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“And Then I Got Pregnant”: Early Childbearing and the First Nations Life Course

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of the life courses of Aboriginal youth is a greater likelihood of becoming a parent at young ages, at least relative to other youth. Young parenthood is often portrayed negatively, in terms of the implications for later education and employment. However, these effects depend greatly on the context of childbearing, including the sources of available support. In this paper we make use of exploratory qualitative life course interview data with a sample of First Nations living in Canadian cities to investigate the circumstances around early childbearing, including sources of support and strategies for managing this transition, its meaning from the perspective of parents themselves, and the potential implications for their later lives.

French Abstract

"ET PUIS JE SUIS TOMBÉE ENCEINTE " : MATERNITÉ PRÉCOCE ET PARCOURS DE VIE DES PREMIÈRES NATIONS

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Résumé

L'une des caractéristiques du parcours de vie des jeunes Autochtones est la probabilité élevée de devenir parent à un jeune âge, du moins en comparaison des autres jeunes. La parentalité précoce est souvent présentée de façon négative, notamment en raison des répercussions futures sur l'emploi et les études. Cependant, ces répercussions dépendent beaucoup du contexte de la maternité, y compris des sources d'aide offertes. Cette étude utilise les données qualitatives d'entretiens exploratoires sur le parcours de vie recueillies auprès d'un échantillon d'individus des Premières Nations vivant dans des villes canadiennes pour déterminer les circonstances de la maternité précoce ainsi que les sources d'aide et les stratégies permettant de gérer cette transition, le sens de cette transition du point de vue des parents et les répercussions possibles sur leur avenir.

Motsclés : Premières Nations, parentalité précoce, parcours de vie

Spanish Abstract

“Y ENTONCES ME QUEDÉ EMBARAZADA”: EMBARAZO PRECOZ Y CICLO DE LA VIDA EN LAS PRIMERAS NACIONES

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Resumen

Una de las características de las vidas de los jóvenes indígenas es la mayor probabilidad de ser padres a edades jóvenes, al menos con respecto a otros jóvenes. Ser padres cuando se es joven suele describirse como algo negativo por las consecuencias para la educación y el empleo. Sin embargo, estos efectos dependen en gran medida del contexto en el que se procee, incluyendo en él los apoyos disponibles. En este artículo se emplean

datos de entrevistas exploratorias y de carácter cualitativo sobre ciclos de vida entre una muestra de individuos de las Primeras Naciones que viven en ciudades canadienses, para investigar las circunstancias que rodean la procreación precoz, incluyendo en ello las fuentes de apoyo y las estrategias para gestionar esta transición, el significado de esta transición desde la perspectiva de los propios padres y las repercusiones potenciales para sus vidas posteriores.

Palabras clave: Primeras Naciones, padres jóvenes, ciclo de la vida

Keywords

First Nations, early parenting, life course, teenage pregnancy

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“And Then I Got Pregnant”: Early Childbearing and the First Nations Life Course

The perception of teen childbearing as a social problem has persisted, despite little evidence that it is a widespread or increasing phenomenon (Duncan, 2007). In Canada, rates of teenage pregnancy are low relative to other countries and have been stable since the mid-1970s (Dryburgh, 2002). However, teenaged fertility is high among Canadian Aboriginal populations, particularly First Nations, despite falling overall fertility. Between 1996 and 2004, there were about 100 births per 1,000 First Nations women under 20 years old, compared to about 14 per 1,000 among all Canadian women under 20 (Guimond & Robitaille, 2008). Moreover, the young age structure of the First Nations population means that even a lower rate of teen parenting would result in relatively large numbers of young parents.

Early childbearing has been identified as having negative consequences for young parents, families, and First Nations communities (Big Eagle & Guimond, 2009; Guimond & Robitaille, 2008), and as possibly contributing to the overall disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations (Guimond & Cooke, 2008). This is consistent with research from other contexts that finds that early parenting has negative educational and economic consequences for mothers, as well as for their children (see for example Furstenberg, 2005). However, understanding early childbearing is complex and some have argued that early parenting is more the result of social disadvantage than the cause. Young men and women from low-income families or communities are especially at high risk of becoming parents, and it can be difficult to separate this selection from the effects of early parenthood (Furstenberg, 2005).

