Western Journal of Nursing Research, 2005, 27(7), 831-850

Teenage Mothers at Age 30[1]

Lee SmithBattle

This longitudinal, interpretive study explored how teen mothers experienced the self and future during a 12-year period. Sixteen families were first interviewed intensively in 1988-1989 once the teen's infant reached age 8 to 10 months; they were reinterviewed in 1993, 1997, and 2001 (Time 4). Twenty-seven family members were reinterviewed at Time 4. The metaphor of a narrative spine *is used to describe how the mothers' lives unfolded during the 12-year period. The narrative spines of some mothers were large and supported well-developed, coherent "chapters" on mothering, adult love, and work. For others, mothering provided a "backbone" for a meaningful life; however, chapters on adult love and work were less fully developed. The lives of a third group of mothers lacked a coherent narrative structure. Each pattern is presented with a paradigm case.*

Keywords: *adolescent mothers; parenting; narratives; longitudinal studies*

> Thy life is a miracle. Speak yet again.
>
> —William Shakespeare *King Lear*, IV, vi, 55.

In clinical literature and the popular press, teenage mothering is almost universally seen as a nonnormative life event that results in negative long-term consequences for mother and child. In spite of the vast research on teenage mothers, there are few longitudinal studies (Apfel & Seitz, 1996; East & Felice, 1996; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Horowitz, Klerman, Kuo, & Jekel, 1991; Leadbeater & Way, 2001) that chart young mothers' lives over time and even fewer that are designed to elicit the voices and perspectives of teenage mothers and their families. Because of these gaps, public policies and programs that serve young mothers may be inconsistent with the complex realities of young mothers' lives. In fact, several studies highlight the contradictions between professional, scientific views and the perspectives of young mothers themselves (Clemmens, 2003; Geronimus, 1997, 2003; Luker, 1996; Rains, Davies, & McKinnon, 1998; Schultz, 2001; SmithBattle, 2003b; Souza, 2000). The

Lee SmithBattle, R.N., DNSc, Professor, School of Nursing, Saint Louis University

DOI: 10.1177/0193945905278190

current longitudinal study was designed to address these gaps by describing teen mothers' perspectives on their meanings of the self and future during a 12-year period.

CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM REGARDING TEEN MOTHERS

Clinicians, researchers, and the public at large generally believe that the lives of teenage girls are irrevocably derailed when they begin parenting during adolescence. Campbell's (1968) claim from more than 30 years ago—that giving birth as a teenager prescribes 90% of a young woman's "life script"—remains the common view today. This view suggests that giving birth as a teenager restricts a young woman's chances for completing high school, becoming gainfully employed, finding a marriageable partner, escaping poverty, and having children who succeed in school. The assumption is that if only poor teens would defer parenting till their 20s, their life course would more closely resemble the middle-class pathway to adulthood; that is, they would complete high school, attend college, establish a career, and get married before beginning a family, thus securing better futures for themselves and their children. Research supported this view until quite recently. A growing number of studies now suggest that the lack of adequate comparison groups in earlier studies exaggerated the long-term negative consequences associated with teenage mothering and conflated the antecedents of teen pregnancy with their negative sequelae (Geronimus, 1997, 2003; Luker, 1996).

In the past, studies that compared teen mothers with women who deferred childbearing until their 20s found considerable differences in the life course between both groups of women. In matching teen and nonteen childbearers on characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status, these studies did not control for many other family and neighborhood factors. The more recent use of better comparison groups have allowed for the control of previously unmeasured background factors with surprising results. For example, a study that compared teen mothers to their sisters who did not become mothers as teens (Geronimus & Korenman, 1992), and another study, which compared teen mothers to teens who had miscarried (Hotz, McElroy, & Sanders, 1996), found that the negative long-term effects (e.g., educational status, use of welfare, long-term earnings, and other indicators of economic well-being) previously associated with early childbearing were reduced in almost all analyses. In controlling for previously unmeasured background

factors, findings of these studies suggested that teen mothers are more disadvantaged than later childbearers prior to giving birth, and this prior disadvantage accounts for at least some of the adverse effects usually attributed to teen mothering. The importance of unmeasured background factors in explaining the negative outcomes of teen births was also documented in a large retrospective cohort study in which women's cumulative exposure to adverse childhood events, not young maternal age, accounted for teen mothers' negative outcomes based on a dose-response gradient; that is, women who had given birth as teens and who had experienced no adverse experiences as a child were unlikely to report adult psychosocial problems; however, as the number of difficult childhood experiences increased, the number of adult psychosocial problems reported by women who had given birth as teens increased (Hillis et al., 2004). These several studies have challenged the conventional wisdom that deferring parenthood would substantially enhance teen mothers' life prospects so long as the prepregnancy experiences and prior disadvantage that are linked to teen births in the first place are not addressed.

Longitudinal studies also suggest that teen mothers' lives diverge from popular negative stereotypes. Leadbeater and Way (2001), for example, discovered great variation in life-course outcomes among the poor Black and Puerto Rican teen mothers they followed for 6 years. In a remarkable 40-year study of all 698 babies born in 1955 on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Werner and Smith (2001) described how the 28 teen mothers in the cohort (8%) did increasingly better over time, in spite of adverse childhood experiences. By the 26-year follow-up, all 23 of the teen mothers who were contacted had completed a minimum of high school; none received welfare benefits; and most had improved their economic situations since the previous follow-up by gaining higher skilled jobs. Werner and Smith also reported that their findings resembled the results of a 17-year study of predominantly inner-city mothers who were poor, Black, and had given birth as teens in the 1960s (Furstenberg et al., 1987). While Furstenberg et al. concluded that the teen mothers they followed also fared better over time, they discovered that the teen mothers did worse in terms of educational, marital, and economic careers compared to women from three national surveys who had deferred childbearing until their 20s.[2] Their conclusion, however, may have overestimated the negative effects of teen childbearing given the accumulating evidence that later childbearers do not represent an adequate comparison group for exploring the long-term effects of teen childbearing.

