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META-STEREOTYPES CONCERNING TEEN PREGNANCY

Aurora SIMIGIU*, Ramona HENTER**

*Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania,

**Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University "Transilvania" from Brasov, Romania

Abstract: *Meta-stereotypes (perception about the stereotypes the external group has towards an individual's group of origin) mark the development of adolescent personality. Negative meta-stereotypes have aversive consequences on the self and when concerning teenage pregnancies, things are even more complicated. This paper aims to highlight the existing stereotypes in Romanian society, both the negative and the positive ones, by investigating adolescents in two high-schools from a large city (where the incidence of such cases is higher), students and adults and corroborating data obtained with the ones provided by specialty literature (relatively limited).*

Meta-stereotypes such as stupidity, irresponsibility, shame, fear, loneliness, on the one hand, and love, blessing and family, on the other hand, profoundly influence the teenage mother's reintegration in the community.

The identification of adolescents' meta-stereotypes towards their pregnant colleagues, who have kept the child or aborted, may provide a basis for counselling teenagers in such a situation. Also, reintegration in the classroom can start from counselling their colleagues, using the force of negative meta-stereotypes for making them more responsible, instead of condemning and rejecting these young mothers.

The meta-stereotypes inventory was accomplished through a questionnaire completed by 106 subjects and through interviews with two pregnant teenagers. The results are their listing and building of specific action plans for counselling middle aged adults facing such a situation in their own family or class, if teachers and for individual counselling for the pupil-mother so that she can effectively adapt to her new status. We also argue for sexual education for teenagers.

Keywords: *stereotypes, meta-stereotypes, adolescent pregnancy, counselling*

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Meta-stereotypes. Meta-stereotypes are defined as "beliefs regarding stereotypes that the out-group has about one's in-group", as the expectations about how one is perceived by the others (Koudenburg & Gorgijn, 2011) or how he is evaluated by the others. Not only beliefs regarding the stereotypes of the out-group must be taken into consideration, but also those on the in-group, which are embedded in the meta-stereotypes (Gomez, 2002). Stereotypes tend to polarize, into negative and positive, thus influencing the stereotyped ones, especially at ages when

human beings are more easily influenced, such as adolescence.

As teenage mothers have become more and more frequent lately, it is worth investigating society's perception on them. If in the early 1900s, getting married at 16 was natural and even an expected event, nowadays it has changed. Women are expected to go to school, have a career and fulfil their dreams before becoming mothers, or, as one of our respondents said, before "a woman's life ends". This shift in social perception is reflected in the stereotypes people have on pregnant adolescents. Even more, these stereotypes are passed on to younger

generations, creating thus a basis for their meta-stereotypes. In case they get pregnant as teenagers they tend to see themselves through the eyes of the significant ones and implicitly, appeal to meta-stereotypes.

The perceptions about the way in which members of other social groups stereotype one's own group can also influence their interaction. Thus, a pregnant adolescent will be influenced in her attitudes, behaviour and cognition by what she thinks others think about her and her condition. If negative, these meta-stereotypes can weigh big in a pregnant teen's adjustment to the world.

1.2 Teenage pregnancy. Throughout history, being a teenage parent has not always been seen as a problem; actually it was quite natural some decades ago. It was when getting married young was the standard and having a child at the age of 16 – 18 was the right thing to do. Only lately, it has been considered as a problem, a crisis (Shaw, 2010), when a woman should continue her studies and have a career before having a baby. Teenagers who choose to give birth to a child are rejected by the archaic and fundamentalist communities, public opprobrium being drawn on them. Not even in post-modern society it is easy to fight people's prejudices in this issue, although social representations related to pregnancy in this age does not seem to be so intolerant. From March to November 2009, Romanian Association of Youth with Initiative, under the "Parents inadvertently" project monitored the local press and national media institutions and sites, including archives from 2003 to 2008 to identify the most relevant articles on teenage pregnant girls and to show the dynamics of media coverage of such cases.

