Conceiving a Re/Assemblage of Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting

ABSTRACT
The chapters in this collection aim to trouble simplistic notions of teenage pregnancy and parenting. Each chapter, in its own way, contributes to a nuanced, yet critical, reading of the ‘problem’ of teenage pregnancy and parenting. If we achieve our objective, the collection will contribute to a ‘re/assemblage’ of the multiplicity that forms at the intersection of being a teenager, of being pregnant and, for some, of parenting, all in the gaze of a Questioning/concerned/judging/sometimes voyeuristic public. The teenage parent ‘problem’ is, in itself, a result of processes of assemblage; it is a consequence of diverse discourses, cultural constructions, social structures, economic projections and emotive entanglements that coalesce in concerns for young people, for their children, for their futures and our own. By drawing together narratives of teenage pregnancy and parenting – from the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Aotearoa New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland – we foreground processes of assemblage and re/assemblage that occur within lives that are reconfigured to greater or lesser degree by the multiplicity that is teenager + student + mother/father + daughter/son + pregnant woman/partner. In this chapter, the conception of this book and its theoretical and empirical genesis are gathered, tinkered with and acknowledged. This is followed by an introduction to the chapters to come.

Re/Assemblage

As you read this, where are you? Are you sitting at a desk or on a sofa, in an aircraft, perhaps, or on a train? Or perhaps you are lying in the bath? Another question: how many versions did this text go through? What was added and deleted along the way?

The answers to these questions are among the many complexities that don’t concern us here. We leave them out not because they are irrelevant to intellectual work in general; no doubt they are relevant in various ways,
but a single text cannot be everywhere at once. It cannot do everything all at the same time nor tell all.

— Law & Mol (2006: 6), original emphasis

In the book from which this quote is taken, John Law and Anne-Marie Mol were concerned to engage with complexity and, in particular, complexity in the context of knowledge practices. In opening their book in this way – and in our own choice of this opening quote – they aimed to trouble ‘simple’ responses to the widely acknowledged dangers of reductive simplification.

As the chapters in this book evidence, there are many shifting trajectories involved in being pregnant, and in being pregnant at an age that does not confirm with the norms of a given population, whatever those norms might be. Similarly, as any parent will confirm, there are many, shifting, trajectories involved in parenting. For those young people who contend with pregnancy, and perhaps parenting, whilst also engaged with cultural norms of completion of secondary- and, increasingly, tertiary-level education and/or employment, there are even more trajectories to contend with. For Law and Mol, this kind of multi-dimensional fluidity in a given life, and in our attempts as social scientists to understand that life, to gather knowledge that can inform policies that better support that life, go beyond a critique that one must not be reductive. Rather, they imply multi-dimensional approaches that include theoretical, empirical and methodological inquiry. It is this task that we have set ourselves in this collection.

Whatever the context, the dominant assumption – particularly from the medical disciplines – around teenage pregnancy and parenting is that it is undesirable (Cherrington & Breheny 2005); even when it is acknowledged that a pregnancy may follow from a conscious decision, that decision is in itself deemed foolish. The dominance of an expert, medical, negative discourse on teenage pregnancy has been associated with the rise of the biomedical model in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, subsequently, increasing prescription concerning issues of sexuality and fertility (Foucault 1980). Pregnancy became aligned with illness and was, therefore, established as a legitimate object of scientific intervention (Cherrington & Breheny 2005). Lawlor and Shaw (2002) note that while the management of teenage pregnancy as a problem has had more to do with social, cultural
and economic imperatives, medical and public health discourse frames the logic of how the problem of the pregnant teenager has been both amplified and redefined.

In this process of redefinition, Macvarish (2010) demonstrates shifts in how the teenage parent has already been re/assembled: a process of ‘de-moralising’ in which – in some contexts at least – diminishing concerns around the morality, or otherwise, of pre-marital sexuality have been replaced by expanding concerns of harm to any child of a teenage parent and cost to the taxpayer; the re-construction of the individual teenage mother as lacking in rational agency; the teenage father as being in need of responsibilization; and constituting both parents and their children as social threat and economic burden. In part, this process of redefinition has its roots in longer run processes of biopolitics (Foucault 1997) – active since the nineteenth century – through which individuals have come to be ‘known’, rationalized within certain discourses about life and governed by way of inducement to particular forms of subjectivity.

