A Process of Ethical Subjectivation in Forming Subjectivities in Teenage Mothers

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Abstract

These preliminary results of narrative inquiry are based on the data collected as part of a doctoral dissertation, which concentrated on how some young mothers are able to form new subjectivities and resist dominant discourses on teenage mothers in Thailand. To understand this process, Michel Foucault's concept of the ethical self is employed along with an examination of the discourses of teenage mothers in Thailand. Ethical subjectivation is a process in which individuals decide to reconstruct their identity reflecting on a perceived moral dilemma. In the case of teenage mothers, this ethical concept usually involves aspects of the ideal mother and a discourse on motherhood in Thai society. Six teenage mothers who appeared to possess an ethical self were selected for this qualitative study. Each mother was invited to share her life story using an in-depth interview. The stories were analyzed through an analysis of narratives and applied a thematic analysis to find common themes among the participants. These results indicated three types of ethical mothers: "Buddy mom", "Two-in-one parent" and "Traditionally-oriented mother". However, these types of subjectivity can change over time depending on the individual and, at times, may appear simultaneously.

Keywords: Ethical Subjectivation, Teenage Mother Discourses, Analysis of Narratives

Introduction

Teenage pregnancy has been viewed as social problem in Thai society for a long time. As a result, the Thai government passed the Prevention and Solution of the Adolescent Pregnancy Problem Act, A.D. 2016 to address this phenomenon. Even though the most recent statistics from the Bureau of Reproductive Health indicated that, in 2018, the birth rate among women aged ten to nineteen is approximately twelve percent. This number is lower in comparison to the previous year (Bureau of Reproductive Health, Department of Health, 2018). Nonetheless, there is still a concern among the public on this matter. Through a variety of channels, pregnancies among young girls are seen as a source of many social problems. In addition, these girls are shamed by society for engaging in sexual activity before marriage and will receive even more criticism; if they become pregnant. Therefore, many solutions are proposed and implemented in order to combat this social problem. However, it is unfair for teenage girls to be considered "a problem" by society simply because they became mothers in such a young age (Anastas, 2016).

This article attempts to depart from problematizing teenage mothers through health, psychological, or public policy discourses. Thus, the main objective is to provide a new perspective against the dominant discourses of teenage mothers and reveal the efforts to resist it by some teenage mothers. The author applied Foucault's concepts of ethical subjectivation, a process in which individuals form their subjectivity based on a certain ethic from their own self-reflections and decide to oblige without causing harm to others. This standard can be a cultural norm, moral codes, or laws that individuals decide to base their subjectivity on (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Under this concept, some teenage mothers can create their own ethical meanings of being a mother and lead their lives without succumbing to negative stigmas.

Theoretical Framework

In Thai society, one of the most important aspects of being a conventional woman is to keep sexual activity within the sacred institution of marriage. However, most young mothers who conceive their child outside marriage are stigmatized as deviants in accordance with societal moral standards. This violation makes them an undesirable candidate for a "proper" motherhood (Songsamphan, 2008). In addition, many of them become pregnant while they are still in school. Thus, they are perceived by the public to lack all of the necessary qualities to raise a child properly. Furthermore, the discourses on young mothers continue to depict them in a negative way and the public tends to put blame on them without considering their situation. Additionally, abortion is illegal in Thailand, making it difficult for these women to terminate their pregnancy. Not only that, abortion is considered to be an immoral act in Thai society. This prevents women from obtaining safe abortions (Tharawan, 2005). The Thai government passed the Prevention and Solution of the Adolescent Pregnancy Problem Act A.D. 2016, which has been in effect since July 2016. This act would open many doors that were closed in the past and provides young mothers with government assistance (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2016), yet the outcomes remain unclear. Even with this new initiative, negative perceptions of teenage mothers persist in the public eye.