When longitudinal researchers adopt a natural science model of the life course, epistemological problems may occur because the self is treated as an

empirical object that is fully self-contained and neutral. Time is understood as a linear chronology of logically distinct and punctual events that impinge on the self and future events in a mechanistic way, without meaning or significance for the person (Benner, 2001; Leonard, 1994; Taylor, 1989). For example, in the Furstenberg et al. (1987) study, mothers who deferred parenting until their 20s provided the norms for judging teen mothers' lives. Describing teen mothers only in terms of how they differ from women who defer parenting makes it impossible to understand how variations in personal meanings, family and cultural traditions, or material circumstances shape family formation and the way that teen mothers understand their own lives. As Benner (1994) pointedly stated, "Defining men, women, and cultural groups in terms of what they are not gives an incoherent and often denigrating account of what they are" (p. 100).

Some recent qualitative research has shed light on these complex issues. Burton (1997) noted how the premature mortality common to inner-city violent neighborhoods leads to a foreshortened future and an accelerated life course. As youth are pressed into adult responsibilities to help their families survive on the economic margins and are deprived of educational and occupational options, disadvantaged girls may feel there is little to lose and perhaps something to be gained by having a baby of one's own. In the absence of middle-class resources, aspirations, and opportunities, mothering provides purpose and a pathway to adulthood (Clemmens, 2003; Luker, 1996; Spear & Lock, 2003) and motivates some teens to remain in or return to school (Pillow, 2004; Schultz, 2001). Teen mothers are quite realistic in discounting marriage as a viable option because the fathers of their children often lack the job skills and employment opportunities to support families (Furstenberg, 2003). Reliance on welfare is also seen as a temporary resource by teen mothers who want to continue their education (Rains et al., 1998; Souza, 2000). As Lamanna (1999) discovered among the teens she studied, mothering provided "a sure source of life satisfaction and purpose. . . . All is not sleeplessness, restricted mobility, and lost hopes for the future" (p. 193).

My earlier studies in this longitudinal research with teen mothers revealed that mothering rescued some teens from self-destructive behavior, transformed their sense of self and future, promoted their responsibility, and provided a corrective experience (SmithBattle, 1994, 1995, 2000; SmithBattle & Leonard, 1998). Although pregnancy was rarely planned by these teens, becoming a mother became a reason for planning the future as mothering anchored the self and created new connections to the world. In contrast, for teens whose lives were marked by oppression or exclusion, mothering contributed to the despair that prefigured their pregnancies (SmithBattle, 1993,

1995). The fragmented and conflicted stories of these mothers revealed how oppressive situations and relationships eclipsed a sense of future, dampened the mother's moral voice, and invalidated her efforts to become the mother she wanted to be. These earlier findings set the stage for the follow-up study reported here.

PURPOSE

The current follow-up study was designed to describe teen mothers' life course from their perspectives and to examine turning points and continuities in meanings of the self and future during a 12-year period.

DESIGN

Interpretive phenomenology includes a situated understanding of the person and a method that provides detailed descriptions of the meanings, concerns, and practices of study participants (Benner, 1994, 2001; Leonard, 1994). The approach involves a systematic, circular process that unfolds as the researcher's provisional understanding of human actions and lives gains in depth from multiple readings and narrative analysis. In the current study, the longitudinal design and inclusion of family members provided several perspectives for discovering patterns in meanings of the self and future as elaborated in the context of family relationships, caregiving traditions, and life events.

SAMPLE

Recruitment of the original sample (Time 1) was based on convenience and consisted of 16 teenage mothers, 18 maternal grandparents and one paternal grandparent (of the teens' first-born babies), and 3 male partners of the teen mothers. Young mothers who were younger than age 19 years, single, Black or White, and raising a first-born, healthy child were recruited from several programs in a large metropolitan area on the West Coast of the United States. At Time 1 only, the mother's participation in the current study was contingent on at least one grandparent also being willing to participate. Teens' partners were invited to participate with the mothers' permission. Families reflected diversity in family and household composition, income

levels, and educational attainment of grandparents. Families were interviewed intensively in 1988 to 1989 during a 3- to 5-month period, when the teen's infant had reached age 8 to 10 months.

The sample at Time 2 (1993) consisted of 13 of the original teen mothers, 11 grandparents, and 3 male partners of the mothers. At Time 3 (1997), 11 families participated, including 11 teens, 2 partners, and 10 grandparents. From 11 families, 27 family members were reinterviewed at Time 4, including 9 mothers, 3 of the women's partners, 9 maternal grandparents, and 6 of the mothers' first-born children. The first-born children participated for the first time at Time 4 when they were age 12 to 13 years. Attrition in the sample occurred for diverse reasons. Most teens and their parents had moved without leaving forwarding addresses. In addition, one mother refused to participate at Time 2, and another refused at Time 4. One grandmother died after the Time 3 study was completed.