Understanding young parenthood and its potential implications requires attention to the context in which childbearing decisions are made and to the resources that are available to support parenting. This is perhaps even more the case for First Nations childbearing because there is a danger that the fertility decisions of young First Nations adults are judged from the perspective of non-Aboriginal norms regarding the timing and order of major family events. Different systems of family and social support, expectations regarding family, education and work trajectories, and other cultural differences may lead to different fertility decisions, and to different outcomes of early parenting.

Despite the large amount of research on young childbearing in other contexts, there has been little focussing on understanding early childbearing among First Nations. In this paper, we explore teenaged childbearing among urban First Nations parents using qualitative life history interviews from a sample of adults who had their first child before the age of 20. We used a “life course” approach to understanding how these parents talk about their own parenting experiences in the context of previous events and subsequent trajectories. These data also permitted us to explore the factors that preceded first births, the sources of support for early childbearing, and the potential life-long consequences of early childbearing. These exploratory data are used to draw conclusions regarding how research done in other contexts may relate to young First Nations childbearing, and to suggest avenues for future research.

The Consequences and Causes of Early Childbearing

There is a clear pattern of earlier and higher fertility among Aboriginal families as compared to non-Aboriginal Canadians, and part of this pattern includes an increased risk of teenaged parenthood (Guimond & Robitaille, 2008). Although there is little direct evidence regarding the consequences of

early parenthood among First Nations or other Aboriginal peoples, there has been a considerable amount of research into the well-being implications of early births in other contexts, most notably the U.S.

Much of this evidence has focussed on the potential consequences for the well-being of young mothers. Young women who had births in their teens, in a number of different contexts, have been found to be less likely to complete secondary and post-secondary education, or more likely to complete education later, compared with those who had delayed their first births (Mott & Marsiglio, 1985; Waite & Moore, 1978). These delays or disruptions of education trajectories earlier in life have potential knock-on effects for later education, employment, and for lifetime income (Kiernan, 2001). These effects of early childbearing have also been found to partially explain racial differences in income in the U.S., particularly between African-American and white women (Elman & O'Rand, 2004; Willson, 2003).

Early childbearing also has potential consequences for mothers' health. An Australian twin study found that teenaged mothers were more likely to smoke during their lives and be overweight than those who had later births (Webbink, Martin, & Visscher, 2008). Women who have early first births may also be at greater risk of stress and depression, especially in the context of lone motherhood (Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). They may also be at further risk of higher levels and prolonged periods of substance abuse (De Genna, Cornelius, & Donovan, 2009). Young fathers also might be at risk to delinquency and substance abuse (Sigle-Rushton, 2005; Stouthamer-Loeber & Wei, 1998).

Despite the evidence that young parents tend to be disadvantaged relative to other parents, there has been a lively and prolonged academic debate about whether this disadvantage is the consequence of young childbearing itself, or a result of the factors that put young people at risk of early parenthood in the first place (Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Furstenberg, 1991). Research examining the risks of early parenting has identified a number of family, neighbourhood, school, and behavioural characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of pregnancy and parenthood. This has included low family and neighbourhood incomes (Dehlendorf, Marchi, Vittinghoff, & Braveman, 2010; Fletcher, Harden, Brunton, Oakley, & Bonell, 2008). However, there are other family characteristics, beyond socioeconomic location, that can lead to a higher risk of teen pregnancy and early childbearing. Strict parenting styles, for instance, have been identified as reducing the likelihood of teenage pregnancy (East, Khoo, & Reyes, 2006). There is also evidence that early parenting tends to be intergenerational. Women from families with a history of early childbearing are themselves more likely to have early first births (Campa & Eckenrode, 2006; East, Reyes, & Horn, 2007; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010; Meade, Kershaw, & Ickovics, 2008), as are men (Sipsma, Biello, Cole-Lewis, & Kershaw, 2010).

There are also a number of individual behavioural characteristics that have been related to early childbearing. A tendency to risky behaviour and substance use (Kowaleski-Jones & Mott, 1998) and delinquent behaviour among men (Stouthamer-Loeber & Wei, 1998) have been identified as risk factors for early parenthood. A history of previous sexual abuse may also put adolescents and young adults at increased risk of early pregnancy and childbearing (Butler & Burton, 1990).

