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Deborah Freedman Lustig

Childhood 2004 11: 175
DOI: 10.1177/0907568204043055

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BABY PICTURES
Family, consumerism and exchange among teen mothers in the USA

DEBORAH FREEDMAN LUSTIG
Santa Clara University

Key words:
consumerism, family photographs, networks, teenage mothers

Mailing address:
Deborah Freedman Lustig
Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053, USA.
[email: dlustig@scu.edu]

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www.sagepublications.com
10.1177/0907568204043055

Like many parents in the US, teen mothers regularly have professional portraits taken of their children. This article, based on an ethnographic study of a diverse group of teen mothers in urban California, analyzes these baby pictures as representations of childhood, motherhood and family, and as material objects used in the construction of kin networks. Through these portraits teen mothers construct themselves as good mothers, resisting public denunciations of their childbearing at the same time that they embrace consumer culture. Small photos are exchanged with their friends and family members, contributing to a culture of care, albeit one based on market principles.

Like many parents in the US, teen mothers regularly have professional portraits taken of their children (Figures 1 and 2). In this article, based on an ethnographic study of a diverse group of teen mothers in urban California, I first analyze these baby pictures as representations of childhood, motherhood and family, drawing on Black feminist theory, especially the work of bell hooks (1994, 1995) and Patricia Hill Collins (1994), who assert that motherhood is a public and political act for women of color and low-income European–American women. Comparing these photos to the literature on family photos (Boerdam and Martinius, 1980; Chalfen, 1988, 1997; Gardner, 1990; Halle, 1991; Hirsch, 1981; Moran, 2002; Musello, 1979; Titus, 1976), the teen mothers are similar to others studied who use photos to construct their own visions of family, but different in the way they use photos to emphasize their status as good mothers, rather than to show family unity and happiness. Second, I use the consumerism represented in the photos to discuss patterns of consumption and materialism among the teen mothers, showing how they use the photos, clothing and food as material objects that represent their competence as mothers, as do other parents (Edin and Lein,

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Figure 1 Professional portrait, similar to those purchased by many parents in the USA. Photo by Photo Disc/Getty Images

1997; Kaplan, 1997, 2000; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Pugh, 2001, 2002). Third, I discuss the pictures as material objects used to reinforce status and construct kin networks, comparing these networks to those described by Stack (1974) 20 years earlier. While kin networks are still vital (Lareau, 2003; Stack and Burton, 1994), reciprocity has been largely replaced by market principles. The material and market-based aspect of these kin networks adds a different perspective to our understanding of care (Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1993).

This article is based on an ethnographic study of teen mothers and their school experiences (Lustig, 1997). For a year and a half (1993–5), I was a participant-observer in a school program for teen mothers, and I interviewed 78 teen mothers. The young mothers I interviewed ranged in age from 14 to 19 years old and come from a variety of ethnic, class and family backgrounds. All the young women were unmarried at the time their babies were born; only two were married by the end of the study. Some have been on welfare their whole lives, while others are solidly working class. Some were in and out of foster care and different relatives' homes while others lived consistently in the same house with their mothers and siblings. While

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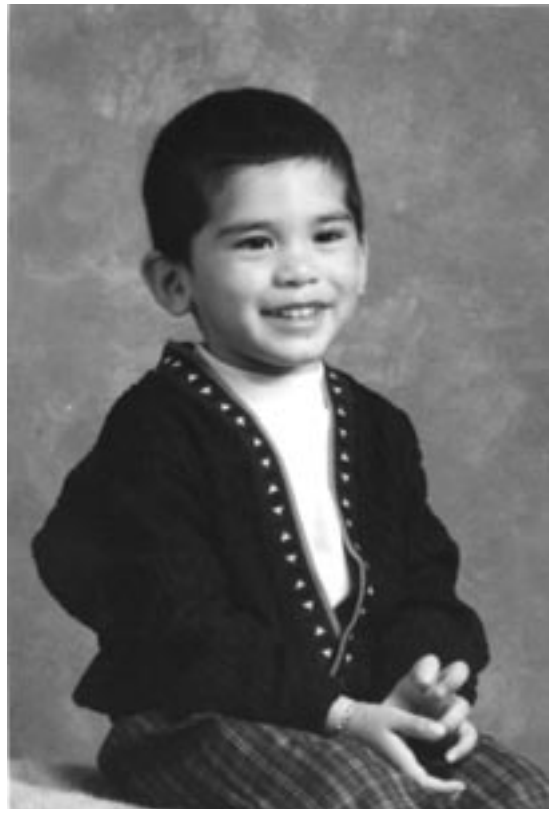

