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Virginia Diez¹ and Jayanthi Mistry¹

Abstract

We report the results of a study about how early childbearing affected the educational trajectories of nine Puerto Rican teenage mothers living in New England. Raised largely on the mainland, participants chose to carry pregnancies to term and to participate in a parenting program for young mothers. Upon examination of shared meaning-making around childbearing, we found that, consistently, childbearing activated a family building script as the main task of motherhood. The pursuit of education as a developmental script was less consistent. We identified three approaches to reconciling the competing tasks of family building and educational attainment. “Successful jugglers” managed to do both, and even work at the same time. “Prioritizers” chose motherhood over education, either before or after childbearing. The two participants who did not follow a clear trajectory also happened to be the youngest in the study. Key factors contributing to each trajectory are presented.

Keywords

Adolescent mothers, pathways to adulthood, educational attainment, Hispanic or Latinos, Puerto Ricans

In the United States today, considerable empirical evidence documents health and educational risks associated with teenage motherhood. As noted in a

¹Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development, Tufts University.

Corresponding Author:

Virginia Diez, 38 Elmore Street, Newtown, MA 02459

Email: virginia.diez@tufts.edu

recent update from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), compared to women who delay childbearing until the age of 20 or 21, teenage mothers (i.e., 19 or younger) are more likely to drop out of high school. This phenomenon has received considerable attention throughout the years, resulting in a number of first and repeat pregnancy prevention programs. Although lately there has been an increase in adolescent birth rates for all ethnic and racial groups (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009), in general, teenage birth rates are lower now than 30 years ago, albeit not in the same proportion for all racial and ethnic groups. The decline in births among mainland Puerto Rican teenagers has been slower than for non-Hispanic White¹ teens. In 2006, for example, U.S. Census data show that the birth rate for Puerto Rican teens aged 15 to 19 (69.3%) was considerably higher than the rate for non-Hispanic White girls (26.6%) of the same age (Martin et al., 2009). The distance between these two groups was even more marked in Massachusetts, in 2007, where “the teen birth for Hispanics was over 5 times higher than that for whites (70.9 vs. 13.3 births per 1,000 women ages 15–19)” (MDPH, 2009).

In this article, we present an interpretive analysis of data gathered from 9 young Puerto Rican mothers living in mainland urban communities to examine how early childbearing affected their educational trajectories. The term “mainland” is used in Puerto Rican communities to denote residence on the continental United States rather than the island. We use the term to mark our focus on portraying participants’ experiences from their own perspectives (Maxwell, 2005). Life on the mainland is life between worlds, or what Anzaldúa (1987) has called life in the “borderlands.” We use all these terms synonymously.

In general, demographic studies show that educational attainment is highly correlated with age at first birth. Specifically, delaying a first birth until the mid- to late-twenties (25–29) is associated with having a high school and college education, while advancing childbearing age to the 20 to 24 age band or younger is not, especially for Hispanic women nationwide (Martin et al., 2007). The case of Puerto Rican women follows this general rule. A large random survey of children of immigrants² under age 36 living in New York City (Mollenkopf, Waters, Holdaway, & Kasinitz, 2005) established a stronger correlation between parenting at a young age and low educational attainment for Puerto Rican respondents than for respondents of other ethnicities and places of origin. Puerto Ricans who were parenting were most represented in the no-school-no-work category (64.3%) and least represented in the work-and-school category (22.5%).

The strong association between early childbearing and low educational attainment is often constructed as a causal relationship, with early childbearing

being the risk factor for other poor outcomes. Thus, we hear that early childbearing increases the likelihood that young mothers will drop out of school and never graduate, will live in poverty, and/or will remain single at age 35 (Holcombe, Petersen, & Manlove, 2009). Yet longitudinal studies, or studies that look at maternal education pre- and post-childbearing, have found that school achievement prior to childbearing tends to be consistent with school achievement thereafter (Beutel, 2000³; Casserly, Carpenter, & Halcon, 2001; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Way & Leadbeater, 1999). For Puerto Rican mothers, the comprehensive study confirming this direction of causality was the landmark New York Study of Adolescent Mothers (Leadbeater & Way, 2001), which found grade placement prior to childbearing to be the only independent predictor of delayed grade placement at 1 and 3 years postpartum (p. 51). Interestingly, at 6 years postpartum, two additional variables predicted lower educational attainment: number of repeat births, and having more emotional (not childcare) support from grandmothers. Way and Leadbeater attributed the negative impact of grandmother emotional support to grandmother expectations. They found that having either a family with high educational expectations or a neglectful family motivated some young mothers to succeed in school, especially when supportive mentors were available. Conversely, having unconditionally supportive and lenient primary caregivers who did not pressure their daughters to succeed in school during the early years of motherhood was associated with low school achievement.

