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# Qualitative Research and the Evidence Base of Policy: Insights from Studies of Teenage Mothers in the UK

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## Abstract

Qualitative research is ambiguously placed as a source of evidence for policy. It provides a way of accessing the experiences and perspectives of those targeted by welfare interventions, yet it is routinely excluded from the evidence reviews undertaken to inform these interventions. The article explores what qualitative research – mapped and synthesised through a systematic review – can contribute to evidence and policy. Taking teenage motherhood as a case study, it juxtaposes the conclusions of quantitative reviews with themes emerging from a systematic review of qualitative studies of teenage mothers' lives. It highlights how teenage motherhood, identified in quantitative reviews and in policy interventions as a route to social exclusion, emerges in these studies as an act of social inclusion. It highlights, too, how social disapproval as well as material hardship weigh on teenage mothers, and the potential role that policies could play in supporting the identities and resilient practices mothers develop in the face of material and social disadvantage.

## Introduction

Qualitative research is ambiguously placed as a source of evidence for policy. On the one hand, qualitative studies are routinely excluded from evidence review and policy development: it is quantitative data which are used to assess the nature and scale of the social processes in which governments seek to intervene. For example, the development of UK policies to tackle child poverty and social exclusion has been marked by the publication of authoritative reviews and strategy documents drawing on quantitative studies and routinely gathered statistics (HM Treasury/CASE, 1999; HM Treasury, 2003, 2004; SEU, 1999, 2004a). Qualitative research is conspicuous by its absence in these influential texts. Informing them is a wider swathe of research reports, again relying exclusively on quantitative evidence (see, for example, Berthoud *et al.*, 2003; Bynner *et al.*, 2002; Jones, 2002; Kemp *et al.*, 2004).

On the other hand, the position of qualitative studies has been enhanced by the increasing emphasis given to public engagement in policy development, with service providers encouraged to work with users to identify needs and tailor interventions to meet them (DETR, 2000). England's strategy to support teenage mothers, for example, seeks to build the perspectives of young people into its development and delivery (IAGTP, 2003). In line with this emphasis on user views and young people's voices, the contribution of qualitative studies is getting greater official recognition (SEU, 2004b) and 'real life' accounts are acknowledged to be an important part of what policy-makers count as evidence (Petticrew *et al.*, 2004). Qualitative research offers a range of methods through which 'real life' experiences can be factored into policy-making, with interview-based studies predominant among them. Insights from such studies are particularly relevant to governments who see the enhancement of individual skills and capabilities as the key to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Recognising their potential, the qualitative research community has been working to develop ways of inserting qualitative findings into the evidence base of policy. Particular attention is being paid to systematic reviews as a tool for assessing the quality of qualitative studies (Popay *et al.*, 1998; Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2004). Like a traditional literature review, a systematic review maps and assesses research, but it does so through a prescribed set of search strategies and appraisal techniques. Originally developed as a quality check on evidence from clinical interventions, systematic reviews are increasingly held up as the gold standard for evaluating and synthesising evidence from observational studies, both quantitative and qualitative (Egger *et al.*, 2001; Petticrew, 2003).

The article explores what qualitative research, mapped and synthesised through a systematic review, can contribute to the evidence base for policy. It takes UK-based qualitative studies of the lives of teenage mothers as its case study. Teenage mothers occupy a pivotal place in current welfare policy, with young motherhood seen as a major factor in the continuities of disadvantage across generations (SEU, 2004b). In the UK, 15 per cent of first-time mothers are under the age of 20 (Kiernan and Smith, 2003), and it is young women who have faced multiple difficulties – childhood poverty, lack of academic success at school, temporary and low-paid work – who are most likely to become teenage mothers. Early motherhood compounds these disadvantages, making it more difficult both for them and their children to escape long-term poverty. Paid employment is the government's preferred ladder out of poverty, with welfare reforms and interventions seeking 'to widen opportunities for parents to work' (HM Treasury, 2003: 25).