Figure 2 Professional portrait, purchased by teen mother, of her child, California, 1993. Photo by Le's Photo

many have close relationships with their fathers, only a few lived with their fathers continuously (see Tables 1–5 for demographic information about the young women in the study and those specifically quoted in this article).

My fieldwork base was a teen parent program at a comprehensive high school, which I call King High, in a large city in California, which I call Pineview.[1] Pineview is a city with many low-income neighborhoods, and King has the highest concentration of low-income students of any Pineview high school. King was a rundown school characterized by low expectations. At the time of my fieldwork, in the early 1990s, base closures, plant closures and an ongoing recession made jobs scarce, especially in the inner-city. Anti-immigration sentiment was widespread, and the African–American teens in my study often commented on immigrants taking all the jobs. Proposition 187, denying services to undocumented immigrants, and Proposition 209, dismantling affirmative action, had just been passed, fueling racial tensions. I did my study just prior to welfare 'reform', and there was a widespread sense that even that resource would soon be gone.

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Table 1 Ethnicity of informants

Ethnicity	*Number of informants*
African American	47
Asian American	4
European American	6
Latina	21

Table 2 Number of children/informant

Number of children	*Number of informants*
1	64
2	13
3	1

Table 3 Age of informants

Birth year	*Age in 1993*	*Number of informants*
1975	18	17
1976	17	28
1977	16	16
1978	15	12
1979	14	5

Table 4 Age at first childbirth

Age at first childbirth	*Number of informants*
13	1
14	8
15	16
16	31
17	16
18	5
19	1

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Table 5 Selected characteristics of informants mentioned by name in article

Pseudonym	*Ethnicity*[a]	*Number of children*[b]	*School status*[c]	*Age in 1993*[d]	*Age at first childbirth*
Baneekia	AfA	1	SAP–out	17	14
Chanteel	AfA	1	SAP–out	16	16
Demetria	AfA	2	SAP	14	13
Iris	AfA	1	SAP	14	14
Janelle	AfA	1	SAP–out–SAP	17	17
Keisha	AfA	2	Out	17	16
Lanisha	AfA	1	Out	17	16
LaShaun	AfA	1	SAP	17	16
Latika	AfA	1	SAP–grad	18	15
Olivia	L	2	SAP–school–grad	16	16
Ramona	AfA	1	SAP–grad	18	15
Sofia	L	1	SAP–out	18	17
Starkavia	AfA	2	SAP	17	16
Susan L.	AfA	1	SAP	14	15
Teshay	AfA	1	Out	18	18
Yvette	AfA	1	SAP–grad	18	17

[a] AfA = African American; AsA = Asian American; EA = European American; L = Latina.

[b] Number of children at the time of my last contact with them.

[c] School status at time of first contact (subsequent changes that I know of are indicated as well) : SAP = School Age Parent program; school = any comprehensive high school (i.e. not in School Age Parent program); out = not attending school; grad = graduated from high school.

[d] 1993 is when the research began.

Most of the material in this article comes from participant-observation at the school and the young women's homes; some comes from semi-structured interviews I conducted with the teen mothers. I did not ask about picture taking or picture exchange in the interviews, but the teen mothers often brought up the topic.

Baby pictures: representations of motherhood

While I did not plan to investigate pictures, I quickly realized their importance. In one of my first sets of field notes I wrote:

> Pictures of their kids are extremely prevalent and interesting to all. Everyone wants to see them and wants copies (of the little [photos]). Many pictures displayed on lockets, plastic frames on purses, jackets, etc. Many of the pictures are of the mom and child. All professionally done, Kinderfoto, Sears. No snapshots. No cameras? Representations of motherhood.