In the developed world at least, ‘normal’ development is now portrayed as involving a slow yet steady movement toward normatively defined adulthood. This portrayal derives from a discourse of panoptical time, a time framework that compels parents, young people, medical experts, social workers, educators, teachers, academics and policymakers ‘to attend to progress, precocity, arrest, or decline’ (Lesko 2001: 41). In Discipline and Punish (1977), Foucault had introduced the notion of the panopticon to explore a mode of total surveillance in prisons which affected the subjectivities of both the prisoner and the guard. The notion drew on Jeremy Bentham’s architectural panopticon, a model for eighteenth-century institutions:

At the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized
and constantly visible. [...] Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (Foucault 1977: 200)

As a concept, the idea of ‘panoptical time’ illustrates the ways discourses of ‘normal’ development privilege certain ways of being and problematize those ways of being that – through choice or circumstance – do not conform to what is deemed to be normal development. The development of physical and psychological stages of ‘normal’ development such as those proposed by Piaget and Erikson are both, for Nancy Lesko (2001), examples of panoptical time, as is progressive implementation of age-graded schools where the concentration of young people of the same age together in ‘stage-based’ schools resulted in decreased tolerance of variation from the standards of ‘normal’ development (Chudacoff 1989). In the context of the twenty-first century, the new normal is no longer just completion of second-level school and securing of an initial qualification. Rather, young people, and particularly young women, are deemed to be at risk if they lack a tertiary qualification.

The pregnant young woman and parenting teenager vividly and visibly speak a counter-narrative to a discourse that sees young people as childlike until they have completed university. However, that counter-narrative will, with time, vanish. Sooner or later, for one reason or another, pregnant teenagers are no longer pregnant; and teenage parents grow into non-teenage parents, being rendered ‘decent’ by the passage of time and leaving the mantle of stigmatization to rest on the next generation of pregnant and parenting teenagers. What was at once articulated as a future-threat – teenage parents, and particularly teenage mothers, routinely being told they have ruined their lives and created a future burden for others – cannot be countered in the present and is carried into the future, no matter what happens afterwards. As we write this first chapter of the collection, one of us is engaged in a Twitter discussion with a commentator who assures the world that there is no hope for children of teenage mothers and disengaged fathers. He states his focus is not about people like one of us, but, rather, the ‘early teen unwed mother compromising her independence and self-fulfilment’. We don’t want to engage in this discussion which plays out so frequently in the comments section of newspapers; but we do want to ask how that clarification makes any difference whatsoever? One of us was an
early teen when she became a parent. She was unwed. She now has four degrees, a career as an academic that has allowed her to work around the world, a daughter and son (both successful in their own fields) and four grandchildren. She doesn’t feel compromised in either independence or self-fulfilment, even if she did not follow a ‘normal’ path in getting to here. We want to ask: how much does a teenage parent have to achieve before he or she is able to extinguish this prophecy of a life ruined once and forever? Yet, all around us, teenage-parents-now-normal get on with the joys and challenges of parenting, working, learning, struggling at times, thriving at times and constructing a life in much the same way as does any other parent.

In this, the notion of re/assemblage offers potential. In acknowledging that discourses are not ‘truths’ (even if they masquerade as such), and that they are assembled in particular ways, at particular times, in particular places by particular people, with particular interests, the possibility of assembling new ‘truths’ becomes apparent. The narratives in this book – no less than other life narratives that do not appear in this book – demonstrate lines of flight that do not travel resolutely on one predetermined trajectory. In opening spaces for narratives of the ways and means by which young people construct ‘a life’ that is then re-constructed – re/assembled – through the inclusion of pregnancy and parenting, we become more attentive to how diverse these new ‘truths’ of teenage pregnancy and parenting can be. This is not simply a case of ‘add pregnancy = lose potential’: sometimes loss of existing potential, existing problematic potential, is a productive trajectory. At other times, adding pregnancy without any possibility of productive re/assemblage can be devastating. It is to this possibility that we now turn.

Compelling consequences

In December 2016 the New Yorker’s ‘Photo Booth’ columnist Moira Donegan (Donegan 2016) reviewed the photo series On Abortion, photographed by Laia Abril. This series of photographs is the first component
Annelies Kamp and Majella McSharry

of a larger project which catalogues abortion across the ages. The article makes compelling, somewhat horrifying, reading of the range of responses to pregnancies that – for whatever reason – are unsafely terminated: soap syringes, long reeds and thorns, rat poison, a forty-pound rock, a grapevine stalk, herbs, clothes hangers, steaming-hot baths, stairs, abortive pills. It also includes close-up images of some of the women who have died as a result of abortion being illegal or so ‘legally ambiguous’ that it became prohibited by effect.

One of those photos is of Savita Halappanavar, a thirty-one-year-old dentist, who died in the Republic of Ireland in 2012 and whose story raged across the front pages of the media following her death four days after she delivered a stillborn daughter. Her death was due to medical mismanagement and complications of a septic miscarriage that occurred after she was denied an abortion (Holland 2012). Sixteen weeks into her pregnancy and suffering back pain, Savita had been taken to hospital by her husband, Praveen. The following day, her waters broke. On 23 October, having been advised that miscarriage was inevitable, Savita and Praveen asked for a termination; they were advised that termination of pregnancy was not legally possible in Ireland while there was a foetal heartbeat.