Other studies of early childbearing and low educational attainment have focused on the high incidence of out-of-wedlock births among young Puerto Rican women (Landale & Fennelly, 1992; Landale & Hauan, 1992; Manning & Landale, 1996; Oropesa, 1996). This phenomenon has been associated with limited education. "Women who have fewer than 12 years of education are less likely to marry before the birth of their child than women who have completed 12 years of schooling" (Manning & Landale, 1996, p. 74). Yet out-of-wedlock childbearing in Puerto Rican communities appears to be different than in other cultural communities. Although marriage is not formalized, mother and father often form a "consensual union" for the purposes of raising a child. In these unions, cohabiting partners take on the roles of husband and wife without being formally married. This arrangement is different from cohabitation as we know it in mainland middle-class communities today. The prevalence of consensual unions may explain why, in 2007 (Hamilton et al., 2009), among all U.S. states and territories, Puerto Rico had the second highest rate of live births to unmarried mothers of all ages (59.3% after the Virgin Islands' 71.5%). High rates of births out of wedlock in the Caribbean today are consistent with historical accounts that trace "consensual unions" back to colonial times (Cubano-Iguina, 2004).

The Cultural Nature of Early Childbearing and Educational Attainment

The sample for the New York Study of Adolescent Mothers (Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Way & Leadbeater, 1999) was roughly half African American and half Puerto Rican. When the two groups were compared, the study found that Puerto Rican mothers were less likely to pursue an education than their African American counterparts. The authors attributed these different outcomes to the greater value attached to motherhood in Puerto Rican culture (Leadbeater & Way, 2001, pp. 49-50), thus hinting at the centrality of cultural institutions and practices to human behavior. In this study, we take up where Leadbeater and Way left off by using a sociocultural framework (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) to understand the mechanisms that prompt Puerto Rican mothers' decisions on whether to pursue schooling while mothering. Briefly put, sociocultural theorists situate individual mental functioning in "cultural communities" or groups of people "who have some common and continuing organization, values, understanding, history, and practices" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 80). To sociocultural theorists, all of these common elements shape higher mental functioning and, in turn, are shaped by it. As Rogoff has pointed out, educational expectations and aspirations may be contingent upon valued markers of maturity in different communities. In communities where individuals are expected to develop along a prescribed timeline and to become economically independent and self-reliant, educational attainment and financial independence are effective markers of maturity. Conversely, in communities where a change in roles is seen as a marker of maturity, marriage and parenthood may be more valued passages into adulthood, even when couples are still young and require support and supervision from more mature family members.

This same line of reasoning was presented by García-Coll (García-Coll, 1989; García-Coll & Vasquez-García, 1995, 1996) when she argued that in Puerto Rico, when the necessary support mechanisms—father involvement and grandmother support—were in place, teenage childbearing could be a positive experience for mother and child. Yet she also saw how the same developmental track could be less adaptive in mainland communities where different cultural practices were favored. Cubano-Iguina's (2004) recent account of the historical origin of consensual unions in Puerto Rico shows this practice as closely tied to the island's economy in the 19th century. The island's labor opportunity structure required that male workers move freely from coastal sugar plantations to interior coffee-growing regions in order to make a living. This need for mobility, coupled with rigid legal and religious norms against divorce, made consensual unions adaptive.

Cultural institutions, social practices, and conventions have underlying material and ideal dimensions or schema (Cole, 1996). Schemas are shared among members of a community of practice and serve as a guide to action. Of particular interest to this study are “event schemas” or “scripts” (p. 126) that specify, for a particular situation, what actions are *normal*, in what sequence, who is involved, in what roles, with what objects, and so forth. Also important for our study are considerations of whether and when the process of physical migration has a parallel mental process leading to gradual changes in mental schema, as the cultural institutions of sending communities are replaced with new ones in receiving communities.

The complexity of living between worlds was forcefully represented by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) when she spoke of the borderlands as having both physical and psychological dimensions. In the borderlands, existing *shared* and newer scripts could blend or clash when “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (p. 100). We equate Anzaldúa’s frames of reference with Cole’s cultural models or scripts. One script, possibly constructed within participants’ immediate family realm, may call for the establishment of at least a consensual union when a baby is born. This script corresponds with *familismo*, or a collectivistic orientation, which creates a system of obligations and reciprocity among family members to provide each other instrumental, economic, and social support in times of need (most recent review by Landale & Oropesa, 2001).

Another script, culturally constructed within the larger societal context of the mainland, may call for economic independence through educational attainment. Conflicting scripts can place high demands on individuals, especially when scripts emphasizing economic self-reliance are not supported by employment and educational opportunities that facilitate their instantiation. In this study we shed light on key factors contributing to participants’ choices of different scripts in connection with early motherhood.

Method

The data for this study were drawn from an evaluation of a home-visit program for first-time parents under age 20 (Jacobs, Easterbrooks, Brady, & Mistry, 2005). The program’s main goals were to (a) prevent child abuse and neglect by supporting effective parenting skills and a nurturing home environment, (b) achieve optimal development in infancy and early childhood, (c) promote maximal parental educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency, and (d) prevent repeat teen pregnancies.

The evaluation design consisted of three intersecting studies in the following areas: (a) outcomes, (b) process or program implementation, and (c) ethnotheories of parenting and help seeking. The latter derived from ethnographic studies of different New England cultural communities: (a) European American families from an ex-urban area, (b) African American families from an urban community, and (c) Puerto Rican families from former mill towns. The data for this study were drawn from detailed case histories collected from 9 Puerto Rican families.