If those who are more likely to be young parents are also those with family, neighbourhood, or behavioural characteristics that also put them at risk to poorer educational and employment outcomes

later in life, it becomes difficult to separate these selection mechanisms from the effects of young childbearing itself (Duncan, 2007; Ribar, 1999). Longitudinal studies (see for example Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2001; Yamaguchi & Kandel, 1987) have confirmed the importance of family social background and individual behavioural risks as important predictors of early pregnancy, and some longitudinal research suggests that the children of young parents may not, in fact, be at an increased risk of poor educational or behavioural outcomes (Levine, Emery, & Pollack, 2007). However, natural experiments have also confirmed that some effects of early childbearing on education (Hotz, McElroy, & Sanders, 2005) and health trajectories (Webbink, et al., 2008) may remain, even after the selection effects are well controlled.

In addition to the debate regarding the causes and consequences of early parenthood is the question of why teens from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds are at particularly high risk. One line of argument is that there may be local “fertility cultures” that are associated with particular areas. Arai (2007) reports qualitative evidence from a UK context that there may be some effect of peer groups and local culture on teenage fertility. Evidence regarding the high rates of fertility among young African-American adults has pointed to different family and caregiving norms. Burton (1990) has identified teenage childbearing as alternative life course strategy among African-American women. The prevalence of intergenerational families and co-parenting, especially with their own parents, means that having a child at a young age may be a rational and available strategy to deal with the lack of support from fathers. Furthermore, for young people for whom educational and employment opportunities are limited, the costs of becoming a parent may not be as great as for middle-class teens, for whom having a child might disrupt education and employment trajectories (Phoenix, 1993). For communities in which there is a cultural “script” regarding lone parenthood and parenting roles may hold particular cultural significance, transitions to parenthood that are considered “early” in other contexts may not be problematic and may, in fact, be desirable (Diez & Mistry, 2010; Horn, 1983).

Even the degree to which young parenthood is a real problem, rather than a “moral panic” partially constructed through research and policy discourse, has been the subject of debate (Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Caragata, 1999). Duncan (2007) relates the “problem” discourse to a denial of the rationality of teen mothers in much academic and policy writing. This discourse is further related to the assumption that young pregnancy and childbirth is a result of mothers’ “ignorance, mis-information and low expectations”, and the “fecklessness” of young fathers (Duncan, 2007). Characterisations of young parents as entering parenthood accidentally or through carelessness tend to discount the agency of these young people. It ignores the possibility that fertility decisions are, at least partly, the result of rational decision-making, which must be understood in the social and cultural context in which these young parents live.

The possibility that teen parenting may be a rational decision reminds us that attention should be paid not only to the risk factors and consequences of young parenthood, but also to how young parents see parenthood within the context of their own lives. This may be even more the case among First Nations, for whom traditional family patterns and current economic realities may make the experience of parenthood quite different from those of non-Aboriginal parents.

Understanding Early Childbearing among First Nations

Despite the large amount of research focussing on investigating the relationships between young parenting and social and economic disadvantage, and the high rates of young childbearing among First Nations, there has not been much research specifically focussing on First Nations. The framing of early pregnancy as a social problem may be especially problematic in the case of First Nations. Different First Nations family formations and cultural attitudes toward parenthood may lead to fertility decisions that do not appear rational from a non-Aboriginal perspective, but may well make sense within the context of First Nations communities. Interviews with American Indian women in the U.S. indicated that they were knowledgeable about contraception and pregnancy is considered an important validation of a woman's femininity, suggesting that early births had not in fact been unintended (Horn, 1983). Other research on Navajo women in the U.S found that having children was seen as less of an individual choice and more of a community issue (Murry & Ponzeitti, 1997). Childbearing decisions were, therefore, not to be taken only in consideration of one's own resources and personal goals, but in light of the expectations of the community at large.

Considered within the appropriate cultural context, young childbearing becomes more easily understood as a rational decision. The assumption that early childbearing necessarily has negative consequences may also be less appropriate when considering the decisions made by First Nations adolescents and young adults. Certainly, much of the reason for the negative consequences of early childbearing is a lack of resources available to young parents, including money, time, and caregiving support. Young parents, in general, have limited financial resources, and are less likely to be in stable partnerships. The high likelihood that teen parenting takes place outside of marriage or stable partnerships puts mothers in particular at high risk to poverty (Umberson et al., 2010). However, different family formations may provide different levels of support for young or lone parents. Traditional First Nations and Métis family systems, although disrupted by colonization, may still be seen in the importance of extended family and social childrearing (see Quinless, 2013, in this issue). "Lone parenthood," as identified by the Census, may, therefore, fail to capture the true extent of social support and co-parenting that may be available to young First Nations or Métis parents (Anderson & Ball, 2011). Similarly, in the Australian Aboriginal context, Senior and Chenhall (2008) found that young, sexually active women were well aware of the risk of pregnancy, but saw pregnancy as an acceptable outcome that would be supported within their communities.