Media reported that in the days that followed, midwife Ann Burke had explained to the couple that a termination was not possible because Ireland is ‘a Catholic country’; subsequently, medical staff were reported as being ‘keen to dismiss’ suggestions that a Catholic ethos ever influenced treatment decisions (Humphreys 2012). However, it was the case that under the law at the time – the Offences against the Person Act 1861 – the act of abortion was a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. Termination of pregnancy in Ireland was allowable only under certain circumstances, a result of the X case ruling of the Supreme Court of Ireland in 1992. ‘X’ was a fourteen-year-old girl who had been raped and impregnated by a neighbour. The rape was reported to Gardaí1 and in the following weeks X and her parents made the decision to abort the pregnancy. Given the law in the Republic, the termination would take place in the United Kingdom. The family advised the Gardaí of this decision as they wanted

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1 The police force of the Republic of Ireland.
to establish whether DNA collected during the procedure might aid in a prosecution. Through a chain of connections, the then Attorney General Harry Whelehan became aware of events surrounding X and, on the day the family arrived in London, he obtained an interim injunction stopping the family leaving the country or arranging a termination.

The family duly returned to Ireland, with X still carrying the child of her rapist. The action was heard on 10 and 11 February, the rape having occurred in December. After reserving his judgement for a week, Justice Costello ordered that the right to life of the unborn child should not be interfered with and restrained X from leaving Ireland for a period of nine months. Despite accepting evidence that X was suicidal, Justice Costello argued that the risk to her life was not sufficient to override the right to life of the unborn.

I am strengthened in this view by the knowledge that the young girl has the benefit of the love and care and support of devoted parents who will help her through the difficult months ahead. It seems to me, therefore, that having had regard to the rights of the mother in this case, the court’s duty to protect the life of the unborn requires it to make the order sought. (Cited in O’Carroll 2012)

The following week, X’s parents lodged a Supreme Court appeal of the decision on behalf of their daughter. The appeal argued that the risk to the life of X was not less than that of her unborn child given her overt intention to end her life rather than continue the pregnancy. The appeal was heard in March and resulted in a majority decision of four to one to set aside the High Court ruling. X and her parents were permitted to travel and immediately returned to the United Kingdom. At this point, X miscarried before the termination was performed.2

Of note, the neighbour who raped X was found guilty of unlawful carnal knowledge and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment, which was reduced on appeal. In 2002
X case a number of referendums concerning the Irish Constitution were passed, including the freedom to travel outside the state for an abortion and the freedom to obtain or make available information on abortion services. However, unless a pregnancy endangered the life of the mother, it remained against the law in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In the Republic this was despite the lack of any legislation to give guidelines as to when, and under what circumstances, a pregnancy could be terminated – a situation that Savita and Praveen would be brought face to face with some twenty years later.

This chapter, and this book, is not solely concerned with the profound consequences of unwanted pregnancy or with pregnancy that endangers the life of a mother, whatever her age, in the Republic of Ireland. The story of X and Savita (and the untold stories of the thousands of Irish women who travel outside of Ireland every year to terminate a pregnancy) acts as a both an entry point – a profoundly human entry point – to this collection and an imperative for our work given the profound consequences of the discourses that shut down our ability to productively engage with young people who are pregnant and parenting.

Rather, in this chapter we want to place these points of reference from the Republic of Ireland in comparative perspective, in the process establishing a basis for the chapters that follow – chapters that offer narratives and counter-narratives of the experience, incidence, construction and trajectory of teenage pregnancy and parenting in the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Aotearoa New Zealand. Access to abortion, or lack of it, is irrevocably connected to the

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Of the women who terminated a pregnancy in England or Wales in 2015, 3,451 gave their address as one of the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland; of these 263 (7 per cent) were aged under twenty. In the same period, 833 women gave their address as Northern Ireland; of these, ninety-nine (12 per cent) were aged under twenty (Department of Health 2016). Terminations undertaken in Scotland in 2015 for women who gave an address in the Republic are unclear, being categorized as Other/Not Known for address. Of the potential sixteen who may have been from the island of Ireland, one was aged under twenty (National Services Scotland 2016).
experience of pregnancy at whatever age it occurs: unintended pregnancy is the ‘root’ of abortion (Guttmacher Institute 2012). Just as the socio-political context of the Republic of Ireland results from a particular assemblage of religious, medical, historical and cultural discourses, so does the socio-political assemblage of the other contexts on which we focus. While we openly declare our partiality here – with Aotearoa New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland being our respective birthplaces – there is also a non-partisan rationale for these four countries featuring in this book. That rationale lies in the incidence of the topic of concern: that our countries, and the United States and United Kingdom are, in developed countries, noteworthy in their high rates of teenage pregnancy and parenting. We will sketch the nature of this noteworthiness in the following section.

