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Permalink

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Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 25(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2001

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

Teenage Mothering on the Navajo Reservation: An Examination of Intergenerational Perceptions and Beliefs

ROCHELLE L. DALLA AND WENDY C. GAMBLE

Teenage parenting, characterized as a "crisis" by some,[1] and an "alternative life course strategy" by others,[2] comprises an issue of debate and concern among policy makers, academicians, educators, and social-service providers alike. Not surprisingly, teenage parenting has received considerable attention from behavioral scientists over the past three decades. Still, significant gaps exist in the current literature.

The majority of investigations have included Euro-American populations as the reference group, with secondary attention focused on Blacks and non-White Hispanics. Little attention has been afforded Navajo (and other Native American) teenage mothers. The individuals participating in the present study reside on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. The Navajo Nation is the largest tribe in North America,[3] occupies the most expansive reservation,[4] and experiences higher rates of teenage childbirth among youth aged fifteen to nineteen than among similarly aged women across the United States as a whole (15.8 percent versus 12 percent).[5] Beyond the public health data, little information exists regarding Navajo perceptions or attitudes toward parenting in general, or teenage parenting specifically. By focusing attention on majority groups and generalizing findings to non-majority populations, unique cultural and contextual influences are overlooked. Teenage parents, in general, do not comprise a homogenous group.[6] Knowledge of unique influences that shape attitudes and behaviors is paramount for successfully assisting youthful adaptation to the parenting role.

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Accurately representing what those attitudes and behaviors are and the forces that shape them depends largely on the methodology employed by the investigator. Despite the scientific strength of obtaining multiple perspectives, most investigations of attitudes and behaviors relevant for understanding adolescent pregnancy and parenting have included teenage mothers only. Occasionally, perspectives of the teenagers' partners or from teenage fathers have been included.[7] Numerous investigations have also examined teenage parenting from a multigenerational perspective.[8] Yet investigations including the perspectives of the teenage mothers, their own mothers, and adolescent fathers simultaneously are noticeably absent in contemporary teenage parenting literature. The voices of other community members, who may provide a unique perspective on teenage parenting, have often been overlooked as well.

The teenage parenting literature also lacks a comprehensive base of information regarding the relationships between teenage mothers and their male partners, the fathers of their children. Social support literature provides cursory data regarding male partners of teenage mothers. Adolescent mothers seek more support from family members, and particularly their own mothers,[9] than from partners or husbands.[10] Racial differences are evident with regard to marital status among teenage mothers, in that White and Black women tend to remain single and live with their families of origin for extensive periods following the birth of their first child,[11] while Hispanic youth are more likely to be married or living with a partner.[12] Regardless of ethnicity, male partners often provide a relatively large portion of financial and economic support to young mothers,[13] although this tends to diminish with time.[14] Still, a paucity of information exists regarding the development and maintenance of those relationships before and after discovery of an unexpected pregnancy, or the dissolution of the relationship. This investigation seeks to explore these unanswered questions.

The primary objective of this investigation is to compare attitudes of the meaning of the term *mother*, the maternal role generally, and teenage parenting specifically among (a) two generations of Navajo and (b) individuals representing diverse roles within the community. Second, this investigation seeks to examine the relationships between adult Navajo men and women, and between teenage Navajo mothers and their partners.

This investigation attempts to address gaps identified in the teenage parenting literature by: (a) examining teenage parenting among a unique population; (b) incorporating multiple points of view from individuals from different generations who occupy various roles; (c) examining the development and dissolution of male/female teenage parenting relationships; and (d) adopting qualitative assessment techniques to allow for the full expression of participants' attitudes and perceptions. Given the scarcity of current, theoretically driven research-based literature on the Navajo and the lack of empirically standardized instruments available for use with Native American populations, qualitative methods were deemed essential for the success of this investigation.

GUIDING FRAMEWORK

In her seminal work, Kristin Luker explores historical-political influences on adolescent reproductive choices and the social construction of adolescent childbearing as a "problem" or "epidemic."[15] She provides an analysis of adolescent pregnancy and parenting in the United States, with a particular focus on Whites and Blacks. Luker argues that the social context in which teenagers make life decisions is a product of three decades of changes in public attitudes toward sexual and reproductive behavior, family structure, and gender roles.[16] She contends that existing data sets are inadequate for identifying and understanding the forces that shape the way American teens, and particularly teens of color, make reproductive, marital, and life decisions. She further argues that critical information, namely how women view their own lives and circumstances, is rarely described in the literature. The challenge for researchers of adolescent parenting is to develop frameworks that account for personal decisions about sexuality and parenting within unique social and cultural contexts. The present study explores the context in which Navajo adolescents make reproductive and life choices against the backdrop of their own, their mother's, and adult community members' perceptions of traditional and contemporary attitudes.

