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LIFE PATHS  
AMONG  
ADOLESCENT  
MOTHERS:  
A CASE STUDY  
IN THE  
MONTRÉAL AREA**

**Johanne  
CHARBONNEAU**

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**INRS-Urbanisation**

3465, rue Durocher  
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**Johanne CHARBONNEAU**  
INRS-Urbanisation, Culture et Société  
University of Québec  
3465, rue Durocher  
Montréal Qc H2X 2C6  
*johanne.charbonneau@inrs-urb.quebec.ca*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Families resulting from a situation of adolescent pregnancy are often considered more at risk of mistreating their children and more likely to endanger their children's personal and social development than the average family (Buchholz and Korn-Bursztyn, 1993; Chase-Landsdale et al., 1991). These families often exhibit a series of characteristics that are seen as predisposing factors for child maltreatment or as fostering behavioural problems in the child or other problems. Among these factors, researchers often note the existence of family difficulties during the young parents' own childhood; personal problems of low self-esteem, stress, depression, immaturity and lack of parenting skills; conjugal, educational, residential and employment histories that are also marked by major difficulties; and poverty and social isolation (Buchholz and Korn-Bursztyn, 1993; Cervera, 1991; Furstenberg et al., 1990; Hanson, 1990; Tracy, 1990; Trent and Harlan, 1990).

At the same time, some authors emphasize the importance of protective factors, such as the existence of reliable support for parents and children in their social environment (Dubow and Luster, 1990; Unger and Cooley, 1992). Others underscore the fact that all adolescent pregnancies do not necessarily produce "problem" families (Brooks-Gunns and Furstenberg, 1986; Buchholz and Korn-Bursztyn, 1993). In fact, the underlying question is not solely that of risk or vulnerability. More generally, it is a matter of seeing how families manage to get through their early years when they start off without the basic personal resources to support their new family.

Examination of these issues has led to our investigation of the pursuit of various life courses and life paths. Our study was based on some fairly simple questions:

- Which adolescent mothers managed to "cope" after a period of time?
- Which mothers still had major problems in their lives several years after the birth of their child?
- What are the conditions that induce a mother to pursue one life path rather than another?

This approach to the questions asked is essentially based on the idea that adolescent pregnancy represents a major disruption in a young woman's life cycle. Adolescence is marked by a gradual emancipation from one's family of origin, a process that heralds the transition to personal autonomy at adulthood. The events surrounding the birth of a child during adolescence—and successive events in the following years—are significant indicators of each young mother's ability to control her life conditions through this process of acquiring greater freedom and autonomy. The birth of a child is obviously a very important symbolic indicator of this emancipation, since the starting of

one's own family is one of the key elements defining the transition to adulthood. But it is also an event that requires an extensive mobilization of resources, and an analysis of this process enables us to identify the practical conditions for the completion of the process leading to autonomy.

Before introducing the three life paths we have identified ("coping," "improvident" and "in transition"), we first need to examine the conditions affecting these young women at the time of the study.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY POPULATION**

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In 1996 I began a study of 32 young women living in the Montérégie region located south of Montréal, (Quebec)<sup>1</sup>. This region includes a large, rather highly developed suburban area but also extends right down to the U.S. border through farming and tourism districts dotted with small and medium-sized cities and towns. The study was conducted in both the highly developed area and the outlying region. Using information gathered during semi-structured interviews, our aim was to describe and analyze the stages preceding and following the birth of a child during adolescence, with particular emphasis on the development of the individual life paths of the young mothers and their social support systems. Table 1 presents some of the personal and family characteristics of these 32 young women.

If we compare this population with aspects generally mentioned in studies on adolescent mothers, some of the key characteristics are:

- difficulties during childhood
- early sexual relations
- high level of conjugal breakdown and single parenthood
- high school dropout rate and low level of education
- high level of poverty and dependence on welfare
- living in a disadvantaged area (noted during interviews, especially in the urbanized sector)

These characteristics are not randomly distributed in our study population. Through a more in-depth analysis of the sequence of events in the life history of each of the mothers, we were able to categorize these into typical life paths based on the

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<sup>1</sup> This study was financially supported by CQRS (Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale) and SSHRCC (Social Science and Humanity Research Council of Canada).