Context and constructions

The contributors to this book trouble discourses that fix the ‘problem’ of teenage pregnancy and parenting, as one issue (age), one reading (medical) and one likely long-term outcome (ruination). Teenage pregnancy and parenting is not one thing, even within the experience of one teenager. It is always the case that, to some greater or lesser degree, pregnancy and parenting are full of tensions and ambivalences; young people are no different to older people in that regard. Yet young people are different in terms of managing the physical, economic, social and emotional changes associated with pregnancy and parenting whilst simultaneously managing culturally appropriate normalized expectations of transition to adulthood: finishing formal education, securing a foothold in some form of sustainable employment, forming enduring personal relationships, setting up an independent household or family unit and so on. Within this shifting assemblage, continuation of a pregnancy and, eventually, parenting, may well be beyond the capacity of the individuals; abortion may be the right choice (provided, of course, that choice is available). Postponed or part-time education may also be the right choice, or not. Teenage pregnancy
and parenting is unquestionably complex and our engagement with it should be equally complex.

Despite steady declines across all countries over the latter decades of the twentieth century (The World Bank 2016), the World Health Organization reported that in 2014, 11 per cent of all births worldwide were to young women aged fifteen to nineteen. In human terms, some sixteen million young women aged fifteen to nineteen and a further one million girls aged under fifteen gave birth, mostly in low or middle income countries. Complications associated with pregnancy and childbirth were, globally, the second highest cause of death for fifteen- to nineteen-year-old girls (World Health Organization 2014), mostly occurring in the developing world. Yet in these contexts cultural norms often include young marriage and childbearing, and pregnancies are more often intended (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers & Singh 2015). These facts offer a necessary and sombre insight into our relatively privileged position in thinking about, speaking to and experiencing teenage pregnancy and parenting within our four countries. In terms of geographical focus, the United States offers fertile ground for examining prevailing conceptions, misconceptions and assemblages of the teenage parent. In spite of a declining teenage birth rate, the rate itself remains the highest among developed countries, and the United States’ share of teenage births worldwide is substantial. On either side of the US, we focus on two geographically remote contexts: the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland in northern Europe, and New Zealand in the South Pacific. Similar in political orientation and geography but diverse in history and culture, they offer compelling contrasts of the incidence, experience and management of teenage parenting in advanced liberal democracies.

Using the most recent UNICEF Report Card (UNICEF 2001) to allow comparability at point in time, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand reported the highest global number of births to young women aged fifteen to nineteen at 52.1, 30.8 and 29.8 births per 1,000 respectively (see also Sedgh et al. 2015). The Republic of Ireland stood at 18.8 births per 1,000. Of interest here is how, in a global context where teenage birth rates have decreased, the rates in Ireland had resisted the global trend. For example, in New Zealand in 1970 the rate of births for fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds was 64.3 births per 1,000 women; in 1998...
the rate had dropped to 29.8 per 1,000 women. In the United States the rate for the same group had dropped from 69.2 births per 1,000 women to 52.1 births, while in the United Kingdom the drop was from 49.4 births to 30.8. In Ireland the rate had increased from 16.9 births per 1,000 women to 18.7 births, no doubt demonstrating a context in which the pregnant teenager has been forcibly rendered invisible.⁴

In 2015 Gilda Sedgh and colleagues examined trends since the mid-1990s for all countries with available information on pregnancy rates and outcomes among teenagers; the pregnancy rate was found to have declined since the mid-1990s in the majority of the sixteen countries where trends could be assessed (Sedgh et al. 2015). Of the twenty-one countries with complete data, the United States continued to demonstrate the highest rate (57 pregnancies per 1,000 females), followed by New Zealand (51 pregnancies per 1,000 females) and England and Wales (47 pregnancies per 1,000 females). Switzerland had the lowest rate (8 pregnancies per 1,000 females). Of those countries with reliable evidence, the proportion of teenage pregnancies that ended in abortion was highest in Sweden at 69 per cent; in the United States 26 per cent of pregnancies ended in abortion compared with 36 per cent in New Zealand. For the reasons noted earlier, data was not available for the Republic of Ireland. These point-of-time comparisons are complex and somewhat contradictory, in that they offer a dynamic picture of the diversity that is teenage pregnancy and parenting in the twenty-first century.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of ruination/salvation

Despite what you might be led to believe on the basis of media portrayals of teenage parents in the twenty-first century, there is no ‘homogenous category’ of teenage parents; the experience of pregnancy and parenting exhibits

⁴ See the chapter by Bradley in this collection for a detailed portrayal.
significant variation by gender, class, race and ethnicity (Johansson & Hammarén 2014; Luker 1996) and by location. Similarly, there is no ‘bounded discourse’ used by those who theorize these topics: ‘discursive activities [...] (their talk, practices, and institutions) are but one aspect of cultures’ myriad active and ongoing social processes of meaning production’ (Cherrington & Breheny 2005: 92). As Johansson and Hammarén note in their research, which focused on teenage fathers’ processes of constructing fatherhood in online spaces and in counterpoint to community discourses, most studies focus on/construct teenage parents as vulnerable, immature and socially disadvantaged – those who are parenting at the ‘margins of society’ (Johansson & Hammarén 2014: 366–7). Alternative discourses – those we might think of as quietly spectacular stories of young parents who, no more nor less than any other person, assemble a trajectory through education, employment and all the other markers of what is currently deemed as ‘success’ in their life world – remain less evident. Education as a field – as acknowledged in the sub-title to this book – is a central concern given the normative trajectory that expects young men and women to have, as their dominant concern, engagement in full-time education during their teenage years. As Wendy Luttrell (2003: 3) noted in the opening lines of her book on the education of pregnant teenagers in North Carolina in the United States, drawing on a quote from W. E. B. Du Bois: it is indeed a ‘strange experience’ to be a problem.

