

“Hidden” or “Hypervisible”? Writing and Representing the Pregnant and Parenting Student

by Heidi L. Hallman

I began my research study, Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, today and the first question I was asked by LaTasha (a senior at Eastview) was, “Who are you?” And I answered in a clumsy way, saying that I was here because I was studying the school—a school for pregnant and parenting students. I told LaTasha that I wanted to learn about Eastview and its students. But, after I said that, I realized I hadn’t really answered her question.

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The first page of my field notebook begins with the above statement. Looking back on this entry now, more than three years later, I am reminded of my ongoing quest to ethically represent the participants involved in my study at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Throughout my study, students such as LaTasha asked me the question, “Who are you?” and over time I became more comfortable in asserting things about myself. Although my research at Eastview focused primarily on teaching and learning, a critical part of the study aimed to represent students at Eastview and how they perceived themselves as mothers, students, and adolescents. I, too, was interested in asking the question of “Who are you?” As I became more deeply involved in the study, questions of how to “best” represent students’ answers to this question became a dilemma I grappled with throughout the process of writing and representing Eastview and its students.

The context of my inquiry

During the academic years of 2004-2005 and 2005-2006, I studied the teaching and learning at Eastview

School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, a public school alternative program for teen mothers in the Midwest United States. Throughout my research, I worked to represent Eastview’s ability to provide a positive learning space for its students. Because scholars [Dierdre Kelly \(2000\)](#), [Wendy Luttrell \(2003\)](#), and [Wanda Pillow \(2004\)](#) have documented the ways in which the schooling for this population of students has been generally founded upon a “remedial” model of instruction, I aimed to illustrate how schools like Eastview assist students in presenting counter-narratives to the typical, dominant images U.S. society holds about the pregnant and parenting student.

At the time of my study, Eastview, as a school, had been in existence in the Lakeville Public School District for over twenty years, and had evolved over this period of time into a full-day middle/ high school academic program. When Eastview was founded in the mid-1970’s, it was considered a “supplementary” program for teen mothers and schooled just a handful of students. During the 2004-2006 years, Eastview enrolled up to fifty teen mothers, aged 12-19, during each quarter of the academic year.

Throughout this essay, I aim to explore the ethical dimensions of representing pregnant and parenting students (and the students at Eastview, in particular) in educational research. Part of this inquiry calls for a dialogue with scholars who have recently written about pregnant and parenting teens (e.g., [Luttrell, 2003](#); [Pillow, 2004](#)). By fostering such a dialogue, I hope to explore how these researchers have framed the methodological and ethical dilemmas of representing this group of students, thereby moving toward an ethical consideration of how “best” to represent this demographic of students in my own

research. Throughout this essay, I pose the following questions:

- Does representing the pregnant/ parenting teen as a unit of analysis undermine researchers' efforts to ethically highlight the stories of these teens?
- In representing the stories of pregnant and parenting teens, are researchers aiding in the construction of some stories as "fit" and others as "unfit"?
- In educational research, how are pregnant and parenting teens positioned both as "victims" and "free agents"?

Representing the pregnant and parenting student

In looking more closely at the nature of the outlined questions above, I am reminded of the current era in research as one touched by "the posts"—post-structuralism, post-feminism, post-colonialism (see [Ellis & Bochner, 1996](#); [Olesen, 2000](#); and [Richardson, 2000](#)). [Britzman \(2000\)](#) notes that the "posts" characterize ethnography as a "site of doubt," and therefore contemplate the state of ethnography by questioning both the position of the researcher and the researched, concluding that both standpoints are problematic and can only yield partial truths about the site of investigation. [Vidich & Lyman \(2000\)](#), who have written about the state of ethnography, conclude with the recognition that the ethnographer working in the current era must be in some ways less fearful about being part of the site of investigation while also cognizant of the fact that ethnographers have been historically imperialistic and unable to be a "full" participant in the community they research.