When compared to outcomes of the overall sample ($n = 316$), those of participants in the Puerto Rican ethnographic study diverged considerably in aspects that appeared to be internally consistent. Whereas 17.7% of the overall sample had repeat births, and less than 30% established committed relationships with their babies' fathers, 7 of the 9 participants in the ethnography of Puerto Rican families had repeat births, and 5 remained in committed relationships for the duration of the study.

The association of repeat births with stable relationships led us to hypothesize the presence of a family-forming script triggered by motherhood. Our first question addresses this hypothesis: What shared meaning did early childbearing have for the mothers? On the other hand, the presence of different outcomes led us to hypothesize that shared beliefs intersected with structural conditions and developmental histories in different ways. Our second question, therefore, was, "How did individual, familial, and structural factors intersect into different trajectories as participants negotiated the demands of motherhood and education?" We approached the second question with the expectation that reconciling parenting and education would be associated with having greater support systems, whereas picking motherhood over education would be a choice for the less advantaged.

Participants and Settings

Participants were recruited into the ethnographic study if they were receiving the home-visiting intervention and agreed to participate in the overall evaluation, self-reported their ethnicity as Puerto Rican, and lived in two old New England mill towns that had served as immigrant gateways for a good part of the 20th century. We were not satisfied that ethnicity per se would represent participants' shared cultural schema. Rather, we hypothesized that a shared Puerto Rican identity, area of residence, and experience of childbearing while still in high school might be markers of shared cultural schema, and we were right, as shown in our results.

The 9 participants⁴ came from 2 towns that we have called Mill Town and Services Town to denote different economic bases that resulted in different labor markets. As noted by Portes and Rumbaut (2006), labor market characteristics in receiving contexts may have an impact on migrant adaptation. In

2006, 35% of Mill Town's economic output was based on manufacturing. The town advertised itself as "still a hub of textile, apparel and shoe companies." Its population was 72% Latino—immigrant and native born—of which 38% was Puerto Rican. Mill Town had high rates of poverty (27.8% vs. a state average of 9.9%), family households with unmarried partners (50%), inhabitants without a high school education (38%), and low rates of inhabitants over age 25 with a college degree (6%).

Services Town, on the other hand, had shifted its economic base from cotton to the minicomputer in the 1980s. Puerto Ricans constituted a majority of Latinos in Services Town (66%), but the Latino population was in the minority (only 15%). The rate of poverty was much lower (14.7%), as were family households with unmarried partners (34%), and individuals without a high school diploma (24%), whereas a larger portion of the population had a college degree (13%). Mill Town constituted an ethnic enclave that could "cushion the impact of cultural change" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006, p. 95) while providing fewer opportunities for economic advancement. Services Town, on the other hand, provided a more differentiated labor market, which has been associated with greater opportunities to increase earning potential (p. 94).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered by the first author, a first-generation immigrant and native Spanish speaker who had lived in the United States long enough to identify herself as "Latina" rather than by her country of origin. Moreover, the first author became pregnant shortly before starting data collection. The linguistic match, supplemented by the imminence of motherhood and a similar length of residence in the United States as participants' mothers facilitated the establishment of trusting relationships with participants' mothers of mothers-in-law (babies' grandmothers⁵) in cases of coresidence. Participants' partners (babies' fathers in most cases), whether formally married or in consensual unions, were encouraged to participate in interviews. So were other family members such as siblings and grandfathers.

Establishing a trusting relationship helped retain Claudia and Noemi in the study. Claudia, one of the youngest participants, dropped out of both the home-visiting program and the overall evaluation upon the abrupt departure of a trusted home visitor, but she agreed to return to the ethnographic study after a hiatus. Noemi, an independent, confident mother, lost interest in the home-visiting program and the overall evaluation but stayed in the ethnography because of her reported interest in the relationship with the first author.

The main sources of data were semistructured interviews, informal phone calls, and observations recorded in field notes (Spradley, 1980). Extensive

case histories were developed for each participant, including 10 conversations lasting 60 to 90 min spread out over 2 years, and regular telephone conversations between meetings. The 90 conversations thus collected were transcribed and coded using Atlas-ti software for qualitative analysis. Confidentiality was kept by assigning numbers and pseudonyms to each participant. Participants received small gifts at each visit and \$200 for completing the entire study.

The interviewer carried guidelines of key domains and strategies for eliciting data and at the same time encouraged participants to discuss topics most salient to them in their own words (Jacob, 1987). Key domains for data elicitation were perspectives on life with a newborn; day-to-day feeding, sleeping, discipline, time structuring, and other salient practices; accounts of babies' progress between visits; familial and extrafamilial support systems; sources of parenting beliefs and practices; educational experiences in elementary and high school; and beliefs about the purposes of education.