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I came to learn that the teen mothers adhere to a rigorous schedule they set, going to a commercial photographer such as Sears every 3 months for the first year, and at least once a year thereafter. They remind themselves and each other that it's time to go get pictures taken. Through the practice of taking their children for these portraits they construct themselves as good mothers. By wearing their children's portraits on huge buttons affixed to their purses, they signal their identity as mothers.

Displaying their babies' photos on their person in this way is significant because the school tried to keep the babies invisible. For example, the mothers had to enter the school by a back gate when they had their children with them, and the nursery and the classrooms for the pregnant and parenting teens were in portables at the back of the school.[2] Furthermore, when pictures were being taken at the school by a professional photographer for the yearbook, the teen mothers refused to go because they were not allowed to have their babies with them in the photos.[3] Their refusal underscores their commitment to their identity as mothers and the importance of photos as representations of that identity. They carry the private sphere of the family into the public sphere of the school via the pictures that they carry and display.

After I started visiting some of the young women at home, I learned that they display their children's portraits in their homes as well; for those who live with parents or grandparents, the photos are added to a collection of similar photos of past and current generations. With a few exceptions, these photos are the only images displayed in the home, suggesting their importance.[4] Discussing the importance of photography in the South prior to integration, hooks declares that 'when we speak of photography, then, we make it possible to see the walls of photographs in black homes as a critical intervention, a disruption of white control of black images' (hooks, 1994: 47).

The patterns of portrait taking and exchange I observed were similar across racial/ethnic groups, but my sample was predominantly African American and Latina. My observations contrast with those of Halle, who conducted a systematic study of family photographs displayed in 105 homes, primarily of European Americans. He found that most family photographs 'depict the nuclear family at leisure rather than in formal dress on formal occasions' (Halle, 1991: 217). Halle found few differences across class lines, perhaps because the 'lowest' class he included was 'working and lower middle class' Polish and Italian Americans. He concludes that 'most modern family photographs serve as records and reminders, not of power, status, or ancestry . . . but of good times' (Halle, 1991: 228). The young women in my study needed their babies' portraits as records of status. Because of their race and/or class and because they were teen mothers, they were more marginalized from the 'mainstream' than Halle's sample.

Although the mothers in my study are in some respects not the creators

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of these pictures, I would argue that they control the production of these images in an attempt to control the representation of their babies and their families. Hall's analysis of studio portraits of West Indian immigrants in Britain suggests a similar dynamic: 'The photos were what you sent home as "evidence" that you had arrived safely, landed on your feet, were getting somewhere, surviving, doing all right. It would therefore be wrong to read these portraits as exclusively the imposition of the codes of formal (white) portrait photography on an alien (black) subject' (Hall, 1991: 156). The very conventionality of the studio portraits is counter-hegemonic, reinforcing a dominant theme that emerged among the mothers in my study that they were good mothers despite how others judged them. These photographic representations of their families are a form of resistance to public denunciations of their childbearing. Teenage mothers, and especially African–American teen mothers, are the epitome of the 'bad mother' in the media: 'Living in white-supremacist culture, we mostly see the images of black folks that reinforce and perpetuate the accepted, desired subjugation and subordination of black bodies by white bodies' (hooks, 1995: 96).

At the time of my fieldwork, just prior to the enactment of 'welfare reform' in 1996, teen mothers were commonly vilified. They were emblematic of the loose morals that were supposedly encouraged by the welfare system. The teen mother on welfare is particularly objectionable because she has transgressed into the adult world by bearing a child ('babies having babies'), yet she does not adhere to the ideal of economic self-sufficiency. Given this context, it is notable that the portraits of their babies and toddlers reflect childhood innocence (Figure 3), or the 'Romantic child' as first represented in the 18th century (Higonnet, 1998). While the Romantic child has been almost exclusively portrayed as white, the teen mothers of color were asserting this idealized childhood for their own children at the same time that they countered the societal critique of themselves as unfit mothers.

In discussing family photo albums, Gardner (1990: 78) notes that the photos reveal 'the family's active creation of a self-statement'. I would extend this insight to suggest that for the teen mothers in my study, the photos were a *public* statement about themselves. As Patricia Hill Collins comments, 'women of color have performed motherwork that challenges social constructions of work and family as separate spheres' (Collins, 1994: 47). Having studio portraits taken of their children is one example of this motherwork. In her study of family photography over time, Hirsch suggests that 'photography . . . has broken down those popular medieval and Renaissance equations of poor=social instability; rich=order' (Hirsch, 1981: 44). While I disagree that these equations have been broken down, photography is clearly a tool that allows marginalized people to represent themselves to others, instead of only being represented *by* others.