My role as a participant observer at Eastview over the eighteen months of my study was indeed "ethnographically-informed"; my work was observational, though not ethnographic in a modernist ethnographic and anthropological sense.¹ My role as

participant observer warranted careful attention to some of the same dilemmas ethnographers face and thinking about the tenets of ethnography aided me in considering the theoretical positioning of other researchers who have depicted pregnant and parenting teens. However, my role as an "outsider" to both Eastview and the experiences of Eastview's students prompted me to think about how my experiences resonated with those of the students at Eastview. One day at Eastview, Jessi Martin, a sophomore, showed me a poem that she was writing as part of a poetry unit in her English class. In this poem, Jessi wrote about herself and her experience as a teen mother. After Jessi was finished writing her poem, she shared it with me and I asked her if I could include it as part of my data. When Jessi agreed to this, I was led me to consider how the inclusion of her poem within my writing also became a site for constructing Jessi as a person—as a student, a mother, and an adolescent. I asked myself whether featuring Jessi's poem simultaneously advocated for and further reified the image of the pregnant and parenting teen. Would using Jessi's poem as a lens from which to view teen motherhood further stereotype this group of students? I posed these questions as I made the decision to include Jessi's poem as data within my study. Her poem, entitled "Just Because," is featured below:

Just Because

Just because I had a baby
Don't laugh and talk behind my back.
Don't think I can't achieve.
Don't try to please me with your make believe.

Just because I had a baby
Don't mean I have to give up my dreams.
Doesn't mean for you to stop being a friend.

Just because I had a baby
Doesn't give you a right to throw me on with the
statistics.

¹ Modernist ethnography has historically used "culture" as a defining category of analysis (see [Wolcott, 1995](#)) and has focused on the stories told by participants in order to craft a representation of the research site. "Culture" has problematically assumed a reified position in modern ethnography, though "postmodern" ethnographers recognize the need to conceptualize culture as

"displacement, transplantation, disruption, positionality, and difference" ([Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000](#)).

Just because I had a baby
 Doesn't mean I'm a ho'
 Don't act like I don't know.
 Just because I had a baby
 Means I need you more than ever.

by Jessi Martin

Jessi's poem, placed within my research, became a story that represented her. This story, told through her own words, stood as a way for me (and hopefully my readers) to make sense of Jessi's experience.

Ethnographic methods in a postmodern landscape

Ethnographers build a representation of their research site, in part, through using the stories of their participants. [Pillow's \(2004\) *Unfit Subjects*](#) began by gathering participants' stories of being a pregnant and/or parenting teen. However, Pillow eventually moved to reject using her participants' stories as the basis of her book, and eventually asserted that individual stories are often bound up in problems of representation, similar to the issues of representation cited in the questions outlined earlier in this essay. Pillow's move to address questions of representation eventually focused on analyzing "discourses,"² a methodology that she felt allowed her to operate from a space that included both the analysis of discourse and the acknowledgement of stories. In *Unfit Subjects*, Pillow acknowledges an interest in stories, but the attention throughout her book is given to tracing discourses in an effort to "identify where the discourses about teen pregnancy are being formed, how they work, and what educational opportunities these discourses open up or delimit for teen mothers" (p. 8). Pillow notes that focusing on the teen mothers' stories led her to "continually face the limits and reproductions of [her] stories" (p. 7), thus prompting her to turn her analytic lens away from the teen mother as a unit of analysis and toward the

construction of the discourses that shape and make possible the teen mother herself. Pillow also offers an explicit reason for refraining from representing the stories of teen mothers. Claiming that this group of teens are already "overrepresented and hypervisible," Pillow believes that building representations through stories may assist in reproducing stereotypical knowledge about teen mothers. She poses the question, How do we tell stories that do not easily fit into existing, hypervisible, narrative structures?

Does telling the stories of teen mothers make them "hypervisible"?