Analysis

Our phenomenological stance was constructivist, which is to say that the theory "depends" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130) on the researcher's views and that data is constructed in the researcher-participant interaction. Yet we chose to use strategies associated with positivistic stances (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) for the sake of transparency. We used Miles and Huberman (1994) cross-case matrices to identify similarities and differences in participant characteristics and trajectories (Tables 1, 2, 3, 4). To analyze participants' beliefs and meaning making around childbearing and to formulate theoretical propositions, we used grounded-theory strategies: open coding, axial coding, and integrative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Validity

We have used Maxwell's (2005) checklist of validity tests, which includes long-term involvement, collection of "rich" data, respondent validation, intervention, searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases, triangulation, quasi-statistics, and comparison.

Our ethnographic design incorporated (a) a 2-year involvement, (b) the collection of "rich" data, and (c) respondent validation as participants felt free to correct researcher's misinterpretations of their expressed beliefs.

Other validity tests addressed were as follows: (a) "Reactivity" (p. 108) to researcher-participant power differentials was evident in participants'

perception of the researcher as a “social worker” who was supportive but also evaluative. The researcher repeatedly reminded participants that her role was to evaluate the home visiting program and not their effectiveness as mothers. A second source of reactivity was the presence of participants’ mothers, partners, and other family members in the conversations. To correct this, over time, during one-on-one researcher–participant interviews, sometimes outside their homes, participants were given opportunities to revisit previous conversations and to present their own perspective. (b) Discrepant evidence and negative cases were documented and explained in accounting for contextual, familial, and individual differences in participants’ trajectories. (c) For triangulation, other doctoral students coded the three ethnographic studies and agreed with our selection of family building as a distinctive phenomenon in the Puerto Rican community. (d) There is a quasi-statistical nature to our data that could be tested with larger samples in the future. And (e) our findings corroborated (and expanded) previous empirical studies.

Results and Discussion

In this section we first identify and discuss data about the salient characteristics of participants and their families. Next, we address the first research question by presenting a grounded-theory analysis of participants’ meaning making around early childbearing and educational attainment. To answer the second question, we present participants’ individual trajectories in the form of tables, discuss intervening conditions, and finish with integrative theoretical propositions.

Salient Features of Participants and Their Families

As previously mentioned, upon recruitment, the only common characteristics expected of participants were (a) having chosen to take a pregnancy to term while in high school, (b) self-identifying as Puerto Rican, (c) participating in a client education program and its evaluation, and (d) living in formerly textile manufacturing towns in New England. Upon reviewing the data, other shared characteristics emerged (see Table 1). Except for Mercedes, who had just arrived from the island to reunite with her husband and had a planned pregnancy, participants reported their pregnancies as accidental. Again except for Mercedes, who spoke no English, participants were fluent English/Spanish bilinguals schooled largely on the mainland. A few had dropped out of school prior to becoming pregnant. Participants’ mothers, instead, were

Table 1. Salient Features of Participants and their Families

	Mill Town			Fron Mill to Services			Services Town			
	Claudia	Melissa	Noemi	Patricia	Rosario	Irma	Mercedes	Marta	Jennifer	
LI	E	E	E	E	E	E	S	E	E	
GM's LI	S	S	both	S	S	S	S	S	S	
Age at birth 1	15	19	17	16	17	17	17	14	19	
Age at RB	18	21	—	19	19	19	—	18	—	
No. siblings	4	0	1	3	3	10	2	5	4	
Educational status, Birth 1	In HS	In HS	In HS	In HS	DO	HSD	DO	In HS	DO	
Early death of parent	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	
Depression in family	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	X	X	
Type of union*	none	CU	CU	CU	M	M	M	none	M	
Intact biological family	X	—	—	—	—	X	X	X	X	

Note: Mill Town GM = grandmother (participant's mother/mother-in-law); from Mill to Services Town RB = repeat birth; services town, CU = consensual union/M = married; in HS = In high school/ HSD = high school diploma attained; DO = dropped out of high school; E = English; S = Spanish; LI = primary language; X = reported by participants and observed by researcher.

dominant Spanish speakers, schooled on the island for less than 12 years, and had been young mothers themselves, some from large families. In brief, participants were situated in a physical and psychological borderland where navigating between different cultures was a way of life.

Unexpectedly, participants reported numerous health issues in their families, sometimes resulting in the death of a parent or primary caregiver. These events could have “cascading effects” (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 6) in some cases. For example, Rosario said,

My life is like this because he left [refers to her father’s death], and my mom changed and my mom didn’t know how to raise me right. That is why I am like this. I am real stupid. . . . Like when someone is giving you love, you don’t give it back because you don’t know how to. As the time has passed, me having my son, he showed me what love is. He showed me what love is, how to care . . . how to be a woman and how to be a mother.

The trauma of loss was sometimes compounded by abuse, especially by men who came into the lives of two participants’ mothers once they were widowed. Sometimes depression affected relationships between participants and their mothers. The combination of economic disadvantage, poor health, early childbearing, and low economic attainment prompted us to designate ours as a sample exposed to “cumulative risk” (Luthar, 2003, p. 7).