The teen mothers' reliance on formal portraits of their children is particularly striking given the scarcity of snapshots taken by the teen mothers or

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Figure 3 Professional portrait, purchased by teen mother, of her child, California, 1994. Photo by Le's Photo

their family members. Boerdam and Martinius (1980: 108) discuss the 'informalization' of family photographs and other authors also comment on the prevalence of snapshots depicting everyday life (Chalfen, 1997; Gardner, 1990; Halle, 1991; Moran, 2002; Titus, 1976). While many parents also choose to have studio portraits taken of their children, the teen mothers invest virtually all their picture-taking resources in these portraits rather than in informal snapshots, in contrast to other parents.[5]

Most of the portraits are of the children alone, though some are of the mother and child (Figure 4), and a few of the mother, father and child. Hirsch (1981: 3) asserts that 'a family photograph contains at least two people', yet the portraits the teen mothers have made of their babies are certainly family photos, even if only one person is in the photo. They are family photos not because they assert a relationship between the subjects but because they assert the worth of the family. Teshay, who had these portraits taken with her partner and baby, says that she is doing it partly to set a good example for her cousins.

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Figure 4 Professional portrait, purchased by teen mother, of herself and her child, California, 1993. Photo by Sears Portrait Studio

I had asked her in the interview about her relationship with her baby's father:

> *Teshay:* I couldn't imagine having to do everything on my own, without him. We stick together as a family. We have our problems sometimes, but we never, you know, really break up or nuttin'. We always stay together as a family, and we always go take our little pictures. Then we set examples for other people too. We have cousins and then they come and they see our pictures and little stuff, and they go take pictures of they little kids and because you know when I was funnin' with them 'take your pictures, you know, you gotta have pictures' because you just want your kids to be able to – you know . . .

Here I interjected: 'To look back'.

Teshay agreed with my interpretation, but then seemingly changed the subject:

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> *Teshay:* Yeah, and – yes. But I just – I don't feel – it's easy, but I'm very responsible.

Here when she says 'it's easy' she's returning to a previous question where I had asked her what it's like being a young mother. She went on:

> *Teshay:* So it's a lot – I feel that it's a whole lot easier for me than it would be for somebody else to take care of a child, because I'm very responsible. I was always the most responsible person in my family. My mother always depended on me.

When I look at the interview now, I realize that she was not intending to say that she wants her daughter to be able to 'look back', as I interjected, succumbing no doubt to the idea of childhood photos as a vehicle for nostalgia (Moran, 2002). Musello (1979: 112) suggests that the most important purpose of family photography is the 'retention of memories' and that in practice family photos document children's progress, yet for the mothers in my study, the photos serve a somewhat different purpose. I think Teshay was implying that the photos provide a record for children of their parents' responsibility, not of the children as babies.

Demonstrating motherhood through consumerism

The photos as representations of good motherhood are counter-hegemonic; through these photos teen mothers claim that they *are* good mothers despite their age. Yet the photos simultaneously reinforce the hegemony of consumer culture and define being a good mother at least in part as being a good consumer. This equation of motherhood and consumerism is widespread in the US and has been widely documented, especially among middle-class European Americans (Pugh, 2001, 2002). Low-income mothers (Edin and Lein, 1997) also buy expensive items both to symbolize their maternal care and their children's (apparent) prestige. One mother said, in explaining why she bought her son expensive shoes, said 'You gotta do what you gotta do to make your kid feel normal' (Edin and Lein, 1997: 30).

