

Damned if you do: Culture, identity, privilege, and teenage childbearing in the United States.

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Abstract

Why is the broad American public disapproving of urban African American teen mothers and unaware that the scientific evidence on the consequences of teen childbearing, per se, is equivocal? I focus on the links between culture, identity, and privilege. I argue that the broader society is selective in its attention to the actual life chances of urban African Americans and how these chances shape fertility-timing norms, in part, because this selective focus helps maintain the core values, competencies, and privileges of the dominant group. Delayed childbearing *is* an adaptive practice for European Americans and an *intensely* salient goal they have for their children. Yet early fertility-timing patterns may constitute adaptive practice for African American residents of high-poverty urban areas, in no small measure because they contend with structural constraints that shorten healthy life expectancy. European Americans put their cultural priorities into action ahead

of the needs of African Americans and employ substantial resources to disseminate the social control message meant for their youth that teenage childbearing has disastrous consequences. Their ability to develop a more nuanced understanding of early childbearing is limited by their culturally mediated perceptions. Thus, cultural dominance can be perpetuated by well-meaning people consciously dedicated to children's well-being, social justice, and the public good. The entrenched cultural interdependence of and social inequality between European and African Americans leads African Americans to be highly visible targets of moral condemnation for their fertility behavior, and also sets up African Americans to pay a particularly high political, economic, psychosocial, and health price.



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Keywords

Teenage pregnancy; Culture; Racial inequalities in health; Urban; Poverty; Family; USA

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