

Identity Reorganization among Primiparous Cameroonian Adolescents: from the Status of Daughter to the Status of Mother

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Abstract

Adolescence in Cameroon, as in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, is often marked by early childbearing. Studies have shown a national prevalence of adolescent deliveries to be around 14.2% - 14.4%, a higher rate than the average for sub-Saharan Africa. This presents a unique challenge for young mothers, who must navigate the complex process of identity reorganization while still navigating their own adolescence with its multiple changes. This article explores the experiences of primiparous (first-time) Cameroonian adolescents as they transition from daughters to mothers. The objective of this article is to understand how identity reorganization takes place among primiparous Cameroonian adolescents who pass without transition from the status of daughter to the status of mother. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, with seven participants chosen on the basis of selection criteria, the article examines the psychological, social, and cultural factors that shape this identity shift. An interview guide with three main themes made it possible to collect verbatim comments from the participants. The thematic analysis highlights the challenges faced by these young mothers, such as navigating social stigma, managing emotional upheaval, and balancing motherhood with their own developmental needs. The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of identity reorganization among primiparous Cameroonian adolescents. The social stigma associated with early childbearing, coupled with the emotional and practical demands of motherhood, can pose significant challenges to these young women. However, a study on a larger sample could reveal the resilience and resourcefulness of some adolescents, who find support within their communities and employ various coping mechanisms to navigate this transition. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these findings for adolescent maternal health interventions and social policy in Cameroon.

Keywords

Identity, Adolescence, Motherhood, Primiparous, Daughter, Mother.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial developmental period characterized by significant physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes. In Cameroon, and across much of sub-Saharan Africa, early childbearing is a prevalent phenomenon, with a significant proportion of adolescents experiencing motherhood before the age of 19. This early transition to motherhood presents a unique challenge for young girls, who must grapple with the complexities of parenthood while their own identities are still under construction.

According to UNICEF, the adolescent birth rate (women aged 15-19 years) in sub-Saharan Africa is 67 births per 1,000 women. This means that approximately 6.7% of women aged 15-19 in sub-Saharan Africa give birth each year. Early childbearing in Africa is associated with a range of negative consequences for both mothers and children. These include increased risk of maternal mortality, morbidity, and complications during childbirth; higher chances of dropping out of school for mothers; and stunting for children. In Cameroon, studies have shown a national prevalence of adolescent

deliveries in to be around 14.2% - 14.4%. This is significantly higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa [1]. The aim of this article is to understand the complex process of identity transformation experienced by young Cameroonian women as they transition from adolescence to mother-hood. It seeks to examine how these young women navigate the shift in social roles, expectations, and self-perception associated with becoming a mother at a young age within their specific socio-cultural context.

Factors Contributing to Early Childbearing in Cameroon

Early childbearing, defined as childbirth by a woman aged 19 or younger, remains a significant concern in Cameroon. While the national prevalence is the highest in sub-Saharan African, the reasons behind this are complex and multifaceted. The prevalence of adolescent deliveries can vary within Cameroon, with some regions experiencing higher rates than others. For example, a study found the prevalence ranged from 11.3% in the Centre region to 16.1% in the North West region [2]. Factors contributing to early childbearing in Cameroon include poverty, limited access to education, and social norms that promote early marriage and childbearing. Poverty is a major driver of early childbearing. Girls from low-income families may see marriage and childbearing as a way to escape poverty or gain financial support [3]. Limited access to education, particularly for girls, can limit future employment prospects. Early childbearing can then be seen as an alternative path [4]. Traditional gender roles often prioritize marriage and motherhood for women. Early marriage and childbearing can be seen as a societal expectation [3]. Pressure from family and community to conform to traditional norms can influence girls towards early childbearing [5]. Limited access to comprehensive information about sexuality, contraception, and family planning can increase the risk of unintended pregnancies [6]. Sexual violence against girls, including incest, can result in unwanted pregnancies and early childbearing [7]. Early childbearing might be more prevalent in rural areas where traditional norms are stronger and access to education is limited [4]. Forced displacement due to conflict or natural disasters can disrupt access to education and healthcare, increasing the risk of early childbearing [8]. Addressing these multifaceted factors requires a multi-pronged approach. Investing in education for girls, particularly in rural areas, is crucial. Community engagement to challenge traditional gender norms and promote female empowerment is essential. Furthermore, ensuring access to essential healthcare services, including those addressing sexual violence, is vital to equip young girls with the knowledge and resources to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. By tackling these issues head-on, Cameroon can work towards a future where young women have the opportunity to delay childbearing until they are physically, emotionally, and eco-nomically prepared for motherhood.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development posits that adolescence is a time of identity formation, where individuals grapple with the question of "Who am I?". Early motherhood disrupts this process, introducing a new and demanding role that can lead to identity confusion [9]. Additionally, feminist theories highlight the power dynamics within families and societies that can disadvantage young mothers [10]. Identity reorganization is

