply to the question "What do you hope for yourself in the future?" "Just be a better day. I'll still be alive," she replied. She offered no stories of acting on behalf of herself or Trina and she seemed perfectly content to rely on Vera. She explained that her mother was her best friend and a good mother, because "she reminds me of things that I need to know" and "lets me know if I'm doing something wrong." Maya's lack of subjectivity corresponded to her inability to take action based on what *she* considered right or wrong, important or trivial. Her daily routine was also empty of content: "First thing I do when I get up is watch TV. And after I fix Trina breakfast, we'll just sit and watch TV practically all day, unless I come to my mom's house." That Trina (at 3.5 years) did not have a bedtime and slept with Maya because "Trina's used to it" highlighted Maya's acquiescence to Trina and her lack of skills in setting expectations for Trina's long-term benefit. Stories of responding to Trina as a person with her own perspective, interests, and needs were utterly missing.

At T3, the family's move to a new community removed them from a dangerous social world and improved their access to better housing and schools. Maya, however, did not seize on these changes to promote her children's future or her own development. She avoided working as she waited for Vera to develop a childcare center, and she

described few skills for cultivating routines, expectations, and a sense of belonging for her children. For example, she sat her young children (ages 3 and 8) at the kitchen table to eat meals alone as she retreated to her bedroom. She provided little structure for Trina to do homework or to go to bed at a reasonable time. She acquiesced to her children to avoid conflict or "bribed" and threatened them in hopes of gaining their compliance. She continued to rely on Vera "to let me know what I should be doing."

Maya offered a vivid contrast to mothers in the study whose lives were bound together by their commitment to their child. They told of reevaluating their lives and resetting their course as they aspired to graduate from high school, to gain work skills, to avoid risky situations and peers, and to become good parents. Maya, however, consistently denied that she had changed or developed as a person. When I asked, "Is there any way that mothering has changed your life?," she replied. "No. Not really." Although she talked of wanting to return to school, she never made the plans or sacrifices to achieve this goal. She revealed little forethought, imagination, or reflection on what she wanted or hoped for herself or her children. When I asked her what she wanted Trina (at age 8) to be like, she replied, "I haven't really thought about that."

Maya expressed few hopes or disappointments but a blind optimism in the future. Her characteristic response to problems was, "I try to think positive" or "I'm sure my life will get better." Her optimism depicted a lack of engagement and the self-understanding that she could influence events and project herself into the future. Her thin sense of agency was consistent with the absence of a narrative structure that comes from having things matter. This absence was apparent in the way she denied being changed by mothering and by her inability to identify goals and expectations for herself or her children. Her aimlessness cast her children into an existential void without behavioral expectations, responsive relationships, and landmarks to guide them. At T5, Maya lamented her ineffectiveness at controlling Trina's behavior: "She always runs off. I pretty much wasting my breath because no matter how much I tell her not to do stuff, it seem like she go out and do it anyway." Trina had become quite adept at "push[ing] my buttons." Vera confirmed Maya's long-term disconnection and revealed her own limits in guiding Trina:

Trina is so out of control. . . . It hurts me the way she talks to her mother. I told Maya when she was 4, "You need to jump on it now. She don't need a friend, she need a mother." Maya just allows her to manipulate. Sometimes it is so hard to see it but I say [to Trina], "Don't try it on me, because I will kick your butt like a bitch out on the street."

Trina was eager to share her thoughts and feelings with me at T5. Here is her response to the first picture she selected of a masked person with the caption, "The invisible":

I'm drawn to [this picture] because. . .that's how I feel with my life, like nobody sees me, nobody appreciate my feelings. I feel like I'm just not even there. . . . People just pass by me and just don't care about how I feel or how my life is, and they don't help me out in my situations that I need to be helped to make my life better.