The discourses surrounding Thai teenage mothers are concerned with deviation. Although there are various meanings of the word discourse, in this paper, the author mainly adopts the work of Michel Foucault on discourses. From his perspective, discourses are seen as sets of cultural constructed realities with the power to limit and/or permit what is possible and what is not through the work of knowledge. It works on social body and shapes people in a way that they become an object of power. It is like a spider web that covers every part of a society and while nobody knows exactly where the power lies, everyone can feel it. He sees power as productive because it does not force people to behave or think. Instead, it normalizes the judgments of people through knowledge by creating a regime of truth within society (Mills, 2005; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Foucault believed that scientific knowledge is the dominant discipline in the modern world. Due to the fact that science is based on a concept of rationality and objectivity, it becomes difficult for people to disprove scientific findings. In addition, it forms a system that shapes the way people see reality. Therefore, it is possible to exclude and include certain groups of people within a scope of certain knowledge. The discourse unconsciously determines a framework, judgment, and subjectivity that people use as a reference for who they are. It also continues to circulate and reproduce itself, thus maintains its status and dominance within a society. By pathologizing the bodies of teenage mothers as problematic, their identity is continuously being produced and supported through knowledge from medical, cultural, and sociological disciplines. This entraps them into a particular constructed social identity. In turn, it regulates their behaviors and how people perceive them in different contexts; even if they do not fit with that category. Therefore, it is difficult for people to resist a discourse once it is imposed on an individual, making them a docile subject of a particular knowledge (Foucault, 1978; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Barcelos, 2014). Even though dominant discourses in Thailand paint them as deviant and unqualified mothers, some of them are able to overcome this negative label place on them by society.

From Unplanned Mothers to the Self-Forming Subject

One of the concepts proposed by Foucault is what he called technologies of the self. It is a strategy or technique that enables individuals to exercise some control over their life using their own means or help from others. This practice is based on a foundation of self-care that each individual determines for themselves. In a way, it allows individuals to transform themselves into a new type of subject in order to attain a particular level of self-satisfaction

or resist certain discourses. This process normally occurs when individuals begin to question and reflect on themselves, as such when they found out about their pregnancy, when they became a single mother, or when they had no one to rely on. This process gives individuals autonomy to govern themselves and constitute their own subjectivity through biopower. It is a power exercised at the level of life and regulates individuals through population control and subjugation of their bodies. This form of power encourages individuals to practice self-regulation under the aegis of their own health, life, society, or humanity as a whole. For Foucault, this form of power is an effective political tool employs by the governing institutions over the subjectivities of citizens. It operates on an individual level and turns them into a self-govern subject. Furthermore, rationality plays an important part in turning this form of power into practice because a practice is not possible without a meaning to justify its existence (Carlson & Albright, 2012, pp. 189-208; Skinner, 2013). In case of teenage mothers, this type of practice can be found in everyday actions of a mother, which may include housework, childcare, and childbirth.

According to Charoensin-o-larn (2018), in some aspects, everyday life practice can be used as a platform for the practice of freedom for individuals. Because biopower gives individuals freedom to manage their own lives, it allows them to choose the type of practices they can use as long as it is correlated with knowledge that supports biopower. Motherhood can be used as a form of knowledge that provides a space for biopower to exercise over the bodies of teenage mothers. These practices may be seen as a regular activity of a mother, which teenage mothers can also use to their advantages. For example, Orn would teach her children to value tradition and respect senior members of her community. This lesson is in line with the traditional values of a mother, so people cannot negatively criticize her motherhood. Furthermore, by refusing to terminate their pregnancy, they are accountable for their actions in terms of public perception and the more positive aspects of being a mother. This also indicates their sense of responsibility. Other activities, like caring for children, cleaning a house, attending a class, or going to work can also be ways to resist dominant teenage discourses in Thailand. Because these activities can be accomplished in multiple ways, mothers have the ability to negotiate them. This may appear to be a normal every day actions for mothers; however, these tasks require a certain degree of freedom to execute. The more potential they can show others, the more people will respect them as competent mothers, even if they are teenage mothers. Of course, this cannot occur without any a form of standards.