**Table 1 – Characteristics of the study population by type of life path**

|   |                     | Path 1<br>(Coping) | Path 2<br>(Improvident) | Path 3<br>(In<br>transition) | Together        |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Mother's age at<br>the time of the<br>child's birth | 14                  | -                  | -                       | 1                            | 1               |
|   | 15                  | -                  | 1                       | 2                            | 3               |
|   | 16                  | 1                  | 1                       | 3                            | 5               |
|   | 17                  | 3                  | 5                       | 5                            | 13              |
|   | 18                  | 1                  | 4                       | 1                            | 6               |
|   | 19                  | 1                  | 3                       | -                            | 4               |
|   | Average             | 17.3               | 17.5                    | 16.4                         | 17              |
| Mother's age at<br>the time of the<br>study         | 17-20               | -                  | 1                       | 8                            | 9               |
|   | 21-23               | 1                  | 2                       | 2                            | 5               |
|   | 24-26               | 3                  | 2                       | 1                            | 6               |
|   | 27-29               | 1                  | 3                       | -                            | 4               |
|   | 30-34               | 1                  | 6                       | 1                            | 8               |
|   |                     | Average            | 26.5                    | 27.9                         | 20.75           |
| Number of children                                  | 1                   | 2                  | 1                       | 3                            | 6               |
|   | 2                   | 3                  | 3                       | 6                            | 12              |
|   | 3                   | 1                  | 4                       | 2                            | 7               |
|   | 4                   | -                  | 3                       | 1                            | 4               |
|   | 5                   | -                  | 2                       | -                            | 2               |
|   | 7                   | -                  | 1                       | -                            | 1               |
|   |                     | Average            | 1.5                     | 3.42                         | 2               |
| Difficulties during<br>childhood <sup>a</sup>       | Parent.sep.         | 5                  | 12                      | 8                            | 25              |
|   | Death/par.          | 2                  | 5                       | -                            | 7               |
|   | Placement           | 2                  | 5                       | 4                            | 11              |
|   | Abuse               | 1                  | 3                       | 1                            | 5               |
| Fathers   | Same                | 2                  | 5                       | 6                            | 13              |
|   | Different           | 2                  | 8                       | 3                            | 13              |
|   | Not<br>applicable   | 2                  | 1                       | 3                            | 6               |
| Single parent<br>since first child                  | Yes                 | 5                  | 11                      | 4                            | 20              |
|   | No                  | 1                  | 3                       | 8                            | 12              |
| Level of education                                  | Elementary          | -                  | -                       | 1                            | 1               |
|   | Sec. I              | 1                  | 3                       | 2                            | 6               |
|   | Sec. II             | -                  | 3                       | 3                            | 6               |
|   | Sec. III            | 1                  | 3                       | 2                            | 6               |
|   | Sec. IV             | -                  | 2                       | 3                            | 5               |
|   | Sec. V              | 3                  | 3                       | 1                            | 7               |
|   | University          | 1                  | -                       | -                            | 1               |
| Source of income                                    | Welfare             | -                  | 14 <sup>b</sup>         | 5                            | 19 <sup>b</sup> |
|   | Unemp.<br>insurance | 1                  | -                       | -                            | 1               |
|   | Studies             | 1                  | -                       | 2                            | 3               |
|   | Paid work           | 2                  | -                       | 2                            | 4               |
|   | Benefits            | 2                  | -                       | -                            | 2               |
|   | Partner             | -                  | -                       | 3                            | 3               |
| <b>N</b>  |                     | <b>6</b>           | <b>14</b>               | <b>12</b>                    | <b>32</b>       |

a Responses may not add to the number of cases owing to multiple responses.

b Welfare supplemented by undeclared work in two instances.

mother's ability or inability to take control of this sequence of events. By the end of our study, we could thus distinguish between those young mothers who were doing well (path 1), those who were not (path 2), and those who were in transition (path 3), and see how the three life paths were directly related to the distribution of these characteristics linked to personal, family and social problems.

We will first present these typical life paths. We have then chosen to analyze them by highlighting the importance of the motherhood/employment opposition in the young women's life cycle, in both the series of actions taken and the attitudes developed by the young mothers.