Being adrift and invisible, bereft of recognition and guidance, Trina must make crucial decisions on her own. Her sense of urgency is evident as she reflects on a picture of a person walking in a gorge: "This is my journeys, like little journeys I'm going to do to make my life better. Should I take this journey? Should I take that journey? Which one's quicker to get to where I need to go?"

Trina is cast adrift in a leveled world. She is easily absorbed into the perils of adolescence without a human compass to guide her or a cushion of safety, protection, and recognition. While some children compensate for a family's leveled existence by succeeding at school, Trina's learning difficulties and the inferior elementary school she first attended precluded this possibility. She began to read in the third grade only after enrolling in a new school which identified her learning problems. With extra help and the devotion of a fifth-grade teacher, Trina's interest in school

and her grades improved. But when she entered a large urban high school and no one addressed her academic struggles, she found it difficult to concentrate, her grades declined, and she began to skip school. Out of control at home and alienated from school, she sought connections and recognition elsewhere.

An early-maturing girl, Trina showed interest in boys by age 12. At age 15, she terminated a pregnancy at Maya's and Vera's insistence. At T5, she reported that many of her friends smoked pot, drank alcohol, and got in trouble for fighting or stealing. Although she denied cigarette, drug, or alcohol use, her 17-year-old boyfriend smoked and sold pot. Trina was also on probation for petty theft. She explained that she did "stupid things, stealing and fighting. . .cause when I'm mad, my mind is in a different place, it seem like nobody care about my feelings. So basically I do something dumb and when they find out, they'll eventually be focused on me. So basically to get their attention." Her pregnancy and antisocial behavior reflect a logical but failed attempt to repair a broken world. She has inherited an impoverished world that lacks a center of gravity to hold, protect, and guide her.

Creating a future

LaShan is 15 years old and lives with his 3 siblings (8, 9, and 11 years) and his parents LaKeisha (age 31) and Kyre (age 32). LaShan's parents dated for 2 years before he was born but they have separated numerous times over Kyre's drinking and spotty employment. Neither have a high-school diploma. At T5, LaKeisha supports the family with welfare and part-time work. The family resides in a subsidized home in a safe suburban neighborhood with good schools. Kyre's mother lives nearby in a working-class neighborhood. LaKeisha's mother, Rhonda, lives 2 hours away. Both grandmothers have recovered from drug abuse. LaKeisha's father died when she was 3 years old; Kyre's father died recently.

Maya and LaKeisha were both raised by single mothers in the same community known for inferior schools and high rates of violence and drugs. LaKeisha and Maya eventually moved their families to safer communities but struggle on the economic margins to support their children. These aspects of their lives are similar, but LaKeisha's world, unlike Maya's, was transformed by mothering. We see this in her very first interviews as she adopts a long-term perspective to develop herself *and* to protect, nurture, and guide her children. Her story is especially remarkable because she gains direction by rejecting her past, imagining what she would have wanted as a child. She offers a vivid example of inventing a future by cultivating responsive relationships, family routines, and behavioral expectations that anchor her children's lives and her own sense of agency and future.

LaKeisha's emotional engagement as a mother was apparent at T1 as she described taking pleasure in caring for 8-month-old LaShan: "Just being with him everyday is a lot of pleasure to me, and watching him play and laugh, and little new things that he do." Consoling her son became an occasion to develop patience as she identified with her own mother, imagining how she too had developed the skills to care for a cranky baby: "I just lean back and rock him and know my mother was sitting here going through the same things with me. I'm grateful to her for that, and hopefully he'll feel that way about me when he get older." This imaginative dwelling cultivates her emotional engagement and sensitivity to her son: "I try to understand why LaShan crying and try to understand that I was young once, making my mother go through the same thing." These and the following passages attest to LaKeisha's capacity for being absorbed in the ongoing significance of mothering that transforms her self and world. As she adopts a long-term perspective regarding LaShan's future and her own development, she gains a sense of direction: "Before I was a mother, I would just let things happen. I wasn't thinking about the future or what I wanted to be or what I had to do. . . . Now I think of the future."