At Time 4, mothers ranged in age from 27 to 31 years. Three mothers had given birth to an additional child since the Time 3 follow-up; thus, 2 families had 4 children; 3 families had 3 children; 5 families had 2 children; and one family had one child. Five mothers were married, and 6 were single; one of these women had divorced since Time 3. Two families were receiving public assistance. One mother was living in low-income housing, and three mothers were living with their parents. Of the 7 remaining families, 4 owned their own homes. Most families were satisfied with their neighborhood and financial situations.

METHOD

I have interviewed all families over time and collected data at Time 4 from November 2001 to March 2002 after approval was gained from the university's Institutional Review Board. Adults provided written consent; children assented, and their parents consented to the child's participation. Data consisted of detailed narratives elicited during three home visits. Two visits were made to the mother's home. At the first visit, the mother (and her partner in three cases) discussed changes in their lives since Time 3 (Life History Review) and described difficult and rewarding parenting situations (Coping Interview). The second visit occurred approximately 1 month later to conduct a second Coping Interview and to ask the parents and the index child to discuss their family routines (Family Routines Interview). The family's discussion of daily routines, schedules, and celebrations provided insight into the family's organization, relationships, and the emphasis that

parents placed on family, work, or other activities and relationships. Participating children were then asked to describe their relationships to family, school, and peers in a separate interview (Child Interview). One visit to grandparents was made to conduct a Life History Review and a Coping Interview. After reviewing the last 4 years of their lives, I asked them to discuss rewarding and difficult situations in being a parent (to the mother) and grandparent to the index child. With the exception of the Child Interview, all interviews had been used in previous studies.

Feminist research has shown that narratives recover the "missing text" of women's development (Gilligan, 1982) in ways that do justice to women's perspectives and social contexts (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; DeVault, 1990; Oakley, 1992). In all studies, interview protocols served as flexible guides. Active listening and clarifying probes encouraged participants to describe situations in their own terms and to provide detailed accounts so that the meaning and context of situations were fully described (Benner, 1994; Kvale, 1995a). Interviews were tape-recorded and professionally transcribed. Parents completed a Demographic Questionnaire and an investigator-developed tool that asked them to evaluate their satisfaction with their neighborhoods and financial status.

ANALYSIS

In the initial stage of analysis, Time 4 interviews with each family were read as a set to examine similarities and differences across interviews. Interpretive Summary Files for each family were developed and amended as interviews were read and as salient aspects of the text were coded or tagged with descriptive headings. These tagged excerpts were then copied and moved as a block to the summary file with my interpretive commentary. As Interpretive Summaries for each family were completed, they were compared to earlier summaries (from Times 1, 2, and 3) to reveal change and continuity in mothers' concerns, meanings, and practices. Summaries were also compared between families in the later stages of analysis to identify themes, exemplars, and paradigms (Benner, 1994). The complete set of interviews (n = 26) of five cases were read by one of two qualitative researchers to control for biased interpretations. During discussions with these consultants, the metaphor of a *narrative spine* emerged as an evocative way of describing patterns and distinctions in mothers' meanings of the self and future.

FINDINGS

The current research explored variations in teen mothers' lives during the 12-year period. Narrative spine provides a metaphor for understanding similarities and differences in women's lives, particularly with respect to the meaning and significance that mothering, adult love, and work played in their lives. In earlier studies, mothering provided a central source of identity and direction for the self and future. At Time 4, mothering remained a central source of identify for many women; however, work and adult love also emerged as core themes. These themes varied in terms of their salience for each woman. For example, some spines were large and supported well-developed chapters on work, adult love, and mothering. In these life stories, the woman's sense of self was strong, and her sense of agency or "ability to act upon or influence a situation" (Benner, Hooper-Kyriakidis, & Stannard, 1999, p. 14) was woven through each chapter of mothering, adult love, and work. Mothering provided a sense of purpose and direction; however, adult love and work also gave content and meaning. For others, mothering provided the primary backbone for a meaningful life. The "books" of these mothers supported a rich, fully developed chapter on mothering but less fully developed chapters on adult love and work. Stories from a third group of mothers lacked a coherent narrative structure or spine. The voices of these women were muted, and their lives were less coherent than the other two groups of women. Each pattern is presented below with an illustrative case.

A Large Narrative Spine That Supports Many Chapters

In the life stories of women whose lives encompassed a large narrative spine, the women's voices were strong and were expressed in mothering, adult love, and work. Each of these commitments provided purpose, meaning, and identity. Lily serves as a paradigm of this pattern.

Lily grew up in a two-parent, middle-class home in a suburban neighborhood. Both of her parents worked full-time. In her first interviews 12 years earlier, she described her father as an alcoholic and her mother as an appeaser. In high school, Lily was class president and valedictorian and was voted the student who was most fun to be with. Few people knew that she had considered suicide before becoming pregnant. After giving birth to Tory, she graduated from high school and lived with Jose, Tory's father. They married 3 years later and had one more daughter. Jose consistently worked as a machinist and recently completed his high school graduate

equivalency degree (GED). For the past several years, Lily provided day care in their home. This added income allowed them to buy a modest home.