## **PATH 1: "COPING" MOTHERS**

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The six young mothers whose path indicates a fairly sustained ability to take control of their lives did not initially experience their pregnancy as a sudden transition from adolescence to adulthood. Nor did their pregnancy disrupt the normal sequence of events in their lives. During pregnancy, most continued with their studies or work, experienced little change in their residential circumstances, and maintained their social network.

At the time of adolescence, these young women already seemed to be resourceful and quite sociable individuals. Although they did not have many close friends, they claimed to be part of the "gang" at school. They often had a fairly stormy adolescence. Some used the word "rebellious" to describe their lives before pregnancy, especially their relationship with their parents—which usually meant their mother, since fathers seemed to play a rather unobtrusive role in their story.

[My father] let me do what I wanted, since he knew my mother was laying down the law pretty heavy, so he did the complete opposite so I wouldn't judge him . . . maybe he shouldn't have, because if he had disciplined me more, maybe I wouldn't have rebelled. . . . Because right from the start, . . . I would have had it pretty good as a kid if I hadn't decided to be so rebellious. . . . It's like I always have to prove something, to keep pushing it . . . (Chantale)

It is within this context of rebellion and slight delinquency that the young women encountered their first boyfriends, with whom they did not expect to have a long-term relationship. These young women generally used contraceptives, but often quite carelessly. In this context, pregnancy was more often than not an unforeseen, unplanned occurrence. The young women reacted negatively to the idea of being a mother, a condition they did not view very positively. Two of these young women even responded by denying their situation. They suddenly woke up, as it were, six months pregnant and with no other choice than to keep the child.

But the moment of deciding whether or not to keep the child should be regarded as crucial for the young women in this group. None of them would come right out against abortion. They were aware of their choices. Two of them said that they had already had an abortion earlier because they felt that they were not ready to have a child then. Among other reasons was the fact that both they and their partner were using drugs. At that time, they had made the decision to have an abortion on their own and had only told their partner and parents about it afterwards.

In the present case, they had decided to keep the child. Like the other young women in this group, they indicated that they were thus assuming their responsibilities. It was as though by keeping the child, they had agreed to pay the price for their carelessness. For the young women in this group, their partner's views were of little consequence, but the family generally took the news well, after the initial shock, and promised to help them. For those still considering having an abortion, this promise of help made all the difference. So we could say that for these young women, despite their limited resources, the decision to keep the child was based on a fairly realistic view of the personal and material difficulties awaiting them.

The period of pregnancy was relatively easy for most of these young women, who continued their activities and kept up some of the friendships they had made earlier. They also received a great deal of support from their close and extended family network which helped them prepare for the arrival of the child, in the parents' home or elsewhere. Each would come to question their earlier rebellious and delinquent behaviour, and relations with the mother improved.

But when I was pregnant, . . . I became more responsible. I quit drugs and all that sort of thing. . . . It was really important that my baby be healthy, so during the whole time I was pregnant, I was very careful. . . . I think that I was responsible. My daughter will be six next month and I think that I've raised her well. (Chantale)

During the months of pregnancy, the young women were able to prepare themselves mentally for the birth of their child and to recognize the extent of the responsibilities awaiting them. The rather euphoric period surrounding the birth was marked by the giving of numerous gifts, promises of help and actual help. For a few months, the new mother put her studies or work on hold and her own mother helped her tremendously in caring for the child, whether the young mother was living with her parents or not.

After the period of euphoria, the first few years were quite difficult for these young women, who were obliged to simultaneously pursue their studies or work, assume their responsibilities toward their child, and still maintain some kind of social life. For one young woman, the burden proved too great: at the time of the study, she was off work due to problems with depression, whereas she had been working ever since the birth of her child. So this was a time of considerable sacrifices for these young mothers, spurred

by their desire not to be financially dependent on their partner, not to remain dependent on welfare and to keep up some form of social activity. When available, help provided by parents was precious, especially for those young women who had stayed with their parents and could call on them to babysit, even if the atmosphere was sometimes marred by conflict. Another young mother could similarly count on the support of her partner.