In addition, we found that participants’ biological family structures and participants’ union formation behaviors varied between the two towns. Four out of five participants who came from two-parent families resided in Services Town while three out of four participants from single-parent families lived in Mill Town. The fourth moved from Mill Town to Services Town. Only one participant from a two-parent family lived in Mill Town. More participants in Mill Town remained in “consensual unions” while in Services Town most married their partners.

Shared Cultural Script About the Meaning of Childbearing

To develop a model for the cultural script that was activated by childbearing, we used a grounded-theory approach, including open, axial, and integrative coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Core category: family building. The two most frequently recurring “in vivo” codes were “putting baby first” and “starting a family.” We picked “starting a family” as the core category because we realized this was

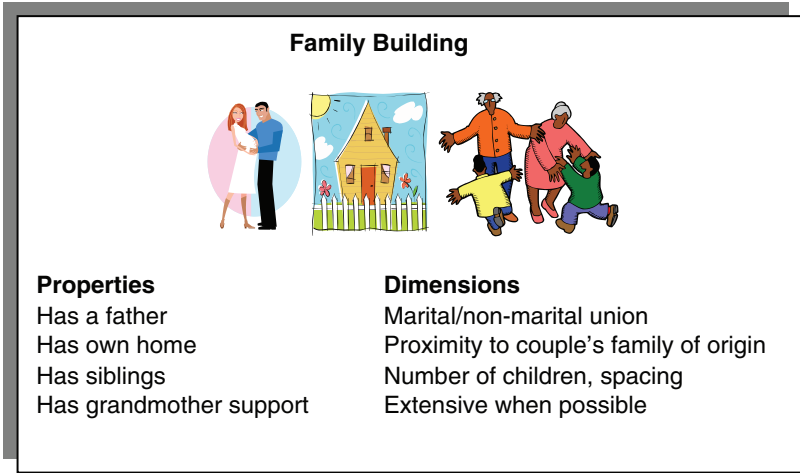


Figure 1. Family Building

perhaps the most important way of “putting baby first,” and we renamed it “family building” to reflect participants’ commitment to this developmental pathway.

The strong association of family building with the belief that baby should be put first was striking, especially in contrast to expected references to literacy activities and dyadic mother–child stimulation characteristic in European American communities. Participants assumed that children learned independently by imitating adults. The major task of adults in the early years was to give “love.” Family was the cultural institution that provided a loving, nurturing structure that could meet the needs of both children and their mothers early on and later in life. When all of its properties and dimensions were fully coded, family towered over other cultural institutions as a source of care for the ill, marriage partners, jobs, housing, financial assistance, social life, and trusted advice. Participants’ lives revolved around family.

Figure 1 illustrates key properties and dimensions of family building from participants’ perspectives. The illustration is based on a statement made by Noemi: “I want to live the fantasy with a nice picket fence and some flowers in the house and a nice little backyard with a dog, something that a family’s supposed to live in. Not just this apartment.”

Axial coding: properties and dimensions of family building. After identifying a core category, in axial coding we developed its properties and dimensions,

Table 2. Successful Jugglers: Family, Education and Work

Town	Name	Age at first birth	Repeat births	Intervening conditions					Trajectories chosen
				Individual	Familial				
				Education prior to birth	Relationship with BF	GM support	BF's job	Family structure	
Mill	Noemi	17	No	Good student, in high school	CU	Co-resides, provides daycare	Yes/n	Mom divorced, not remarried, loving relationship	+ family + education + work
	Patricia	16	Yes	Good student, in high school	CU	Co-resides, no support, conflict	Yes/n	Mom widowed, works, teen was abused	+ family + education + work

Note: BF = baby's father; CU = consensual union; GM = baby's grandmother (participant's mother/mother-in-law)

followed by structural and intervening conditions, and their consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We present properties and dimensions of family building from participants' perspectives first.

A family involves a strong partnership with the baby's father. Enlisting the support of their babies' fathers constituted participants' first step toward building a family. When asked to draw maps of their support networks, participants put the baby's father at the center. Ensuring involvement of the father in the child's life was important and sometimes participants' parents took it upon themselves to have a "serious talk" with the father-to-be upon learning about their daughters' pregnant status. Participants' relationship with their partners automatically was perceived as more formal upon pregnancy news. Boyfriends became "husbands." Some participants actually married their partners, and others moved into cohabitation arrangements with their partners and their families. At first, participants spoke about formalizing the relationship in the near future, but afterwards some dropped this expectation.

In the borderlands, the script for "good fatherhood" emphasized an obligation to provide financial stability to mother and child. The greater availability of well-paid jobs in Services Town than in Mill Town made it easier for young men in Services Town to fulfill the role of the "good father" as reported by Marta in the following section. Employment in factories, as well as installation, maintenance, and repair occupations in Services Town accounted for this difference. These jobs were remunerated well enough to provide highly valued economic stability, as reflected in Marta's comment:

The summer I got pregnant he didn't have a job. But in October, he got that job at the telephone company where I've told you he makes good money. . . . And then he started spending money, and more money to buy things for the baby.

On the other hand, in Mill Town, participants reported greater job availability for themselves than for their partners. Participants were willing to work to supplement, or sometimes individually provide, a family income. They might juggle building a family with school and work.