At Time 4, Lily's interviews provided several core narrative threads that gave meaning to her life. She found immense satisfaction in mothering, in her work as a day care provider, and in her marriage to Jose. All her stories reflected a strong sense of agency. This is how she looked back on her life as a 31-year-old married mother of two girls:

> *Lily:* When I was young, I wasn't able to have a voice. Whatever I said didn't matter with my dad. We had to wait til he sobered up. And I said, "I'm not waiting now for anybody for anything. . . . This is my life and if I'm gonna make it better or ruin it, it's gonna be because of me." And when I had Tory, it had to be for me and her. It had to be for me because of her. That's when it clicked. I'm not taking anyone's shit anymore.
> *Interviewer:* So that's when you developed your own voice? . . . Because you had to do it for her?
> *Lily:* Right. Right. Who else was gonna do that for her? Who did that for me? No one did. And I was gonna be different than the way I was raised. I said it wasn't gonna be like that.

Lily described how her life "opened up" after giving birth to Tory. Mothering transformed her world and created a new direction. Her anger at her childhood liberated her from her past, and her new voice and agency led her to imagine and live up to new expectations for the future. She began to make demands of her husband, who eventually stopped drinking. By Time 4, she described their relationship as a source of intimacy, trust, and mutual respect. Her work as a day care provider also provided meaning and satisfaction. Lily's life story, therefore, comprised fully developed chapters on mothering, adult love, and work. Mothering did not foreclose her future but propelled her to imagine a better life for herself and her children. This interpretation was confirmed when her mother said to me at her separate interview: "Lee, I think that Lily would have been dead if she had not become a mother 12 years ago."

Mothering as the Core Thread of a Narrative Spine

Among a second group of mothers, mothering was the central narrative and crucial backbone for living a meaningful life. For these women, mothering provided the content and meaning for elaborating the self and future. Although the voices of these women were strong as far as their children were concerned, they did not make demands of others on their own behalf, nor did their work provide real meaning. Because these women did not experience

work or adult love as a telic demand, their life stories were held together primarily by the narrative thread of mothering. Cary exemplified this pattern.

Cary had grown up in an abusive home. She drifted into pregnancy at age 17 and married the baby's father, Tim, 2 years later. At Time 4, they had two sons and two daughters (ages 13, 11, 10 and 8). Similar to Lily, she was determined to be a better parent to her children than her parents had been. During 12 years, Cary had developed a strong voice and sense of agency on behalf of her children. For example, when Jake, her oldest child, was ridiculed in class by his ethics teacher when he was 8 years old, she spearheaded an effort to have the teacher removed. She also developed emotions and maternal practices that were finely tuned to each child, drawing on the parenting skills of Tim's family (SmithBattle, 2000). Jake, her 6-foot tall, 13-year-old son, confirmed this when he told me in his private interview:

> This is a picture of my mom. I love my mom. She's cool. I just don't like it when we have to do chores and stuff. And she's like, Jake, you have to do chores. (laugh) But she's cool. She helps me out with my homework. She will help me out in school if I have problems. She'll help me clean my room. She'll pretty much help me with anything.

Lily and Cary were similar in that mothering redirected their lives and provided a narrative spine that organized their lives. Although Cary, similar to Lily, had developed a strong sense of agency on behalf of her children, she did not address her own needs with a similar sense of self-assurance. For example, Cary did not make demands of her husband, and the strains in their relationship often surfaced during interviews. At the last interview at Time 4, I asked them in a joint interview: "Who do you feel cared for by?"

> *Tim:* My kids, I know my kids love me. There's no doubt about it.
> *Cary:* And not me? Believe me, I would be long gone if I didn't care about you.
> *Tim:* I know my kids love me. There's never, ever any doubt. And I think that's the only reason why I'm as affectionate as I am because of my kids.
> *Interviewer:* Cary? [long pause, Tim laughs anxiously]
> *Cary:* He's not very emotional. [She is tearing up and becomes silent.]
> *Interviewer:* Can you talk about it? [long pause] Do you know what's going on with Cary?
> *Tim:* You mean, why she doesn't wanna.
> *Interviewer:* Why she's upset?
> *Tim:* Well probably because our relationship isn't ideal. Yeah. That's probably it. . . . I'm so busy and the short time that we are together, we're so conscious about making sure our kids are on the right track. It's not really focused on how Cary and I are.
> *Interviewer:* And that's a disappointment for her?

Tim: Yeah. Probably.
Interviewer: Is there anything you both want to do about that? What about you Cary?
Cary: I don't know. I think it would be good if we went to counseling.
Interviewer: Um hum. Have you discussed that?
Cary: Not yet.

Unlike Lily, who made demands of her husband and refused to be dismissed, Cary became silent in response to Tim's disconnection. This was particularly distressing to Cary because their relationship mattered deeply to her. Although Cary and Lily had first found their voices as mothers, Cary's voice was mute when her own needs were at stake.

Cary and Lily provided day care in their homes. Cary's reasons were primarily practical: day care contributed to family income and allowed her to be available to her children. Her work, similar to her marriage, lacked the narrative structure and meaning that Lily experienced. Cary's book, therefore, consisted of a compelling chapter on mothering, while the other chapters of her life were less developed. Because she had been less successful in developing these chapters, she sometimes disappeared socially and became anxious or depressed.

The Absence of a Narrative Spine

Meg represents those mothers whose lives lacked a narrative spine. Because mothering, adult love, and work provided little meaning, purpose, or direction, the chapters of her life had a less coherent story line than Lily's and Cary's narratives.