But most found themselves single mothers after recognizing that the father of their child did not seem to be able to shoulder his responsibilities. "In the beginning, he helped a lot, not with dishes or that kind of thing, but he was okay. . . . But after a while it was like he didn't want to be a father any more" (Julie). This new stage in the family's life history underscores the fact that the relationship that had produced the child would probably have been simply a teenage love affair. In the same way, after a short respite, reemerging conflicts in the relationship with the parents, although not affecting the provision of help, also underscore the ongoing process of adolescent emancipation interrupted by the arrival of the child. What particularly sets this group of young women apart from those we will present next is their ability to make the transition toward autonomy while retaining the parental support so necessary in their condition. Those young mothers who were living with their partners generally moved to an apartment near their parents to maintain this link, a link now seen as less restrictive and less controlling.

The language of autonomy and independence became very important to these young women, even fostering the desire to no longer live with a partner, after the disillusionment of their first experience, and to rely only on themselves.

[My partner] helped me a bit, but [he was] angry all the time. I had unemployment insurance benefits, I was on maternity leave, but. . . . It's the only time I was dependent on a man, and I said never again. [I went back to work] because I didn't want to depend on my boyfriend any more. I wanted to be independent. . . . That's why. I didn't want to ask him any more. (Julie)

These women also actively took control of their sex lives; two had their tubes tied and one opted to use an IUD. This is certainly the group of women with the lowest average number of children. Some would, of course, have other children. But for most, their initial reaction was to try not to make the same mistake again. The woman who would later have a third child "by accident" reacted very badly to the news of their pregnancy. How could she have made the same mistake again? But negative responses to a new pregnancy or a new living situation with a partner occurred mainly in the period of late adolescence. In time, these young women would reassume a "normal" family life pattern. But they had clearly set their conditions: above all, they were looking for a stable partner. It is noteworthy that those who later had other children often lived with a partner who had won their hearts through the interest he had shown in their child. In their subsequent family life, the new partner considered himself the father of this child born of another relationship. All these new partners were also in stable employment situations.

He [the new partner] kept telling me he loved me. When I met him he wasn't working and everyone said: "He wants to take advantage of you or something." I wasn't sure about him. He found a job in Montréal and moved there during that time, and I just went to see him once in a while. He spent the Christmas holidays with me, and in January I knew I loved nobody else but him. Because I was really in love with him but I didn't want to admit it. He stayed in Montréal until June, and then in June he came to Farnham and we were together. He worked at a grocery store here but kept looking for something else, and when he got a good job at the foundry, he went to work there. Today he says that it's because of my daughter that we're together, because it was her he fell in love with first. (Chantale)

By beginning a stable family life, the young mothers were erasing their past mistake. Two of the young women who resumed a relationship with a partner even took the further step of home ownership.

At the time of the study, most of these young women were in their twenties. They had not necessarily completed the transition to adulthood. But as had seemed to be the case since the birth of their child, they continued to plan for the future, to look forward to the life they wanted to live—in terms of their family, employment and residential goals—and to think of concrete ways of attaining these goals.

## **PATH 2: "IMPROVIDENT" MOTHERS**

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In many ways, the profile of the "improvident" mothers is directly opposed to that of the previous group. First, let me note that the group of "improvident" mothers includes the oldest women in our study population. So there is less room for uncertainty or for the probability of radical change in the outcome of their life paths, especially since their situation, although problematic in many ways, shows a certain "stability" over time.

The 14 women in this group (out of 32) had all experienced difficult family situations in childhood, like the separation of their parents, the death of a parent, placement, and even incest. Some had to live with the new spouse of a parent, which sparked considerable conflict. Some had to care for younger brothers and sisters. Several had lived in poverty.

During adolescence, these women were often lonely and withdrawn. They confided little in others, had few close friends and did not go out very often.

I went to school, but I didn't have very many friends. I had maybe one or two; there was one girl I used to hang around with that I lost sight of, and when I was pregnant with my daughter I saw her on the street, just like that, but we didn't get together again. (Nadia)

I was too shy to reach out to other people, and I was afraid to talk about myself in case everyone said: "She's talking about herself so people will feel sorry for her," and so on. So I didn't say much. I was very lonely. (Valérie)

These young women seemed far from rebellious, but their family history made it difficult to maintain good relations with their parents. They all had a low level of education; none had finished high school. None of them liked school, and most had left school before becoming pregnant. Some had worked. But after their pregnancy, very few were in a work situation except for those with drug problems who occasionally worked as dancers, without reporting their income, while continuing to receive welfare.