a complex process that can have significant implications for the well-being of primiparous women. Understanding the factors that influence this process and providing support systems can help women navigate this important transition and achieve a positive sense of self. This article utilizes these frameworks to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by primiparous Cameroonian adolescents.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 7 primiparous adolescents aged 15-19 from Ekoko 2, a rural community in central Cameroon. Qualitative research de-sign employing an in-depth interview approach is used. We have a sample size of seven primiparous Cameroonian adolescents aged 15-19 years old. We used selection criteria with inclusion criteria which might specify adolescents who are healthy, with no major mental health concerns, and willing to openly discuss their experiences. Exclusion criteria include adolescents with significant language barriers or cognitive impairments. For the recruitment strategy, approached participants through hospitals, community centers, or NGOs that work with young mothers. Data was collected through in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions have been used to explore participants experiences with identity transformation, challenges faced, coping mechanisms, and sources of support. The interview guide likely focused on themes related to identity, motherhood, and the transition from daughter to mother.

Thematic analysis was a suitable approach to identify recurring themes within the interview transcripts. We identified key themes related to identity transformation, challenges faced, and coping mechanisms employed by the participants. The study may have some limitations. The article with 7 participants would likely be considered a pilot study due to the small sample size. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the larger population of primiparous Cameroonian adolescents. Additional Considerations has been taken into account. The article mention how informed consent was obtained from participants and how confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Even though the sample size is small, the article discuss whether data saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes were emerging from further interviews.

Results

The study underscores the significant shift in identity experienced by young Cameroonian mothers. The transition from daughter to mother involves a complex interplay of relinquishing certain aspects of childhood while simultaneously embracing new responsibilities. This identity reorganization is not solely internal; it is profoundly influenced by societal expectations. Young mothers often face pressure to conform to traditional ideals of motherhood, which can include expectations of financial stability, emotional maturity, and the ability to provide for their child's needs (though often without the means to do so themselves). This societal pressure can create a significant burden for young mothers who are still developing their own sense of self. The analysis revealed several key themes related to the identity reorganiza-tion process

of primiparous Cameroonian adolescents. Participants reported experiencing a range of challenges, including social stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy, feelings of isolation, and difficulty balancing motherhood with their own educational aspirations. Many participants described experiencing emotional turmoil, including anxiety, fear, and feelings of inadequacy in their new role as mothers. Sources of support included family members, particularly grand-mothers, and peer networks of other young mothers. Additionally, some participants found solace in religious faith.