Meg was the youngest of Carol's four children. Meg gave birth to Mike, her first born, at age 17 years after a previous abortion and miscarriage. She has lived continuously with her children and Carol. Their household at times included the three fathers of Meg's three sons, all of whom had physically abused her (but not her sons). This living arrangement was a blessing and a curse for Meg, her children, and Carol. While the family benefited from pooling income, the lack of a shared understanding of each woman's role in caring for Mike, as well as the episodes of domestic violence, contributed to Meg's diminished agency.

Carol assumed a critical, overinvolved stance when Meg began to develop confidence in caring for Mike as a baby. Carol's nagging and criticism led Meg to feel that "I can't do anything right" (SmithBattle, 1996, p. 60). Meg responded to the competition and conflict over Mike's care by withdrawing and returning to the streets. This circular pattern undermined

Meg's relationship with Mike and thwarted her agency as a mother. While Meg's and Carol's relationship had improved to some extent by Time 2, earlier patterns continued to foil Meg's care of Mike (SmithBattle, 1997). At Time 4, Meg's mood and style of parenting Mike, who had become a testy teenager, were characterized by resignation and avoidance.

In contrast to the 2 mothers described above, mothering did not create a clear purpose, identity, or direction for Meg's life. At Time 4, she related few meaningful or pleasurable stories of mothering and few family routines. Meg and her children rarely ate together or did things as a family. Household chores usually led to conflict, especially between Meg, Carol, and Mike. To Meg's consternation, Carol would clean Mike's room and pick up after him, rather than encouraging him to become a responsible family member. Meg gave the following example: "If I tell Mike, 'Pick your shoes up,' my mom'll go get 'em. She'll actually do it for him." Meg coped with these frustrations and conflicts primarily by avoidance. Her disengagement was also apparent in her response to Mike's difficulties with school. She reported that he had been having difficulties in the sixth and seventh grades but yet was totally surprised when Mike failed seventh grade for not completing his homework:

> What was difficult was Mike just completely screwing up in school. You know, it's hard being a mom and working full time. . . . 'Cause I get home from work and I say, "Is your homework done?" And he says "Yeah." And then come to find out, he hasn't done homework all year. That was difficult.
>
> *Interviewer:* So when did you first begin to suspect or learn that he wasn't doing well in school?
>
> *Meg:* Every year [his teachers] said he could be doing better. In sixth grade he screwed up. Seventh grade he really screwed up. Trying to figure out how to instill in your kid's mind how important education is is so difficult.

At Time 4, with Mike in the eighth grade and in a new school district, and with the fall semester well under way, Meg had no idea how Mike was doing in school and assumed that the babysitter was supervising his homework. She had not considered contacting Mike's teachers, and she was awaiting his report card with some trepidation. Her passivity in the situation reflected long-standing patterns of resignation and avoidance. Her diminished agency and voice were also observed in her relationships with men. In this context, Meg's work in entry-level health and legal positions served primarily as an emotional refuge from the conflicts at home, rather than as a source of identity or meaning. Without a narrative spine, her life story was more fragmentary and incoherent than Lily's or Cary's lives.

DISCUSSION

The metaphor of a narrative spine highlights the variations in these teen mothers' lives and the role of mothering as one chapter of a life story. Even though the majority of mothers in the current study described a foreshortened sense of future before becoming pregnant (SmithBattle, 1995), their lives were not irrevocably foreclosed by an early birth. Their narratives add credence to the view that teen parenting provides an important rite of passage to adulthood (Burton, 1990; Clemmens, 2003; Spear & Lock, 2003). These findings are also consistent with the emerging view that young women's lives are not predetermined by an early birth (Fessler, 2003; Geronimus, 1997, 2003; Luker, 1996) and that many teen mothers fare better over time (Furstenberg et al., 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001). In spite of adverse childhood experiences, mothering for some teens provides a corrective (SmithBattle, 1994) or a turning-point experience (Rutter, 1999). Rutter suggested that turning points, especially when followed by "positive chain reactions," can reduce the effects of prior adversity. Rutter also described that these changes are not strictly located in the self but involve a transaction between the person and her world. This seems to be the case for mothers such as Lily and Cary who first found their voices in loving and caring for a child. For Lily and Cary, mothering created a telic demand that placed them on a new path and gave new meaning and depth to their lives. Lily, in particular, developed a sense of agency that led her to find identity and meaning in work and in a respectful relationship with her husband. In contrast, Cary's identity at the 12-year follow-up issued solely from mothering; she lacked Lily's incisive anger over the past and could not demand to be recognized by her husband. Without projects beyond mothering to give her life direction, her life story remained vulnerable to despair. Mothering nevertheless transformed Lily's and Cary's worlds and created a new moral horizon for how they should live. Their subsequent experiences as mothers in the context of supportive others sustained the priorities, meanings, and possibilities that they first experienced in mothering.

Although Meg's early interviews demonstrated a nascent identity as Mike's mother, her early difficulties in caring for him undermined her confidence and complicated the development of mothering practices. Mike was a colicky, difficult-to-console baby, and Meg's dependence on her mother, her mother's overinvolvement and criticism, and their long-standing coresidence also undermined Meg's connection to Mike. To cope with her own ambivalence and to avoid conflict at home, Meg was drawn back to the streets after Mike's birth and became involved in a series of abusive

relationships. Meg's relationships with her mother, her children, and their fathers contributed to a long chain of primarily negative experiences that undermined her agency, voice, and possibilities for the future. Lacking a narrative structure for how she should live, feeling powerless and trapped, Meg could not take up or endorse a particular direction for herself or her children. Her lack of voice, story, and thin expectations for the future contributed to a fragile story line.