The arrival of the child was to some degree a “planned accident” since few of the young women were using contraceptives, without admitting that they were trying to become pregnant.

Well, I didn't expect it, but it didn't bother me since I wanted a child anyway. It was pretty selfish of me. I didn't think about it and then it happened. . . . With no protection, I was bound to get a surprise one day. Let's say that I had a good idea that it could happen, that's for sure. (Caroline)

Unlike the women in the first group, they did not seem to really think about whether or not they would keep the child. They were all against abortion and quickly decided to keep the child, without considering the opinion of the child's father and, especially, without considering the material and financial situation they would find themselves in. These women were not planners: half of them said that they did not think about what would happen; some felt that they were ready since they believed that they had the necessary experience because they had cared for children before; and others said that they were mainly looking on the bright side, picturing the pleasure they would gain from the affection between mother and child. The reality of the situation would prove harshest for the latter, but also for some of the “experienced” mothers. It is with the “improvident” group of mothers that situations of child placement occurred.

Let's just say that I have five sisters and I'm not the youngest; some of them were younger than us, so I knew a bit about what to expect, but I never thought it would be so hard to raise a child on your own. Mind you, I'm pretty happy today, but. . . . If I had to do it all over again, no thanks. (Nathalie)

Me, I was really glad, well, uh . . . I don't know [laughter]. I had thought about it, yeah, a child, it's great, it's great. I was thinking it's great, it's great, but maybe I wasn't seeing all sides of it. I wanted a child, and then it became my goal in life, spending my life with my child, I'll give her everything I have, and she'll give me all her love, and so on and so forth, so I was only thinking about how nice it would be. (Karine)

In the years following the birth of the child, these families tended to become quite socially withdrawn. The young mother did not work, and nor did her partner, when there was one. Episodes of single parenthood were more frequent than in the previous group. For all these mothers, their main source of income was welfare. And then other children came along, usually with the arrival of a new partner. This is the group where the families had the greatest number of children: four, five and seven children.

But these families were not the ones who obtained the most support from their social environment: support networks were often limited and social relationships shortlived, especially since the “improvident” mothers were the ones who moved most often. As well, ties with the family were either nonexistent or rarely favoured the provision of help. And although the birth of the child may have triggered the reception of numerous gifts, other types of support did not seem to be either forthcoming or accepted by the young mother. In fact, these families tended to repeat the pattern of solitude and isolation that had characterized the mother’s younger years. In this sense, this state was not always viewed negatively: it was instead described in terms of independence and autonomy, even in a context of severe poverty and real dependence on institutional resources. The “improvident” mothers genuinely saw welfare as the legitimate salary of the mother as homemaker, albeit one that left them little room to manoeuvre. Moreover, there seemed to be no end to this cycle of dependence: some mothers pictured an improbable return to work when their youngest child entered school, but then another child came along . . .

You make out okay [on welfare]. You don’t do something crazy like saying you’re going to Florida! You get by, and you have what you need. It never happened that we didn’t have any more milk in the fridge. We always managed pretty well that way. (Sophie)

Well, the first thing I want to do is that I’m waiting for my youngest to be three years old. If I’m expecting another child I won’t be able to work, but let’s say I decide later to have another child: I’ll wait until that one is three to send him to daycare and then I’ll be able to start working. Because my two oldest will be in school and the other one will be in daycare. (Brigitte)

### **PATH 3: MOTHERS “IN TRANSITION”**

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Being halfway between the two previously-defined life paths did not mean randomly exhibiting some of the characteristics of both groups. The first point to mention is that the mothers “in transition” were generally close to either end of the spectrum, i.e. the outcome of their life history at the time of the study was often very close to that of either “coping” or “improvident” mothers. But age becomes an important factor in an analysis of their life paths. These mothers were, on average, younger than the others, and their future remained more open in the sense of determining the route they would take.