It is, therefore, important to understand early parenthood in terms of the experiences of the parents themselves and the resources they have available. The degree to which an "early" pregnancy is seen as a problem for individuals or families may depend not only on the degree to which adolescents or young adults have goals that might be impeded by a pregnancy, but also on whether that pregnancy is likely to be an impediment to reaching those goals. Young men and women who do not see childbearing as a threat to their future plans are not likely to postpone it (Jumping-Eagle, Sheeder, Kelly, & Stevens-Simon, 2008). The presence of social or other supports for childbearing may reduce the social and economic costs of early childbearing, and may also make it possible to reconcile early childbearing with other life course goals.

The Life Course and Early Parenting

One framework that we can use to integrate these various ideas, and within which to ask questions about the timing and consequences of childbearing, is the life course (Umberson et al., 2010). Life course research generally examines individual life transitions and trajectories through interrelated life domains such as education or employment. This longitudinal view of life helps to focus attention on how the timing of events in one domain, such as family, can have implications for later outcomes in work, education, or health (Marshall & Mueller, 2003).

We have described the benefits of a life course framework for Aboriginal policy research elsewhere (Cooke & McWhirter, 2011). In general, the perspective helps direct research questions by focussing on the factors that shape the life course and the timing and experience of various life course events. These factors are generally considered to include the effects of social structures, as well as individual agency, historical time and place, the linking of the lives of individuals, and the effects of the timing of previous events (Marshall & Mueller, 2003).

Despite its potential utility, the application of a life course framework to understanding the lives of Aboriginal peoples requires some special consideration. In addition to identifying the differences in the timing and experience of various life course events, such as childbearing, which may have implications for other outcomes, it also must be recognized that the lives of Aboriginal peoples have been shaped by policies and institutions in ways that non-Aboriginal lives have not. Residential schooling and the *Indian Act* are perhaps the most powerful examples of these effects (Cooke & McWhirter, 2011).

For our present concern on the timing of childbearing among First Nations, the life course helps us address several questions suggested by the previous literature review. In general, we are interested in the place of early childbearing in the life course of First Nations parents. This includes three questions.

First, what seem to be the antecedents to early childbearing in the life courses of First Nations parents? The literature reviewed suggested that young childbearing may be intergenerationally transmitted, and the social and economic status of birth families may affect the likelihood of early childbearing. In addition, individual behaviours, such as alcohol and drug use, may place adolescents and young adults at increased risk.

Second, what are the sources of support and strategies that young First Nations parents draw upon that allow them to provide for their children? As discussed above, different family formations among First Nations may help young parents access social supports that allow them to care for their children while meeting other goals. However, there may also be other strategies and resources used by these parents, which should be understood as part of the context of early childbearing.

Third, what seem to be the outcomes in other life course domains for young First Nations parents? Although previous literature suggests that early childbearing tends to have negative implications for later life, what do the later life courses of these parents look like in terms of marital, education, and employment trajectories?

Methods

This research makes use of exploratory qualitative life history interviews collected by the Aboriginal Inequality in Life Course Perspective study. The goal of this study was to collect life history information from First Nations and Métis adults living in urban areas in Alberta and Ontario, in order to better understand their experiences in various life course domains. The ongoing disparity between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians in income, health, education, and other dimensions formed the background to this project, which aimed at using life course principles to understand some of the mechanisms by which these inequalities are reproduced, both within individual lives and across cohorts. The project aimed at examining the roles of life course processes such as the accumulation of risk or disadvantage (O'Rand, 1996), the interrelationships between events in different life course domains, and the connections among individuals or "linked lives" (Elder, 1994) in the maintenance of inequality, as well as the influence of the presence or absence of various types of social, financial, or other support on life course trajectories (Cooke, 2009)

In the absence of prospective, longitudinal data, retrospective interviews were used to provide insights into these processes, as well as subjective accounts of various "turning points," from the perspectives of individuals themselves. The interviews used a semi-structured interview guide and life course "tree" instrument (Figure 1) validated by Elders and Aboriginal researchers as being more culturally appropriate than the usual life history calendar methods. Whereas the life history calendars typically collect information on the domains of health, work and education, and family trajectories, the tree instrument was used to focus discussions around events in *work and education*, *family and community*, and *health and spirituality*. It was thought that these themes more appropriately captured the domains that were important to Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, the "tree" instrument better reflects a non-linear view of life courses that may be more appropriate (Castellano, 2008) than does a calendar. Furthermore, the tree presented an appealing metaphor for Aboriginal life trajectories that enabled interviewers to talk about the life course while avoiding possible negative or stigmatizing aspects of non-standard trajectories. This included the interrelated notions that we all grow in different directions at different times, sometimes our lives branch in unexpected ways, and our lives are "rooted" in family and community.