The article begins by setting the government's strategy for teenage motherhood against the backdrop of the quantitative evidence on how social inequality shapes young people's transitions to adulthood. Noting that the experiences of young people are often lost in these quantitative reviews, the

article draws on a systematic review of qualitative studies of teenage mothers' experiences to bring subjectivity and agency back into focus. It concludes by highlighting how such a focus can provide a critique of quantitative reviews and of the assumptions driving policy.

### **England's Teenage Pregnancy Strategy**

In 1999, a ten-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was launched in England, with the goals of reducing the rate of teenage conceptions and 'getting more teenage parents into education, training or employment to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion' (SEU, 1999: 8). These goals are being pursued through a twin-track strategy of 'better prevention' of teenage pregnancy and 'better support' for teenage parents to participate in education, training and employment (SEU, 1999: 9, 10).

'Better prevention' is to be secured through improved sex and relationships education, and through improved access to advice and contraceptive services. While some reviews point to evidence that such interventions can reduce teenage pregnancy rates (Kirby, 2001; Swann *et al.*, 2003), a meta-analysis of preventive strategies concluded that they do not reduce unintended pregnancies among young women aged 11–18 (DiCenso *et al.*, 2002). 'Better support' rests on interventions by welfare agencies to help teenage mothers complete their education and find a job. Examples include Reintegration Officers employed by some local educational authorities to help mothers of school age back into education and the larger *SureStart Plus* programme to promote the welfare of young parents under the age of 18 and their children (Hosie, 2003; Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2000). This programme is designed to provide additional support over and above those managed by the network of local Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinators (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2000; see also Arai, 2003a). The lynchpin of *SureStart Plus* is a personal adviser, typically female and with a background in education, youth work or social services, who co-ordinates a tailored package of support in which providing emotional support and access to welfare services are major components (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2000; Wiggins *et al.*, 2003). Offering support to young fathers is also identified as an aim of the programme (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2000). To date, the programme is being run on a pilot basis in 35 local authority areas, selected for having high rates of teenage pregnancy (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2004).

But evidence on the outcomes of measures to promote 'better support' is thin on the ground. The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy gives examples of 'promising approaches' to supporting teenage parents (back) into education and employment, but no systematic evidence on their effectiveness is provided. There is little evaluative evidence on interventions designed to improve either the social circumstances or the educational and employment trajectories of young mothers

(Swann *et al.*, 2003). In its place, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, both in the original report and in subsequent briefing papers, relies heavily on observational studies for evidence on the causes and consequences of teenage motherhood (see, for example, SEU, 1999; Teenage Pregnancy Unit/Health Development Agency, 2004). This evidence is almost exclusively quantitative.

### **Quantitative evidence on teenage motherhood**

Built from analyses of the major UK cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys, the quantitative reviews locate contemporary teenage motherhood in a wider narrative about changes in young people's transitions to adulthood (see, for example, Jones, 2002; Bynner *et al.*, 2002; Kemp *et al.*, 2004). It is a narrative about the emergence of fast and slow tracks to adulthood.

The narrative begins in the 1960s, a period of British social history when youth-to-adult transitions were both more stable and more uniform than they have been before or since. Fifty years ago, the majority of young people made an ordered progression from school to work in their mid to late teens and from marriage to parenthood in their late teens to early twenties. In the 1960s, two-thirds of young people left school at the minimum leaving age and the majority went straight into full-time employment (Bynner, 1999). Among women born in the 1940s, 60 per cent of women were married, and over 50 per cent had had their first child by the age of 23 (Kiernan and Eldridge, 1987; Ferri and Smith, 2003).

Quantitative analyses capture how young people's transitions to adulthood have both changed and polarised. Through the 1970s, opportunities for 16 year-old school leavers to enter full-time work shrank, as the labour market sectors which traditionally employed them collapsed, including those offering semi and unskilled manual work, clerical work (for young women) and apprenticeships into skilled manual work (for young men) (Green, 1999). Supported by active intervention by governments in youth training and the expansion of post-school education, the result was an extension of full-time education and the deferral of entry into full-time employment.