There has been a content analysis of approximately 1,020 articles, the main themes approached being: pregnant and abandoned teenage girl, articles on the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy, articles reflecting cases of rape, articles presenting life stories of young women who became pregnant as a teenager, articles promoting means of contraception, medical articles, cases of incest, articles presenting the phenomenon of abortion among minors, administrative measures taken by authorities to stop the alarming increase in

adolescent couples become parents and presentation of abandonment in young parents. By far, the most frequently discussed topic was that related to women who became pregnant during adolescence (25% of articles), followed by cases of incest (22%) and rape (18%).

According to the articles analyzed, the pregnant minor is presented as a victim, a mediocre student, an advocate of abortion as a means of contraception or as a young rebel. Her context is rather negative, positive elements are found only in relation to her attitude to take responsibility in some cases.

The perception on the national and local media on prevention of pregnancies in adolescence and young pregnant girls' protection is heavily negative, most articles indicating an alarming increase in such kind, but also a stagnation of public policies on pregnant teens; there was no national program or even a set of strategic directions.

2. GOALS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 Goals. We aimed at identifying parents', teachers', students'/pupils' stereotypes concerning teen pregnancy, at identifying pregnant girls' meta-stereotypes and at identifying some directions of counselling.

2.2 Hypotheses. Our general hypothesis was that pregnant girls have a correct representation of the others' stereotypes towards them.

Our specific hypotheses were:

1. We expect parents and teachers (middle aged adults) to have more negative stereotypes towards teen pregnancy than pupils and students (who are experiencing early adulthood).

2. We assume that young mothers' meta-stereotypes match correctly the ones of the reference groups

3. If we identify these specific stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, we can identify the most efficient lines in specific counselling.

2.3 Sample. Our sample included 108 subjects, out of which 106 filled in questionnaires with open answers and two



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were subjects to interviews (two pregnant teenagers). We questioned middle aged adults (represented by 22 parents and 29 teachers), 30 students in the early adulthood era, and 25 teenagers (pupils), categories chosen according to the classification made by Daniel Levinson (1986).

The teachers involved in this research teach at the high-school the two pregnant pupils attend. Their mean age is 38,89 and they have faced such situations during their career.

The parents' mean age is 42 and they did not experience a teen pregnancy in their family.

The students belong to the early adulthood era, their average age being 21,46. They belong to a technical faculty and a humanistic one.

The teenagers subjected to this study belong to the same class as one of the interviewed pregnant teenagers. The investigation involving them was done immediately after they found out that their colleague gave birth.

The pregnant teenagers attend two different high-schools. The first one, A.V., 18 years old, is a XII grade student at a national college in Brasov. She gave birth to a boy of 2000 g on 28th February 2012. She had not told anyone about her situation before the birth of her child. The child's father is a schoolmate; he found out that he was the baby's father after the birth. The teenager has an elder sister and they were brought up only by their mother. The pupil continues her studies, missing just one week during hospitalisation. She kept the child and her family accepted this situation. The second one, A.G., 16 years old, is a X grade student at a technical college in Brasov. She hid the pregnancy until the seventh month when it was detected by teachers. School

mediated her relationship with the family and Child Protection Services, as she wanted to start the procedures for giving the baby for adoption. She gave birth to a baby of 3000 grams and he was adopted. The father was an adult, involved in another relationship; the teenager did not even want to let him know about this situation. She was not absent from school classes except for the hospitalization period.

2.4 Instruments used. We used a questionnaire which had five questions with open answers. The first one targeted the teachers' feelings towards the situation when a teenage student is pregnant. In the second item of the questionnaire, the teacher is required to characterize through a single word the pupil –mother's life situation. Then the teacher was asked to decide whether adolescent pregnancy was an accident or premeditated act. There is also the "I do not know" choice. Also, they had to say whether it was a mistake or not and an act of courage or not.