LaKeisha followed the path of her mother and siblings in dropping out of school by

the 10th grade. Her older siblings had prison records, histories of drug abuse, and their children would eventually enter the foster system. Rhonda's indifference to LaKeisha's education taught an indelible lesson:

In the morning [my mom] would bang on the wall, not even get out of her bed, and yell, "Get up and go to school. You're gonna be late." After a while I started thinking, what's so important about school?. . . She just want me out of her hair. So the whole school thing for me was really messed up and I see that now.

Given the family's poor education and the inferior schools LaKeisha attended, she had little reason to imagine a different course for herself, until she had a son. Here is how she described the meaning of school in her life before and after her pregnancy: "I just felt like hanging out and getting the newest clothes or being popular. I didn't really care about school. But now that I have LaShan, I need school because I wouldn't want him growing up in my mother's house with her taking care of him. I wouldn't want him asking me to spell something and I don't know how."

At T1, LaKeisha's priorities are to finish high school and provide a good example and future for LaShan. She concedes that if not for LaShan, "I probably would be into some trouble. Now I want to do what's right and try to go to school, be a good example." Being a good example encourages her to resist peer pressure when friends go shoplifting: "At first I considered it but I was thinking that if I got caught and went to jail, somebody would have to watch my son. I wouldn't be there for him. . . . I think he pushes me to want to do stuff and go to school."

By T2, LaKeisha had moved from home into an apartment with LaShan and Kyre over her frustration with her mother's interference and overindulgence of her son:

My mother and I just started disagreeing how my son should do things. She think one thing was right and I'd think another. . . . She just spoiled him. . . . It'd make me mad. She just act like she was the mother and I had no authority. And then, when I try to tell him something in the long run, he ain't going to want to do it.

LaKeisha's greater skill in promoting LaShan's development and cooperation, without threats or bribes like Maya, reflected a growing sense of agency. LaShan responded accordingly: "When I tell him to stop doing something, I have to tell him twice or I make him sit down, and he won't do it again. . . . When I tell him something, that's what goes."

LaKeisha's strong attachment to her son at T2 was equally apparent in her descriptions of playing with him, participating in his make-believe play, and nurturing his growing personhood: "I stop to listen to him and see maybe he might want to tell me something." Four years later (T3), when LaShan was 8 and his 3 siblings were under 4 years of age, LaKeisha realized how easy but unacceptable it would be to rely on his help: "I want to ask him all the time to [help out] but I catch myself and try not to put a burden on him because he's just a child." To give him the attention he deserved, she created special moments to convey that he was worthy of her attention: "I tell LaShan to come with me [on errands] so we can talk on the way. I feel he is lacking a little attention from the other kids, so I try to figure a way he won't feel left out." She also regretted remaining on welfare and not completing a General Equivalency Diploma (GED):

I feel that I should be working, not waiting for a check. . . . The kids are young and they're seeing mommy always around the house. I mean, keeping the house clean is a big deal because when they get older, they'll be clean, and they'll remember that I spent a lot of time with them. But I want them to grow up and have jobs and education. If I'm not doing it, they'll think it's not important.

Over the next 8 years, I learned through LaKeisha's letters of a "downward spiral" that began when she lost subsidized housing (the owner sold the home) followed by separating from Kyre and splitting the 4 children between them for a year. She admitted to dark times when "I felt my life was just leading nowhere." But at T5, after reuniting her children, enrolling in courses at a community college, and working in office positions for 4

years, LaKeisha described a sense of achievement in having created the family life that she had yearned for as a child.