From the examples above, teenage mothers are able to govern themselves, they also care for others around them. However, this new form of subjectivity is still grounded on a type of personal ethics or moral dilemma that may reflect current societal standards. It does not mean that individuals are no longer subject to power/knowledge, but individuals can still negotiate their ways within the power relations, while retaining parts of themselves (Foucault, 1990; McLaren, 2002; Markula & Pringle, 2006). For Foucault, ethics are not necessarily based on religious or legal systems. Rather, it is a framework that individuals decide to use as a guideline to form their subjectivity in order to obtain certain degree of well-being. (Charoensin-o-larn, 2018)

A process of transformation started when an individual begins to problematize the way his/her current identity is constructed and how it can be changed in concurrent with current settings. This normally occurs when there is a discrepancy between their ideal self and current self. For teenage mothers, this may happen when they experience critical events in their life. However, to be able to lead a good life with in a contemporary society, one has to follow certain types of norms, which includes a form of morality or ethics that every mother should follow. Thus, this practice could lead to a formation of an ethical subject, which can influence discursive relations and allow

subject to form a new identity that is different from the negative label of teenage mothers. This ethical practice involves 4 aspects.

The first is the ethical substance or a part that an individual decides to shape or change in order to become an ethical subject. This part usually grounded in individual traditional and standards, moral dilemmas, or motherhood that one decides to use as his/her principle. The second aspect is the mode of subjection. This refers to ways people believe it will help them to meet the ethical conditions they desired. The third aspect is asceticism or practices that an individual engages in order to become ethical subject. This is when people apply their beliefs or test modes of subjection in everyday life. The last aspect is telos, which is the goal that individuals set for themselves. Under this concept, it does not mean that everyone follows the same pattern or it occurs in a neatly ordered pattern. It can be as simple or as complex depending on the desires of the individuals. From these concepts, it is possible for some teenage mothers to overcome negative stigmas and resist the dominant discourse (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Methodology

The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Strategic Wisdom and Research Institute, Srinakharinwirot University.

To understand the process of ethical subjectivation of teenage mothers, the narrative approach was selected as the primary tool to analyze the experiences of young mothers. This method is based on the concept of post-structuralism, with an emphasis on reflection on their subjectivities as individuals through complex relationships with various discourses. There are many narratives in our society, but not all of them receive the same attention, especially those that are deemed unimportant by society. Normally, such narratives are overshadowed by the grand narrative even if they can provide meaningful understanding of certain groups of people. This include stories of teenage mother. In order to access the common themes from the narratives of teenage mothers, the author started by collecting stories from the key informants. All teenage mothers were asked to tell their stories starting from when they were young up until the most current experience. Researchers would ask question to probe for a clear understanding on their struggling as mother along with how they were able to overcome obstacles in their lives. Afterward, the stories were organized by the narrative identity of each mother and how they reflect on to the dominant discourses. Finally, researchers used thematic analysis on all stories and was able to establish common themes among them.

Research Participants

In this study, a teenage mother is someone who is pregnant before twenty years of age, in accordance with Prevention and Solution of the Adolescent Pregnancy Problem Act, A.D. 2016. Furthermore, they must be older than twenty, but younger than forty when the interview was conducted. The reason for selecting this age range is because, in 2009, the Thai government and international organizations began to notice a rise in the teenage pregnancy rate in Thailand after a period of decline (UNICEF Thailand, 2015). This should give researchers recent information regarding their struggles. In addition, they have to raise the child as teenage mothers and do not give the child up for adoption. Six women were selected as part of this study. They shared a common theme of unplanned pregnancies, but all of them had different circumstances i.e. student, factory worker, and farmer.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to get in touch with these mothers, the researchers received assistance from gatekeepers, such as friends, family members, teachers, and NGOs. Then, researchers set up an appointment with each informant, explained the study to them, and inquired if they wish to be part of this research. The participants were purposively selected in order to reduce discrepancies; while still retaining diverse experiences (Chase, 2005; Charmaz, 2014; Mandal, 2018). Furthermore, researchers would spend some times before the interviews to explain purposes of this research, built rapport, and allow them to ask any question regarding the study. A female assistant was needed in a couple of cases because informants felt more relaxed talking with another woman rather than a male researcher. This formed a trusting relationship between the interviewers and key informants, making them feel comfortable to share their stories. This process relied heavily on the trustworthiness of key informants and the ability of researchers to present their information as accurate as possible. On some occasions, researchers would discuss with gatekeepers to gain a different perspective on key informants. In some cases, researchers would conduct a second interview to obtain more information (Riessman, 1993; Schwandt, 1997).

