

Paper #1

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### Introduction

This paper will deal with the characteristics and problems of teenage mothers, and how the two theorists Albert Bandura and Erik H. Erikson would have interpreted them as a population.

In our days teenage pregnancies are by far nothing unusual. But it is surprising to see how many adolescent girls choose to carry out and keep their baby, although there are other options available, such as abortion or giving the child to adoptive parents. In our society, teenage pregnancy is in general an unwelcome event. Most people see a lot of dangers and negative effects in a child having a child, they think for example that a young mother will not be able to raise the child appropriately, or that the young mother forsakes her own future etc. It is up to every individual to decide for themselves what they think about this topic, if they agree with these concerns or not. But are there psychological explanations why a young girl decides to become a mother? Some explanations will surely range in the realm of sociology, but I will put the main emphasis on the psychological aspects. Why do teenage mothers choose to keep the child? What might have led to such an early pregnancy in the first place? What consequences does the decision to keep the child have on their future lives, what impacts? All these are

questions that will be dealt with in this paper, I will discuss them from the specific theorist's point of view.

### Erik Erikson

Erik H. Erikson called himself a Freudian but he had indeed a very different approach towards the development of personality than Freud. He differs with Freud in two important points, the first is that he did not put total emphasis on the psychosexual development of the human being. He took into account the effects that culture, history and society have on the development of a person. Another big difference between Freud and Erikson is, that Erikson's theory includes the whole life cycle and does not end after young adulthood, he realized that personality changes can occur at any point of a person's life, even at an old age. He divided the human life into 8 stages of development. Inherent to these 8 stages is that they all postulate a crisis in the personality development that has to be overcome to progress successfully into the next stage.

The stages that will be most interesting for the topic of teenage mothers are mainly the stages 1 to 5, which cover the time from birth to adolescence.

Stage one lasts from birth till the age of 1 or 1,5 years. In this stage the most basic element for the development of personality is laid – it is the formation of Trust or Mistrust towards others, but also from the child toward itself. The trust is built up, or deteriorated, mainly through the infant's relationship to his mother

and the trust of being taken care of by her. If this stage is completed successfully the child will in later life have a solid trust in other people and also feel trustworthy about himself. In correspondence to this stage one could interpret that teenage mothers may have an overly developed trust in mankind. They are used to being taken care of which makes them naïve and believe that the father of their baby will take care of them. That is why they decide to keep and raise the baby.

Stage two covers the development up to the age of 3 years. The basic conflict here is Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt. It is similar to Freud's anal stage, the main difference to the first stage is that the child learns to have control over the own body, he learns to control his impulses. This stage's development is the source of free will if the children are able to gain a sense of self-control without losing their self-esteem. If the parents are overly rigid in this period the child might develop a feeling of shame for not being of "any good", and doubt in his own abilities. I do not think that the pregnancy of teenage girls can be related to this stage.

Stage number three on the other hand is very likely to have its part in the pregnancy of adolescent girls. In stage three, which is the age between 3 and 6 years, the conflict is between Initiative vs. Guilt. The result of a successful development of stage three is a realistic sense of ambition and purpose. The children learn in stage three to be more independent. They are very active, start asking about the goings-on in the world and learn to be sociable with their peers. The children try to imitate others, especially their parents. In this phase they have

also, according to the Freudian basement of Erikson's theory, hidden fantasies about their other sex parent and envy the same sex parent - these fantasies can lead to feelings of guilt. People that are stuck in this phase may be unable to make decisions, their ambitions are low and they have little will and trust to achieve something in life. It is therefore possible that a girl who had problems in this stage of development is unable to change something about her situation upon facing pregnancy. She might be unable to decide how to go on and allows others to make the decision for her (like the father of the child who does not want her to have an abortion or give the child away). Or she waits too long with making up her mind till options like abortion are ruled out. Another explanation might as well be that a girl stuck in phase three is content with becoming a mother – that way she can avoid future career problems. She has no will to make a career in the business world or the like, and therefore is not unwilling to stay at home and be solely a mother. This seems to be the 'easier' way, which seems to require less ambitions and strong will than a typical career life.

Stage four now is dominated by the conflict of Industry vs. Inferiority. This stage covers the development between the ages of 6 and 12 and is characterized by the challenge of learning new skills. The children go to school and learn that it is pleasurable to achieve goals, to perform well or even perfect on a certain task. If this stage is passed through successfully, the child will later on be assertive, able to solve problems and will take pride in accomplishing goals. Children who do not perform well or perfect, who are not interested in learning new skills are at risk to feel inferior and without positive achievements

they might feel inferior all through life. A girl who is not doing well at school and feels inferior to her peers might decide to keep her child when she is pregnant because that seems to be a way out of her inferiority. She cannot accomplish as much as her peers, but she has at least been able to make a boy interested in her and now she becomes a mother. She might as well think that she will not be able to make it in school anyway, so she might as well become a mother at early age and maybe succeed in that new duty.