Wanda Pillow would likely weigh whether featuring Jessi Martin's poem within research makes teen motherhood "hypervisible." However, two critical ethnographers who have written about the schooling experiences of pregnant teens, [Dierdre Kelly \(2000\)](#) and [Wendy Luttrell \(2003\)](#), may view Jessi's poem in a different way. Both Kelly and Luttrell offer a theoretical rationale for focusing on the stories that individuals tell—a rationale that they feel keeps the agency of participants at the center of research. Both Kelly and Luttrell execute this theoretical position by maintaining that their research, which values the stories and voices of their participants, provides alternative visions to the myths and stereotypes that surround the image of the pregnant teen. [Wendy Luttrell's *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds* \(2003\)](#), uses self-representations of the students she works with to represent them, and asserts that the students' efforts to construct themselves through their own image work and self-representations work toward the goal of providing crucial alternative visions of the pregnant and parenting teen. Jessi Martin's poem "Just Because" would fit the criteria of a self-representation and would adhere to Luttrell's mandate of centering the stories of participants.

In contemplating Wendy Luttrell's work with pregnant and parenting students, it was important for me to consider how Luttrell does not aim to create a single story from the stories she tells about her participants; rather, she recognizes that all researchers assume a normative or universal relation to truth when

² I am using the term "discourses" here in a [Foucauldian \(1972\)](#) sense, referring to historically and culturally located systems of power/ knowledge that construct subjects and their worlds. Foucault explains that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects [and subjects] of which they speak" (p. 48).

speaking about research participants (Carspecken, 1996). These truths exist to allow people to recognize they are ideologically located. The “double crisis of representation” (Behar & Gordon, 1995) and the acknowledgement that the crisis has two roots, one in the postmodern turn and the other in the critique of the white, middle-class feminist version of women’s experiences, is clearly accounted for in Luttrell’s work. For example, Luttrell (2003) points out that she has been told that she, as a white scholar, “had no business re-representing the lives of black youth” (p. 168). Luttrell disagrees with this claim, while also clearly understanding that she cannot break free from the social and racialized world of which she is part. Not only is it her responsibility to debunk myths and stereotypes about pregnant and parenting teens, but it is also her duty to create alternative visions. It is through these alternative visions, Luttrell argues, that the process of “becoming and being made” can be explored. Luttrell’s work aligns with the tenets of “postmodern ethnography,” an approach Denzin (1997) describes as including a deep understanding of the lives of one’s participants and a contextualized reproduction of the stories told by the participants.

Luttrell’s stance as an ethnographer does not aim to make the emotional facets of her investigation invisible. Instead, it is these difficult sites of emotional knowing that facilitate the creation of multiple truths. Her ability to “ethnographically know,” in fact, relies on her emotional ties to her research and to her participants. Luttrell identifies her work as a “person-centered” approach to ethnography (p. 6). Claiming this as an “experience-near way of describing and knowing” her participants, Luttrell views experience-near knowing as promoting the goal of engaging people in talking about and reflecting upon their subjective experiences.

Dierdre Kelly, author of *Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling* (2000), also positions herself as a critical feminist ethnographer and speaks to the dichotomous construct of teen mothers as victims/ teen mothers as free agents. Recognizing that viewing teen mothers as victims neglects giving girls personal agency and, conversely, viewing teen mothers as free agents

neglects the recognition of the discourses that influence/ shape the girls’ subjectivities, Kelly endorses a critical feminist stance as a methodology that attends to both “agency and the lived experiences of the research participants (especially the most vulnerable); the extra-local context of research sites, including the various asymmetrical power relations; and the documentation of oppressive ideologies and practices with an eye toward envisioning more emancipatory alternatives” (pp. 8-9). Kelly views her understanding of critical feminism as inclusive of a variety of feminist approaches, including the work of multicultural, poststructuralist, socialist, and materialist feminists (the latter three she characterizes as “critical”). The position of “feminist” is emphasized in her work in order to stress her desire to scrutinize the act of “othering” the teen mother. In an effort to include the students she worked with as co-researchers, Kelly created a context where full collaboration with her research participants would be possible. However, she notes that from her previous research she knew that “public schools are not places conducive to participatory action research, particularly when the intended co-researchers are students and minors” (p. 192). Kelly understands that because of dilemmas such as these, she is not just “studying down,” a position for which she has been criticized (when she, as the White, middle-class female academic investigated the positionalities of students disadvantaged by age, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity), she is also “studying up” (when she, as an academic, encountered difficulty with the school district with regard to allowing her research project to move forward). These more complex understandings of a researcher’s position in doing ethnography led Kelly to an understanding that “critical feminist ethnographers will collude in unequal relations of power despite our political goals to challenge and transform them” (p. 203).