The mothers in my study may be motivated by their children's future thoughts of themselves as 'normal', as seen in Teshay's comments in the preceding section, but they are mainly driven by the need to assert their own normalcy. Both the photos themselves and the consumerism depicted in the photos demonstrate the teen mothers' status as good providers/good consumers. The mothers often buy special outfits for the photos. The backgrounds provided by the photo studios often include toys (Figure 4) and the studios also provide toys as props for the photo. Most of the teen mothers choose to use these props, usually stuffed animals. These toys in the pictures are a public symbol of the material goods that the mother is providing for her child, most of which remain private, at home.[6]

Even when the mother is not in the photo, she is representing herself

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through the photo as a good mother because of her consumerism. Motherhood is 'enacted and molded in part through the terrain of consumption' (Pugh, 2001: 5). While 'consumerism' has negative connotations and implies that the consumers are victims of marketing, the teen mothers in my study were not buying mindlessly. They were appropriating the messages that were being marketed to them and buying in order to market themselves. This powerful linkage of consumerism and mothering extends beyond the photos. Many of the young women showed off new clothes and toys they bought for their babies. A few of them explicitly said they would never buy used clothing for their children. In contrast, in my social circle of mostly European–American, upper middle-class parents of young children, buying used clothes, furniture and so on was the norm, and we bragged about the bargains we found. Ironically, part of our privilege was to be able to shop at used clothing stores without risk of judgment. Since we had the choice of buying expensive items new, finding them used for a low price became a high-status pursuit.

The availability of inexpensive consumer goods from a global economy at stores like Target and K-Mart meant that the mothers in my study could buy new clothes and toys on a limited budget. When I asked Lanisha during the interview how her family had responded to her pregnancy, she said that her mother's friends had been very disapproving, saying she wouldn't make it. And then she said, 'But I showed them – I mean I know I have a lot more years to go, but every stitch of clothing she has, I paid for.' She proved her worth as a mother by buying clothes for her daughter, which stands for her care for her daughter.

I only twice heard one of the teen mothers question her own practices of consumerism. Once was when Olivia told me that she and her husband had given their 2-year-old daughter her Christmas gifts late because they didn't have any money. She said that since her daughter lost interest in new toys so quickly she had suggested they just take her to Toys-R-Us and let her play with the open toys and then take her home.

The second occasion was during a lunch-time conversation at school among a group of young mothers:

> I'm just in love with my son.
> Don't you love dressing your baby up?
> I do, I love to dress him up and show him off.
> He has this one outfit that is just so cute, and every time I take him somewhere I want him to wear it.
> My mom says I'm spoiling him. I don't want to, but I just buy him everything he wants.

While this conversation seems to reinforce the negative stereotype of teen mothers having babies so they can dress them up like dolls, material goods and clothing in particular were key to these young mothers' demonstration of their fitness as mothers and also provided them with great pleasure.

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In describing how middle-class African–American youth outside Chicago embrace 'ghetto' clothing, music and language, Pattillo-McCoy notes that consumption offers both enjoyment and the chance to make a symbolic statement. 'Just as the [ghetto] styles have both a material and an aesthetic genius, Groveland youth follow ghetto styles both because they can identify with the actual content and themes, and because the act of consumption and translation is highly pleasurable' (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999: 122). Similarly, the teen mothers in my study dress up their babies and buy them new toys because doing so demonstrates their status as good mothers and because it's fun.

> Little Tim [age 5 months] surely could not understand what he was worth when he was all suited up in his pricey clothes and gym shoes, but the fashion statements were worth much more to his [teen] mother [Neisha] than what they cost in dollars. . . . 'But like our age group, I guess 'cause maybe we more materialistic and into things like that or something, but our age group keep our kids clean you know. Everytime I go out the door, . . . Tim's always dressed. Dressed and I'm dressed.' (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999: 161)

Pattillo-McCoy's informant highlighted the fact that she and her baby are always dressed when they *go out the door.* The public space, out the door, is where clothing matters for the statements it provides about status. On one occasion, when I was talking on the phone with Janelle, she told me that she was rescheduling her baby's shots because her sister had left her two children with Janelle. Her sister didn't bring decent clothes for the children, they 'look[ed] a mess', and Janelle didn't want to take them out. I too represented the public of 'out the door'. One day I gave Iris a ride home. She was upset when we got to her house and her mother had her baby only in an undershirt. She complained to her mother, 'Why you got him naked?' Her mother replied that it was a hot day. He was not naked, but he was unclothed. I think she was upset that I saw him without one of his outfits on.[7]