Taylor (1989) noted that an important aspect of being human is that "we grasp our lives in a *narrative*" (p. 47). Other social scientists and nurse researchers agree that stories play an indispensable role in understanding ourselves and others (Benner, 1994; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988). Gilligan (1982) and other researchers (Banks-Wallace, 1999; Belenky et al., 1997; DeVault, 1990; Oakley, 1992) have noted the clinical and scientific importance of women's narratives for understanding lives in context. A growing number of studies document the value of narratives for revealing the terms by which teen mothers make sense of growing up, becoming pregnant, and embarking on motherhood (Burton, 1990, 1997; Clemmens, 2003; Rains et al., 1998; Souza, 2000; Spear & Lock, 2003). Their terms for understanding the self and future broaden clinical understanding and are critical to developing participant-centered interventions that are relevant to the meanings and complexities of their lives (SmithBattle, 1994, 2000, 2003a).

Relationship-based nursing care is indispensable in supporting the young mother's development of a coherent narrative, particularly when she lacks a supportive family (SmithBattle, 1996, 2000, 2003a). Clinicians can play a key role in mentoring and nurturing young mothers when their sense of self, agency, and future are nascent and fragile, and when they lack the skills and trusted others to support their new priorities and connections to the world and baby. For example, nurses cultivate teen mothers' trust, self-disclosure, and an enlarged future when they take teen mothers' perspectives seriously, validate their difficulties and challenges, affirm hidden or poorly articulated strengths, and celebrate their successes (Kitzman, Yoos, Cole, Kormacher & Hanks, 1997; SmithBattle, 2000, 2003a). In sharing their stories with trusted clinicians, teen mothers' fears and hopes, gains and losses, and strengths and struggles are available for dialogue, elaboration, and validation or correction. Nurses also play a pivotal role in linking teens to resources to complete school, obtain day care, access health care and mental health services, and gain life skills. These nursing skills and responsive relationships have been found to promote maternal outcomes in a series of clinical trials (see Olds, Henderson, et al., 1999; Olds, Robinson, et al., 2002).

A clinician's attentive listening can contribute to a teen's moral development, however fragile or thin, by validating and sharing the young mother's vision of the good (SmithBattle, 1994). The responsive presence of a nurse can also help a teen to imagine and carve out a meaningful future. For example, a nurse who was interviewed for a study of public health nursing practice described having "life discussions" to encourage teen mothers' goals and dreams and provided the following example in caring for a 13-year-old mother: "We're working on this plan for her life. Her next step. Now that she's finished summer school, she starts high school. That's a whole different chapter in her life" (SmithBattle, 2003a, p. 374). Another public health nurse (PHN) described inviting teens to consider their future by asking them: "'Tell me what you think you're going to be doing in a year. Tell me what you might be doing in 5 years.' Most of the time," she added, "they can't tell me. So I say, 'Well, what is it you like to do? Picture yourself in 1 year. What are you doing? Where are you living?'" (SmithBattle, 2002) This skillful practice of narrative articulation, when combined with long-term support, advocacy, mentoring, and linkages to resources, creates and sustains new horizons and connections. Nurses must also intervene when educational, health, or social policies contribute to a foreclosed future as, for example, when a PHN pestered and threatened a school principal with media exposure for refusing to enroll a teen in school (SmithBattle, Drake, & Diekemper, 1997).

Limitations of the current study include the small sample size and the attrition of families over time. Attrition occurred among families across socioeconomic status, household composition, and among Black and White families. Table 1 compares the baseline characteristics of the teens at Times 1 and 4. There is a lower percentage of Black mothers and a slightly higher percentage of mothers who were living with nonkin at the current follow-up. These percentages, however, are calculated on very small numbers, making statistical inference unreliable. Given that the proportions are remarkably similar regarding school status and mean age of participants over time, the sample does not appear to have changed appreciably regarding relative disadvantage of the participants.

The small sample size may have limited the discovery of additional patterns in how mothering, adult love, and work configure former teen mothers' lives. For example, work did not provide meaning and direction for women who lacked coherent narratives from mothering or adult love. This possibility may surface in future follow-up studies as the women in this sample gain work experience, become better educated, or find employment in more satisfying jobs.

TABLE 1: Baseline Characteristics of Teens at Time 1 and Current Follow-Up

Baseline Characteristics[a]	*Baseline Sample (Time 1)* n = *16 (%)*	*Follow-up Sample (Time 4)* n = *11 (%)*
Teen mother's ethnicity		
Black	7 (45)	4 (36)
White	9 (56)	7 (64)
Mean age of teens[b]	16.4	16.6
Teens' educational status		
High school dropout	7 (44)	5 (45)
On track with school[c]	9 (56)	6 (55)
Teens' living situations		
Teen living with family	10 (63)	6 (55)
Teen living with partner or nonkin	6 (37)	5 (45)

a. Unless otherwise noted, baseline characteristics refer to teen mothers' characteristics at induction into the original study (Time 1) that occurred 8 to 10 months after teens had given birth to the index child.
b. Mean age of teens at delivery of index child.
c. Teens were attending or had graduated from high school.