Stage five is the developmental stage of adolescence. In this stage the conflict is between Identity and Role Confusion. Adolescents try to find out who and what they are. They are allowed to experiment with different roles and kinds of identities, in order to find themselves. They rely heavily on their peers and often identify through their peers, a group of friends, a clique, a gang etc. If they pass this stage successfully they have a well- developed sense of identity, and they are able to fulfill the various roles given to them by society (such as being a sibling, a child, a peer, a group leader etc). But on their way to become this “own self” most adolescents experience confusion. If they fail to develop goals, to find out what and who they want to be in the future they might never overcome this crisis in their whole life and will never be sure of their own identity. It is also in this stage when sexual identities are developed and the first sexual contacts are experienced. A girl who is overly secure in her role as a girl might be as well very determined to become a mother, to have her role in society as a mother. She might be too sure about her future role and goals in life. In this stage of life adolescents undergo a lot of changes and tomorrow’s goals might very well differ

extremely from today's. What I mean is, that she might be very sure that she wants to be a mother when she makes the decision to keep the child. But at a different point, later on in adolescence she may realize that that was not true at all, that she was not yet prepared to be a mother or not able to be a good mother, etc.

Another possible explanation could be that the pregnant 16- year old is influenced by her choice of a role model. During the fifth stage, while trying to find their own identity, adolescents base their search on adult mentors. If this pregnant girl has chosen a woman as her role model who herself had a child at a very young age, the girl might be convinced that that is the right way for her to become more like her mentor. Or it seems at least to be the right choice to have the baby at that point of life, because that was a successful way for the mentor at that age, too.

The impact this early pregnancy has on the further development of the young mother is obvious. She will not progress in the "normal" way through the last stages of the personality development. To become mother at a young age and have the responsibility for a child makes it basically impossible to experiment as much as any other adolescent can during the fifth stage. Her identity will now always be dominated by being a mother, her social role is fixed, at least to a certain degree, she has lost the flexibility that is characteristic for adolescence. Motherhood might also affect her passing through the sixth stage. Instead of experiencing her newly found (or in that case maybe still developing) self with a partner who shares certain interests and who she can develop a true and

intimate love with, she is confined to share a big part of her life with the baby's father. This being stuck to the father might decrease her ability to develop herself further and might as well reduce her chances of finding another man to actually experience an "adult" love with.

### Albert Bandura

Albert Bandura is a social cognitive theorist. His main emphasis is the concept of Vicarious Learning – he believes that personality is shaped by observations of other people's performing a task. He also says that behavior is determined not only by external factors but as well by the person's thoughts, expectations, hopes etc. – the cognitive structures, our "self". Therefore behavior is influenced by both internal and external factors. By observing the environment and interpreting the observed behavior correctly, the individual can form expectations and anticipate outcomes of a certain behavior. If a girl sees a person being praised for having done something in a certain way, she will remember that reaction to the performed task and, in expectation of the same outcome, might consider acting in the same way as the other person had done when she is in a similar situation. Bandura proposes that a person's behavior can be changed through observing an outcome, internalizing this outcome and make it one's own knowledge: it is this knowledge that changes the behavior and not a direct reinforcement of an action.

Bandura's concept of Vicarious Learning, learning through observation, is therefore learning from a model: a person forms him- or herself in such a way as

to become more like the observed model. It is an active decision to perform in a way that has been observed before in the model. In the case of our 16- year old pregnant teenager, the model for her behavior could be a family member, for example an older sister who also got pregnant at an early age. She has seen her sister being very happy and fulfilled as a mother, enjoying motherhood and loving her child dearly. In this case she might decide to follow her sister's footsteps when she discovers that she is pregnant. Her sister is so happy and been rewarded with so much love through motherhood – it cannot be a wrong decision to do the same, can it?

A reinforcement for this modeled behavior can also be that her sister has not only become fulfilled and happy since she had her child, but she has also been praised by her own mother and other family members for having made the correct decision in having the baby. To see the sister rewarded in so many ways can increase the likelihood of the 16- year old to make the same decision, to go the same way her sister did because she expect the same reward, the same outcome for herself if she does so.

But, according to Bandura, not only the expectation of the same outcome makes people base their behavior on a model. Other characteristics like similarity in age, status, competence etc between model and observer also affect the modeling. This makes it even more likely that for example the behavior of a sister can be the model for a younger sister's behavior. They have the same family background, the same social status, and that usually also brings with it the same amount of power – ergo, the situation is very similar. If the bigger sister was



successful with her behavior the likelihood is big that the younger sister expects to be as successful with the same or a similar behavior.

Another influencing factor is the character of the observer. If the observer is a rather dependent person, a person with low self-esteem, or low self-confidence, he or she is more likely to imitate the behavior of a supposedly “stronger”, more successful and more decided person. If our 16- year old girl is dependent and insecure, and has maybe even been successful in copying another person’s behavior before, she might follow the example of another girl she knows. Maybe this other girl is successful in life, gets what she wants and manages her life pretty well – she might be a role model for our girl, who is never sure what to do and how to decide. If her friend, who is strong and successful, decides to have a baby or to keep her baby this might be the right way for her life, too.

A behavior is also influenced by the acting person’s self-efficacy, which is the expectation about how one will be able to perform a certain behavior. If the self-efficacy is positive, one believes that a certain behavior can be enacted successfully. Self-efficacy influences whether we will try to perform a certain behavior at all, how decidedly we will try to perform it, and how the outcome of this behavior will affect our future behavior. Now, let’s say a girl at the age of 16 has learned from stories or from observing that most women in her environment have been successful and happy with becoming mothers at a young age, and that they have managed to be even good and caring mothers. This girl believes that she can do it as well as these other women, maybe even better. She is

convinced that she is able to be a good mother and that she wants to have a baby. She has always felt that she wanted to have children, she feels passionately about it. All these factors provide for a high self-efficacy that makes it very likely that she will become pregnant and will keep her child to raise it herself. She is expecting to be a mother, and a good one that is, and therefore she acts in a way to make this more likely to happen.