A family must have its own separate home. Moving into a separate home marked the beginning of a new identity for the couple as a separate family. For this purpose, availability of and eligibility for subsidized housing under the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program helped solidify the marital union. At the same time, couples expected and were expected to move near their biological families, as reflected in the following statement by Jennifer's

mother, "I told them when they were looking for an apartment, 'Are you going too far?'" She was concerned that her grandchildren, like her children, would grow away from their grandmother, a choice she saw as undesirable. Noemi expressed vehemently that she wanted her mother to move into an apartment right on the first floor of her new building. For her, living in different apartments within the same building was enough separation. Eventually, Noemi moved her new family into an apartment in a neighboring town and her mother into a nearby building in the same town.

Family has a minimum number of members. Once a family had a child, at least one other close in age was expected, for the benefit of the children. A critical mass of at least two children was seen as protective; siblings close in age were expected to care for each other throughout life, especially when parents were no longer able to do so. This script usually prevailed over external advice to finish high school prior to having a repeat birth. Only three mothers postponed a repeat birth: Mercedes due to health complications, Jennifer because of economic instability, and Noemi in order to go to college. Noemi's decision shows a greater degree of buy-in into the educational attainment script of the borderlands, which we discuss later.

Family is built with extensive grandmother support. Grandmother support was a heavily scripted role, counted upon for family building, but was not readily acknowledged. Both maternal and paternal grandmothers were expected to provide childcare while participants attended school, worked, and occasionally socialized. The term "grandmother" is somewhat misleading as these women, most of whom had been teenage mothers themselves, became grandmothers while still in their mid-30s. Ironically, their daughters' early childbearing may have given some grandmothers a first opportunity to fully parent a newborn. Grandmothers had the additional advantage of being seen as sources of expert advice, which was highly valued, together with the advice of doctors and home visitors.

Integrative Coding: Interaction of Individual, Familial, and Contextual Factors With Family Building and Education

In integrative analysis, we examined how individuals constructed trajectories combining family building and education. Beliefs about education were less consistent than the uniform script about childbearing reported above. At first, when confronted with social expectations around educational attainment, participants reacted positively and attempted to complete high school or a GED at least. Participants' mothers were highly supportive:

She has to finish her studies. I can't allow her. . . . She doesn't know what will happen with her marriage. . . . First she needs to finish her studies, and then there is time for the wedding. I will take care of her child with that condition, that she finishes her studies. And while she is a minor, I don't want to marry her until she finishes her studies. When she turns 18 years old, when she finishes her studies and all, she can do what she likes because she will be an adult and it's none of my business. But I will take her up until she finishes her studies.

The chant-like quality of the phrase "finishing her studies" in this statement shows the value placed by Marta's mother on educational attainment yet presages a possible reversal of plans. Indeed, 6 participants dropped out of school while parenting. Marta was one of them.

Unlike family building, in which beliefs and actions were aligned, expressed beliefs about education were not always aligned with chosen educational trajectories. Even participants who had dropped out of high school prior to becoming pregnant expressed a strong desire that their children would complete it. For example, Jennifer, who chose to build a family and work instead of completing high school, dreamed that her daughter would pursue enough education to become the legal secretary Jennifer had hoped to be. On the other hand, Irma had finished high school prior to giving birth, was planning to attend college to pursue a nursing diploma once her children were in school, and yet did not believe that college was a must for her two boys to make a good living. She voiced concerns over the high cost of a college education versus on-the-job training such as her husband's. The cost-benefit considerations voiced by Irma may have deterred others from actualizing their educational aspirations.

Furthermore, the unanticipated demands of parenting were difficult to reconcile with school obligations. For example, participants had to care for their babies when they became sick, even at the cost of exceeding absenteeism limits. Noemi and Patricia, the 2 participants who managed to finish high school while parenting, reported advocating for themselves or having adults who advocated for them at school when parenting interfered with attendance. The perception of supportive adults at the school as advocates has been found to be protective (Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2008; Leadbeater & Way, 2001).

In order to better understand incongruities between participants' beliefs and actions, we examined potential intervening conditions in their communities and developmental histories. Tables 3 and 4 document participants' individual trajectories together with key contextual, familial, and individual conditions, and show some salient factors in participants' choices.

Table 3. Prioritizers: Family, No Education, Sometimes Work

Towns	Participants			Intervening conditions					Trajectories chosen
	Names	Age at first birth	Repeat births	Individual		Familial			
				Education prior to birth	Relationship with BF	GM support	BF's job	Family structure	
From Mill Town to Services Town	Melissa	19	Yes	Poor student, retained, aging out, has disability ^a	CU	Lived with ML first year; ML passed away	Yes	Parents divorced Mom died young Raised by GM GM died	+ family - education - work
	Rosario	17	Yes	High school dropout	CU	Lived with ML first year; Moved out; Conflict with ML and GM	Yes	Dad in Mill Town Dad died, abused by stepdad	+ family - education + work
Services Town	Irma	17	Yes	Finished high school	M	Lived independently; ML advised	Yes	Parents together; large, strong family	+ family + education +/- work
	Mercedes	17	No	Finished middle school in PR	M	Lived independently; GM advised	Yes	Parents together in Puerto Rico	+ family - education - work
	Jennifer	19	No	High school, dropout	M	Lived with ML first year; GM and ML advised	Yes/ no	Parents together	+ family - education + work

Notes: CU = consensual union; M = married; BF = Baby's father; GM = Baby's grandmother (participant's mother/mother-in-law); ML = Mother in law; PR = Puerto Rico.

a. Melissa was physically impaired since birth. She had a prosthesis from the knee down on her right side. During pregnancy, as she gained weight she had difficulty moving. She was receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) at the time of the study.