Domestic transitions have also changed through a postponement of marriage and parenthood. Mean age of first birth rose steadily from the 1960s, as women who became mothers delayed having children to their late twenties and early thirties (Kiernan and Diamond, 1983; Botting and Dunnell, 2000). The result has been a sharp decline in birth rates among women under the age of 30 and an increase in fertility rates among women in their thirties. Among women under the age of 20, the birth rate fell from 50.0 (live births per 1000 women) in 1971 to 26.8 in 2003, a rate significantly below that of women aged 20–24 (71.2 in 2003) (ONS, 2004). However, there are important ethnic differences in teenage motherhood. The evidence suggests that, among white and Caribbean women under the age of 20, the downward trend was confined to the 1970s, with birth rates changing little since the early 1980s (Botting and Dunnell, 2000; Berthoud, 2001). The majority

of young white and Caribbean mothers are unmarried (Berthoud, 2001). Among South Asian women (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) under 20, births occur predominantly within marriage and rates have fallen rapidly over the last two decades, with very low rates among Indian women (Berthoud, 2001).

Changes in youth transitions have resulted in what is identified as a 'widening gap between those on the fast and slow lanes to adulthood' (Bynner and Pan, 2002: 25). Those on the slow lane are disproportionately born to parents in higher socioeconomic groups. They stay in education long enough to acquire the credentials needed for entry into full-time work, defer cohabitation/marriage until training is complete and a career established, and postpone parenthood until after cohabitation/marriage. For these advantaged young people, the transition takes longer than it did in the 1960s, but it retains the linear direction and ordered sequences which typified youth trajectories 50 years ago. As Thomson puts it, these young people are 'already middle-class' and need only to invest in education and, for women, to defer motherhood to maintain their class position into adulthood (2000: 418).

The fast lane is populated by young people from poorer backgrounds, and without the cultural capital secured through an advantaged social background and high educational qualifications. It is a lane which provides little sense of the linear and ordered progression which still characterises the lives of their advantaged peers. As a range of studies have noted, the school-to-work transition has been fractured, with young people facing unpredictable and insecure futures, as they are forced to move from periods of training, to low-paid work, to unemployment, to further training (see, for example, Johnston *et al.*, 2000; Fergusson *et al.*, 2000). Even when the no pay/low pay cycle is broken and longer-term employment is found, low-paid work is rarely a stepping stone to better-paid work; instead, low-paid workers move to other low-paid jobs (McKnight, 2002).

In this narrative of diverging transitions, the fast lane is the lane into social exclusion. It is a pathway which is gendered, with teenage motherhood integral to the process linking childhood and adult disadvantage for women (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2001). Girls born to young mothers and growing up in unskilled and semi-skilled manual households are more likely to forge their adult identities through early motherhood than their more advantaged peers (Botting *et al.*, 1998; Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2001; Berthoud *et al.*, 2003). Early motherhood thus contributes to what has been identified as the intergenerational transmission of social exclusion (Sigle-Rushton, 2004), by further reducing the employment prospects of those who are already disadvantaged (Bynner *et al.*, 2002). The majority of families with children whose household head is under the age of 25 are lone mother households; 75 per cent of these families are in the bottom two quintiles of the income distribution (DWP, 2003).

Summarising the evidence on the social predictors and outcomes of teenage motherhood, Bynner and Pan conclude that 'teenage motherhood, perhaps more

than any other status, epitomises the problem (of social exclusion): early school leaving, no qualifications, poor job or youth training, pregnancy and childbirth, poor prospects of ever getting a decent job, family poverty' (2002: 25).

Such conclusions are important in signalling that the stable rates of teenage motherhood among white and African-Caribbean women are part of a wider polarisation of youth transitions, a polarisation which is contributing to wider inequalities in life chances and living standards. But such conclusions have been criticised for being implicitly normative: for taking the transitions more commonly found among middle-class young people as the yardstick against which alternative trajectories are judged. Such a normative position can cast young people as responsible for their own 'failed' transitions (Fergusson, 2004: 290), a position which makes it difficult to appreciate the values and identities affirmed through early motherhood (Thomson, 2000; Arai, 2003b).