The interviews were conducted mainly by First Nations student interviewers and ranged between one to two hours in length. The interviews focussed on the situations surrounding important "turning points" in the respondents' lives, and addressed experiences in childhood and adolescence, young adulthood, and later adulthood (when appropriate). The interview subjects ranged in age from 18 to 69 years old and were purposefully sampled to include people from a variety of income and education levels. The purpose of this sampling method was to capture a wide array of experiences and reflect the diversity of the population as much as possible in a small sample. The transcribed interview data were analysed using qualitative, interpretive methods and facilitated by NVivo qualitative analysis software, which allowed the inductive coding of data into "themes."

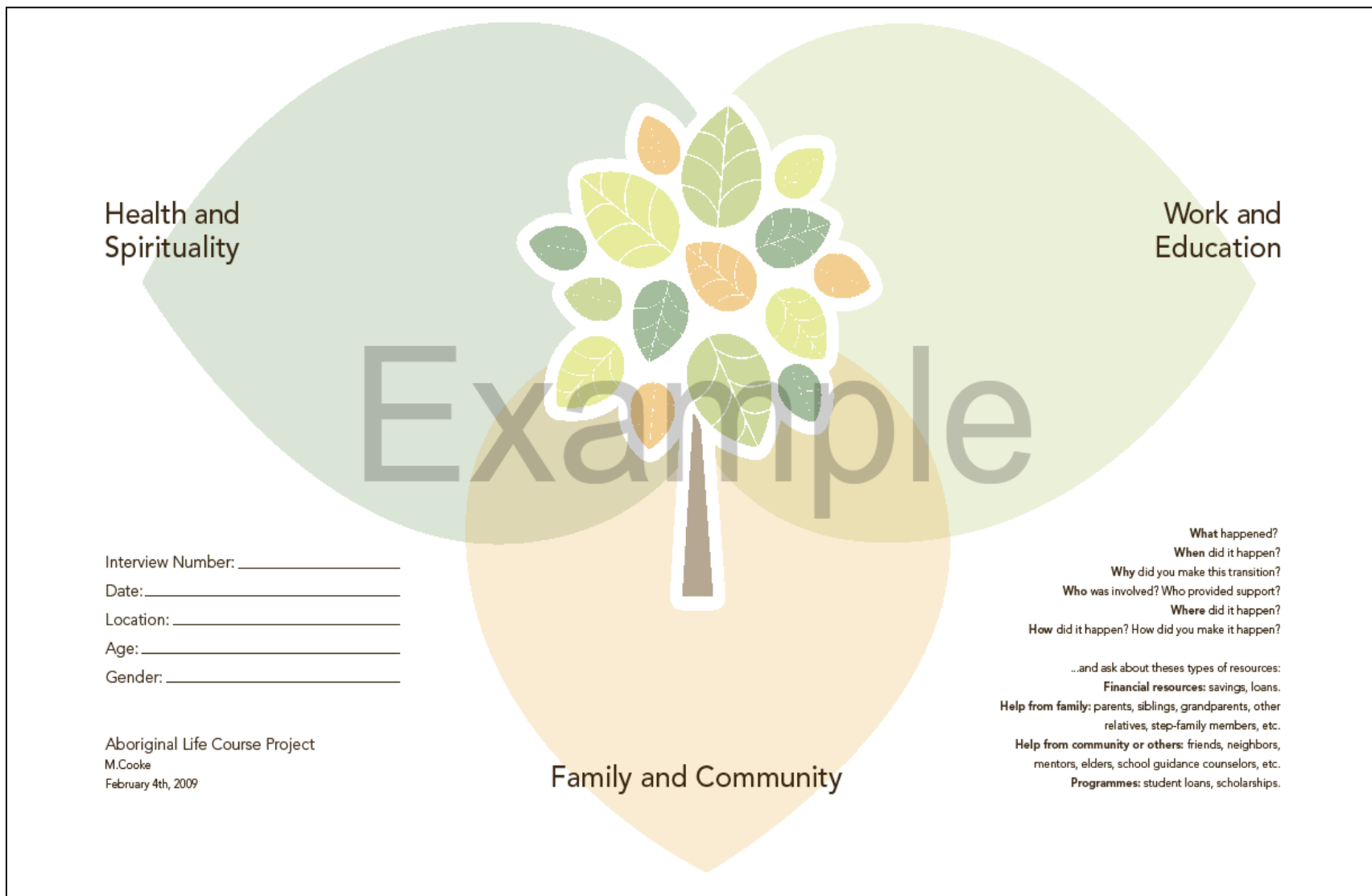


Figure 1. Life course interview tree instrument.

These exploratory data are not able to definitively answer the three research questions posed above. In the absence of longitudinal data that could link earlier and later life course events among First Nations, these narrative data can provide some evidence about the causes and outcomes of early parenting. As well, our strategy can provide insight into whether early childbearing among young First Nations, and the context in which it takes place, are meaningfully different from that described in the extant literature from other contexts, and provide direction for further research.

Results: Early Childbearing in the Life Course of First Nations Adults

Of the 55 interviews that were available at the time of this analysis, 11 respondents indicated having had a child between the ages of 14 and 20. Those cases could be grouped into three major types of life course trajectory.

First, of those eleven cases, three women were still in their 20s at the time of the interview. These women were still coping with raising young children, all in the absence of the children's fathers. Second, an additional six women, who were in their 30s or 40s when interviewed, had their first births while they were teenagers and had re-started their education and employment careers after a period of childrearing. Of these women, two could be identified as having particularly "successful" trajectories, in the sense that they had completed higher education and had well-established working careers. A third group included two men, both in their 30s at the time of interviews, who had children in their teens.

Several themes emerged from the analyses of these interviews. These include the important impacts of disruptive and high-mobility childhoods, the role of extended family social support for young parents, and the return to education as a post-childbearing life transition.

Disruptive and Mobile Childhoods

One theme that appeared in the analysis was the extent to which the young parents had themselves experienced what appeared to be fairly disruptive childhoods, characterised by frequent moves and unstable households. Although currently living in urban areas, most of the respondents were raised in First Nations communities for at least part of their childhoods.