Table 4. No Clear Trajectory: No Family, Education, or Work

Town	Participants			Intervening Conditions				Trajectories chosen	
	Names	Age at first birth	Repeat births	Individual Education prior to birth	Relationship with BF	Familial GM support	BF's job		Family structure
Mill Town	Claudia	15	Yes	Poor student	Broke up	Coresides GM GM coparents	n/a	Parents together	– family – education – work
Services Town	Marta	14	Yes	Good student	Broke up	Coresided GM, own home, back w/GM GM supports; doesn't live with coparent	n/a	Parents together	– family – education – work

Note: BF = Baby's father; GM = Baby's grandmother (participant's mother/mother-in-law); N/A = not applicable, as the babies' fathers were absent.

Educational performance and aspirations prior to childbearing. Finishing high school after giving birth was highly associated with educational performance and aspirations prior to childbearing. Noemi and Patricia, for example, showed a passionate commitment from the outset to pursuing an education beyond college—both wanted to be pediatricians. Noemi stated:

I'm planning to finish high school, go to college, and get into the medical field. . . . Everybody says you're not gonna do it, you're not gonna do it. I say if you set your heart on something you'll do it. You can't say no, I'm not going to do it because of the baby. That's not an excuse. That's more of the reason why you should continue your education. . . . If you want to leave school, leave it. But the baby is not an excuse. It may slow me down in my college, but it's not going to slow me down as to say forget about it and not go, 'cause I'll find a way. That's how I see it.

Because of their confidence and their ability to juggle school and family building, we have called Noemi and Patricia “successful jugglers.” As shown in Table 2, their trajectories combined not only family building and education, but employment as well.

Just as having positive educational experiences prior to childbearing was protective, participants who had struggled in school prior to giving birth were still toiling in GED programs or had dropped out of them by the end of the study. As challenges arose, they were willing to sacrifice education for jobs to help their partners make ends meet or just for full-time motherhood if their partners had stable sources of income. Table 3 presents the trajectories of these “prioritizers” of family over education, most of whom had troubled educational trajectories prior to giving birth. The exceptional case of Irma is discussed later.

Finally, participants who had dropped high school prior to becoming pregnant did not take it up seriously afterwards. These “early prioritizers” had decided that working and family building were more fruitful endeavors than pursuing an education. Jennifer, for example, expressed her decision to drop out of school as the result of a strong desire to have a job:

I felt I had to do something and working was good. Last year, or the year before, I was studying the GED. I was working and studying the GED in the evenings. I dropped it because once I got pregnant it was hard for me to work during the day and do the GED at night.

Mercedes, who came from Puerto Rico to join her husband after he secured a job, valued his ability to provide for their child and saw herself as a home maker:

He got a job, an apartment with everything and now even a baby! And he is crazy with the baby. He is always buying him things. That he bought on Sunday. He bought him a swing, and the crib has a lot of toys. . . . He works fabricating trash drums at a factory nearby. . . . He likes to work and he likes having good things. Today they are going to bring a dining room set. He buys me everything new, nothing is used. He likes good things. And for the baby he likes buying him everything. He has a bank account in case anything happens because you never know.

Perception of self as provider. The exceptional case of Irma – who finished high school after being a good student, formed a stable marital relationship, and yet did not go on to college immediately after graduation – added a new dimension to the joint pursuit of education and motherhood. On close examination, we found that the motivation to work, study, and parent simultaneously emerged from situations of risk rather than privilege. When the developmental histories of Noemi and Patricia were contrasted with Irma's, it became clear that "successful jugglers" were motivated by a perceived need to provide for their families. Two factors may have contributed to this self-perception. Both came from families headed by single mothers (one divorced, one widowed) who had managed to support their families and who urged their daughters to protect themselves against family disruption. Noemi's mother said:

This one (referring to Noemi) was two months when her father left me, and I said, 'I'll do anything to put food in their (Noemi and her sister's) mouths. Except going out with a man, and sleeping with a man. . . . So if these two (Noemi and her partner) broke up, just think about it, you want to break up, let him go. . . .

Furthermore, both Noemi and Patricia lived in Mill Town, and were in nonmarital relationships with partners who could not provide a stable source of income. We have noted that participants in formal marriages came from two-parent families and lived mostly in Services Town, where well-paid jobs in electrical equipment mechanics and other installations and repair occupations accounted for a higher level of male employment than in Mill Town. Four participants in Services Town reported their partners as holding well-remunerated jobs, whereas none of the male partners of our participants in Mill Town had stable jobs. Mill Town, on the other hand, appeared as a greater source of employment for female unskilled labor.