Within the developmental field, Urie Bronfenbrenner's most recent formulation of Ecological Systems Theory describes the necessity of examining the interplay between person and environment through time.[17] Other theoretical perspectives similarly argue for examining the social context. Lev Vygotsky presents a compelling conceptualization of the processes by which cultural factors contribute to individual development.[18] The tenets of Vygotsky's developmental theory illustrate the critical connection between culture, history, and environment, and the resulting influence on human development. He asserts that: (a) the human species continually creates and elaborates its environment in the form of culture; (b) the evolution of culture is seen as a historical process that has taken different forms across space and time; and (c) humans beings are not only a culture-producing species, but are also culture produced.[19]

An ethnogenetic model examining constancy and change in relation to both person and environment guides this investigation. *Ethnogenetic* refers to the process whereby people come into and modify the terms of their existence and assumes that characteristics of the social context—a product of cultural, historical, and current environmental processes—influence every transaction. A brief history of the Navajo is thus necessary to interpret current perceptions of Navajo teen pregnancy and parenting in the social context in which it emerges.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Navajo trace their decent matrilineally (through the mother's line) and historically reside with the wife's family after marriage.[20] Children traditionally served as a source of security for their aging parents. Extended families and the maternal role were highly valued, as evidenced in Navajo cosmological beliefs, ceremonies, and prayers.[21]

According to the Navajo, First Man and First Woman were created by the Diyin Diné (Holy People), although they had no definite form or shape.[22] First Man and First Woman built a sweathouse at the place of emergence and "sang into existence the world as the Navajo now know it."[23] As described by Maureen Trudelle Schwartz,[24] the perfect order of that world was disrupted; women began giving birth to monsters whose presence in the world resulted in the loss of reproductive capacity among plants, animals, and humans. The Diyin Diné intervened and arranged for First Man to find Changing Woman (Asdzáá Nádleehé). She matured miraculously and began menstruating after twelve days. Her menstruation symbolized the restoration of power and fertility on the earth; the Kinaaldá was celebrated in honor of the event. Changing Woman gave birth to twin sons, Monster Slayer and Born for Water, who destroyed all monsters except Hunger, Poverty, Old Age, and Lice. Changing Woman was lonely, so she created the first four Navajo clans by rubbing skin from her own body.[25] From these people, the present-day Navajo clans and all their descendants were created.[26] The life, death, and rebirth of Changing Woman is mirrored in the changing seasons; she is considered the mother of all life on earth.[27]

The significance of fertility and the role of Navajo women in providing and maintaining the life of their children is further depicted in cultural symbols and ceremonial practices. For instance, yellow-corn pollen is considered "the single most sacred item in the Navajo universe," and was fed to Changing Woman by First Man and First Woman, providing her with generative powers.[28] Moreover, contemporary Navajo females are initiated into adulthood through the traditional sacred Kinaaldá ceremony, during which young women symbolically become Changing Woman, reinforcing their own procreative powers.

Yet tremendous economic, political, and social changes have transformed the Navajo Reservation.[29] Land comprising the Navajo Reservation is rich with natural resources, including petroleum, uranium, vanadium, helium, coal, and other renewable resources.[30] The Navajo have little control over these resources, however, as profits largely go to outsiders. Wolfgang Lindig further notes that although jewelry and craft sales contribute to family income, wages earned off the reservation are becoming increasingly important.[31]

Reservation social and economic changes have resulted in dramatic transformations in the status of Navajo women. According to Mary Shepardson, stock reduction (beginning in 1933) marginalized Navajo women's status.[32] Traditionally, sheep herding was integral to Navajo subsistence and economy. Being a matrilineal society, women owned and cared for their own herds.[33] Stock reduction, a federally enforced act, devastated Navajo woman because they possessed few alternatives for wage work. Men occupied the most available and lucrative positions in forestry, irrigation, road building, and construction.[34] Between 1950 and 1980, the status of Navajo women again began to reverse with expanding educational and employment opportunities. Due to the implementation of electricity and indoor plumbing, the standard of living also began to rise as did the health status and life expectancy of Navajo people. The inception of the Indian Health Service (IHS) in 1955 dramatically

reduced maternal and perinatal mortality and morbidity.[35] Despite improved health service delivery and technological advancements, the Navajo Reservation is still characterized by persistent poverty, substandard housing, limited educational opportunities, and high rates of academic failure, unemployment and underemployment.[36]