Jessi Martin’s poem “Just Because” references several discourses of teen motherhood, and one might view these discourses as confining Jessi’s ability to act as a free agent. For example, as readers of her poem, we may notice that Jessi references “giving up her dreams,” “talking behind her back,” and “throwing

her on with the statistics” (lines 6, 2, and 9). All three researchers that I have featured in this essay, Dierdre Kelly, Wendy Luttrell, and Wanda Pillow, might argue that these words are not necessarily Jessi’s words as a free agent speaking, but are instead discourses at play that are articulated by Jessi. However, Jessi’s understanding of herself as a teen mom involves “talking back” to discourses as well as synthesizing them. Her critical awareness that these discourses exist and are at play within her own construction of herself is an indicator that she feels a sense of agency. Her poem, “Just Because,” is a metaphor for teen mothers’ work within the dialectic of “free agent”/ “victim.”

Throughout their work, ethnographers [Kelly \(2000\)](#) and [Luttrell \(2003\)](#) are able to capture how local technologies play a part in shaping and producing discourses. Through a dialectical relationship, these scholars are able to feature individuals’ agency and the discourses they work within and through, recognizing the tensions and problems scholars doing ethnography have recently faced. Although it has been argued that drawing attention to the narratives of pregnant and parenting teens may make these young women even more “hypervisible” ([Pillow, 2004](#)), the stories of teen mothers, as [Kelly \(2000\)](#) and [Luttrell \(2003\)](#) illustrate, are powerful tools of representation because they respond to what [Luttrell \(2003\)](#) calls “both ways” of ethnographic knowing: detachment/ analysis and being an emotional participant in what one is seeing (p. 162). [Luttrell](#) claims that this is what makes ethnographic knowing an “exemplary” kind of knowing: it takes into account personal subjectivity.

Writing within the dialectic of “both ways” of ethnographic knowing

Working within the dialectic of “both ways” of ethnographic knowing is the call for researchers who study the experiences and lives of individuals. [Dorothy Smith \(1987, 1990\)](#) has been explicit in addressing “both ways” of ethnographic knowing, and has focused on the possibility of a “dialectics of discourse and the everyday” (1990, p. 202). She

articulates this in reference to women’s “active” placement in their worlds:

It is easy to misconstrue the discourse as having an overriding power to determine the values and interpretation of women’s appearances in local settings, and see this power as essentially at the disposal of the fashion industry and media. But women are active, skilled, make choices, consider, are not fooled or foolish. Within discourse there is play and interplay. (1990, p. 202)

[Smith \(1990\)](#) understands that while discourse may shape possibilities, women as agents still have the ability to take up the possibilities in various ways. [Jessi Martin’s](#) poem, “Just Because,” articulates the interplay of “woman as agent” working within discourse and firmly situates agency as a distinct aspect of life. Her poem’s critical awareness evidences [Smith’s](#) claim that women are indeed “active, skilled, make choices, are not fooled or foolish” (p. 202).

Throughout this essay, I have worked to call attention to particular theoretical and methodological stances of scholars, including [Kelly \(2000\)](#), [Luttrell \(2003\)](#), and [Pillow \(2004\)](#), who have written about pregnant and parenting teens. The goal of my inquiry has been to more purposely position the question of “Who are you?” within an analytic framework that “best” speaks to the construction of identity within ethnographic ways of knowing. As a scholar interested in the lives and experiences of youth who are labeled “at risk,” my inquiry will no doubt lead me to more deliberate, and therefore, more ethical, representations of all youth—particularly those who are deemed to be most “at risk” of school failure.

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