### **Qualitative evidence on teenage motherhood**

Young people's values and identities are captured in qualitative research on transitions to adulthood. Studies of young working-class women's lives represent an important seam of research within this qualitative tradition.

Like quantitative studies, qualitative studies capture how socioeconomic disadvantage mediates the lives and life plans of young working-class women (see, for example, Bettie, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Thomson, 2000), but they also highlight the active and purposeful ways in which young women strive against these disadvantages to secure valued adult identities. Participants in these studies recognise the importance of education for future employment, but do not anchor their future identities in the labour market, with its prospects of low-paid and insecure work. Futures are built, instead, around motherhood, where the opportunities for self-esteem and social respect appear more certain. As Thomson notes of the young women growing up in a large and economically deprived public housing estate, the value placed on early and single motherhood resonated with their experiences of family life, where mothers were the emotional core and fathers and father figures were 'the source of uncertainty and change' (Thomson, 2000: 419). It also provided a positive alternative to local youth cultures, which young women experienced as dominated by young men cultivating a hard and sexualised masculinity.

Providing direct access to young people at the sharp end of class and gender inequality, qualitative studies offer important perspectives on the 'fast lane' to adulthood. But, highlighted on a study-by-study basis, these perspectives have remained marginal to the evidence reviews commissioned to inform strategies to promote social inclusion. The drive towards the systematic review of research offers a potential gateway through which qualitative studies can enter the evidence base of policy – and one that health researchers are beginning to exploit (see, for example, Britten *et al.*, 2002; Campbell *et al.*, 2003; Rees *et al.*, 2001). To explore

its contribution to the analysis of social exclusion, we draw on a systematic review of the experiences of those seen to 'epitomise the problem': mothers and mothers-to-be under the age of 20 (McDermott *et al.*, 2004; McDermott and Graham, 2005). While an earlier review of qualitative studies of teenage motherhood, predominantly US-based, has been published (Clemmens, 2003), to our knowledge there has been no previous review focused on the UK, where the primary data are the young women's own accounts of their experiences of caring for a young child. UK qualitative studies published between 1990 and 2003 were included. With the spotlight on the experience of being a young mother, studies concerned with decision-making around abortion/adoption were excluded.

### **Teenage mothers' experiences of their lives: a qualitative synthesis**

Systematic reviews typically progress through four standard stages. These are (i) searching the literature using a set of search terms developed through an initial scoping review, (ii) applying inclusion/exclusion criteria to the studies located through the search, (iii) quality-appraising the studies which meet the inclusion criteria and (iv) synthesising the findings in the studies which meet the quality criteria. For the first two stages, we adopted the methodologies used in systematic reviews of quantitative studies. We developed search terms appropriate to our review (including terms like qualitative, focus group, grounded theory, experience, perspective) and searched relevant electronic databases, grey literature gateways, and key journals, supplementing these by networking through researchers cited in the search and/or known to the two researchers. The 4000-plus studies identified by the search were then checked against the inclusion criteria: UK studies published between 1990 and 2003, in which young women's own accounts of their lives provided the primary data. This yielded 98 studies.

For the final two stages of the review, we drew on techniques which have been developed expressly for qualitative syntheses. For the quality-appraisal, we used the criteria developed by the EPPI-Centre (Rees *et al.*, 2001). These criteria include a clear description of the study context, sample selection and characteristics, and methods of data collection and analysis; evidence of attempts to assess the validity and reliability of the analysis; and the inclusion of sufficient original data (e.g. participants' accounts) to make clear how researchers built interpretations from them. Ten studies met the quality criteria. These included studies with a specific focus on housing needs (Letherby *et al.*, 2001; Speak *et al.*, 1995; Walters and East, 2001), diet (Burchett and Seeley, 2003), kin support (Mitchell and Green, 2002), and young women in care (Corlynon and McGuire, 1999). Also included were studies providing a broader overview of mothers' experiences (Aarvold and Buswell, 1999; Burghes and Brown, 1995; Phoenix, 1991; Schofield, 1994). The young women in these studies were predominantly white and African-Caribbean.

