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Career Intervention Considerations for Unwed Young Black Mothers in the United States

Diandra J. Prescod and Andrew P. Daire

Teen pregnancy among unwed young Black mothers is still an issue of concern in the United States. Black teen mothers face educational, economic, and career/vocational challenges. This article discusses integrating Gottfredson's (1981) career theory and the Outline for Cultural Formulation (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) in career development counseling with young Black mothers.

Keywords: teen pregnancy, Gottfredson's career theory, Outline for Cultural Formulation, career development

Teen pregnancy continues to be a significant topic of discussion pertaining to teenage girls in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found declining teenage birthrates (see Ventura & Hamilton, 2011). From 2007 to 2009, the teenage birthrate declined by 8%, reaching a historic low at 39.1 births per thousand for teenage girls 15 to 19 years old (Ventura & Hamilton, 2011). There was a significant decline in births across all races and ethnic groups. For Black teenage girls 15 to 17 years old, the CDC reported birthrates dropped from 86.1 per thousand in 1991 to 32.1 per thousand in 2009. In comparison, the reported birthrate decreased from 69.2 to 41.0 for Hispanic teenage girls and from 23.6 to 11.0 for White teenage girls. However, these findings still suggest concern for Black teen mothers in particular. For Black teenage girls 18 to 19 years old, the birthrate decreased from 162.2 to 97.5 in the same years (Ventura & Hamilton, 2011). Birthrates for Hispanic teens decreased from 155.5 to 114.0, and birthrates for White teens decreased from 70.6 to 46.1. The decline in the incidence of teen pregnancy among Black teenage girls shows good progress, but the numbers still remain high. With the amount of programs implemented at various schools in the United States, these results are discouraging.

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Various programs, many funded with federal dollars, implement and evaluate programs to increase teen knowledge on sexual education and contraception. The CDC funds programs through the Community Coalition Partnership Programs for the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy (Shearer, Gyaben, Gallagher, & Klerman, 2005). Other programs include the Postponing of Sexual Involvement Program and the Youth Asset Development Program (Yampolskaya, Brown, & Vargo, 2004). Programs have also been implemented to educate young people on the importance of completing their high school education. These programs include a home visitation model intervention and a hospital-based intervention for pregnant and parenting teens (Key, Gebregziabher, Marsh, & O'Rourke, 2008; Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002). The Mothers of Mount Sinai, a program that helps teens finish their education and find jobs, shows promise in changing the direction of teen mothers' lives, with 45% of the young women achieving financial self-sufficiency; in addition, 74% did not become pregnant for a second time (Swedish, Rothenberg, Fuchs, & Rothenberg, 2010).

Despite these programs, young women, particularly young Black women, continue to give birth to children and drop out of school (Key et al., 2008). Young Black mothers face career and vocational challenges that hinder furthering their studies either in college or in specific vocational pursuits. Teenage mothers, less likely to pursue higher education, make less than their counterparts who delay childbearing and are more likely to receive public assistance (Hoffman, 2008). Although programs exist to educate teens on sex education, teen pregnancy, and the importance of completing schooling, research shows that young women continue to become pregnant and not finish school. The resulting economic challenges decrease their financial ability to effectively raise a family when childbearing is not delayed and when education is not completed.

A gap in research exists related to culturally competent career development counseling with young Black mothers. This article aims to identify the challenges for young Black mothers and to provide information about culturally sensitive career development counseling to these young women. Specifically, we provide information about (a) challenges faced by unwed young Black mothers and (b) culturally sensitive methods of career counseling. Furthermore, we introduce the integration of Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise and the Outline for Cultural Formulation (OCF) from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., *DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as a method to help young Black mothers with career development counseling.

EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES FACED BY PREGNANT TEENS

Unwed young mothers who do not delay childbearing face a number of challenges, including educational, economic, career, and vocational challenges. Graduating high school poses a challenge, and when teen mothers do not

finish high school, economic challenges follow (Gyamfi, Brooks-Gunn, & Jackson, 2008; Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002). Julian and Kominski (2011) found that when young mothers do not finish school, it is difficult for them to find good-paying jobs, and career/vocational challenges arise. Previous primary and secondary interventions had aimed to increase these young mothers' graduation rates, increase their knowledge on risks associated with sex, and lower subsequent births (e.g., Casserly, Carpenter, & Halcon, 2001; Key et al., 2008; Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002; Yampolskaya et al., 2004). These young women see themselves being sexually active, if not already, and see themselves having children and families at a young age (Yampolskaya et al., 2004). They also encounter difficulties finishing school and moving on to higher education (Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002). However, in return, teen pregnancy creates career and vocational challenges for young teen mothers. Findings from the aforementioned studies support our claim that teen mothers need competent career counseling services.