LaKeisha's ability to reset her course after major setbacks occurred despite few examples and experiences from her past or present to guide her. In fact, at T5, she denied knowing anyone in her social circle who was a "good" parent: "I can't say there is, and that's really sad and scary because I don't have anyone I can look at and see how they're doing it and coping." The few positive childhood memories she recalled involved living briefly with two different aunts, first when she was less than 3 years of age and later when she was 10 or 11. These experiences of care and attention remain so vividly etched in her memory that they no doubt have fueled her imagination to develop responsive relationships and family routines. Having these inspirational adults and models of good parenting in her childhood, which Maya lacked, offered a strong contrast to her mother's negative example: "A lot of the things from my childhood I try to do the opposite. I didn't have hugs and kisses or sweet and nice words, so I try to give them everything that I so desperately wanted as a child." She offered compelling descriptions of responding to her children's needs that differed from the way she was raised:

I get up in the morning with my kids, which my mom didn't. I'm concerned with what they wear, which my mom had no clue or cared.... Even the discussions in the morning, like ... talking about breakfast and if it's good, or if they'd rather eat at school. It's good discussions. And when they leave for school, if they're sleepy or tired or not in a good mood, I try to change it before they leave, so it's very different [from my childhood].

Having felt neglected as a child, LaKeisha is tenacious in promoting her children's sense of belonging and validating their worth. She creates the daily structure, emotional tone, moments of dialogue, and guidance that Maya's children lack:

When they come home, they need to do homework and then their chores, and if it's a school

night, they need to go to bed early.... They get home and I greet them and ask them about their day.... After we chat, then everybody comes to the table for homework. The young ones breeze through theirs and then have 45 minutes on the computer ... while me and LaShan are at the table.... If he doesn't have homework, we find something that either he want to learn or I want to learn. When it's something I want to learn that he already know, he [explains it to me] and I notice that it makes him feel good.

LaKeisha's description of her family as a "team" reflects a family ethos that cultivates cooperation and a sense of belonging. Eating at the table and participating in chores draw the family together and create a repository of stories and memories that LaKeisha hopes her children will draw on when they become parents: "We're all team players.... My kids going to be grown soon and I want them to look back and remember times that we did things as a family and be able to tell their families, 'When I was growing up, we used to clean up together and eat at the dinner table.' I want them to have experiences like that."

LaKeisha appraises herself as a "strict parent" who "keeps the doors of conversation open." She says: "I figure if you have moments with your kids—conversation, walks around the park—you don't need a lot of money.... If you treat them like a person, then they'll open up and do the same for you." She creates just these kind of dialogical moments with LaShan and claims that this is her favorite aspect of being the parent of a teenager. Such conversations encourage LaShan "to spill the beans":

I know a lot of the times that things are going on with him and I say, "What's wrong?" and he be like, "Nothing." And I'll say, "Are you sure about that?" And he'll say, "Nothing mom!" You can always look and see his face–it looks like something but I'll leave it alone. And then about 10–15 minutes later he'll come find me ... and he'll start spilling the beans. I am glad that we have what I wanted so desperately, especially as a teenager. I probably wouldn't have got into some of the things I did.

LaShan did not confide in his father. Although LaKeisha encouraged a closer

relationship between them, Kyre "went about stuff the wrong way." Because of her greater skill and openness, LaShan turned to her. She also had frank discussions with her son: "We talk a lot about drugs, sex, diseases, parenting, grades, plans."

Although LaKeisha was one of the youngest mothers in the sample, she has gained a sense of agency and carved out a future for herself and her children in spite of many hardships. Beginning from T1, mothering provided meaning and a moral anchor for how she should live. When she was asked at T5 to describe how being a mother had changed her, she had this to say:

Oh there's so many ways. I think the biggest change is not shutting down with my kids, not being able to just go to my room and close the door. . . . Most of the things that I have to do, I don't want to do but I know that I have to for them. So they push me to do all the positive things to keep going, to keep striving, and going forth for the positive.