I first decided to place some young women in this group whom we could have defined as “coping” after examining their living conditions at the time of the study, and yet I felt that they exhibited one aspect that made them very vulnerable in terms of controlling their destiny: their great dependence on their partner. The situation of these young women seemed quite stable over time, but the relatively favourable conditions in

which they lived were directly determined by the financial contribution of their partner and by the fact that the young women often worked in their partner's family business. So they were perhaps not "in transition," but the risk of a significant deterioration in their living conditions was an ever-present factor.

Compared to the other cases, one strong trend emerged from my analysis of this group: the passage from "improvidence" to adulthood. These young women initially shared the characteristics of "improvident" mothers: a difficult childhood, a marked tendency toward social isolation, and very little interest in school. The cases I placed in this group were however fairly equally divided between those who become pregnant before the end of their studies and those who did afterwards. But these young women also frequently professed the idea that the arrival of the child would compensate for the lack of affection experienced in their own childhood.

The life paths taken by these young women in the first few years after their pregnancy often resulted from an inaccurate assessment of their situation. For example, the period free from conflict with parents that accompanied the announcement of their pregnancy and favoured the provision of help was much shorter than in the case of "coping" mothers. These young women also tended to lose their network of friends during pregnancy, sometimes under the influence of their partner, so that there was less help from friends. In addition, poorly planned moves often led to an unforeseen vulnerability.

I already knew my future . . . but I was wrong once again because I didn't expect a second [child] to come so soon. I told myself that I would have my baby and stay home with him during his first year of life, and then go back to school, and that when I had finished school I would go to work, and put my child in daycare. Welfare pays for daycare, it gives you a certain percentage and you have a bit of money for studies. So I said to myself that it might be a good time to go back to school.

Then the baby came. I wanted to stay at my mother's until we got some new furniture but . . . things weren't going well with my boyfriend now because my mother was interfering too much in our business and how we were caring for the baby. So at one point he [the boyfriend] said: "It's very simple, if we don't move, I'm leaving and I'm not coming back."

And then we separated because we got to the point where we couldn't stand it any more. My baby wasn't sleeping at night and didn't until he was fifteen months old, and I got depressed because my boyfriend was never with me, because he was working at night, and my baby wasn't sleeping. Then he got depressed because now he wasn't sleeping either. When he saw the baby he was too tired. If the baby even cried a bit, it got on his nerves. At one point I didn't like the way he was talking to me. And then, my boyfriend had a problem, in any case, he started to hit me. (Claudine)

But at a certain point the life courses of these young women took a different route from the life paths of the "improvident" mothers. It was not so much one particular event as the fact of going through a period of disillusionment with conjugal and family life that

seemed to spark the sudden awareness of a strong need for change. Recognizing the problems they were getting into, these young women took the step of asking for help. And especially, feeling uncomfortable with a prolonged dependence on welfare or even on a partner, they tried to take control of their lives again. For one young woman, for example, this happened when her partner was pressing her to have a third child, which she saw as a way of keeping her in the role of mother as homemaker. Although, like the “improvident” mothers, these young women had little interest in school, unlike the former, they did not use the argument of the economic situation making it unlikely to find work to justify staying at home. Instead, they found work, even if this meant relatively unskilled jobs.

Once they had reached this awareness, the mothers “in transition” began to plan more for the future, like the “coping” mothers, and to develop strategies to empower their lives. For example, some took advantage of the time when they were caring for their youngest child to pursue technical training, which they saw as the best way to find work quickly. Others, very aware of their relational problems, sought to consult health care professionals to help them overcome this handicap. This was not an easy path for many, since there were fewer resources available to them than there were for “coping” mothers. They also faced greater obstacles. For example, those living in outlying areas had less access to specialized services such as those offered by l’Envol (an organization providing support to young mothers), or facilities such as a daycare centre next to adult education services, etc.

## **CONCLUSION: MOTHERHOOD VERSUS EMPLOYMENT: A FALSE OPPOSITION?**

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Our identification of the first two, rather extreme, life paths could easily influence us to depict two types of opposite life choices. In the first case, the adolescent pregnancy would have been simply an accident while the pursuit of studies leading to employment could be seen as the guiding thread in a personal life course that places the priority on work and individual autonomy. This pattern would seem close to that of the career woman, who may even choose not to live with a partner. In the second case, that of women who decide to stay at home and raise their children, who appear to value affective relationships above all else and to reject work, we seem to find the traditional image of the mother as homemaker.