Deirdre Kelly offers one reading of the framing of this problem in work that grew from her discourse analysis of articles printed in the Canadian media between 1980 and 1992. In working with over 700 articles, Kelly was able to demonstrate how stereotypical discourses of teenage pregnancy and parenting allowed structural dynamics to be rendered invisible

5 In this we acknowledge, but are not restrained by, the work of Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the field is multiple, and defined categorically in terms such as ‘education’. While a field is self-determining, it is nonetheless subsumed within ‘the social’, which is in turn framed by various forms of power. The concept allows analysis of how agents – human agents – are positioned relationally. While this clearly speaks to notice of the symbolic positioning of teenage parents in the field of education, it is overly structured and focuses insufficient attention on non-human agents as argued by O’Hara (2000).
Conceiving a Re/Assemblage of Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting (Kelly 2000b), replaced by a ‘stigma contest’ that cohered in four forms and through which pregnant and parenting teenagers ‘must walk as they make decisions and take actions in their lives’ (Luttrell 2003: 25). In Pregnant with Meaning Deirdre Kelly (2000a) captured some of the pervasive stereotypes and their counter-narratives. For Kelly, discursive frameworks concerning the problem of teenage pregnancy and parenting offered four frames that co-exist, only two of which, at that time, found favour with media and policymakers. As a consequence, teenage pregnancy and parenting are the focus of ‘stigma wars’. The first discourse stems from bureaucratic experts who create teenage pregnancy and parenting as a certain kind of problem. It is this frame that has been and remains dominant; it is a frame that feeds off a more generalized youth-at-risk discourse, where experts are brought in to manage the risk associated with youth (Kelly 2003). This ‘wrong-girl’ frame pathologizes the individual as psychologically flawed and, as evidenced by her childbearing, incapable of making ‘good’ choices that align with normative trajectories for young people in the context of the twenty-first century. The second discourse which speaks to media and policy flows from conservative forces – economic, religious and social. Here, a ‘wrong-family’ frame looks to the immediate social context of the teenager, viewing teenage parenting as an issue of welfare dependency. In this discourse, abortion should be rejected as being out of line with conservative values, but adoption is framed as a ‘good’ choice, offering as it does a chance for the child to be raised in what is perceived as a better family, a family that is not-wrong, a family that will fit in with the dismantling of the welfare state (Lesko 1995). The third and fourth discursive frameworks stand on the opposing side of the stigma wars. The third discursive framework is articulated only in alternative media, if at all, and is identified as a ‘wrong-society’ framework. Taken up by feminists and others, this discursive framework sought to correct the blindness to structural factors such as class inequality, gender relations and diverse forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) as central to decision-making processes around pregnancy and parenting. The fourth and final framework articulated by Kelly was that of the teenager: a young person with forms of agency. Many of the chapters in this collection provide further support for the presence of
this second counter-framework: a ‘stigma-is-wrong’ discursive framework that is evoked by young parents, that is informed by their own knowledge of their lived world and the aspirations that they gather to themselves.

More recently, Breheny and Stephens (2010) adopted a similar approach to explore the discursive frameworks in regard to teenage parents within medical journals. An initial ‘public health’ discourse constructed teenage parenting as a disease that, by necessity, required a public health response. This was followed by an ‘economic’ discourse – familiar in other disciplines – where the teenage parent is presented as a financial drain on society and a compromise to the future-economic-self. An ‘ethnicity discourse’ presents next, where teenage parents are categorized by ethnicity, which of necessity and always brings with it different levels of resistance to the use of contraception. Finally, there is a somewhat disturbing ‘eugenics discourse’, which positions young parents as unsuitable parents in and of themselves by virtue of their immaturity and the consequent risk they pose for future generations. This analysis suggested that despite age being used as a blanket measure of concern, the concern – at least in this discursive space – is as much about the particular sort of young woman who is or will be a teenage parent, rather than any individual teenage parent. In a review of the quantitative research published between 1981 and 2000 in the US and the UK, Chris Bonell (2004) found a slant in the way the research clustered: in the UK teenage pregnancy was considered as a health problem, whereas in the US the issue of welfare expenditure was foregrounded, including positioning teenage pregnancy and parenting as a mediator in the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In this, Bonell highlights the powerful role of political, religious and research design factors, a point to which we will return.