To examine how these teenage mothers engaged in the practice of freedom in their everyday practices of being a mother, each participant was asked to talk about their life and how they raised their child. The interviews were recorded and transcribed words by words. Then, the data was coded into various codes. Once the codes began to repeat themselves among key informants, they were arranged into category. After enough category were accumulated, thematic analysis was applied to find common themes among life stories of key informants. Finally, the information was organized through analysis of narratives to code and conceptualize into different themes and analyzed using 4 aspects of Ethical self. It is important to note, as part analysis of narratives, researchers are viewed as the author of the stories, similar to a novel. The difference is that (Havanon, Jeradechakul, Wathanotai, Ratanarojsakul, & Sankatiprapa, 2012). The results of the analysis were as follows:

Findings

Ethical Subjectivation of Teenage Mothers

In the beginning, all of the mothers shared a similar view that they did not plan to be mothers. In this aspect, their early childbearing turns into a critical event in their life that requires them to reflect on themselves. In addition, other events in their lives may encourage or challenge themselves to revisit a self that they had formed consecutively, such as a break up, a marriage, or a problem at work. These reflections may result in the need to make adjustments to their current selves. Even though they were not prepared to raise a child, they wished to become better people and chose to take on the responsibilities of mothers. As such, they can show others that they are not the unqualified mother a society perceives them to be. This usually led to the desire to problematize their current subjectivity as a mother. It is also possible for a mother to possess different subjectivities at the same time. For example, medical discourses have a strong influence in the healthcare field. Therefore, mothers are more likely to believe information from doctors over local beliefs. In this aspect, the mothers are more docile to medical knowledge and would form their subjectivity around this belief. However, when it comes to childrearing techniques, they would be more likely to trust their own experience over information from a doctor. In this sense, they have more freedom to choose and can decide their own method to raise a child. Based on the interviews, three types of ideal mother appear to be common themes among participants, which are "Buddy mom", "Traditionally-oriented mother" and "Two-in-One parent". The elaborations are as follows.

Buddy Mom

Kan and Phun mentioned that they were raised in a traditional Thai family. Their parents were considered to be the authoritative figures in their family. As such, they were discouraged from discussing problems with their caregivers, since they were more likely to be scolded than to receive support, leaving them feeling distant from their parents. In addition, any topic related to sexuality and sexual education was rarely mentioned, but they were only told to abstain from sexual intercourse. Therefore, they reflected back on their past experiences and decided to form a closed relationship with their child in which communication is encouraged. On the other hand, Jane has a more friend-like bond with her mother. She is not afraid to talk to her mother when she has problems and she feels that this would be the best path for her child as well. From these origins, the "Buddy mom" emerges. This is a mother who forms her identity like that of a friend to their child instead of an authoritative figure. However, they still have to take on the role of a mother when necessary. Jane, Kan, and Phun appeared to identify themselves with this type of ideal mother. This group of mothers appears to share a similar goal for their children. The primary goal was to develop a relationship with their child in a way that is less rigid and less hierarchical. With this objective in mind, they begin to examine their current subjectivities and attempted to find ways to help them to be become the type mother of they want.

Because they would like to create a more trusting bond, they started to imagine their child as their younger self. After that, they decided which aspect of their life they had to change along with the best way to interact with their child. Due to a narrow age gap, at times, it is possible for them to act more like an older sister to their child. However, the boundary between a mother and her child still remains. Kan stated that "[I] want to raise my child like a friend, don't want to force him too much." This way, her child would feel like they are talking to a friend rather than a mother. In addition, they tended to give more freedom to their child for guidance. Phun told her son that "...I am not your boss, I am your friend, you are your own boss..." She also stated that there are times when she needed to take on the role of a mother because she still needs to perform her duties as a mother. In addition, Jane integrated technology and scientific knowledge into a part of their practice to help prepare her child for the future. This does not mean that she does not engage in traditional methods when caring for her child, but she believes that these methods are more suitable for the present time. For example, she followed a few Facebook pages related to being a new mother to help her get up-to-date information on childrearing along with a group support when she had a question. While this group of mothers focused more on modern culture, another group of mothers concentrated on local knowledge.