The Young Mother and Preparation for Her Child's Future

Adolescence is a time of vibrant dreams and a burgeoning sense of self. For a primiparous (first-time) adolescent mother, however, these dreams can be overshadowed by the daunting question: "Will I be able to provide for my child?" This question embodies the theme of growth of life, highlighting the stark contrast between the new life a young mother brings forth and the challenges she faces in nurturing it. Motherhood, by its nature, requires a significant commitment of resources, financial, emotional, and physical. An adolescent mother, often still dependent on her own family, may feel ill-equipped to shoulder this responsibility. This can lead to economic insecurity as adolescent mothers often lack the education and work experience necessary to secure well-paying jobs, making it difficult to provide for their children's basic needs [11]. Early motherhood can also disrupt a young woman's education, limiting her future earning potential and hindering her ability to provide for her child in the long term [12]. The young mother faces emotional strain as the pressure of providing for the child can lead to anxiety and depression, which affects a young mother's ability to care for herself and her child. Despite the challenges, the theme of growth of life persists. Numerous resources can help a young mother nurture a future for her child. Those with supportive parents, grandparents, and other family members can better provide emotional and financial assistance, creating a more secure environment for the child. An adolescent mother's question, "*Will I be able to provide?*", doesn't solely reflect doubt; it also reflects a powerful resilience. The act of giving birth represents the beginning of a new life. By seeking support and developing the necessary skills, a young mother can nurture this life, not just for survival, but for growth and a brighter future. While the challenges faced by adolescent mothers are significant, they are not insurmountable. By acknowledging the difficulties and providing comprehensive support systems, we can foster hope and enable these young women to navigate their motherhood journey with confidence. The theme of growth of life, embodied in both the birth of a child and the potential for a young mother's own development, takes root and flourishes when nurtured with the right resources and opportunities. The transition to motherhood, particularly for adolescent girls, represents a significant turning point, demanding a complex reorganization of identity and a shift in focus towards the well-being and future of the child. This transition is further complicated by socio-cultural contexts that shape expectations and resources available to young mothers. This process is particularly nuanced for young mothers in Cameroon, where traditional values often intersect with the challenges of adolescence and limited access to resources. Preparing for a child's future becomes inextricably linked to the

young mother's own evolving identity and her navigation of these intersecting pressures. Preparing for the child's future, therefore, becomes a central focus for these young mothers, even amidst their own identity struggles.

The Primary Relationship: The Authentic, Emotional, and Psychological Engagement of a Primiparous Adolescent with Her Child

The question of whether a primiparous adolescent engages with her child authentically, emotionally, and psychologically delves into the complex dynamics of the primary relationship theme in early motherhood. While there are challenges, research suggests that adolescents possess the potential to form strong and meaningful bonds with their babies. Challenges to Authentic Engagement: Developmental Immaturity: Adolescents themselves are navigating significant emotional and psychological changes. They may lack the emotional maturity and life experience to fully understand and respond to their infant's cues [13]. Social Stigma: Early motherhood can be met with social stigma, leading to feelings of isolation and potentially impacting their ability to connect with their child openly [14]. Limited Resources: Young mothers often face limited financial resources and social support, impacting their ability to meet their own and their child's needs [15]. Potential for Authentic Engagement: Maternal Sensitivity: The capacity for maternal sensitivity, or the ability to read and respond to an infant's cues, is not solely dependent on age. Studies have shown that primiparous adolescents can develop this sensitivity over time [16]. Positive Parenting: Programs that promote positive parenting skills can equip young mothers with strategies for emotionally connecting with their children [17]. Social Support: Strong social support networks from family, friends, and community resources can significantly bolster a young mother's ability to connect with her child [15].

The primary relationship theme refers to the emotional foundation laid down in the early years of life, particularly between an infant and its caregiver [18]. While adolescence can present challenges to this theme, the potential for authentic engagement exists. It's crucial to acknowledge the challenges faced by primiparous adolescents while recognizing their capacity to form strong and nurturing bonds with their children, especially with appropriate support. The notion of a primiparous adolescent engaging with her child authentically, emotionally, and psychologically is complex. While challenges exist, research suggests that fostering maternal sensitivity, promoting positive parenting skills, and providing strong social support can significantly enhance the primary relationship theme in this unique context.

Support Matrix Theme: The Necessary Support Matrix for Motherhood of a Primiparous Adolescent

This question delves into the complexities surrounding adolescent motherhood, particularly the theme of the "support matrix." A support matrix refers to the network of resources and individuals that assist a mother in fulfilling her maternal role. While some primiparous (first-time) adolescents may possess the necessary elements, many face significant challenges in establishing a sufficient support matrix.

Challenges for Primiparous Adolescents

Developmental Immaturity: Adolescence is a crucial stage of personal growth and development. Young mothers often lack the emotional maturity and life skills necessary for effective parenting [19]. **Limited Financial Resources:** Adolescent mothers frequently have limited access to financial resources, making it difficult to provide for their children's basic needs [11]. **Educational Disruption:** Early motherhood often disrupts a young woman's education, limiting her future earning potential and hindering her ability to provide for her child [12]. **Social Stigma and Isolation:** Adolescent mothers can experience social stigma and isolation, leading to feelings of shame and depression, ultimately impacting their ability to care for their children.