For the final stage, the synthesis of the studies, we followed a process developed by Noblit and Hare (1988), which they describe as meta-ethnography.

In contrast to qualitative *analysis* which is constructed through the interrogation of the participants' accounts, the primary data in a qualitative *synthesis* are the findings which the study authors generate from these accounts. We summarised the findings of each study in a matrix, which enabled us to cross-check whether related issues were identified in other studies. From this summative synthesis, we were able to identify a set of experiences which ran across the studies. We grouped these recurrent experiences under broad (and overlapping) headings: poor material and economic conditions (e.g. poverty, housing problems), the management of a stigmatised identity (facing social disapproval, for example), the 'good' mother identity (including belief in one's maternal capability and commitment to the mother-child relationship), and social support (e.g. from one's family).

Working from these broader sets of issues, we re-examined the findings of the studies and derived what Noblit and Hare (1988) call 'second order inferences'. These are new interpretative concepts which link and encompass the study-level interpretations. We developed two such concepts to guide our understanding of teenage mothers' lives: that, in the face of *constraining factors* which made their lives constantly difficult, they worked to develop and sustain *resilient mothering practices* (described in more detail in McDermott and Graham, 2005). While the accounts of study participants were not the primary data, we include some in the section below to illustrate how these overarching concepts connect with the experiences they seek to capture.

*Constraining factors*: the qualitative studies detailed the material disadvantages summarised in the wider seam of quantitative research on youth transitions. The teenage mothers in the ten studies were overwhelmingly poor, expecting and caring for their babies in impoverished circumstances. Most were single mothers on state benefits, and economic survival was a major preoccupation. Opportunities to temporarily escape from poverty – to afford the bus fare to visit their mothers, for example – were limited. The avenues out of poverty favoured by government – through education and employment – were blocked by limited opportunities and by their domestic responsibilities.

But the mothers faced more than the material disadvantages detailed in quantitative studies. The process of synthesis revealed another and interlocking set of constraints. Across the studies was evidence of how young mothers found themselves in a residual and stigmatised position: young when most women are deferring motherhood to later adulthood, and poor when most mothers are not. A sense of moral worth and, through this, a positive maternal identity needed to be constructed within a dominant discourse which saw them as 'epitomising the problem'. As one mother put it, 'they look at you like you are a slag or something. No one smiles at you or anything, they just give you dirty looks' (Letherby *et al.*, 2001: 20). Another poignantly observed 'not one person said "congratulations" to me' (Aarvold and Buswell, 1999: 4). The studies documented how pregnant

teenagers and teenage mothers were denied the respect they saw other (older) mothers receiving, and faced what they experienced as hostility both in public spaces (when out with their child/ren) and across the range of public agencies, including education, health care, social security and housing.

*Resilient mothering practices:* constrained both materially and discursively, the studies document how young mothers sought out the resources – emotional, practical and material – they needed to succeed as a young mother. At the heart of these resilient practices is a belief in one's moral worth as a mother.

It has made me more settled in, like, myself, because I have a goal now and I have something to achieve and I have to bring her up the best way I can and give her the best of everything and do what I can to help her grow up and not be like how I am. (Corlynon and McGuire, 1999: 140)

Commitment to their maternal identity provided a buffer against the potential threats to self-esteem which the studies reported young mothers experiencing in public places and from public agencies. It is an identity which draws on, and derives its moral legitimacy from, the wider public discourse which emphasises that the child's needs are paramount and that the child's primary need is for her/his mother. Caring and responsible mothers therefore gave primacy to their relationship with their child. As one mother put it, the baby 'comes first anyway, whatever happens' (Phoenix, 1991: 196), with another describing how 'from the moment my baby wakes up until he goes to bed I don't leave his side. I feel I have to be with him all the time' (Letherby *et al.*, 2001: 21).