Evaluating an interpretation involves making judgments regarding the plausibility, credibility, trustworthiness, and the communicative and pragmatic validity of the study (Angen, 2000; Kvale, 1995b; Mishler, 1990). The quality of the text is an important consideration to assure that findings are not based on thin data, spurious comments, trivial meanings, or experience-distant categories. In the current study, the quality of the data was enhanced by conversational interviewing, the use of clarifying probes, and the verbatim transcription of tape-recorded interviews. I also corrected all interview transcripts after interviews were professionally transcribed to add details about participants' gestures and interactions that were not captured on tape. The credibility of the data was further strengthened by the rapport developed with families over time, by complementing interviews with detailed field notes, and by detailing my initial impressions and ongoing interpretations in Interpretive Summaries. The inclusion of family members provided additional perspectives on each family's history and relationships so that temporality and context were available for understanding each case.

Because understanding is inherently circular, consensual validation with an interpretive community is the appropriate validity procedure (Angen, 2000; Benner, 1994; Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 1996). In the current study, the interpretive community included two additional qualitative researchers who reviewed five complete cases and a total of 26 interviews between them. The inclusion of narratives in this article also allows readers to

evaluate if this is a convincing interpretation with the potential for deepening and refining our understanding of teen mothers. Clinicians, in particular, should ask themselves if this interpretation encourages them to remain open to the ways that teen mothers understand their lives, to listen carefully to their accounts, and to respond with care and respect to their meanings, concerns, difficulties, and priorities, no matter how tragic or transformative their stories may be.

A narrative understanding of teen mothers' lives, as described here, reveals the mystery and unpredictability of human lives. Caputo (1987) affirmed this when he wrote:

> Before the world is stabilized as the object of scientific construction. . . [and] [b]efore ethical life is bound up by a net of rules of conduct, there is the prior mystery of other persons, who outstrip whatever we think we know of them and command our respect. Finally, we come up against the mystery itself, the unencompassable depth in both things and our (non)selves. And then we are brought up short. (p. 214)

We encounter this depth and mystery in our own lives and in the words of Shakespeare that began this article. Similar to Lily and Cary, we may find new and unexpected possibilities in spite of past adversities or mistakes, or we may live out limited expectations, until perhaps a life-changing experience fosters new meaning and purpose. Because the future is not as predictable or controllable as we might like to imagine, we must remain open to narrative accounts from the life world, even when they contradict popular stereotypes, or when women's accounts reveal contradictions, the loss of horizon, or diminished agency.

Mothering often provides a pathway to adulthood for teenage girls and can promote a new sense of purpose, meaning, and responsibility. These meanings may be fragile and undermined by oppressive relationships or stigmatizing policies, or they may be supported and enlarged by positive experiences that support the weaving of a narrative structure and an enlarged horizon. Discovering how these possibilities unfold is one of the many reasons that I look forward to revisiting the families in the near future and inviting them to "speak yet again."

NOTES

1. I want to thank the families who have participated more than 12 years in this research; Drs. Victoria Leonard and Mary Ann Cook for providing consensual validation; the American Nurses

Foundation for funding the current study; and Dr. Louise Flick and three reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions. This paper was presented at the annual conference of the Midwest Nursing Research Society in St. Louis, MO, on March 29, 2004

2. The reader is referred to Table 2.2, p. 29 in Furstenberg et al., 1987, for a summary of the differences between teen and older childbearers.

REFERENCES

Angen, M. J. (2000). Evaluating interpretive inquiry: Reviewing the validity debate and opening the dialogue. *Qualitative Health Research*, *10*, 278-395.

Apfel, N. H., & Seitz, V. (1996). African American adolescent mothers, their families, and their daughters: A longitudinal perspective over twelve years. In B. R. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 149-170). New York: New York University Press.

Banks-Wallace, J. (1999). Storytelling as a tool for providing holistic care to women. *Maternal-Child Nursing*, *24*, 20-24.

Belenky, M. F., Bond, L. A., & Weinstock, J. S. (1997). *A tradition that has no name: Nurturing the development of people, families, and communities.* New York: Basic Books.

Benner, P. (1994). The tradition and skill of interpretive phenomenology in studying health, illness, and caring practices. In P. Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring, and ethics in health and illness* (pp. 99-127). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Benner, P. (2001). The phenomenon of care. In S. K. Toombs (Ed.), *Handbook of phenomenology and medicine* (pp. 351-369). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic.

Benner, P., Hooper-Kyriakidis, P., & Stannard, D. (1999). *Clinical wisdom and interventions in critical care: A thinking-in-action approach*. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders.

Benner, P., Tanner, C. A., & Chesla, C. A. (1996) *Expertise in nursing practice: Caring, clinical judgment, and ethics*. New York: Springer.

Burton, L. (1997). Ethnography and the meaning of adolescent in high-risk neighborhoods. *Ethos*, *25*, 208-217.

Burton, L. M. (1990). Teenage childbearing as an alternative life-course strategy in multigenerational black families. *Human Nature*, *1*, 123-143.

Campbell, A. A. (1968). The role of family planning in the reduction of poverty. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *30*, 236-246.

Caputo, J. D. (1987). *Radical hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction, and the hermeneutic project*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Clemmens, D. (2003). Adolescent motherhood: A meta-synthesis of qualitative studies. *American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing*, *28*, 93-99.

DeVault, M. L. (l990). Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. *Social Problems*, *37*, 96-116.

East, P. L., & Felice, M. E. (1996). *Adolescent pregnancy and parenting: Findings from a racially diverse sample*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fessler, K. B. (2003). Social outcomes of early childbearing: Important considerations for the provision of clinical care. *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health*, *48*, 178-185.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter* (S. Sampson, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Furstenberg, F. F. (2003). Marriage: A luxury good? *Zero to Three*, *23*(3), 13-17.

Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Morgan, S. P. (l987). *Adolescent mothers in later life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Geronimus, A. T. (1997). Teenage childbearing and personal responsibility: An alternative view. *Political Science Quarterly*, *112*, 405-430.

Geronimus, A. T. (2003). Damned if you do: Culture, identity, privilege, and teenage childbearing in the United States. *Social Science and Medicine*, *57*, 881-893.

Geronimus, A. T., & Korenman, S. (1992). The socioeconomic consequences of teen childbearing reconsidered. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *107*, 1187-1214.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hillis, S. D., Anda, R. F., Dube, S. R., Felitti, V. J., Marchbanks, P. A., & Marks, J. S. (2004). The association between adverse childhood experiences and adolescent pregnancy, long-term psychosocial consequences, and fetal death. *Pediatrics*, *113*, 320-327.

Horowitz, S. M., Klerman, L. V., Kuo, H. S., & Jekel, J. F. (1991). School-age mothers: Predictors of long-term educational and economic outcomes. *Pediatrics*, *87*, 862-868.

Hotz, V. J., McElroy, S. W., & Sanders, S. G. (1996). The costs and consequences of teenage childbearing for the mothers and the government. *Chicago Policy Review*, *1*, 55-94.

Kitzman, H. J., Yoos, H. L., Cole, R., Kormacher, J. &, Hanks, C. (1997). Prenatal and early childhood home-visitation program processes: A case illustration. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *25*, 27-45.

Kvale, S. (1995a). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1995b). The social construction of validity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *1*, 19-40.

Lamanna, M. A. (1999). Living the postmodern dream: Adolescent women's discourse on relationships, sexuality, and reproduction. *Journal of Family Issues*, *20*, 181-217.

Leadbeater, B. J., & Way, N. (2001). *Growing up fast: Transitions to early adulthood of inner-city adolescent mothers*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Leonard, V. W. (1994). A Heideggerian phenomenologic perspective on the concept of person. In P. Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring, and ethics in health and illness* (pp. 43-63). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Luker, K. (1996). *Dubious conceptions: The politics of teenage pregnancy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mishler, E. G. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies. *Harvard Educational Review*, *60*, 415-442.

Oakley, A. (1992). *Social support and motherhood.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Olds, D. L., Henderson, C. R., Kitzman, H. J., Eckenrode, J. J., Cole, R. E., & Tatelbaum, R. C. (1999). Prenatal and infancy home visitation by nurses: Recent findings. *Future of Children*, *9*, 44-65.

Olds, D. L., Robinson, J., O'Brien, R., Luckey, D. W., Pettitt, L. M., Henderson, C. R., et al. (2002). Home visiting by paraprofessionals and by nurses: A randomized, controlled trial. *Pediatrics*, *110*, 486-496.

Pillow, W. (2004). *Unfit subjects: Educational policy and the teen mother.* New York: Routledge Falmer.

Polkinghorne, D (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Rains, P., Davies, L., & McKinnon, M. (1998). Taking responsibility: An insider view of teen motherhood. *Families in Society*, *79*, 308-319.

Rutter, M. (1999). Resilience concepts and findings: Implications for family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *21*, 119-144.

Schultz, K. (2001). Constructing failure, narrativizing success. Rethinking the "problem" of teen pregnancy. *Teachers College Record*, *103*, 582-607.

SmithBattle, L. (1993). Mothering in the midst of danger. In S. L. Feetham, S. B. Meister, J. M. Bell, & C. L. Gilliss (Eds.), *The nursing of families* (pp. 235-246). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

SmithBattle, L. (1994). Beyond normalizing: The role of narrative in understanding teenage mothers' transition to mothering. In P. Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring, and ethics in health and illness* (pp. 141-166). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

SmithBattle, L. (1995). Teenage mothers' narratives of self: An examination of "Risking the Future." *Advances in Nursing Science*, *17*(4), 22-36.

SmithBattle, L. (1996). Intergenerational ethics of caring for adolescent mothers and their children. *Family Relations*, *45*, 56-64.

SmithBattle, L. (1997). Change and continuity in family caregiving practices with young mothers and their children. *Image: Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, *29*, 145-149.

SmithBattle, L. (2000). Developing a caregiving tradition in opposition to one's past: Lessons from a longitudinal study of teenage mothers. *Public Health Nursing*, *17*, 85-93.

SmithBattle, L. (2002). [Development of community health nursing expertise]. Unpublished raw data.

SmithBattle, L. (2003a). Displacing the "rulebook" in caring for teen mothers. *Public Health Nursing*, *20*, 369-376.

SmithBattle, L. (2003b). Understanding teenage mothering: Conventional and unconventional wisdom. *Prevention Researcher*, *10*(3), 1-4.

SmithBattle, L., Drake, M. A., & Diekemper, M. (1997). The responsive use of self in community health nursing practice. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *20*(2), 75-89.

SmithBattle, L., & Leonard, V. W. (1998). Adolescent mothers four years later: Narratives of self and visions of the future. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *20*(3), 36-49.

Souza, C. (2000). Personal responsibility among Puerto Rican teenage mothers in New York City. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *35* (21-22), L24-L32.

Spear, H. J., & Lock, S. (2003). Qualitative research on adolescent pregnancy: A descriptive review and analysis. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, *18*, 397-408.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (2001). *Journeys from childhood to midlife: Risk, resilience, and recovery.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.