Given the historical, social, and economic changes experienced by the Navajo, how are contemporary Navajo women, and mothers specifically, perceived in reservation communities? How do they view their own lives and circumstances and do these views vary by generation or in light of the role the individual occupies? Does evidence exist to suggest that adolescent teenage parenting is encouraged, however subtly, through family and community attitudes, thus accounting for the higher-than-average rates of adolescent parenting on the Navajo Reservation? Finally, how are contemporary relationships between Navajo men and women, and between teenage mothers and their male partners, described?

METHODS

It is important to acknowledge and address potential biases that may have affected this research investigation. The principal investigator (PI), who collected all data, is a non-Native female. Developing rapport and a sense of trustworthiness is essential in research involving personal, in-depth interviewing techniques. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked, it is possible that a shared biological sex enhanced rapport between the researcher and the female participants. Conversely, male participants may not have been as forthcoming in their responses as they would have had they been interviewed by a male. Finally, it is also possible that participants responded differently to a Caucasian interviewer than they would have had they been interviewed by a Navajo. To alleviate anxiety and set the foundation for the development of trust and rapport, each interview began with the PI explaining the purpose of the investigation and her desire to learn from the participants. The interviewer also reassured participants that they, not she, were the experts in relation to the subject matter. Although integrity to participant perceptions was of primary significance throughout the investigation, data were necessarily filtered through non-Native eyes. Steps to alleviate potential biases are described later in this article (see "Establishing Trustworthiness").

Sample

Twenty-five individuals comprised the final sample, which included teenager mothers, their mothers, community informants, and teenage fathers. Eight Navajo teenage mothers were included. Interviewees ranged in age from sixteen to nineteen (mean age=16.8 years). When the subjects first gave birth they ranged in age from fourteen to sixteen (mean age=15.6 years). Most (n=7) had one child only, two were pregnant with their second children, and one teenager was the mother of two children. The majority (n=7) of the pregnancies were unexpected. Fathers of the children ranged in age from

seventeen to thirty-six (mean=21.4). Six of the teenage women participated
in an alternative education program; two attended high school. One young
woman was employed part-time, and several participated in extracurricular
activities such as karate and basketball. Most teen mothers (n=6) lived with
their families of origin, although one lived with extended family and anoth-
er with her partner. On average, seven individuals resided in each household;
annual household incomes averaged less than $20,000 a year.

Flexibility is a necessary component of field investigations.[37] Thus,
although the mother of each teenage participant was sought for inclusion,
two compromises were made. First, one of the teenage-mother participants
asked that her mother not be included in the study; her wishes were respect-
ed and her mother was not contacted. In the second case, the mother of
another teen was asked to participate, but refused. The young women's grand-
mother (the great-grandmother of her child) was included instead.
Subsequently, seven women comprised the "grandmother" group. They
ranged in age from forty-one to fifty-seven years (mean age=44.9), with the
great-grandmother being the oldest. Most of these women (n=6) were
divorced or separated; one was a widower. All reported being married for the
first time between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three and as having their
first child between the ages of twenty and twenty-four. They reported having
from one to six children (mean number of children=4.6).

Four teenage fathers also participated. They ranged in age from eighteen
to twenty-one years (mean age=19.2). Two of these men, one nineteen-year-
old and the twenty-one-year-old, were the partners of two of the teenage moth-
er participants. One of the participating fathers attended high school, two
had dropped out and were employed, and one was neither employed nor a
high school graduate. All were born and raised in the target community.

The final participant group (n=6) was represented by individuals holding
diverse roles and occupations throughout the community, including two
teachers from the alternative high school; a nurse; a drug/alcohol abuse
counselor; a delegate to the Navajo Nation (a position equivalent to that of a
city mayor); and a traditional Navajo healer. Three, including the two alter-
native school teachers and the high school nurse, were Caucasian and had
lived in the community for an average of 3.4 years. They were included
because they had direct, extensive, and daily contact with the teenage moth-
ers, their families, and their male partners. The teachers, specifically, often
acted as sources of support to the young mothers. The remaining three infor-
mants also had extensive contact with teenage parents and their families, but
due to their Navajo heritage and life-long residence in the community of
interest it was expected that they could provide detail unfamiliar to the other
community member participants.

