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The phenomenon of young motherhood

Young mothers are considered to be a problematic group in the public as well as in the scientific dispute. Social work refers to young pregnant women and young mothers as a special high-risk group. Generally, the data for Germany does not show an upward trend for “teenage pregnancies”. In comparison with other western industrial nations Germany lies far behind. However, “teen pregnancy” is scandalised based on the assumption of escalating number of cases and thus receives increased attention.

In the German and in the English-speaking dispute about young mothers there exist several interpretations and different ways of focusing on this phenomenon. On the one hand young mothers are seen as adolescents with a deviant way of living that is morally reprobate on the other hand they are addressed as socially excluded members of society who need support to get reincluded in a pretended mainstream. However, young motherhood is usually seen as a problem and class- or genderspecific structures of inequality are often not discussed. The conservative dominated discourse about young motherhood is strongly related to the dispute about the erosion of family structures and assumes missing moral values in society. In the course of the “Underclass”-debate, especially in its cultural perspective, the “teenaged”, single and unemployed mother becomes the female ideal type of a member of the “Underclass”. The German „neue Unterschicht“, is ‘new’ because it is no longer distinguished by a monetary distress but rather by an absence of cultural resources. Young mothers’ sexual attitudes are now characterized by a deterioration in their moral and cultural values. Thereby an irresponsible handling of sexuality and contraception is picked out as a central theme as well as the allegation of a “welfare dependency” that is supposed to spread like a “vicious circle” through the generations. An assumed deficit in competencies of caring for their child, for themselves and their situation in the labour market is often discussed.

Suggested reasons for a young motherhood are a low social position and missing life- and job-related perspectives. Interestingly these “riskfactors” for a young pregnancy have also been named as prevalent consequences of young motherhood.

Ongoing debate about young motherhood is actively conducted but mostly analytically imprecise and without any empirical foundation.

My dissertation project seeks to close this gap by making an empirical analysis without using pre-attributed assumptions. This is necessary for the development of appropriate social and educational policy strategies and arrangements for the support of young mothers.

My project deals with the question: What is the phenomenon of young motherhood about? This will be explored by using the knowledge-generating research approach of episodic-narrative interview. Through this it will be possible to know about the self-description of young mothers and

their own construction of meaning of young motherhood and wellbeing. It will also be possible to find out about the influence that pregnancy and motherhood might have (had) on their capabilities and well-being.

Furthermore the influence of educational and social policy on the well-being of young mothers will be explored. In addition, an analysis of several institutions that address young mothers – mainly institutions of the youth welfare service – will be carried out by qualitative interviews with experts and the analysis of concepts of these institutions.

The qualitative data obtained will generate categories which then will be used to construct a quantitative online-questionnaire for young mothers.

According to the Capabilities Approach of Martha Nussbaum the main question of my dissertation project is about the connection between young motherhood – besides the stigmatizing assumptions that exist in the public and scientific dispute –, institutions that address young mothers and the chances that young mothers have to live an autonomous life in the sense of well-being. To achieve this not only the available goods, resources and accesses are relevant, the option to choose between them and the real freedom of young mothers to realize their own conception of a good life are equally important.