While investing in motherhood can provide protection against the negative judgements of others, it can also leave young mothers vulnerable to the slur of being a 'welfare scrounger'. Seeking to escape this slur, the studies described how some mothers were committed to finding paid work. But while being in paid work could potentially improve both their social standing and their material conditions, it could also compromise caring practices – and specifically the childcare practices – which were more fundamental to their sense of self. This self was one who met their child's need for a full-time mother.

Well sometimes I feel I would like . . . to go out to work to earn extra money and that, but I also feel that I should be at home with her. So she's more important. When she starts school I can start working. I chose to have her. It's my place to stay with her. (Phoenix, 1991: 57)

When I actually had him I decided I couldn't leave him . . . I thought, 'oh, part-time mother' it wasn't for me that – I didn't like that idea. (Burghes and Brown, 1995: 57)

The priority attached to the mother–child relationship also guided the young women through often-complex relationships with their child's father. Consistent with the evidence from quantitative analyses, the qualitative studies pointed to the social and economic difficulties faced by young men on the 'fast lane' to adulthood. The capacity of male partners to provide a home – specifically, to be

a supportive partner, engaged father and economic provider – was questioned by the young women, with the studies providing evidence that the mother–child dyad was seen as a more certain source of intimacy than that the heterosexual relations they had witnessed and experienced.

But their material and discursive position – as both poor and stigmatised – meant that good mothering required more than clear priority-setting and emotional commitment. Other studies echo what Mitchell and Green's study makes most explicit: that the mothering practices to which the young women aspired were made possible in large part through the support of kin, and of their mothers in particular (Mitchell and Green, 2002). On the one hand, families helped secure the material conditions needed to care for a young child, providing money and a range of resources in kind: accommodation in the parental home, baby clothes and equipment, food, as well as childcare. On the other, families protected young mothers from exposure to the stigma and surveillance they experienced elsewhere. As one mother commented, 'the problem is you get so much shit off people . . . I don't want to be part of this community if they're going to make us feel shit all the time. My own family don't treat me like that' (Letherby *et al.*, 2001: 20). Where family ties had been severed, or had broken down following the announcement of the pregnancy, the interviewees described how hard it was to surmount the material and social disadvantages of being young and poor.

Inevitably, dependence on kin could be a source of tension, particularly as the young women's confidence in their mothering ability increased. Across the studies, respondents noted their need for increasing independence. But, constrained materially and socially as poor and young, the struggle to be a good mother relied centrally on the resources, emotional and material, provided by their mothers and their families.

### **Qualitative reviews: a resource for (critiquing) policy**

For our review, we searched and filtered over 4000 studies to locate ten which met a set of quality thresholds developed by qualitative researchers. Taken together, the ten studies provide a collective testimony of the subjective experiences – and the lay expertise – of a group cast as epitomising the problem of social exclusion. But our review gave us more than an 'in-their-own-words' synopsis of the lives of teenage mothers. Synthesising findings across studies enabled new interpretative concepts ('second order inferences') to be derived. These interpretative concepts – of constraining factors and resilient mothering practices – refer to material and social structures through which inequality is both reproduced and resisted. In the face of material disadvantage and social disapproval, belief in one's capacity to be a good mother was nurtured through mothering practices which turned on investment in the mother–child relationship and the support of kin.

What light does our qualitative synthesis shed on the government's drive to tackle social exclusion? Two issues can be highlighted, relating to the development of resilience and the dynamics of social exclusion/inclusion.