Procedure

This investigation was conducted in a small rural Navajo Reservation com-
munity located in northeastern Arizona. After obtaining permission to con-
duct research in the community, high-school personnel assisted in locating

potential participants. Inclusion for the adolescent sample required that individuals be Navajo, nineteen years of age or younger, and a parent. The teenagers were interviewed in a private room in the high school library, or after hours in the alternative school. Grandmothers were located through their teenage daughters and were interviewed in their homes or places of employment. Community members were located through word of mouth and high school personnel. Inclusion of community members required that they be knowledgeable of the community, representative of different sectors within the community, and experienced working with local teenage parents. All data were collected by the PI who was trained in interview methods and experienced in conducting field work with teenage mothers on the Navajo Reservation. The purpose and interviewing procedures were explained to all participants, who then signed an informed-consent form.

Participants were assigned identification numbers. All interviews were conducted in private to ensure confidentiality.[38] Participants preferred to be interviewed in English.[39] Interviews were semi-structured; questions related to the issues of interest were predetermined, although the sequence of questioning varied, as did the amount of time spent discussing each topic, depending on participant responses. Interviews ranged in length from fifty to 110 minutes (average interview=75 minutes); participants were compensated $15 for their time. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the PI.[40] Transcribed data were examined by a second person, knowledgeable in qualitative methods and the topic of study, to ensure reliability. Data were analyzed using Phenomenological Descriptive Analysis.[41]

Data Analysis

Phenomenological Descriptive Analysis allows for the analysis of data obtained through naturalistic investigations. The procedure begins with a thorough reading of all text-based data (or protocols) followed by the extraction of significant statements related to the research questions (in this case, statements about traditional or contemporary attitudes regarding teenage motherhood). Step two entails formulating meanings of each significant phrase or statement. For example, in discussing the break-up between herself and her baby's father, one teenager reported:

> I wanted her [daughter] to have a father so she could have both parents there for her. But it seems like that's not working out. And I didn't want her to see any—I know there's going to be violence in her life, but I don't want her to see what I saw. Somebody beating up on me, or something like that. And—that's my mom—my dad, he used to like really spank us and stuff. I don't want that in her life.

This statement suggests the following: (1) the teenager is knowledgeable and concerned about the effects of childhood exposure (either direct or indirect) to violence; (2) she is willing to raise her daughter as a single parent versus

exposing her baby to violence; and (3) she expects that her daughter will experience violence during her lifetime. This step is followed by the identification of emergent themes or patterns across each statement (multiple participants reporting similar expectations, beliefs, or experiences). Themes are then clustered and the results are integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic. In the final step, participants evaluate and respond to conclusions.[42] Results of this investigation were evaluated by several participants whose comments and suggestions were integrated into the final results.

Establishing Trustworthiness

One of the greatest challenges of conducting qualitative research is "persuading [one's] audiences that the findings of an inquiry are worthy of paying attention, worth taking account of."[43] Answering this question is largely an issue of establishing trustworthiness, and is achieved by confirming the credibility and transferability of the methods.

Credibility is achieved through triangulation and member checks.[44] Triangulation of source was achieved by including four participant groups (teenage mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and community informants). Member checks were incorporated in the interview process by reiterating participants' statements, requesting clarification or additional information, and comparing events/situations described by one group with those of another. Differences in beliefs or perceptions between participant groups is reported where applicable.

With regard to transferability, Egon Lincoln and Yvonna Guba assert that, "The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do. . . . [T]he responsibility of the original investigator ends in providing sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible."[45] Extensive information regarding the community, participants, and procedures are provided. Others must determine the extent to which results from future investigations should compare with those described here.

Dependability is achieved through an inquiry audit in which an "auditor," or individual without stake in the final analysis, examines the process by which the data were collected to ensure fairness of the representation of the phenomenon.[46] An extension educator working in the target community for over fifteen years assisted in the research design, beginning two years prior to data collection. With the additional assistance of two community informants, the interview format was established along with the wording of questions, the identification of potential participants, and attention to issues of cultural sensitivity and appropriateness.