Of course, not all participants who came from single-headed families and had underemployed partners had positive educational outcomes. Rosario, a bright young woman whose father passed away when she was in elementary

school, had been abused by one of her mother's boyfriends and had put herself in care of the Department of Social Services. The passing of her father, in conjunction with risks experienced thereafter, resulted in mental health problems that made it hard for her to complete her education, work, and seek help. Rosario's case suggests that a single-parent household can be protective as long as the parent has the ability to shelter children from "cumulative risk" (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 8). Cumulative risk refers to the buildup, over time, of negative and stressful life experiences. Cumulative risk may result from independent events (death of a parent) or nonindependent events (chosen behaviors such as dropping out of school). Rosario, Noemi, and Patricia all experienced risk from independent events, but Rosario was the least able to prevent the buildup of risk from nonindependent events. As she noted in a quotation cited earlier, one outcome of her life experiences was her inability to trust those who claimed to care for her.

Age at first birth. There was an exception to the rule that good educational performance prior to childbearing was followed by more of the same after children were born. Marta, a good student prior to bearing a child, dropped high school after she had a baby at age 14 due to her inability to sustain a steady course of study in the face of physical and mental health complications encountered during pregnancy and after delivery. Table 4 shows that the two youngest participants did not have a discernible trajectory by the end of the study. Both had repeat births in relationships that appeared unstable and more likely to build cumulative nonindependent risk.

Integrative coding: theoretical propositions. As a final step in grounded-theory analysis, we developed propositions that capture the conditions in which young mothers with characteristics similar to our participants may be more or less likely to pursue an education:

Proposition 1: Childbearing activated a family building script in all of our participants.

Proposition 2: Family building and education were successfully juggled when young mothers had good educational trajectories prior to childbearing, perceived themselves as providers of economic stability for their families, and avoided the excessive buildup of nonindependent risk.

Proposition 3: Family building was prioritized over education when academic experiences prior to childbearing were uneven, when young mothers did not see a need to work to provide economic stability for their families, and did not avoid the excessive buildup of nonindependent risk.

Proposition 4: Family building and education both were jeopardized when mothers gave birth while 15 or younger.

In developing these propositions, we reflect on Way and Leadbeater's (1999) work 10 years ago attaching educational outcomes to parenting styles such as leniency, neglect, or high expectations. Our work supports their findings, partially, but we believe there was something else going on for these mothers. They were pursuing education while building families because they were building identities as mothers whose role included providing financial stability for their families. They were attaining economic self-sufficiency not just for themselves but for their new family unit. They struggled to keep their babies' fathers involved, even when the father could not provide financial stability. We attribute this behavior to the strength of the familistic script in the mainland Puerto Rican communities we studied. Yet in breaking away from traditional female roles, their mothers first and then the daughters were showing signs of adaptation to the pathways promoted for teenage mothers on the mainland.

Conclusion

In this study, we have focused on the risks that early childbearing has for the mother, especially in terms of low educational attainment. We found that, overall, for our participants, educational experiences prior to childbearing were predictive of educational outcomes afterwards. Similarly, we uncovered a number of risk and resilience factors in our participants' lives preceding early childbearing that contributed to how participants were adapting to motherhood during the time of the study. The presence of cumulative risk associated with economic disadvantage prior to childbearing leads us to agree with Furstenberg's (2007) urgings to use caution when attributing poor educational and economic outcomes to early childbearing alone. Indeed, some of the risks associated with participants' life trajectories were a result, not of their age, but rather of life experiences that would have manifested regardless of age at first birth.

Although economic disadvantage was a factor in some of our participants' lives, it alone did not explain their chosen pathways. The ways in which participants juggled or prioritized family building and education indicated to us the clashing of scripts originating on the island and the mainland and the unpredictable ways in which such clashes can be resolved. On the basis of our findings, we throw a cautionary note on quantitative studies where individual experiences are decontextualized and aggregated, as valuable insights can be lost in this process. This message is not new but seems urgent still.

Notes

1. "Non-Hispanic White" is the designation used in U.S. Census data.

2. Although Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, some immigrant studies like the one cited here collect data on Puerto Rican children and families.
3. Beutel found that new mothers tend to both have reduced educational expectations and that women with less educational expectations tend to bear children earlier than their peers.
4. We started with ten mothers but found that one was Dominican after she was recruited. Although we kept her in, her case presentation was different enough from the other nine that we dropped her for this analysis.
5. Participants' mothers and mother-in-laws are also referred to as grandmothers.

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Bios

Virginia Diez, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Child Development at Tufts University and a research associate at the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She studies the impact of sociocultural factors on the developmental trajectories of children of migrants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

Jayanthi Mistry, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University. Her research and scholarship is based on cultural perspectives on children's development and the use of interpretive methods, with a focus on how children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds navigate multiple cultural worlds and identities.