The pressure to dress the children a certain way does not come only from the teens, but also from their elders. One day when I was picking up Susan, she asked her aunt to help her get her son ready by putting on his shoes. The aunt mocked Susan for his 'rubber shoes' and told her to get him some sandals. In her study of African–American teenage mothers, Kaplan found a similar pattern of 'dressing-up', passed on through the generations. 'The teen mothers attempted to manage information about themselves by stressing acceptable modes of behavior, thus diverting attention from more unacceptable traits in order to lessen the oppressive judgments made about them' (Kaplan, 1997: 151). The consumerism represented in the photos is an extension of the consumerism of daily life, a consumerism that is enmeshed with issues of representation, responsibility and motherhood.

Buying food was another way that the mothers indicated their worthiness and one that also calls into question the idea of a divide between public and private. One day when I was at Yvette's house, she gave her toddler a

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piece of raisin bread and proudly told me that he loved raisin bread, so she bought it for him, even though it was expensive. In discussing the meanings of food among middle school students, Kaplan (2000) observes that food is a symbol of care, but also extremely political in its links to class and image. For the teen mothers, food is about status as much as nourishment. When I was eating a peanut butter sandwich at lunch, one student told me, 'I will never let my children eat peanut butter and jelly. That's all they gave me to eat in foster care.' While food seems like part of the private, domestic sphere, for these mothers it is part of their public personae as good mothers. One day I gave another mother, Keisha, a ride to the grocery store. She was embarrassed to use her WIC coupons, saying 'it takes so long and people look at me, thinking, "she can't even buy food for her baby" '.

Circuits of exchange in a culture of scarcity

The photos themselves are also important as material objects of exchange. When the mothers purchase the photos they usually buy a package that includes a sheet of wallet-size photos. These small photos are exchanged with their friends and family members, providing a tangible reminder of a network of support. Chalfen, analyzing Japanese American family photography, notes that 'the pictures tend to solidify familial relationships as they are . . . exchanged between family members' (Chalfen, 1988: 14). The teen mothers write notes on the back, often in the baby's voice; sometimes the message further reinforces the bond represented by the gift of the photo: for example, 'Deborah: take care of me.' This was followed by 'Lil Stephen, 2 months', and then the mother's name. These messages and the showing and exchange of photos contribute to an 'ethic of care' (Tronto, 1993), though as I discuss below, caring with a political-economic dimension.

Presenting baby pictures to another person is not only symbolic of the relationship between the two, but also of the mother's competence as a mother. 'Giving photos [of new babies] to another person can be considered to be a way to increase the commitment to parenthood because this behavior is both a public and a voluntary gesture' (Titus, 1976: 529). Even when the teen mothers do not give the photos away, they often show them to others as a way of demonstrating their commitment to parenthood and as a way of initiating a relationship. For example, I wrote in my field notes about Starkavia and Olivia showing each other their baby pictures and then followed their growing friendship over the following weeks. The teen mothers often showed me their baby pictures as we were getting to know each other, and when they learned I had a toddler they always wanted to see his picture.

Because they only have a limited number of the photos, choosing whom to give the pictures to can be difficult. Some of the young mothers brought their photos to school to show them to everyone and then selectively gave away the small ones, often causing conflicts when they did not give a

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photo to a classmate who wanted one. By passing out the photos, they are reinforcing a communal ethos of sharing and support, yet the very shortage of the photos reinforces a competing ethos of hierarchy and scarcity, congruent with the photos' status as material possessions in a consumer culture. The photos represent the relationship between the mother and the child, and the exchange of photos represents the relationship between friends or relatives. Thus far they seem to represent the 'maternal work' of protection and nurturance as defined by Ruddick (1989), yet as I described earlier, the photos do not represent only or even primarily the mother's love for her child or their dyadic relationship. They represent a claim, by the mother, about her fitness as a mother in contradiction to society's view of her. Furthermore, the exchange of photos is both relational and economic.