RESULTS

The Meaning of *Mother*, the Maternal Role, and Teenage Parenting across Different Generations and Individuals

"Women," according to one community informant, "have always been respected among the Navajo." This statement was reiterated by many, and the reasons provided for women's high status was reportedly related to their procreative ability and familial role. One community member explained, "the role of the woman is exalted because she has babies." And according to another, "In our tradition . . . it's the women that really hold the families together." Most of the grandmothers agreed, noting that although they were mothers and grandmothers, they continued to view their own mothers as sources of comfort and support. When asked where she found strength to raise her six children alone, one grandmother explained, "My mother—my mother is the one." Another grandmother explained,

> Women are the head of the household. They're the ones that are the
> backbone of the family because they're the ones that are at home all
> the time. Even a long time ago, that's what my mom tells me . . . and
> I think it's true, even today, that women [are] still the head of the
> household.

Most participants reported believing that the roles of Navajo women and the status afforded them has changed little from more traditional times. When asked to compare women's roles of the past with demands of the present, one participant explained that, "In many ways it's the same as it's always been—to be mature, responsible, to take care of the needs of the family."

Teenage parenting was described by research participants as normative in the past. But this view no longer prevails among the teenage parents, the grandmothers, or the community informants. Even the traditional Navajo healer agreed that "today, teenage parenting is too early." In contrast to traditional Navajo custom, he believes that marriage and parenthood should be postponed and educational goals pursued prior to taking on the roles and responsibilities associated with contemporary adulthood. In comparing traditional and contemporary attitudes toward teenage parenting, one grandmother explained,

> [The girls] were married before and in that sense it was more stable,
> the girls knew that they were gonna be with this man and have chil-
> dren together and make a life. Now, the stability is not there.

Similarly, of teenage parenting, Merlinda noted, "It's not okay. They are too young, they don't know what's happening." Unexpectedly, many of the attitudes conveyed by the grandmothers were reiterated by their teenage daughters. Because they were adolescent mothers, it was assumed that they would report greater acceptance of teenage parenting. Contrary reports emerged. Most described feelings of disapproval regarding adolescent parenthood. Palissa remarked, for instance,

> This is not one of my everyday childhood dreams, like, "Oh, I want to
> have a baby." I didn't say that. When I was really young it was like, "No,
> I don't want to have a baby." And here it is . . . Why did I do this, why
> did I just turn around and go in the wrong direction?

The shame Palissa feels is evident in her association of teenage mothering
with "going in the wrong direction." Nonetheless, she believes that adoles-
cent parenting on the Navajo Reservation is a reflection of broader, non-
reservation norms, stating:

> Traditionally, we're not supposed to have kids until we're married, but
> the world is changing. Now, it's just like anywhere else. We're put in a
> society where your people [non-Native, white] are like role models to
> us. . . . Teenagers in cities get pregnant and here they get pregnant.
> This is just like anywhere else.

Although many of the young women reported deep commitment to their
children and the maternal role, they also expressed guilt and shame for their
unexpected pregnancies and feelings of being rejected by peers. Yana
remarked, "I used to have friends but they just drifted off, they looked down
on my because I got pregnant. Before they used to think I was real cool, now
they just ignore me." Yana reported rejection from peers due to her unex-
pected pregnancy. In contrast, Rhonda A. Richardson, Nancy E. Barbour,
and Donald L. Bubenzer report peers as a primary source of emotional sup-
port, interfering less than family.[47] Context, however, is significant. Yana's
remark implies that the general attitude among youth was that teenage par-
enting was not condoned within the community, and perhaps was criticized.
     Community informants reiterated that teenage parenting is not a com-
munity norm, although they did note that it is more acceptable on the Navajo
Reservation than in non-reservation communities. One community informant
summed up the prevailing attitude with the following remark:

> . . . there's more acceptance of teenage parenting in this culture. . . .
> [B]ut there's a lot of people around who say "you need to have an edu-
> cation, you need to go to college, it's not good to have a baby when
> you're a teenager," but it will take a long time for that to change, real-
> ly radically change, because they've been doing this for twenty thou-
> sand years."

In sum, participants described Navajo women, and mothers specifically, as
powerful, strong, and family-oriented. She is perceived as the sustainer and
maintainer of the Navajo family. Despite the value placed on children and life
among the Navajo, teenagers were encouraged to finish school before having
children. Moreover, all participants agreed that, although teenage parenting
was not condoned, if an unplanned pregnancy occurred, family support typi-
cally remained strong.