LaKeisha has created a new family legacy on her own since Kyre, she says, is on "a different page" as a parent. Others notice her skill. Rhonda refers to her as an "excellent" mother who "don't seem to yell like I did. She tells her kids what to do and they do it. . . . Plus she really creative with them. She puts up questions for the week, like what does NAACP mean?" LaKeisha also recalls that Kyre's niece loves to spend time with the family. After a weekend of painting toenails, doing hair, and going for walks in the park, this young girl left LaKeisha's home reluctantly, saying, "I don't want to go. I wish you were my mom." This bittersweet moment reminds LaKeisha of her two aunts who created a temporary oasis of love in LaKeisha's primarily dark childhood: "I'm glad I was able to make [my niece] feel like that because I think without that experience (with my aunts), without that good, I could have been totally dark."

LaShan does not inherit a dark or meaningless world but he is the most vulnerable of LaKeisha's children. As the oldest child, LaShan has had the longest exposure to Kyre's drinking and his parents' separations. When the family split up, he and a brother moved with Kyre to his mother's home. Never a strong student, LaShan's grades declined. Four years later at age 15, he had completed ninth grade but had failed 2 classes. LaKeisha was concerned about his future but positive about his generous spirit. His teachers consistently reported, "He's a good kid, a sweet kid, never disrespectful." And LaKeisha agreed: "He is a good person. He's great with his brothers and sisters. He love them. He's always playing with them, making sure they're OK. He's going to be a great adult if he can just improve in school."

LaShan began his interview by selecting the same picture of a masked person that Trina had chosen because it reminded him of a "superhero." He explained, "My brothers and sister always want me to do everything for them and help them." He mentioned that his grades had declined when he moved with his father but he hoped that attending summer school would help him improve. He made it clear that cutting classes or dropping out were not options: "I don't really like school but I have to go." In spite of family adversities and academic struggles, he has avoided drifting into risky situations like Trina. None of his friends have been in trouble, and he enjoys playing basketball and riding his bike with them in his safe neighborhood. His mother's strong sense of agency and future, her unambiguous support for school, and their many discussions provide clear goals: "I see how it's hard for my mom to get jobs or try to get a lot of money, so I'm not going to be in a rush to grow up. I'm just going to try and get a good job, stay in school, instead of dropping out."

LaShan confirmed that LaKeisha had created a cushion of safety and recognition in describing her as the most important person in his life: "She just helps me with everything. She's always there, even when she's mad." He added: "Most parents can't have fun with their kids like she does. We go out running and stuff . . . and she's played basketball with me." His mother also provided a strong example of the good parent he aspired to be

someday: "Be close to my kids, be able to go play with them, do things they like to do and I like to do." Only at the end of his interview, when I asked LaShan about his father, he said, "My dad says he cares about me but I don't know."

LaShan's ambivalent relationship to his father reflects the fact that Kyre remains on the periphery of family and community life. Providing an account that does justice to Kyre's marginality is beyond the scope of this article but his learning difficulties as a child (that were never addressed), subsequent school failure, and difficulties in supporting his family are emblems of failure and humiliation. That he has remained involved with his children, even when separated from LaKeisha, is a compelling story that requires understanding the historical and social forces that lead impoverished black men to father from the periphery.

LaShan's academic underachievement and his ambivalent relationship to Kyre notwithstanding, LaShan is not cast adrift in an existential void. He has strong, loving connections to his mother and siblings and these relationships provide anchors of hope and a sense of belonging and purpose. From the time he was a baby, LaKeisha took pleasure in his play and learned to respond to his cries and later to his concerns as a teenager. She recognized his personhood and expected him to grow into the demands of the world as he attended school, did homework, and participated in family life. That LaKeisha created this world from unstable ground in the context of minimal material and social resources attests to how mothering transformed her priorities, introduced significance, and provided a moral vision for how she and her children should live. How LaShan's future will unfold as he moves beyond the family sphere is uncertain but we suspect, and hope, that the cushion of safety and recognition created by LaKeisha will provide the anchor and moral compass for his ongoing development as he negotiates the dangerous shoals of the American underclass as a young black man.