The exchange of the photos is governed by the principle of balanced reciprocity: a careful mental record-keeping of who gave photos to whom means that photos are usually 'repaid' with photos, thus cementing ties of friendship and support. These exchange relationships are similar to those described by Carol Stack (1974). Photos are by necessity exchanged over a period of time, since the photos are given out when received. In other exchanges that I observed in my fieldwork, I observed much more pressure for repayment at the time of exchange or very soon thereafter, unlike the pattern Stack noted. 'Since an object swapped is offered with the intent of obligating the receiver over a period of time, two individuals rarely simultaneously exchange things. Little or no premium is placed on immediate compensation; time has to pass before a gift or counter-gift can be repaid. . . . As the need arises, reciprocity occurs' (Stack, 1974: 41).

Twenty years later, when I was doing my fieldwork, the loss of manufacturing jobs in urban centers, the reduction in the real value of welfare benefits and the pressures of prison and drug addiction on kin networks meant that some of the young mothers could not count on strong networks of support. One young woman said that she had no one she could borrow the bus fare from; another that she had no one she could borrow money from to do her laundry.[8] Yet kin networks were extremely important among most of the teen mothers in my study. Like the poor and working-class families studied by Lareau (2003), their daily lives included interactions with aunts, cousins, grandparents and those close friends who count as kin. They were constantly going back and forth between houses of different members of their kin networks or sending their children back and forth. They spent much of their free time in mixed-age groups. When Teshay was telling me about her extended family, she mentioned that her mother has nine grandchildren. 'There's this whole bunch of kids. I even got a whole bunch of pictures of everybody. I like pictures a whole lot. I love pictures.' The young women gave photos of their children to their closest friends and relatives, but even within those networks the expectation of repayment was prevalent.

These kin networks are based much more on market principles than

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those described by Stack (1974). When services are exchanged among family and friends, they are usually repaid immediately and often paid for with money, introducing a market economy into the kin networks. For example, Chanteel complained that no one in her family would watch her baby for free, except her older sister whose children Chanteel babysits sometimes. Her younger sister charges her. Her mother will not do it. Her grandmother gets paid by a welfare program to care for the baby while Chanteel is in school, but charges Chanteel for any extra time the baby is there.

One student's advice to me illustrates this principle of economic exchange. Baneekia asked me how much I charged for tutoring, and I replied that I would tutor her for free. She responded emphatically, 'Don't do anything for free. I'll pay you.' While Baneekia was absolute, most of the young women struggled to define exactly how and when repayment should take place. For example, when Sofia got a flat tire, she was furious because her friend had said she didn't have gas to come and help. 'I can only count on my friends from school. My other friends just take advantage of me. I'm always there for them and they're never there for me. When her transmission broke on her car and she was way out in Lincoln [a neighboring city] I drove all the way out there without getting any gas money.' When I called a roadside assistance program for her she wanted to be sure it would not cost me any money.

The students in the school program for teen mothers, many of whom did not know each other prior to entering the program, were in the process of creating peer relationships that might or might not persist through adulthood. The exchange of photos was both a recognition of existing support and a pledge of future support. The students kept photos of their friends' and relatives' babies with them in the same wallets as their own babies' photos. Demetria, who at the time only had one baby, a son, surprised me one day by showing me a picture of her 'daughter'. She eventually told me that the little girl was the biological daughter of a friend who had a drug problem. Demetria said she took care of the baby, who lived with her grandparents, on weekends and considered her like a daughter.

Musello (1979: 109) describes families exchanging photos 'through the closed network of family and friends'. While all family networks are subject to change, the teen mothers' networks were most definitely not 'closed'. As new mothers, they still belonged (with only a few exceptions) to the network they grew up in; they were also usually establishing a link to the network of their child's father; moreover, they were establishing new relationships of support with their peers. These new relationships were still being tested, as in Sofia's case described earlier.

Both the teen mothers and their older kin struggled with the issue of payment, even within well-established relationships. Starkavia and her children lived with her cousin LaShaun in a duplex owned by her grandmother. Starkavia was paying $250 a month rent, but her grandmother told her she

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was going to start charging her $700, still below the market value of $800. One day at lunch Starkavia was discussing this situation and saying she was going to move into her own apartment. Her friend Latika asked, 'What about LaShaun?'

> Starkavia: I don't know
> Latika: You can't just put her out. I mean she's your cousin, your blood cousin.