However, not all accept this view of the ‘catastrophic’ consequences of teenage pregnancy and parenting. In his consideration of the evidence on the causes and consequences of teenage parenting, Simon Duncan (2007: 308) noted that there was a ‘severe problem with this official view of teenage parenting – the research evidence does not support it.’ Duncan suggests that:

Age at which pregnancy occurs seems to have little effect on future social outcomes, and many young mothers themselves express positive attitudes to motherhood, and describe how motherhood has made them feel stronger, more competent, more
connected, and more responsible. Many fathers seek to remain connected to their children. For many young mothers and fathers, parenting seems to provide the impulse to change direction, or build on existing resources, so as to take up education, training and employment.

From this perspective, the age of the parents at the time of their child’s birth does not, on its own, predict either negative or positive outcomes, either for them and their children at that point in time or as some guarantee-before-the-event of future failure. At the most basic level, this is apparent as age appropriate roles – such as the appropriate age for becoming a parent – become troubled when considered from a cross-cultural perspective. While in the United States it is estimated that 82 per cent of teenage pregnancies are unplanned, in other contexts where cultural norms support youthful marriage, much lower levels of unplanned pregnancy are reported (Finer & Zolna 2014). While evidence indicates that teenage pregnancy can have an effect on patterns of engagement in higher education and early earnings, recent research indicates these effects are actually most pronounced for those least likely to become teenage parents, given they are least prepared for a transition to parenthood (Diaz & Fiel 2016). Even when a pregnancy and subsequent parenthood are unplanned, becoming a parent can equally act as a positive force, particularly for those young women who might have already disengaged from education (Hosie 2007). The extent to which this also holds true for teenage fathers is, to some degree at least, moderated by how much involvement can be sustained if the primary relationship with the mother ends (Bunting & McAuley 2004b). However, for at least some of the young women interviewed by Hanna (2001), their pregnancy was the beginning of a metamorphosis.

Thus, debates around the causes and consequences – personal, societal and economic – of teenage pregnancy and parenting tend towards something of a dichotomy. On one side of the dichotomy is a dominant discourse that ranges from disgust and opprobrium to disappointment and fear. Media, academic and policy portrayals continue to associate teenage pregnancy and parenting with a range of behaviours and consequential disadvantages for the teenage parent (usually a teenage mother), for the child, ‘for society in general and taxpayers in particular’ (UNICEF 2001: 3). On the other side, a narrative angle has increasingly demonstrated the mediating
effect of economic, cultural and social factors on decisions taken by pregnant teenagers and the longer-term joys and consequences of those decisions (see, for example, Bell, Glover & Alexander 2013; Minnis, Marchi, Ralph, Biggs, Combellick, Arons, Brindis & Braveman 2013; Brand, Morrison & Down 2015). However, the assemblage of the life of a teenage parent and his or her child is not undertaken in a void. Rather, it happens in contexts shaped by history and divisions of gender, class, geography, race, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. These divisions matter more, or less, at different junctures in the journey towards, into and beyond parenting. They are mediated by greater, or lesser, support that also changes in its genesis and form (Bunting & McAuley 2004a, b; de Jonge 2001).

For Gilles Deleuze (cited in Rabinow 2009: 27), historical contextualization, while always critically limited, is a ‘necessary preliminary’ for understanding the collection of conditions in which a given event will, or can, unfold. For Deleuze, to understand the signification, explanation, effect and affect of any event, including events such as teenage pregnancy and parenting, one has to ‘take up’ that event; ‘to seize an event in its becoming’ (ibid. 28). Contextualization graphically demonstrates the paradox of teenage parenting: despite the normalizing of sexual activity and child-rearing outside of the constraints of marriage and significant declines in teenage birth rates across the developed world, the issue of teenage parenting has continued to be ‘amplified’ as a social problem (Macvarish 2010). The phrase ‘teenage parent’ has come to be invested with symbolic power through the gathering of dominant (deficit) discourses, stereotypical thinking, societal concerns of child welfare, economic debates on the sustainability of social protection systems, an undervaluing of domestic labour, risk thinking and ignorance of the lifeworld of the individual. In this book we intend rather to take up Luttrell’s (2003) question of what might be possible if one could turn questions of ‘judgement’ about teenage parents into questions of interest about their sense of self and identity-making; into explorations of the ways they assemble and reassemble themselves at one and the same time as they are pre-assembled by others; into considerations of what support

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6 See SmithBattle in this collection for a detailed overview of generations of research into the consequences of teenage parenting.
really looks like when the pregnant and parenting teenager considers themselves as a lifelong learner.