DISCUSSION

With few exceptions, the teen mothers who began this study 16 years ago did not plan to become pregnant. But like other psychologically and socially vulnerable teens, they had taken few precautions to prevent it. Having encountered more barriers than stepping stones and connections to a promising future *before* adolescence, drifting into motherhood was a sensible response to an impoverished past and a foreshortened future.[31] They did not intentionally reject the normative life-course, but they had learned from harsh lessons at home and in their schools and neighborhoods that the future, as one grandmother said at T1, "stopped dead" at adolescence.[38] When the past is shabby and the future seems grim and empty, mothering offers a pathway to adulthood *and* potentially fills an existential void.

The phenomenology of drifting into mothering was a major finding at T1.[31,38] As this follow-up discovered, some teen mothers continue to drift through their 20s and early 30s. Over her full set of interviews, Maya moved passively through life experiences with little forethought, reflection, or imagination. Her sense of agency remained thin and her future foreclosed. Maya and one other mother in this small sample did not develop a "narrative spine" that gave meaning and direction to their lives.[29]

In reviewing data from both mothers over the full study, their diminished agency was consistent with fragmented family and social worlds and with long-term overreliance on their mothers, serial relationships with men, partner abuse, unplanned pregnancies, and poverty. These circular patterns compromised their relationships with their children and the development of family routines. These 2 mothers showed few skills in helping their children connect to school or respond to the demands of the world. They became increasingly exasperated as their older children refused to comply with thin or inconsistent expectations.

The current study captures how these circular, intergenerational patterns in the context of minimal social resources set children adrift. Trina and the teenage boy who fit this pattern lived lives that were filled with absences and fragile or disrupted connections. Relationships with their mothers were strained and relationships with biological fathers or father figures were absent or unreliable. Both teens were truant from school and sexually active. Maya had been pregnant and the boy had impregnated at least 2 girls. No live births had occurred. Bereft of caring adults and engaging schools, they befriended peers who were similarly disconnected from families and schools. They demonstrated a practical grasp of a leveled world and responded in an intelligible way to a perilous adolescence. Like their mothers, they inherited an empty or broken world.

Taken alone, the linked lives of Maya and Trina confirm the conventional view that teen mothering is an untimely disaster. LaKeisha's story, however, offers a striking contrast. Although she too had drifted into pregnancy from an impoverished past, mothering provided a rite of passage into adulthood *and* a life commitment that restructured her world and identity. Following Heidegger,[34] LaKeisha was "thrown" into the world in a new way as she experienced the liberating effect of loving and caring for a child. The existential void of her childhood, as well as the care of her aunts, remained vivid memories for developing existential dwelling skills, which include "memory and access to emotions which facilitate embodied participation in meaningful habits, rituals, and practices, . . .ways of being with people characterized by a self-in-relation-to-others based on practices of mutual recognition, and . . . having current concerns or structures of meaning such that people and things matter."[39(p117)]

LaKeisha and mothers like her in the sample developed existential dwelling skills and coherent life stories as they pursued aspirations to become good parents and examples for their children.[29] Mothering provided a moral compass that enhanced their resolve

and moral agency through their early 30s. These mothers provided strong examples of parental engagement focused on growth and building the child's connections to family and school. They affirmed the child's personhood through recognition practices and by establishing meaningful routines and expectations. They had repaired a broken world.

At T5, the liberating effect of mothering on teen mothers' development is linked to their children's developmental trajectory. LaShan was not adrift in an empty world. In spite of academic difficulties and an ambivalent relationship to his father, he appropriated his mother's heightened sense of future and leaned into the family ethos and structure to avoid the perils of adolescence. LaShan, like the other teens in the sample with strong relationships to their mothers, felt recognized. Some of the teens in this group also had positive relationships with their fathers or grandparents, but not all. None of these teens were truant from school or had been involved in the juvenile system. The 2 teens in this group who were known by their mothers to be sexually active were in long-term romantic relationships and using protection. All of these teens were negotiating adolescence from a cushion of safety and recognition.