Traditionally-Oriented Mother

For Orn, Phun, and Cake, local culture is defined by how they were raised. They grew up in an extended family and were surrounded by senior citizens and relatives; while their parents tended to work outside the house. Children were taught to work hard and rely on themselves since they were young. They did not have enough money to buy many supplies, so they had to improvise in order to survive. As such, they felt that they were not close to their parents. Even though they were not provided with direct guidance on how to live their lives from their parents, they were many other people around them to provide support. Most of the examples they learned were from direct experience rather than knowledge from a book or a teacher. Sex education was usually something they learned at school. For the most part, they had to rely on information passed down from the older generation. Thus, they understood the struggles of life and did not take things for granted. Likewise, they believe that local wisdom in child rearing is better than scientific know-how because it is based on realistic contexts and does not

require a lot of money. As a result, they would form their subjectivity around their perception of how they were raised, with some small adjustments.

Orn and Phun believe that practices passed down from older generation are better than contemporary methods. Both of them were looked down on by people around them because they were pregnant at a young age. Even though Phun got married at the age of 16, it did not minimize the insult she received when people knew she was pregnant. In case of Orn, her pregnancy occurred outside of marriage. As such, her relatives did not approve of her behaviors. She had to leave her hometown and moved in with her partner. In order to overcome negative perceptions, they began to problematize which parts of themselves that they had to change. In the end, they believed that the best choice for them was to raise their child in accordance with how they were raised. In contrast, Cake did not have the same experience as Orn and Phun. She was fortunate to receive assistance from both sides of the family. Due to her pregnancy at a young age, she believed that the aspect of age has to change. Therefore, she chose to follow a local cultural practice and embrace the mother role. At this point, they had to decide what practice would suit their ideal mother the best.

To them, being a "good mother" is to raise their child better than they were raised. They decided to base their new ethic following the lessons they learned from previous generations. When possible, Orn and Phun would take their child to work in the fields with them. This would teach the children the hardship of life and helped them understand the struggles of their parents. From this aspect, their child would become mature and more able to deal with struggles in their lives. In terms of sex education, they used their past experience as an example to teach their child. In a way, this empowers their child to survive any hardships, which includes their sexual lives. As for Cake, she wished to spend time with her son, so she decided to drop out of school and obtained her diploma through non-formal education instead. With support from her partner, she was able to attend classes on weekends. She selected this option because she believes that "the best option for a child is to stay with the father and mother". In the end, each mother had their own, but similar goal to raise their child.

Both Orn and Phun wished to prove to others that they can be a "good mother" too. At the time of the interview, both of them appeared to complete parts of their goal. For Phun, she did not have to worry about her first-born child anymore because she just graduated from university. As for Orn, she felt that she already proved to others that she is not the "unqualified" mother others perceived her to be. In contrast, Cake is still a new mother, so her current goal is to be able to take care of her child while attending classes on weekends. Cake explained that "if I get a Bachelor's degree, I can do more than my high school diploma". She plans to find a job after she finishes her Bachelor's degree. The last type of ideal mother occurs when a mother believes that her relationship with her partner may not last as long as she expects.

Two-in-One Parent

A Two-in-One parent represents an independent mother. It is a type of mother that does not feel like she has to rely on her partner, unlike a traditional mother. Furthermore, a pregnancy does not mean an end to their life path. This type of ideal mother usually occurs among young participants who are in their twenties, which include Ja, Jane, and Kan. Because they are born in a generation with internet access, they have experienced a different world-view growing up. Advanced technology allows them to become more competent without relying solely on their parents. In addition, their acceptance from family members and/or partner can be another important factor that empowers them. Combining all these factors with their desire to become a "good mother", each mother is encouraged to begin to problematize their current subjectivity as a mother, in turn, this allows bio-power to be

exercised on their bodies. From this point, they need to figure out a way they can become their ideal mother and what practice to use to become ethical subject.