While emerging counter-narratives to deficit discourses have been necessary, it is our position that they are, on its own, also insufficient. From the perspective of the subject – the teenage parent – there are ambiguities in gender divisions, sexual relations, fluid identities, the kinds of ‘careers’ that are assembled and reassembled in late modern times, the available forms of education and training with which to prepare for them, and the longer term consequences all of these have for the generation of individual and familial well-being (McDermott & Graham 2005; Stokes & Wyn 2007). Processes of individualization that are argued to be central to the construction of life since the latter decades of the twentieth century have challenged dominant notions of adulthood, community, family. Yet, while adult intimacy might be fragile in a context of liquid love (Bauman 2003), the mother/child relationship is ‘the last remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship’ (Beck 1992: 118), one that teenage mothers – no less than any mother – can at times embrace completely (McDermott & Graham 2005), at other times, less completely (Kamp & Kelly 2014). As Bauman (2003: 42) notes, the enormity of the parenting ‘decision’ is not one to be taken lightly:

In this quote, Bauman is reflecting on the experience of parenting in general. However, his commentary on the high level of risk and prolific source of anxiety and fear associated with the parenting decision cannot but be compounded when combined with the generalized disdain directed at teenage parenting and the manufactured anxiety borne by young people in
transition from school to work in the complex context of the twenty-first century. Here, we are leaving aside any sustained consideration of global uncertainties such as intercultural and interreligious relations subsequent to a decade of a so-called ‘War on Terror’, the election of Donald Trump and the tensions associated with the mass movements of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants. These contextual factors are, unquestionably, acting in the shaping of life assemblages by teenage parents and their children in no less a fashion than they contribute to the shaping of the life assemblages of any of us. However, our intent is for a more modest engagement with the global; for reflection on the pre/dis/re/assemblage of the pregnant and parenting teenager in the context of processes of neo-vocationalization (Tennant & Yates 2003; Grubb & Lazerson 2005), increasing credentialism (Bernardi & Ballarino 2014) and individualization (Beck 1999), the emergence of a global precariat (Standing 2011) and a globalized, technological and cultural environment increasingly marked by a hyper-commodified, hyper-real sexuality (Renold & Ringrose 2016). We respond in the negative to Lesko’s (2001: 147) question: ‘shall we continue to make school-aged [parents] visible only as disordered chronologies and sexual deviants?’

The gathering that follows

Chapter 2 engages with the pivotal conflict for pregnant and parenting teenagers: the tension between their new status and their anticipated role in education. In this, Annelies Kamp offers an autobiographical narrative, and gathers other narratives published in memoir and captured in research to explore the diverse assemblages of parent-student that have occurred in Aotearoa New Zealand over time. The chapter adopts a critical perspective to read across the grain of the dominant policy discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand considering the extent to which specialist educational support for teenage parents has the potential to nurture, incubate and isolate.

Majella McSharry’s work is concerned with the embodied experience of teenage pregnancy and beyond. Representations of female beauty, DIY
biographies and in-control bodies abound in popular culture, and target, in particular, teenage girls. Whether a teenage pregnancy emerges by design or by accident, the impact of the growing foetus presents an array of corporeal challenges including nausea, dizziness, fatigue, breast tenderness, frequent urination, mood swings and in most cases unprecedented weight gain. In a Western context obsessed with healthful slenderness and the intolerability (yet prevalence) of obesity, Chapter 3 explores how a teenage mother might negotiate the space that is her own body during pregnancy.

In Chapter 4, Lee SmithBattle reflects on her extensive longitudinal work in the United States to discuss teenage mothering as a ‘fertile ground’ for efforts to trouble the dominant paradigms of teenage pregnancy and parenting. When pre-pregnancy factors are controlled for, teenage mothers in the United States do about as well as other mothers from similar backgrounds; this suggest that avoiding pregnancy would make little difference in improving the lives of many teenage mothers (and their children) without addressing the structural inequalities that precede teenage births. While these studies suggest that becoming a parent can be ‘protective’ and that teenage mothers are often resilient in facing adversities, studies also document the many constraints that curtail young parents’ aspirations, including the lack of family and partner support, ongoing material hardships and poorly resourced and understaffed programmes that become an additional burden and source of stigma and trauma.

Using in-depth interviews with twenty-six teenage fathers in the United States, in Chapter 5 Jennifer Beggs Weber gathers together narratives and literature to consider how these young men negotiate the stigmas and expectations of teenage pregnancy, responsibility and fatherhood within the bounds of masculinity, social class and youth that are deemed culturally appropriate. Jennifer’s research illustrates that a dichotomous approach to teenage pregnancy and parenting is insufficient to capture the complexity of the assemblage. Teenage fathers occupy/perform multiple subject positions which are further complicated by class structures. The chapter suggests that understanding adolescent fatherhood as an assemblage – one that combines notions of cultural expectations and definitions of traditional fatherhood with the resources and experiences of social class – is a more productive way to take interest in, and support, the lives of teenage fathers and their children.
Irish television and the assemblage of personal narratives of teenage pregnancy and abortion are the focus of Chapter 6. Drawing on work originally undertaken by Áine Ryan and Debbie Ging, the chapter draws on research which examined the presence and absence of personal narratives of crisis pregnancy from specific texts which aired on Ireland’s Public Service Broadcaster, Raidió Téilifís Éireann (RTÉ), including *The Teens’ Midwife* (2013) and *The Abortion Debate* (1994). These texts reveal if, and how, societal attitudes towards teenage pregnancy and abortion in Ireland have evolved over a twenty-two-year period.