But some aspects suggest that the commonly perceived opposition between motherhood and employment does not adequately reflect the reality we are looking at here. So when “coping” and “improvident” mothers discuss the meaning of motherhood and the place of their child in their lives, we see that the former had gradually developed strategies inducing them to take on the responsibilities associated with their parental

role, whether this meant studies, work, or the search for a responsible partner. For these young women, this was an ongoing process; past experiences, both positive and negative, helped to redefine their priorities and future strategies in order to provide the best possible living conditions for their child. So their path truly involved a transition toward adulthood, encompassing all aspects of this process (family, employment, residential and psychological elements), although made more difficult by the premature arrival of a child.

The situation of the “improvident” mothers was quite different. In speaking of their children, they did not use the language of parenthood, much less the language of responsibility. Each of these young women saw herself primarily as a friend to her child; she viewed the child as a source of affection, the affection she failed to receive from her parents during her own childhood: an attitude likely to reverse the roles of parent and child.

For me, [having a child] was like making a friend. I saw it like that because one of my friends had wanted to have children to be her best friend or something like that. So I said: “That’s not a bad idea.” From then on, that was how I saw it. If I have children, I’ll treat them like my friends. They’ll grow up with me; I’ll be a cool mother. (Nancy)

For these mothers, the birth of the child was also an end result, i.e. acquisition of social status. It was not the beginning of a learning process, since many felt that they already had the necessary experience and that they were ready to “be” mothers, which they saw as a state rather than a process. During the interviews, several used every opportunity to emphasize how much experience they had. But the “improvident” mothers were the ones who had not taken prenatal classes and did not appreciate advice from others, especially their families. “I never relied on what anyone said; I managed on my own. I learned everything myself, and I didn’t need anybody’s help” (Claudia). These mothers tended to rationalize all their actions and were very unwilling to admit any questioning of their past mistakes.

Their conjugal and personal lives followed the same type of dynamics. They tended to repeat the same mistakes, both in the choice of a series of “problem” partners in their lives and in their recurrent decisions to have another child when a new partner came along, during the period of euphoria in the beginning of the love relationship. Then the relationship often broke up once again. Of course, some of the young women were in a stable conjugal relationship; but the stability was the stability of welfare and of the family’s isolation. Here again, we clearly see the lack of an ongoing process. The situation had come to a standstill with the birth of the first child. But this moment, which can theoretically be viewed as a major indicator of the transition to adulthood, is also associated with specific responsibilities, other than affective ones. For the “improvident” mothers, it was as though acquisition of their maternal status instead allowed them to stop all other processes of personal emancipation. Their attitude as mothers was to

justify not assuming one's responsibilities but rather reallocating them to society as a whole. In this regard, these mothers could easily fall back on a certain social discourse that places so much emphasis on the importance of affection in family relations that it overshadows all other aspects.

If the "coping" mothers underwent a rather stormy transition to adulthood, the "improvident" mothers seemed frozen in the moment of their own childhood, attempting to reconstruct this early, unhappy period in their lives, and refusing to move on to subsequent life stages. Here we are very far from the image of the mother as homemaker.

Paradoxically, it is perhaps the vulnerable mothers "in transition" who best fit this label. For the model of the mother as homemaker also includes a father as breadwinner. This is lacking in the lives of the "improvident" mothers. It is the vulnerability of the mother as homemaker, dependent on her partner, that we detected in the case of some of the young women in the "in transition" category, who were in fact living very comfortable lives, but with the constant risk of a significant deterioration in their circumstances should a conjugal breakdown occur.

Rather than indicating an opposition between work and motherhood, analysis of the study data suggests a distinction that is instead related to development of a sense of parental responsibility with the transition to adulthood. In this sense, the consequences of the young women's lifestyles for their children are not those that an association between Path 1 and work, and Path 2 and motherhood, might suggest. This is even more true from the perspective of intergenerational analysis and when we look at the lifestyle models offered to the children of "improvident" mothers.

Moreover, our study results also encourage us to question the determinism of certain explanatory factors linked to childhood. The situation of the mothers "in transition" shows that the die is not already cast with the birth of the child, although the path is clearly more difficult for some than for others.

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