The questionnaires given to parents, students, and pupils were similar to the teachers' as it was intended to find out their point of view was on the same items.

There was only one interview guide for the two pregnant teenagers. They were asked what they think other significant people thought about their situation of young mothers (family, teachers, friends, colleagues and other acquaintances - neighbours, other relatives, etc.). They were also asked if their pregnancy was an accident or a premeditated act.

3. RESULTS

As meta-stereotypes represent the stereotypes we think others have on us, we started with the identification of the

stereotypes people have on teenage pregnant girls.

We identified the following categories of feeling towards a teen pregnancy, in order of their frequency: compassion, amazement, rage, lack of emotions, responsibility, fear, guilt, fear, and contempt.

A third of the respondents declared that they felt compassion as concerning a pregnant teenager, the parents having the fewest rate (18,18%) and the teenagers the highest rate (44%), possibly because the teenagers are more empathetic with their peers. The pregnancy was seen a surprise by 25,47% of the respondents, the most surprised ones being the teenagers again. However, such a condition generates rage and anger in 9,43% of the respondents.

Some of the respondents (8,49%) felt nothing as concerning this life event, the young adults being the most numerous (23,43%). Mostly the teachers (6,89%) felt responsible for such an event whereas no parent felt responsibility. Also, the teachers are the only ones who feel fear (6,89) and guilt (10,34%). Parents experience pain (22,72% of them) and one student despises such a situation.

We noticed that the most frequent answers are compassion, surprise, and rage. For the middle aged adults, a teen pregnancy is a surprise. However, parents do not feel guilt but mostly pain. Teenagers and young adults feel compassion mostly because they identify themselves with such a girl. Pupils, who had a pregnant mate, have deeper feelings, their answers being centred on only three directions: compassion, surprise, and rage.

We asked the respondents to give one word to characterize the teen pregnancy and we identified 6 stereotypes: mistake, shock, joy, responsibility, and normality and shame. More than 70% consider teen pregnancy a mistake, although use different words to say it (error, loss, problem, unconsciousness, irresponsibility, disaster, catastrophe). All the others cover less than 10 percent each, as follows: shock (8,49), joy (5,66%), responsibility (4,71%), and normality and shame share the same percent, 2,93%. Detailing on the answers, middle age adults

and young adults perceive teen pregnancy as a mistake in a percent of almost 90, while only 24% of teenagers see it as a mistake.

Teenagers are shocked by such an event in a percent of 16% and parents, 13,63%. Surprisingly, two parents label teenage pregnancy as normal, natural. Also, 20% of teenagers see having a baby as a joy. Only few parents (4,54%) and pupils (8%) see pregnancy as shameful thing. Middle aged adults consider teen pregnancy as a disrupter of a normal life, mainly a mistake and a shock, while teenagers are torn equally between mistake/shock and joy/responsibility.

As concerning the pregnant girl's intentions, 90% of the parents and students presume it was mistake; only one teenager presumes it was premeditated and 44% of the teenagers don't know how to answer.

Surprisingly, 75,47% consider having a baby an act of courage probably because the subjects follow the stereotypes that society has as concerning a teen pregnancy. Some media (through movies and music videos concerning adolescent mothers) postulated that teenage motherhood is an acceptable thing, at a certain extent (Shaw, 2010, Larson, 1996), which may influence our representations on a teenage mother.

Half of the teachers, however, consider it not as a courageous thing to do, but a serious mistake, due to unconsciousness and lack of sexual education.

As concerning the interviews, both young mothers estimated that their families supported them after giving birth. AG underlines, however, that despite this, she has forever lost the confidence she enjoyed before from her family.

Regarding friends' reaction, AV says that they were shocked but they did not judge her. She said that they thought her to be tough, which suggests that she wanted to prove it, to attract attention. As other research shows (Klein & Azzi, 2001), members of the in-group may try to modify certain meta-stereotypes to their advantage, by enhancing the positive ones or attempting to turn negative ones into positive.