The Development, Maintenance, and Dissolution of Relationships between Navajo Men and Women and Teenage Mothers and Their Male Partners

When questioned about the Navajo men and women, participants described an interesting comparison between traditional and contemporary roles. Whereas the role of the Navajo female was described as relatively consistent through time, with family as their primary responsibility, the traditional role of the Navajo male as primary economic provider no longer applied, given economic and social changes on the reservation, and particularly women's increasing economic viability.[48] Many reported feeling that loss of the traditional male economic role imparted serious consequences to the Navajo family and community, including the persistent abuse of alcohol and drugs by male youth and adult men. Navajo men were consistently described as existing on the periphery of the family unit, and as maintaining little contact with their families.

Questions relating to the male's role in the family and relationships between Navajo men and women revealed that divorce was frequently instigated by alcoholism, adultery, and abuse. Upon further probing, many grandmothers described making a choice between the health and welfare of themselves and their children and remaining with a man who threatened that security. Anita and her former husband, for instance, experienced a series of separations and reconciliations until she found her husband in a drunken stupor while in charge of their youngest child. She explained, "I thought, 'this is it, this is it. I can't go through this, the kids can't go through this—we can't live with this. It's not good for me, especially for the kids.'" Similarly, Merlinda left her husband after months of alcohol-related incidents nearly resulted in the removal of their children. Her husband had called from a bar asking her for a ride. After entering the bar to retrieve her husband, the police picked up the kids who were waiting outside, believing both parents were inside and drunk. She stated, "I thought, 'this is it, my kids aren't worth losing. I'm not going to lose my kids running around to look for a drunk person—so I divorced him.'"

Many of these women described themselves as independent and self-sufficient, with the ability to parent competently as single parents. Though single parenting is not desirable, divorce was reported as an acceptable solution to marital problems. When asked to describe her feelings about being a single parent and the sole breadwinner for a family of six, Anita replied, "[It] makes me feel stronger!" This view was shared by many of the adult women. Interestingly, despite considering themselves divorced, several of the grandmothers reported that they remained close with their former husbands and maintained frequent contact. Often, ex-husbands kept clothes and other belongings in the women's homes and they ate meals together. One of the grandmothers stated that her former husband built a home for himself directly behind hers following their divorce.

Attitudes toward divorce and separation, it was noted, had changed little across the generations. Indeed, most of the grandmothers were raised in single-parent homes. Karanna said, "My mom is in the same situation I'm in. She raised all nine of us by herself. . . . My dad was never home, he was the

type that was always out there, drinking." And of her own mother's relation-
ship with her father, Merlinda explained, "I guess finally she just decided
that nothing was going to work and he'll never be home and he'll never help
support her with the kids, so that's why she just let him go."

Most (n=7) of the teen mothers reported being in long-term relationships
(from two to six years) with the fathers of their children prior to becoming
pregnant. Two of those relationships began while the women were in junior
high. Only one young woman reported being single and as never developing
a relationship with her daughter's father. Three of the young women
described being in a long-term committed relationship with the fathers of
their children. One explained,

> they say marriage is just like you're going together. We are living
> together, but we're not legally married . . . papers are nothing to us . . .
> when we do get married the only thing that's changed throughout the
> whole big day [will be] my last name.

Another described the relationship between herself and her partner in the
following manner:

> We're not married legally, but the things we've been through—the
> financial things, the responsibility of children, we even went to coun-
> seling. . . . [T]hose are things that a married couple goes through, so
> yeah, I do see us as being married 'cause we went through a lot.

Still, it appeared that the teenage mothers were, or had been, involved in
relationships very much like those their own mothers had described leaving.
Although the majority of young women reported the desire for a strong, com-
mitted, and supportive relationship with the fathers of their children, most also
described the unlikely probability that their wishes would materialize. When
interviewed, only three of the seven young females were still involved with their
children's fathers; only two of the three believed those relationships would
continue. Descriptions from the teenage mothers regarding relationships with
their male partners parallel those described by other investigators. Patricia L.
East and Marianne E. Felice report, for instance, that contrary to the miscon-
ception of short-lived relationships between teenage mothers and their male
partners, most young couples report having close relationships for some time
prior to pregnancy.[49] Following delivery, however, the couple's relationship
often changed with substantially decreased contact.