*The development of resilience.* The interpretative concepts emerging from the qualitative synthesis shed light on how resilience is fashioned despite, and out of, experiences which threaten to undermine it. While the concept of resilience is contested, it is broadly understood to refer to a process of positive adaptation to adverse conditions (Werner and Smith, 1992). The accent is thus on an individual's strengths and capabilities, rather than what she lacks and does not achieve. A recent review of quantitative research makes clear that resilience is not an intrinsic capacity residing in the young person but develops and is sustained through the active interaction of the individual and their environment. Three protective factors are identified as central to positive outcomes in the face of adversity: attributes of the young person, of their families and of the wider context (Schoon and Bynner, 2003: 26). In discussing implications for interventions for young people struggling against the odds, the authors note the importance of supporting positive adaptational outcomes, including feelings of confidence and idealism.

Grounded in very different sources of data, our review highlights similar protective factors. Individual attributes – including a sense of moral worth, belief in one's maternal capacity, priority setting and idealism – underlay mothers' resilient practices. Attributes of their families, and of their mothers in particular, were central to these practices, with kin providing the young mothers with material resources, practical help and social recognition. The wider context was predominantly one of barriers, with studies reporting mothers' difficulties in securing the help they needed from welfare agencies and their experiences of disapproval and hostility when they tried to do so. As this suggests, the wider context was experienced as undermining rather than nurturing resilience. Such a finding points to the potential contribution of interventions where link workers mediate young mothers' access to welfare services – housing, childcare, education, health as well as income maintenance – to secure important material resources while minimising their exposure to stigma. An important example is England's *SureStart Plus* programme. Launched in 2001, *SureStart Plus* postdates the fieldwork periods of the studies in the qualitative review. It aims to develop new tailored services for pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers, and improve access to mainstream services (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2000).

The one-to-one support of a personal advisor is the key delivery mechanism. Like members of the mother's family, the personal advisor is therefore a potentially important protective factor: nurturing the young mother's self-confidence and self-esteem, providing a counter-weight to the social disapproval she experiences beyond and sometimes within the family, and working to lessen the poverty and material disadvantages she faces. The national evaluation of the pilot programme of *SureStart Plus* suggests that personal advisers are fulfilling

these critical protective functions. They are highly valued by young mothers as important sources of emotional support: 'like a friend but she's not a friend' (Wiggins *et al.*, 2003: 54). The evaluation also found that a 'sizeable number' of teenage mothers regarded a welfare practitioner as their main source of support (Wiggins *et al.*, 2003: 53). As well as enhancing the personal capabilities of mothers and supplementing (or, in some instances, substituting for) the support from families, personal advisors can act as agents for change in relation to the wider context of the mothers' lives. The advisors were found to be a key source of advice and advocacy with respect to securing welfare benefits, health care, housing and education which 'takes a lot of stress off of a few things, like worrying about housing and benefits' (mother quoted in Wiggins *et al.*, 2003: 55). Through the antenatal and postnatal groups they facilitate, their role in building friendships with other young mothers are also rated positively. The programme was less successful in supporting young fathers; our qualitative synthesis points to reasons why, positioned outside the mother-child dyad, they proved a 'hard to reach' group (see also Arai, 2003b).

*The dynamics of social exclusion/inclusion.* But individual-level interventions, however facilitative and supportive, are framed by the wider policy discourse in which they are embedded. Integral to UK discourse is the assumption that early motherhood is problematic, and is problematic because it both epitomises and produces social exclusion. Our systematic review examines this assumption by anchoring the concept of exclusion in the experiences of those who are seen to be on the fast lane towards it.

It suggests that teenage mothers do indeed experience the severe disadvantages described in the quantitative reviews, disadvantages which they seek to limit by making motherhood their defining identity and by investing in the social relationships which sustain it. In particular, they lean on their families of origin in order to prioritise the new family they are creating. Through these strong family orientations, teenage motherhood becomes a mode of social participation, albeit one shaped by broader exclusionary processes. As this indicates, social exclusion and inclusion are not binary categories, one defined and positioned against the other. Instead, their dynamics intersect. On the one hand, what is identified in quantitative analyses and in government policies as a route which takes young working-class women into (further) social exclusion emerges through the process of qualitative synthesis as a pathway to social inclusion. On the other, the pathway to becoming 'a responsible somebody in communities of multiple economic disadvantage' is fashioned out of adolescent experiences of gendered and class-based inequality (Bullen *et al.*, 2000: 450). This more dynamic understanding of social exclusion/inclusion connects with policy debates in at least two ways.