In Chapter 7 Ciara Bradley establishes the socio-historical construction of teenage pregnancy and single parenting in the Republic of Ireland. Despite decades of economic progress and development that have culminated in a more secular and inclusive Ireland, the stigmatization and social exclusion of teenage parents persists. Bradley focuses solely on mothers and uses a retrospective lens to chart how Ireland’s religious and political history has socially constructed teenage motherhood in ways that predetermine how it continues to be conceptualized and responded to today, not least in terms of social and economic policy.

The counter discourses of young Irish Traveller parents frames the contribution by Fiona McGaughey. In Chapter 8, Fiona takes up the narratives of a particular community within the Republic of Ireland to trouble normative discussions of teenage pregnancy and parenting. In the context of contemporary Ireland, Traveller culture is changing, but adherence to patriarchy and pro-natalism remains strong. There is an abiding emphasis on chastity for Traveller girls, young marriage and childbearing; in this community within Ireland there has not been a diminishing concern with pre-marital sexuality. Adopting a feminist cultural relativist approach, Fiona argues that the role of Traveller women and girls could be re/assembled, but the impetus for that must come from Traveller women and girls.

In Chapter 9 Kyla Ellis-Sloan draws on research from the south-east of the United Kingdom to engage with issues of decision-making of young women post-pregnancy. Two decisions frame the focus of the work: the decision by teenage mothers to return (or not) to education and the decision to remain in, or leave, their relationship with the baby’s father. As a stark portrayal of the lived experience of the stigma struggles, the chapter
highlights the implications for teenage mothers given the risk – perhaps even the likelihood – of being further defined as a problem in the persistently neoliberal context of developed Western democracies which value certain attributes, decisions and behaviours over others.

The United Kingdom remains the focus in Chapter 10, where Pam Alldred and Nick J. Fox explore teenage pregnancy, sexualities education and sexual citizenship using a new materialist toolkit of assemblages, affects and micropolitics. The chapter draws together empirical data and diverse literatures to consider the process of sex education in the UK. Alldred and Fox conclude by assessing the wider implications of these assemblages for sexual citizenship – in the context of the continuing emphasis upon educational approaches to address issues of non-normative sexualities including teenage pregnancy and parenting, and the opportunities for an alternative nomadic citizenship of becoming and lines of flight.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, parenting students are supported through three main mechanisms in remaining in, or re-engaging in, formal structures of education. Students can study with the Te Kura – the Correspondence School. They can also look to remain in mainstream second-level schools. Alternatively, they can enrol in one of twenty-three Teen Parent Units attached to mainstream schools across the country. In Chapter 11, Jenny Hindin Miller presents a finely woven story of the emergence over time of Teen Parent Units into the educational landscape. Jenny’s korero (narrative) shares the philosophies – feminist, spiritual and Indigenous – that underpinned the concept of funded, purpose-built schools which adopted a holistic approach and supported parenting students in their journeys to reassemble their lives as student-parent-whanau-citizen.

In Chapter 12, Keith Tuffin, Gareth Rouch and Karen Frewin revisit earlier research with teenage fathers in Aotearoa New Zealand to consider whether more recent research has challenged their exploratory findings. The authors note that the lack of social science research into the experience of teenage fatherhood has encouraged myths and negative stereotypes as much in Aotearoa as it has elsewhere. The chapter draws on extended interviews with teenage fathers in Aotearoa, taking a psychological lens to illustrate the challenges and pressures for these young fathers engaging with contemporary articulations of masculinity. The chapter also illuminates
the psychologically positive aspects of fatherhood as transformative, an opportunity for intergenerational repair and the construction of a ‘better future’ for their children. In closing, the collection we offer a Coda in which we read across the preceding chapters to consider the possibilities of a new sociology of teenage pregnancy and parenting, one that makes room not only for the trials, but also the triumphs, and the fluid movement between the two.

Conclusion

Our intention in this book is to contribute to an important current of work that has, since the latter decades of the twentieth century, sought to speak back to dominant (usually medicalized) discourses concerning the fate of the pregnant and parenting teenager. While pregnant teenagers in the developed world do not face the appalling odds faced by young women in the developing world that we acknowledged at the opening of this chapter, they do nonetheless commonly face appalling realities. These realities include the enduring stigma as ‘stupid sluts’ or ‘deadbeat boys’; unnecessary psychological distress in the face of ambiguous access to safe, local abortion where their choice (either free or forced by circumstances) is to terminate an unwanted pregnancy; avoidable complexities in accessing education, health and seeking employment and, perhaps most damaging of all, a frequent silencing of voice as others – experts, statisticians, policymakers, moralists, tabloid media – speak for and about who they are and who they and their children might become. Who is a teenager – particularly one who is pregnant, has impregnated, or is parenting – to be able to say anything of worth about anything at all? The chapters that follow respond to this challenge.
Bibliography