Four of the young mothers had recently (in the last three months) sepa-
rated from their partners, primarily due to alcohol abuse and lack of emo-
tional and financial support. When asked why she and her boyfriend had
separated, for instance, Yana stated, "Because he takes drinking over his
daughter and me." Several also reported being subjected to physical violence
by their partners. Palissa explained:

> during my last trimester, I'd say it was the hardest because my
> boyfriend wasn't there for me, he didn't see the baby being born . . .
> and he was very, very abusive. And, I was too young to be abused
> already.

Of concern is that the words of this young woman imply that abuse was an
expected part of adult male/female relationships. That she was too young to
be abused was apparently more disturbing than the fact that she had been
assaulted at all.

The male participants confirmed the reports of the young women. Two of
the four admitted to heavy drinking and abusive behavior toward their part-
ners. They also described providing their partners with support. Emmit, for
instance, stated that he provided support by starting the vehicle in the morn-
ing and driving Monica to school and their son to daycare. He also picked
them up in the evening. He reported hanging out with friends and playing
basketball in the afternoon, as he had dropped out of school and was unem-
ployed. When asked to describe the hardest part of being a father, he replied
"just staying home; I want to go play basketball or go cruise or go do any-
thing." Likewise, Tony was not ready to compromise his friendships and youth
lifestyle for family responsibility. He and his partner were no longer together
because

> she didn't like me going out. Sometimes I used to take off with my
> friends and play basketball . . . and she didn't like it one bit. And I
> knew if I married her she'd be a lot worse and make me stay home,
> which I don't like doing.

Despite traditional acceptability of teenage pregnancy in the context of
marriage, grandmothers preferred that their own adolescent parenting
daughters remain single, fearing that teenage marriage might prove detri-
mental to their daughters and grandchildren. As a case in point, Char
explained not wanting her sixteen-year-old daughter to marry, even after
learning of her daughter's pregnancy. She explained,

> No, I didn't want that [marriage]. Even then I didn't want her to get
> married. He can still come to see her but I don't want no marriage. . . .
> To this day I still feel the same way. I'm not gonna change my mind
> just because there's a baby.

Grandmothers reported wanting their daughters to remain single because
of (a) the instability of teenage marriages and (b) their concern over the
ability of the fathers to provide for their daughters and grandchildren.
Marriage trends among economically disadvantaged Black families have
been examined by William J. Wilson. He argues that economic viability, or
the ability of a father (or soon-to-be father) to provide stable income is para-
mount in determining whether a couple will marry. Lacking financial sup-
port from their children's fathers, women are likely better off as single

parents.[50] Perhaps changes on the Navajo Reservation, such as the expansion of economic opportunities for Navajo women, instigated changes in attitudes as well, such that generational norms, particularly in reference to marriage and teenage parenting, were also transformed. Char and others reported feeling that marriage was not expected of women, even adolescents with children. Rather, they emphasized the desire for their daughters to become self-sufficient with the ability to economically support their own families.

In sum, despite the status associated with Navajo women, incidents of physical and emotional abuse appeared frequently in participants' reports. Also, unlike the family role assigned Navajo woman, the role of the Navajo male is characterized as tenuous, as are relationships between Navajo men and women. The physical absence of men within the family sphere was often noted. Separation and divorce were reportedly common in the grandmothers' generation and among their children. Teenage mothers reported that relationships with their children's fathers began to deteriorate after the children were born. Most hoped to raise their children in environments free of drugs and alcohol, which for some meant raising their children alone. Single, teenage maternity is believed more desirable than early, unstable marriage. Grandmothers in particular encouraged their young parenting daughters to remain single.

DISCUSSION

This investigation sought to examine perceptions of teenage mothering and relationships between Navajo men and women across generations and among individuals occupying diverse roles. The contemporary image of the Navajo mother has reportedly changed little from more traditional images emphasizing her role as giver and sustainer of life. Regardless of who was interviewed, the Navajo mother was described as the head of the family, the "kin keeper," so to speak.[51] Contrary to expectations, little evidence emerged suggesting that the high value placed on mothers, children, and life within Navajo culture accounts for the higher than average rates of Navajo Reservation teenage parenting. Indeed, most reported that teenage parenting was "not acceptable"; youth were expected to complete high school and gain employment prior to beginning families.