Each mother has a different idea on how to become an independent mother. For example, when the parents could not decide on a dowry, Ja decided to move in with her boyfriend's family because they were more supportive of her, disregarding Thai tradition. Further, she tried to focus on her Bachelor's degree courses by asking her partner to continue aiding her financially because it was more reasonable and she could be self-sustained. She added "...it's [his] duty to support me until I graduate, after that I will help [him]". Even if she still depends on her partner's help, she is able to negotiate a deal with her partner that allows her continue her education. In case of Jane, she received maternity care fairly late in her pregnancy. As such, she had to make a major life decision after she felt that "... I would not be able to take good care of my baby if I am still in school ...so I decided to drop out". She was willing to sacrifice her future to be able to fully care for her child. During an interview, she stated that she plans to get back to school once her child is a little bit older. On the other hand, when Kan realized that she could not rely on her partner for assistance, she decided to move out of her hometown and went to live with her mother in Bangkok. She believed that this was the best choice for her and her child; otherwise, she would remain in the same unhealthy environment.

To become a successful mother, Ja's life goals revolved around her child and her education. Her current goal is to be able to raise her son and go to school at the same time. Furthermore, she used her life experience growing up in a single-parent household to help her overcome the fear of raising her child alone. She mentioned that "I can stay with my son alone, I don't need his father, but I have to rely on him for now...." Jane also shared a similar view with Ja. Jane had an issue with her mother-in-law, which led to an ending of the relationship. Jane said that it is better that "I don't get involved with them anymore" and live a life without her partner in the picture. In addition, she decided not to withhold any information from her son and will tell him about his father.

Discussion

Based on the stories above, we can see that sexual culture in Thailand is mainly focused on abstinence. In general, parents avoid discussing sex related topics with their children. In the study by Sridawruang, Pfeil, & Crozier (2010) they suggested that the core of Thai culture makes it difficult for parents to talk with their children about sexuality leaving this duty to education system. Although schools provide sex education for students, the primary focus is on anatomy and disease prevention with a little emphasis on comprehensive sex education. This results in a lack of sexual literacy among youngsters and pregnancies among the adolescent population. Furthermore, we can see that not all teenage mothers are problematic; despite what many people in Thailand may believe. However, this does not mean that they do not struggle either. Similar research studies by Duncan (2007) and Furstenberg (2007) correspond with the findings as well. They argued that teenage mothers are not always the sources of societal problems and, at times, they are victims of poor policy interventions. In some cases, early childbearing can be positive experiences for young men and women. With appropriate support, they should be able to become proper parents for their child. On the contrary, they do not focus on the self-formation of teenage mothers. Therefore, this study attempts to fill a gap of those research. Many of them have to reform themselves in a way that allows them to live in society and still retain their sense of self. Through the process of ethical subjectivation, they can continue to be themselves, while still able to negotiate with dominant discourses. This newly constructed ethic is a reflection between their self, motherhood discourses, and teenage mother discourses.

This results in a new meaning of motherhood, namely, teenage motherhood. Certainly, this may not happen without supports from family members, friends, or other stakeholders. These findings also reflect family values of Thai culture, which is different from other studies in Western cultures. Many Thai families, even if they are not comfortable with idea of teenage mother, tend to be more tolerate when a young member of their family experience unplanned pregnancy. They are also likely to provide social and financial assistances for teenage mothers. A similar result from a study by Sriyasak, Almqvist, Sridawruang, Neamsakul, & Häggström-Nordin (2016) also supported these findings in Thailand. In their study on teenage parents, family support played an important role in helping teenage parents, but mainly focused on exploring how teenage parents cope with motherhood/fatherhood.

It is hoped that this article may provide a new space for teenage mothers within Thai society and present them different perspectives. Like other kinds of mothers, teenage mothers need similar support in order to be able to carry out their tasks as mothers. Unfortunately, not all teenage mothers have access to such resources and will continue to struggle. Without proper assistance, they may not be able to overcome their hardships in life, which may cause them to fall into the category of "unqualified mothers", which is similar to the general perception of teenage mothers.

Conclusion

It is important to note that everyone has different goals in their lives and that this may change depending on the situation; though, most share a similar theme of being the best mother. Even though the Thai government attempts to provide support for teenage mothers, many still struggle on a daily basis. One of the obstacles that many of them face is acceptance from stakeholders, especially teachers and the education system in general. If we believe that effective education is an important tool to create equality in Thai society, then it should be extended to teenage mothers as well. Otherwise, we could lose a potential population for the future of Thailand and place them on a path to an unknown destination.

Acknowledgments

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