As for their colleagues, it seems that the pupils from the theoretical college were



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shocked, such events being extremely rare in top high schools. The teenager coming from the technical college believes that she has not heard a single bad word from her colleagues; on the contrary, they supported her unconditionally.

AV believes that her teachers were disappointed by her, though they tried not to show it, while AG believes that the teachers from the technical college supported her. In terms of other people (acquaintances, neighbours) both girls said they were shocked, that they despised them and had an attitude of discrimination against them although they did not show this openly.

Their answers showed that they had correctly depicted the meta-stereotypes towards their situation – teenage pregnant girls/mothers. This may indicate that the stereotypes concerning their group (teen mothers) are well imbedded social stereotypes. The pregnant girls correctly identified the surprise, the shock they caused in others. However, they felt despised, but only one young adult declared openly that he despised such a person. The peers' attitude was friendlier, some of them considering pregnancy a joy and a responsibility. The pregnant girls did not feel the compassion declared by the vast majority of the respondents, either. Compassion may also be a meta-stereotype identified by the out-group members as desirable towards the in-group, as other research shows, too (Klein & Azzi, 2001). The disappointment they felt from the other was well understood, even though disappointment was named in other ways by their significant ones: mistake, error, frustration, unconsciousness.

Our hypotheses were confirmed by this study: parents and teachers (middle aged adults) have more negative stereotypes

towards teen pregnancy than pupils and students (who are experiencing early adulthood), young mothers' meta-stereotypes match correctly the ones of the reference groups (family, friends, teachers, neighbours).

After analysing these specific stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, we identified as efficient lines in specific counselling the following: building of specific action plans in for counselling middle aged adults facing such a situation in their own family or class, if teachers, and for individual counselling for the pupil-mother so that she can effectively adapt to her new status. We also argue for sexual education courses for teenagers.

Counselling should address firstly to the young mother as she must face both inner conflicts concerning her status, and the complex emotional states she goes through: on one hand, the baby needs her love and attention, and on the other hand, she is negatively stereotyped by adults and she feels it (these being the meta-stereotypes). Counselling should focus on efficient emotional management (most of the time the teen mother is left by the father of her baby) and efficient time management (she is still a pupil who must go to school, obey a schedule, do homework, and so on).

Middle aged adults' counselling should focus on their emotional and cognitive preparation for offering children correct information on sexual education, even from early ages. Thus, the number of pregnancies by chance may decrease. Parents should be counselled to feel more responsibility towards their children because our study showed that they do not feel guilty for failing in sexually educating their offspring.

Regarding the pupils, their counselling will cover both health and sexual education and the need for awareness of the impact a pregnancy

has in a teenager's life, because only half of the pupils we questioned saw teen pregnancy as an accident.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Society passes on stereotypes just like a heritage, meta-stereotypes following the same principle. Only if we deconstruct stereotypes and then meta-stereotypes can we attempt to a prejudice-free world.

Some other research directions identified during this study focus on identifying larger groups' stereotypes on pregnant teenagers, including older subjects and more male subjects (which are some of the down points of our research), on interviewing women who had been pregnant as teenagers in order to find out whether they are still content with the choice they had made then. Also, a study on the "scare" of pregnancy at teenagers would be very interesting.

Identifying some of the meta-stereotypes pregnant girls have on themselves may help counsellors fight against their discrimination, for their reintegration in class, for the improvement of their relationship with the family and other acquaintances.

Acknowledging the meta-stereotypes and the stereotypes concerning teen pregnancy is just the first step in accepting the need for counselling all the parties involved in the teenager's life and for counselling the teenager herself. The practical implications of this research are reflected in the contribution it brings to the field of counselling not only for the teen pregnant adolescents and their families, but also for teachers who may attempt to decrease the number of teen

pregnancies or who have to deal with pupils in such situations.

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