Relationships between Navajo men and women were also explored. The frequent absence of the Navajo male emerged as a central theme. Separation, divorce, and the subsequent production of female-headed households was the reported norm within the grandmother generation; a pattern being rapidly repeated by their teenage parenting daughters.

Single teenage mothering is of particular concern due to subsequently limited educational and economic opportunities. The academic careers of single teenage mothers may be severely attenuated if they are forced to drop out of high school.[52] Lacking educational and occupational skills, their ability to achieve financial independence will also be restricted. Lily Hechtman reports teenage pregnancy as the major cause of young girls leaving school.[53] Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale agree that a large number

of teenage mothers do not complete high school, although they continue to note that Black teenagers are more likely to finish high school than their White counterparts after becoming mothers, suggesting familial support, particularly co-residence.[54]

All but one of the teenage mother participants were enrolled in an alternative school designed for youth at risk. The Navajo Reservation experiences high school dropout rates of approximately 50 percent.[55] Compared to urban dwellers, reservation-residing Native Americans experience higher rates of alcoholism, academic failure, illiteracy, illness, and poverty.[56] Subsequently, optimal well-being among children born to reservation-residing Navajo youth may be severely challenged. Although great variability exists in the developmental outcomes of teenage parents and their children,[57] the presence of multiple risk factors, with a corresponding lack of "protective factors," may result in psychosocial delays.[58] Common risk factors among teenage parenting families include father absence, multiple children in the home, maternal education less than twelve years, alcohol or drug addiction by parent, and poverty.[59] Despite the beneficial impacts of familial closeness and Navajo cohesiveness, reports from the teenage mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and other community members indicate that many of the teenagers' children are exposed to multiple risk factors identified above. Environmental risk may prove exceptionally challenging for even the most supportive family unit.

Community contexts discouraging teenage parenting likely result in strong motivation among youth to pursue other roles reinforced within the community, such as academic success. Yet some communities, like that examined here, discourage teenage parenting but have little to offer their youth in terms of alternative roles. The tools and instruments that facilitate the building and strengthening of community assets lay, as noted by many, in providing accessible educational opportunities and youth programs. Community assets and unique programs aimed at assisting youth in obtaining their high school and college degrees would buffer many challenges associated with teenage parenting. One frequently mentioned problem was that day care services were not available for young parents attending school. The need for child care far surpassed the supply. Lacking child care, teens often missed school. The need to provide day care to parenting students was recognized, yet funding shortages limited services the school could provide. It was further reported that financial limitations severely restricted the educational opportunities of many students, not only teenage parents. To challenge and motivate youth to pursue educational goals, two needs were described: (1) role models and mentors working in career fields of interest; and (2) corporate funding to offset costs associated with secondary education.

Importantly, the Navajo culture was described as being in a state of transition, with traditional beliefs and practices becoming increasingly integrated with Western lifestyles and norms. The situation has created confusion among youth and their families, many of whom hope to maintain a distinct Navajo identity while simultaneously developing skills necessary for success in non-reservation communities. For families, teaching children about the traditional ways while finding a balance between customary behavior and

contemporary expectations involves complex negotiation and sensitivity. Most of the young women reported wanting to integrate traditional Navajo practices with their own parenting, yet stated that they have little knowledge of such customs. Programmatic assistance that incorporates a holistic familial approach, traditional education, and contemporary parenting knowledge and information would likely be well-received among parenting Navajo youth.

LIMITATIONS

Factors limiting the ability to generalize investigation results must be mentioned. Although rich descriptive data were collected from multiple sources and varying points of view, the total number of participants was relatively small. All data were collected from individuals residing in a single Navajo community, with each participant interviewed at only one point in time. Thus, data should not be interpreted as reflecting the attitudes and opinions of Navajo men and women generally. Great variation likely exists among people residing in different parts of the reservation, and among those who have spent a great deal of time in urban and reservation residential contexts. Moreover, individual beliefs may be influenced through time; a longitudinal investigation is recommended to capture attitudinal changes. Results of this investigation must be examined in context. Future investigations that include a greater number of participants, representing several reservation communities, who are interviewed at multiple points in time will significantly enhance the scope of understanding regarding the phenomenon of interest.

NOTES

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    40. English preference by participants varied by generation. The teenagers, both male and female, reported that English was their primary language, although three of the more traditional youth could speak Navajo. The grandmothers were asked about their proficiency in English and reported that they had attended BIA schools where speaking Navajo was prohibited.

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