Firstly, it illuminates the argument that the social exclusion discourse privileges labour market identities and relationships. As a number of critics have

argued of the New Labour project, identity and belonging are secured through paid work: it is their relationship with the labour market which determines an individual's status as socially excluded or socially included (Levitas, 1998; see also Fergusson *et al.*, 2004). It is therefore those modes of participation which facilitate entry into the labour market which are validated and supported: education, training, work experience, job searching and, ultimately, paid employment. These are 'the ladders out of poverty' which the Teenage Pregnancy strategy, with its cadre of reintegration officers and personal advisers, are designed to promote.

Our qualitative synthesis suggests that, for a significant number of young working-class women, identity and belonging are secured through informal rather than formal modes of participation. Critical here are not the paid worker identity and relationships with the labour market, but the unpaid carer identity and the mother-child relationship. While education, training and employment may be recognised as offering a longer-term pathway out of poverty, their potential future rewards can only be realised by young women becoming, as one respondent put it, 'part-time mothers'. As the studies in our review make clear, such a requirement can conflict with gendered subjectivities which continue to be grounded in unpaid rather than paid work, and in a major investment in motherhood in particular. This points to the importance of identifying and developing alternative routes to economic inclusion to provide, in the words of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, 'better support' to young pregnant women and teenage mothers. An interesting study of young mothers who volunteered to work in social action projects highlighted the role that part-time, community-based work can play in affirming identities and developing social relationships centred around motherhood – and, at the same time, enhancing motivation and skills, and thus opening doors into formal training and paid work (Kidger, 2004).

An appreciation of the dynamic relationship between social exclusion and inclusion connects with policy in a second important way. It does so by illuminating some of the exclusionary processes which undermine non-market-based routes to social inclusion. Identified as 'constraining factors' in our review, these processes include material disadvantage and social stigma. With respect to material disadvantage, the review points to the importance of welfare services which provide economic security – and, particularly, offer direct and effective protection against poverty. The major policy instrument here is the benefit system, which provides financial support to non-working families. The primary source of financial support for these families is income support which, despite significant increases since 1997, provides an income well below the poverty line (of 60 per cent of median income after housing costs) (Flaherty *et al.*, 2004). With respect to social stigma, projects funded through the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and *SureStart Plus* can offer users supportive spaces while, at the same time, challenging the prejudice they experience from other agencies (Wiggins *et al.*, 2003). But such positive effects may be diluted by the wider policy discourse

of which the interventions are part. A discourse which accords social and moral worth to individuals who work their way out of poverty is likely to be contributing to the stigmatisation of young women who invest in motherhood and do so on a full-time basis (Kidger, 2004).

### Conclusions

User perspectives are increasingly regarded as an essential part of the evidence base of policy. At the same time, the drive to 'quality proof' research is increasing the premium placed on systematic reviews. Systematic reviews of qualitative studies offer a way of combining both elements: providing high-quality evidence on the perspectives of those targeted by welfare interventions. The article set out to examine what such a review could contribute to the understanding of social exclusion. Clearly, conclusions drawn from a single review must be tentative.

But, as an exploratory case study, we would argue that syntheses of qualitative research have the potential to both critique and recast the processes captured through quantitative studies. In the studies in our review, positive and socially-inclusive identities were being forged along the 'fast lane to social exclusion': despite material disadvantage and social censure, teenage motherhood opened doors into valued roles and supportive relationships. In highlighting these dimensions of experience and identity, our synthesis suggests that reviews of qualitative studies are more than a vehicle for marshalling and assessing evidence. They can also facilitate theoretical development. We found that meta-ethnography provided a set of analytic techniques through which to drill more deeply into how structure connects with agency, and how policies can support – or undermine – the resilience of those at the sharp end of class and gender inequality.

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