CAREER AND VOCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY PREGNANT TEENS

Black teen mothers face career and vocational challenges that are hard to escape. Becoming successful in career endeavors takes much more than having the motivation to do well. Teen mothers have the motivation to finish school, but this becomes increasingly difficult for them when they have to include child care in their expenses (Smith-Battle, 2007). Many young Black mothers worry about child care and various expenses that cause them to put their career and vocational aspirations on hold. Many factors, including access to a career mentor, living with parents, and current academic success, are all essential to young Black mothers who feel encouraged to have career/vocational success (Hellenga, Aber, & Rhodes, 2002). Although teen mothers do not always reach career and vocational success because of various circumstances, many of them have the motivation to pursue these goals. Teen mothers have high aspirations for themselves, and when asked to give details about how they see their future, they describe this well. They see themselves as being married, being financially stable, and having careers that will ensure stability for themselves and for their family (Klaw, 2008).

There are strong correlations between education and earnings (Julian & Kominski, 2011; Klaw, 2008). When young people pursue higher education, they are more likely to gain better employment and earn a higher income during their lifetimes. Zhan and Pandey (2004) studied the benefits of single mothers pursuing higher education. Young mothers who earn a college degree make over \$12,000 more in labor income. In addition, it is 9 times more likely for these young women to live above the poverty level. The U.S. Census Bureau states that those without a high school diploma working less than full time earn

around \$11,000 per year, compared with full-time individuals with professional degrees who make around \$100,000 per year (see Julian & Kominski, 2011).

Pursuing higher education ensures that individuals make more throughout a lifetime than individuals who do not seek higher education. Although young Black mothers may have the motivation to move on to higher education, economic struggles can become a hindrance (Klaw, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Counseling services would benefit young Black mothers, which is why it would be beneficial to consider a model that addresses developmental growth along with multicultural issues. Gottfredson's (1981) career theory addresses developmental growth, whereas the OCF from the *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) addresses multicultural issues. Using both models for career counseling with young Black mothers would be a good way to address many of their needs.

GOTTFREDSON'S CAREER THEORY AND THE OCF FOR BLACK TEEN MOTHERS

It is important for young Black mothers to take advantage of career development counseling services in order for them to get back on track after having a child. Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise, also referred to as Gottfredson's career theory, attempts to describe how career choices develop in children and examines the development of individuals' view of the occupational choices available to them (see also Lee, 2012; Zunker, 2008). The *DSM-IV* includes the OCF to aid clinicians in applying the *DSM-IV* to clients in a multicultural setting (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 897–898). Combining Gottfredson's theory and the OCF model provides counselors with a more comprehensive perspective when working with teen mothers in a career counseling environment.

Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise explains how people are drawn to particular occupations in early childhood (Cochran, Wang, Stevenson, Johnson, & Crews, 2011; Zunker, 2008). Development occurs through four stages: orientation to size and power (ages 3–5 years), orientation to sex roles (ages 6–8 years), orientation to social valuation (ages 9–13 years), and orientation to internal unique self (ages 14 years and older). The first stage is a concrete one, during which sex roles aid in creating a sense of self. In the second stage, gender development is significant to growth. Social class and "self-in-situation" affect work preferences in the third stage. In the fourth stage, sex roles, social class, and self-awareness have the greatest influence on career/vocational aspirations. Gottfredson's theory progresses from concrete to complex as a child matures. In addition, self-concept is a central theme to this theory. Self-concept, as explained by Gottfredson, is influenced by socioeconomic background, values, place in society, and gender. This theory recognizes external barriers that limit a

person's access to certain goal and career/vocational aspirations (Gottfredson, 1981; Lee, 2012; Zunker, 2008).

Three other aspects that influence career choice, according to Gottfredson's (1981) theory, are social space, circumscription, and compromise. Social space involves creating a list of acceptable careers paths, and circumscription is the narrowing of these choices. Compromise is adjusting goals and aspirations to fit external circumstances, such as access to education and family responsibilities (Gottfredson, 1981; Lee, 2012; Zunker, 2008).

Ivers, Milsom, and Newsome (2012) explained the importance of using Gottfredson's (1981) model as a way to help Latino students attain school success. Ivers and colleagues believed that the high dropout rate among Latino youth can be explained by premature circumscription, early compromise, and perceived inaccessibility to careers. Because of their ethnicity and sex, some children automatically rule out certain occupations (Gottfredson, 2005). Cochran et al. (2011) examined the relationship between adolescent occupational aspirations and career success during midlife. Socioeconomic status and ability influence the formation of occupational aspirations. In addition, because of limited access, children will choose attainable careers that they have seen chosen by their family members or friends. By addressing these issues, helping professionals can provide more effective assistance to youth with regard to career choices.

Black teen mothers face external realities at young ages that strongly influence their career/vocational goals. While parenting young children, these teen mothers face educational and economic challenges that narrow their choices of career paths. Self-concept, as described by Gottfredson (1981), is essential to career/vocational aspirations, and these challenges can create a negative concept of self for young Black mothers. Their new identity as a young unwed mother has an impact on self-concept and self-in-situation. This creates a need for culturally sensitive career counseling for this population.