All also mentioned making several moves between a reserve community and an urban area while children. These moves often corresponded to changes in household. Most of the women ($n = 6$) described being raised by their mothers alone, or by a sibling. Two reported being raised primarily by grandparents. One was primarily supported by her father, since her mother was unable to raise her because of alcohol abuse. However, most of these respondents indicated that they had made moves as a result of a parent's temporary inability to provide care. Some of this was associated with substance use or violence in the household or community, and some was associated with parents' own changing relationships and employment.

Interviewer: When you moved to (community) at age 11, what happened?

Respondent: My mom was breaking up with the boyfriend she was with for, like, I think, 6 years. She broke up with him and then we moved to (community) and she worked at

(firm) and then we went to school there and then we came back so I didn't finish school.
(Female, 24)

For several respondents, this resulted in a pattern of repeated moves among different living arrangements, including living with grandparents, extended family, and biological parents in several different communities. One man described how he thought this mobility affected his later life.

It was just something that my mom taught me, like. When things weren't well... this is what I picked up... was when things weren't going right, then she would move and, uh, hopefully it was better, right? So that's something that rubbed off on me and I never really realized it: why I moved so much, and, you know, but a lot of the times... when I was younger, like, we'd move somewhere, things would get better for a little bit and then they start to go south. Like, "let's pack up and go somewhere else", right? (Male, 21)

Perhaps tellingly, only one respondent in the sample had lived consistently with his parents, who had remained married for his entire childhood. That man was also the only young parent in the sample who was living with the other parent of his child at the time of the interview.

Although it is tempting to relate high mobility in childhood to the increased risk of early parenting, it should be noted that these patterns were also evident in the interviews of many of the other respondents who did not have children at young ages. However, what did appear to be an important precursor to early parenthood for several women was the decision to leave home as a teenager to live with friends or a romantic partner, which most often involved a move from a reserve to a city.

One striking thing that arose in the analysis of the women's interview transcripts was a lack of personal intentionality or agency in the language that they used to describe becoming pregnant. Although none of them specifically described their pregnancies as unintentional or "accidental," they also spoke about pregnancy as something that happened "to" them, rather than describing it as a planned event.