It appears that Starkavia and her grandmother were both uncertain about the role of money in their kin network. Over the course of 9 months, Starkavia frequently told me she would have to start paying the higher rent, but then a few days later told me her grandmother was going to wait to charge her. Stack and Burton also found networks strained and family members being 'put out':

> Low-income families attempting to absorb down-and-out members . . . find that sometimes in the face of economic cutbacks and emotional crisis they must, however reluctantly, 'let go' of family members who cannot pull their weight. When public welfare support decreased in the 1980s, it produced a remarkable increase in families with these experiences. (Stack and Burton, 1994: 41–2)

One example from my study provides somewhat of a contradiction to the pattern of market-based exchanges. Ramona paid her cousin $10 each week to drive her daughter to childcare; when her cousin's car broke down, the cousin kept the little girl home with her for 2 days. Ramona told her, 'I know you don't want to watch her every day', and the cousin said, 'Anything – just so you graduate.' While Ramona's cousin was being paid, she was willing to go well beyond what she was being paid for. Ramona told me this story as an example of the exceptional family support that she received, and she did graduate from high school. While the young mothers benefited from some gifts of goods and services from members of their support networks, even exchanges among close kin were negotiated within the parameters of a market economy characterized by scarcity.

The young women I came to know through my research were deeply materialistic. Like many American parents they demonstrated their love and caring for their children in material ways. But unlike middle-aged, middle-class parents, they also had to demonstrate their worthiness to be parents to a society that maligned them both for having babies in their teens and for being poor. Suggesting that the poor are unfit parents is nothing new: in the 1920s, psychologist John Watson pronounced that no one should have a child until she could provide the child with its own room (Ehrenreich and English, 1978: 206). In trying to analyze the ways that the material culture of the teenage mothers signified both their acquiescence to and resistance to mainstream culture, I return to the words of bell hooks:

> A major dilemma faced by all marginal groups suffering exploitation or oppression in this culture and by our allies in struggle is the struggle to resolve, in a constructive way, the tension between reformist work that aims to change the

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> status quo so that we have access to the privileges accorded the dominant group and the more radical project of resistance that seeks to dismantle or transform the existing structure. (hooks, 1995: 104–5)

From my analysis, the young women in my study were struggling to have access to the privileges of representing their families as beautiful and healthy and representing themselves as good mothers. Due to structural constraints that limited their options as students or workers, motherhood was an adult role they could fulfill; material goods provided the evidence of their success in that role; and baby pictures provided a public record of their worth.

Notes

This research was funded by the Spencer Foundation; the Research Institute for the Study of Man; Horace Rackham College of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan; the Abigail Quigley McCarthy Center for Research on Women, College of St Catherine; the Women's Studies Program of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation; and Sigma Xi. Thanks to Photo Disc/Getty Images, Le's Photo and Sears Portrait Studio for use of the photos. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Designing Modern Childhoods conference at the University of California at Berkeley. My thanks to the conference attendees, Carol Giancarlo, Mary Grantham-Campbell, Deborah Davis Jackson, Laura Nichols, Lucila Ramos-Sanchez, and two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments on this material.

1. All names of people, schools and cities are fictitious.
2. The school explained this practice as being for liability reasons – that they did not want the babies going through the main part of the campus.
3. In previous years, students had been able to include their babies in their pictures.
4. One home had photos of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. A few had landscapes or religious pictures. I didn't systematically record images, but non-family pictures were rare enough that I usually noted them.
5. Very few of the young women owned cameras and snapshots were rare. Economically, the choice to rely on studio portraits was a rational one. A package of 30 or more photos from a studio costs $10 or less, approximately the cost of buying and developing a roll of film.
6. Since at the time of my research the children were infants and toddlers, they did not have any input into their clothing or props in the photos. Nor did they have any say in who received the photos.
7. Another young mother complained to me that her daughter's daycare had called her to pick her up because she was sick and when she got there the baby was only in an undershirt. So perhaps Iris did just feel her baby was too lightly dressed.
8. One case worker in the school program shared these stories with me as examples of why school attendance was problematic for some teen mothers. While these stories were 'excuses' for why students weren't in school, the case worker believed them. From my observations and from what the teen mothers said to me about her, she had an excellent rapport with them and was knowledgeable about their lives. Her analysis is credible.

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