The *DSM-IV's* OCF (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) consists of five different components:

1. *Cultural identity of the individual*: asking about the client's ethnic and cultural identity, what language the client speaks, and the client's involvement in her or his original culture and present culture.
2. *Cultural explanations of the individual's illness*: identifying how the client and the client's community and family perceive/explain the illness, symptoms as described by the client, and previous experiences with mental health care or other professional care.
3. *Cultural factors related to psychosocial environment and levels of functioning*: identifying the functioning levels of social stressors and accessible social supports, including religious network and family support.

4. *Cultural elements of the relationship between the individual and the clinician*: noticing differences between the client and clinician (i.e., culture and social status) and problems that may arise because of the differences (i.e., diagnosis and treatment).
5. *Overall cultural assessment for diagnosis and care*: evaluating how cultural considerations influence diagnosis and care.

Shaffer and Steiner (2006) explained the importance of referencing the OCF when working with Latino adolescents with conduct disorder. One cannot understand the Latino adolescent with a conduct disorder without understanding the adolescent's cultural perspective and background. Similarly, Byars-Winston (2010) explored the importance of using the OCF when counseling Black clients with regard to career.

When a counselor is providing Black clients with career counseling, it is important to keep in mind the Black culture and the environment of which the client is a part (Byars-Winston, 2010). Black individuals partly make career decisions based on what they see in their environment. If their parent did not finish school or move on to higher education, there is a chance that the child will not do so as well. Additionally, many individuals in the Black community feel a strong bond to their family and will base their career decisions on the need to provide for their family (Gushue & Whitson, 2006).

Considering the growing diversity in the United States, implementing the OCF in counseling increases understanding and allows counselors to work with their clients more effectively. The OCF "teaches clinicians not only *how* to elicit culturally relevant clinical material, but also exposes them over time to the *content* of many cultural perspectives from diverse patients and their families, thus increasing caregivers' fund of cultural knowledge" (Lewis-Fernandez & Diaz, 2002, p. 292). Using this outline in career development counseling for young Black mothers has the potential to better serve these mothers and increase resource-seeking behavior.

Integrating Gottfredson's (1981) career theory with the OCF (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) for young Black mothers involves using a similar structure created by Byars-Winston (2010), but adding in the context of being a young Black mother. There are five components of the OCF for Black clients: (a) self and cultural identity: looking through the Black veil, (b) self and cultural concept of career problems, (c) self in cultural context, (d) cultural dynamics in the therapeutic relationship, and (e) overall cultural assessment for diagnosis and care (Byars-Winston, 2010). We suggest translating the five components to the following:

1. Self and cultural identity: being a young Black mother
2. Self and cultural concept of career problems
3. Self in cultural context

4. Cultural dynamics in the therapeutic relationship
5. Overall cultural assessment for diagnosis

This first component, self and cultural identity: being a young Black mother, involves the change in identity that occurs when a young Black mother gives birth. Not only is she female and Black, but she is now also a mother. She becomes a member of another group: teen mothers. With this aspect being such a large part of her life, she has no choice but to identify with being a young Black mother. The larger picture shows that she now becomes a young mother who is a minority. Gottfredson's (1981) concept of self-in-situation involves a person realizing where he or she is in his or her life, and for the young teen this translates to being a young Black mother. Being part of a new population—young Black mothers—incorporates self-in-situation. There are more teen mothers among minority groups, so when this occurs, they become part of the statistical research of teen motherhood (Ventura & Hamilton, 2011).

The second and third components, self and cultural concept of career problems and self in cultural context, involve examining challenges faced by teen mothers to move on to higher education and the economic struggles they encounter. Self-concept, as described in Gottfredson's (1981) theory, is a significant part of the second component (Zunker, 2008). Self-concept of the young Black mother is formed considering her circumstance: raising a child, facing educational difficulties, and facing economic difficulties (Gyamfi et al., 2008; Key et al., 2008; Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002). Recognizing the self-concept of the young Black mother leads to a better understanding of the cultural concept of career problems and the self in a cultural context.

The fourth and fifth components, cultural dynamics in the therapeutic relationship and overall cultural assessment for diagnosis, do not require a different translation but rather are guidelines to keep in mind when working with young Black mothers. Acknowledging differences between the counselor and the client is important. If differences are not acknowledged, problems may arise that can impede the therapeutic process. When diagnosing a client and creating a plan of care, counselors must consider and be sensitive to a client's culture.

CONCLUSION

Integrating Gottfredson's (1981) career theory and the *DSM-IV's* OCF (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) for young Black mothers is important because young Black women have the highest rates of teen birth in the United States (Ventura & Hamilton, 2011). Organizations can use Gottfredson's career theory and the OCF to better understand these young mothers and the lives they lead. This has not yet been researched; therefore, future research is needed to study the effectiveness of Gottfredson's career theory and the OCF with reference to young Black mothers.

As a minority group with their own needs, young Black mothers could benefit greatly from receiving career/vocational counseling from a counselor who is culturally aware of what challenges they encounter. Increasing counselors' use and knowledge of culturally sensitive career counseling could potentially have a positive impact on the lives of unwed young Black mothers and could change the way the Black community views mental health services. Using Gottfredson's theory and the OCF model benefits counselors, young Black mothers, their children, and the Black community.

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