Well we were both partiers; we had a lot in common, we partied. He's older than me; he wasn't educated; [and,] he worked in the mines. Kind of like everything that I was against during high school but when you're drunk, I guess, booze clouds your vision. And then we lived together, we were shacked up and then I got pregnant. (Female, 34)

Well my boyfriend, the father, had a job and my sister lived in Toronto so I moved in with my sister and then I moved in with the boyfriend and every year I was getting pregnant. Like, there was one year I didn't get pregnant. (Female, 49)

Coping with Early Parenthood: Strategies and Resources

One clear theme emerging from the data was the importance of caregiving support provided by others, including family and other community members. This need for extended family or community support was, in large part, due to a lack of support from fathers. For the most part, the women in the sample had raised their children as lone mothers. One of the young men was the only

respondent in the sample to still be in a relationship with the mother of his first child at the time of the interview. Otherwise, one of the women had married the father of her first child. Some of the women in the sample described their relationships ending because of abuse or their partners' substance use. In two cases, the relationships ended because their partners went to jail.

Having a first birth disrupted the educational or employment trajectories for some of the respondents. Two of the older women in the sample had started post-secondary educational programmes at the time of their first births. The different strategies each adopted to meet the challenges of an unanticipated pregnancy illustrate the importance of extended family resources. One was forced to leave her educational programme and her job. She describes her situation immediately afterward:

I was on welfare. Like I said, her father, just throughout the pregnancy and preparing for the baby, he just was not responsible. So, I had to take care of myself. But I worked until I was, you know, seven months' [pregnant] and then had to do the welfare thing. After that and I couldn't do any courses either. (Female, 36)

Eventually, this woman was able to return to complete her education after a delay. However, the second woman had a different experience because her own mother was available to help take care of her children.

...But I never got to take a moment off from school. My mom, thank God, was there for me and it was like the only sobering time of her life. Like, I don't know if it's just that she had to help me out and she was sober but she had like a five-year stint there where she was sober and she was able to help me out. (Female, 31)

Although these two women had experienced disruptive educational trajectories as a result of their early births, the other women and two men in our sample did not. One of the men had continued to attend university after the birth of his child and intended to go on to medical school.

Most of the women who had left school before the birth of their first child indicated they had made use of some combination of social assistance and the support of family, either in a First Nations community or the city. Most of these women were not working at the time of their first births. Family support, including living with cousins, siblings, parents, or others, was clearly an important part of a strategy for providing for their children.

Trajectories after Childbearing

We were able to observe part of the life courses of some of the older women in our sample after their experience as young parents. Although some of these women were still in their 30s at the time of the interview, the interview data provided information about their subsequent marital, work, and education trajectories.

All of these women had gone on to have other significant relationships or marriages, and three of four of them had subsequent births. These marriages also had ended, however, and none of the women were in a relationship at the time of the interview. It is impossible to relate these

subsequent marital trajectories to earlier childbearing in any causal way: several of the respondents who had not been young parents also had discontinuous marital histories.

All four of these “older” early mothers returned to education at some point, and the two that had been in post-secondary education at the time of their first births went on to earn advanced degrees. The other two older women also went on to post-secondary programmes, and one was completing a degree at the time of the interview. One of the younger lone mothers also returned to school to receive a postsecondary certificate at age 26. She had since begun work as a personal care worker.

It is impossible to know what these young parents’ educational or employment trajectories would have been had they not had early births. The educational trajectories for most of the men and women in this subsample of young parents had been characterised by several disruptions before their parenthood. Returning to education might, therefore, be thought of not as a re-establishment of an educational trajectory that was disrupted by childbearing, but rather as a transition that was made in response to parenthood. Most of the younger women and the two men in the sample spoke of the birth of their first child as a transformative moment that led them to re-evaluate their lives and prepare to take on adult responsibilities. For many of them, this included a desire to be able to support their children.

I felt pity on myself, because I wasn’t providing for my daughter and, at that time, I was just, uh, trying to make something work, right, where I could be proud of myself and say that I was there for my daughter kind of thing. (Male, 21)

Several men and women who had indicated being involved with substance use reported their first births were an impetus to change their behaviours.

Interviewer: How did you feel when your daughter was born?