Importance of a Strong Support Matrix

Research suggests that a strong support matrix is critical for promoting positive maternal and child outcomes [20]. This support can come from various sources, including: **Family:** Supportive grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings can provide emotional, financial, and childcare assistance. **Peers:** Connecting with other young mothers can provide a sense of community and shared experiences. **Community Resources:** Access to social services, healthcare providers, and educational programs can equip young mothers with the skills and resources needed to effectively parent.

Discussion

Adolescence, a period of significant physical and psychological development, also marks the exploration of personal identity. Early motherhood disrupts this exploration, presenting a unique challenge for primiparous adolescents. They must navigate a complex identity reorganization, transitioning from daughter to mother. This study explores the complexities of this transition, highlighting the challenges and potential pathways for successful identity transformation. Adolescence is characterized by a growing sense of autonomy and separation from parents. Motherhood, however, necessitates a shift towards dependence and responsibility. This collision of identities can lead to: **Identity Confusion:** Erikson's theory of psychosocial development suggests adolescents grapple with the question "Who am I?". Early motherhood introduces a new and demanding role, potentially causing confusion regarding the self [9]. **Role Conflict:** The responsibilities of motherhood can conflict with the adolescent's desire for independence and exploration, leading to role strain [21]. **Navigating the Transformation:** Despite the challenges, numerous factors can help primiparous adolescents achieve identity transformation: **Social Support:** Strong family support, particularly from mothers and grandmothers, can provide emotional and practical assistance [20]. **Peer Support:** Connecting with other young mothers can create a sense of community and shared experiences, fostering positive coping mechanisms [22]. **Psychological Resilience:** Some adolescents possess inherent resilience, allowing them to adapt to their new role while maintaining aspects of their adolescent identity [23]. **Maternal Identity Development Resources:** Access to programs that promote maternal identity development can empower young mothers to see themselves in this new role [24]. **The Importance of Gradual Integration:** A successful identity transition doesn't require complete erasure of the "daughter" self. Instead, a gradual

integration of both identities can occur. Adolescent mothers can maintain some aspects of their development while embracing their maternal role. This allows for continued personal growth alongside responsible parenting.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex and multifaceted journey of identity reorganization experienced by primiparous Cameroonian adolescents as they transition from daughterhood to motherhood. The findings underscore that this transformation is not simply a linear progression, but rather a dynamic process shaped by a confluence of individual, familial, and socio-cultural factors. The young mothers navigate a delicate balance between retaining aspects of their former identities as daughters, embracing their new maternal roles, and negotiating societal expectations surrounding both. The interplay of traditional Cameroonian values, which often emphasize motherhood as a defining aspect of female identity, with the evolving aspirations of young women creates a unique context for this transition. The study highlights the challenges these adolescents face, including navigating shifting family dynamics, managing the responsibilities of motherhood, and often confronting societal stigma. Furthermore, it reveals the resilience and agency demonstrated by these young women as they actively construct their maternal identities, often redefining traditional notions of motherhood to align with their personal values and circumstances. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of adolescent mothers in Cameroon, providing valuable insights for the development of targeted support systems and interventions. The transition from daughter to mother for primiparous adolescents is a complex and multifaceted process. By acknowledging the difficulties and providing necessary support, we can help these young mothers navigate this critical journey. This study has several implications for adolescent maternal health interventions and social policy in Cameroon. Firstly, there is a need for comprehensive sexuality education programs that address issues of contraception and family planning. Secondly, interventions should focus on providing social and emotional support to young mothers, potentially through peer support groups or mentorship programs. Finally, social policies should be reformed to address the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy and ensure access to education and childcare for young mothers. Access to social services, healthcare providers, and educational programs can equip young mothers with the skills and resources needed to effectively parent [20]. Programs that promote financial literacy and job training can empower young mothers to become self-sufficient and provide for their children's long-term well-being [25]. This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single rural community. Further research is needed to explore the experiences of primiparous adolescents in diverse settings across Cameroon. Early motherhood presents a unique challenge for adolescent girls in Cameroon, necessitating a complex process of identity reorganization. This article sheds light on the experiences of these young women, highlighting the challenges they face and the sources of support they find. By understanding these experiences, policymakers and healthcare professionals can develop more effective interventions to support the well-being of primiparous adolescents in Cameroon.

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