This study provides longitudinal evidence that teen mothers who are transformed by mothering sustain early gains and build upon corrective experiences through their 20s and 30s. The report informs the statistical findings from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, indicating that many teen mothers improve their lives over the short- and long-term, in spite of early and ongoing hardships.[16,17,19,26,40–42] Equally important, the findings show how the developmental trajectories of mothers and children are shaped by the mothers' situated agency. Future studies should more fully explore mothers' embodied memories from the past and their experiences with negative and positive models of parenting in shaping their trajectories. Studies that investigate the linkages between young fathers' and their children's developmental trajectories are also warranted.

Although the vast majority of teen mothers embark on mothering with educational and social disadvantages, many reinvest in school, decrease risky behavior, work, pay taxes, and become good parents. Evidence that they fare better over time has stimulated important debates among researchers, but the implications of the findings for educational and social policies have been largely ignored. First, nurses should be aware that mothers' aspirations are highly interconnected[26,42]; that is, wanting to be good parents propels mothers to reinvest in education, support their families with gainful employment, and help their children succeed. Achieving these goals, however, are routinely undermined by the lack of community resources, misguided policies, entrenched poverty, and prejudice. LaKeisha's story is instructive in this regard. She made important strides toward her goals as long as she had stable childcare and transportation, subsidized housing in a safe neighborhood, and access to educational options and gainful work. When she lost subsidized housing through no fault of her own, she began a "downward spiral" that had severe repercussions for the entire family and devastated LaShan, who lost his mother's presence and found himself in a less safe community with inferior schools. LaKeisha got back on track when she found subsidized housing in a safe neighborhood for a second time. Few low-income women are this lucky. Unfortunately, low-income mothers are likely to encounter more barriers to advancing their education and supporting their families as they face welfare time limits and the elimination of educational opportunities and college loan programs.[6,7,27,43] Class and race divisions of these policies have reinforced low-income mothers' social exclusion.[6,44] These factors combine to make low-income teen mothers' work in repairing the world a sysyphian task.

One of the most significant clinical implications of the study was elegantly stated by a participant at T5: "It doesn't matter where you start from, it's where you end up [that counts]." This sage comment suggests that adopting a clinical gaze focused on teen mothers' risk factors and deficits becomes yet another form of social exclusion when mothers' possibilities and constraints for gaining a sense of agency are slighted.[38] Nurses cultivate such possibilities by validating mothers' growing agency, supporting their aspirations, and understanding their shortcomings as embodied responses to an impoverished past or to the barriers in achieving their goals.[28,29,31,32] Nurses must also link mothers to community resources when they exist and advocate for the development of programs and policies that support efforts to repair the world.

These results are limited by the small sample size but are offset by the longitudinal nature of the study and rich qualitative descriptions of the lived world. Narratives from 3 generations of family members provided a dense network of data to understand how the lived world engenders a diminished or promising future for teen mothers and their children. The second author served as a consultant over the entire study and limited the potential for biased interpretations. Future studies will explore how the developmental trajectories of mothers and their children continue to unfold as the teens become parents in the years ahead.

CONCLUSION

Few studies have explored mothers' development over time[45] and even fewer have addressed the linkages between teen mothers' situated agency and mothers' and children's developmental trajectories. The initial study described the phenomenon of drifting into motherhood from an existential void and the unexpected finding that mothering transformed the world and self of some mothers. This fifth study extends earlier results to show how mothers' and children's developmental trajectories are linked. Mothers whose lives are unified by the meanings and practices of mothering develop the narrative structure that provides well-developed expectations and routines for themselves and their

children. Their children are suspended in a meaningful world. Mothers with weak identities and an impoverished sense of future sustain an existential void. Their children drift into risky situations and behavior. This emic view shows that teens respond in a meaningful way to the demands and challenges of an adolescence shaped by family meanings and practices as constituted by larger social structures and the divisions of class and race.

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