Respondent: When she was born it was, like, a life-changing experience. I said that, “I have to grow up. I can’t keep doing what I’m doing.” [...] I had to clean myself up a bit. Spiritually, I haven’t really thought too much about it. [...] Spirituality wasn’t my main concern at the time, but it definitely took off after that. (Male, 21)

One source of support that was clearly important for those making a transition to post-secondary education was the availability of post-secondary funding administered by Bands or First Nations. With the exception of one of the men, all of the early parents in the sample made use of post-secondary funding to either begin or return to school. Although such support was also important among the non-early parents in the sample, the circumstances of these parents may have meant that this funding was even more crucial in allowing them to make a transition to post-secondary education.

Discussion and Conclusions

The qualitative data analysed in this chapter provide some evidence about the role of early childbearing in the life courses of First Nations adults. Although the data do not allow us to generalise the results, they do give us some insight into possible antecedents of early childbearing,

supports that are drawn upon, and subsequent life transitions and trajectories after early parenting among young First Nations parents.

Many of the reported findings support research results in other contexts. Our sample indicated that many of these young parents experienced disruptive childhoods, often accompanied by conditions of deprivation. In addition, they often had family and personal lives that involved substance use and violence, which are known to be risk factors for early parenting in other contexts. Early home-leaving and disrupted educational trajectories tended to precede becoming parents, rather than result from parenthood.

We also found, however, that many of the young parents in our sample were able to return to education and find employment after their children had reached school age. Resources allowing them to do this included the support of family and community members, social programmes, and educational funding. Moreover, for some of these young parents, the transition to early parenthood may, in fact, be a positive one. Despite its difficulty at the time, becoming a parent may have been the “turning point” that led some of these young adults to engage in education and work in a more meaningful way. If this is the case, it suggests that it may be even more important than previously thought to provide the right supports for early parents in order to ensure that the transition to parenthood is a positive one, rather than the beginning of a more negative life trajectory.

It is important to remember that evidence of positive outcomes does not necessarily indicate that young childbearing is a decision taken intentionally. We have argued that it is important to consider that childbearing decisions by young First Nations parents may be rational within particular cultural, economic, and social contexts, and that there may be resources available that reduce the potentially negative life course implications of becoming a parent at a young age. Nonetheless, and although the data presented here are exploratory and not broadly generalizable, we find no evidence that the young parents in the sample intended to become parents when they did. Similarly, evidence of supports for young parents, such as assistance from grandparents or other family members, is not necessarily an indicator that there is a community or local culture that supports young parenting as normative and desirable. As Furstenberg (1991) points out, intergenerational parenting as an adaptation to young and unmarried parenthood may also be problematic for grandparents, families, and communities. Similarly, evidence that early parenting may be preceded by disadvantage, combined with evidence of more positive subsequent trajectories, is not enough to conclude that young parenthood is not potentially problematic for individuals or communities. However, generalizable longitudinal data are needed to fully unpack the risk factors and consequences of early births.

From the somewhat more general perspective of the life course and social conditions of Aboriginal peoples, these data provide insight into some of the mechanisms that are at play in the reproduction of inequality, and the potential importance of early childbearing as one of them. It is important to be critical about the role of research in the discursive construction of young parenthood as a social problem (Breheny & Stephens, 2007), especially in the case of First Nations (see Fonda, Guimond, & Eni, 2013, in this issue). Nonetheless, there seems to be reason to believe that young childbearing has some implications for the continued lower average educational attainment and incomes of Aboriginal peoples. Having a child at a young age might be seen as both

a manifestation of disadvantage and a mechanism by which that disadvantage may accumulate or be magnified over the course of individual lives. Although the young parents in the sample did continue their education after having their children, an important principle of the life course is that the timing of previous events matters for subsequent outcomes (O'Rand, 1996). Later educational completion may have implications for the lifetime earnings of individuals and thereby contribute to lower average incomes. Moreover, we can see in the lives of several of these young parents, the difficult transitions that they experienced in their youth were often implicated in their own early childbearing. Insofar as these disruptive childhood experiences could be related to the social and economic conditions experienced by their parents, we can see early childbearing as one mechanism by which disadvantage is potentially transmitted between generations, expressed by the life course principle of "linked lives" (Elder, 1994).

Nonetheless, the qualitative data presented here also confirm that early parenthood should not be thought of as shaping life courses deterministically. Rather, it is one element of complex and interacting trajectories in which outcomes are due in part to the resources and supports available, as well as to individual choices made in the context of those supports.

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