# Helping Everyday Rhetors Challenge Reproductive Injustice(s) in Public

By Jenna Vinson

## ABSTRACT

In a sociopolitical context that continues to constrain reproductive agency, many organizations, media, and people construct pregnant or mothering teenagers as "things that are other than it should be" and many young mothers report being talked to as if they were a defect that must be addressed. People who experience dominant discourses of "teenage pregnancy prevention" are prompted to immediately respond to the rhetorical exigence of pregnant and parenting teen bodies. When visibly young pregnant or parenting people venture into public, they face an unpredictable and potentially hostile rhetorical arena.

In this article, I reflect on a community-based workshop I facilitated in Boston from 2015-2019 at an annual one-day event for young parents called the Summit for Teen Empowerment and Parenting Success. Drawing on feminist rhetorical theories of interruption tactics, this workshop prepares young pregnant and parenting people with researched information and scripted responses they can use to interrupt and transform everyday moments in public places when strangers read their bodies as problems to criticize or loudly bemoan. However, findings from the surveys circulated at the 2019 workshop indicate that what participants value most about this experience is the opportunity to share and relate to one another's experiences of reproductive injustice. This article offers feminist rhetoricians, community literacy scholars, and other scholar-activists an approach to sharing research findings and facilitating discussion in a useful way with those who embody exigences of reproductive justice.

## POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

I am a volunteer workshop facilitator at the 1-day Summit for Teen Empowerment and Parenting Success (STEPS)—an initiative of the Center for Community Health and Health Equity at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, MA—and I operate in solidarity with young pregnant and parenting people (see Mia McKenzie's "No More Allies"). I have experienced pregnancy and parenthood in the ephemeral period labeled "young" and the socioeconomic context of being "low-income" (i.e., working and using government funding for medical/food needs) and, thus, have some sense of shared experience with the pregnant and parenting young people from the greater Boston area who attend the summit. However, in relation to the health equity practitioners who run the event and the young people who attend the event—who are, primarily, people of color—I am an outsider, a professor from a local university they do not attend, and a comfortably middle-class, single, white, cisgender woman in her 30s. Mindful of this positionality, I seek to respond to what participants state they want and need.

## CHALLENGES

As the editors of this special issue note, when the idea of a toolkit was broached at the 2019 Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) conference, I offered a word of caution: "we" (feminist scholars of rhetoric, writing, and literacy) are late to broader discussion about, and activism for, reproductive justice. While individually we may be working with community organizations to address the many human rights issues that fall under the umbrella of reproductive justice, as a field, we have not articulated our theories or praxis as relevant to or in service of these movements. The field is also overwhelmingly white. And, as the editors of Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, and Critique (2017) explain, "In realizing the power of the RJ movement, we move from the politics of inclusion to the politics of leadership. . . .women of color are ideologically leading the movement, centering ourselves, and transforming relationships in the process." Mindful of this, when thinking about how theories, research, and pedagogies might become "tools" to aid the movement, I urge that we ground ourselves in the movement as it has existed and continues to exist beyond the academy. In other words, the work is already happening, tools have been crafted, communities forged, and alliances made. While ongoing injustices demand our field's attention and our activist efforts, we should proceed by listening, learning, and positioning ourselves in solidarity with those already involved with the movements so that when a need for tools of literacy, rhetoric, and teaching arises, we can offer what the community needs. I may very well be preaching to the choir as readers of Reflections likely know what good community engagement looks like, but I take this opportunity to remind us to avoid what Ellen Cushman calls "missionary activism" and strive, instead, for "scholarly activism which facilitates the literate activity that already takes place in the community."

There are many rhetorical exigencies of reproductive justice: an ever-growing prison industrial complex that takes parents and children; corporate and industrial practices that poison our air, food, and water; increasingly stringent (or nonexistent) insurance coverage that blocks people's ability to access the healthcare they need; multiple obstacles to women's, immigrant's, and young people's access to information about sexual health and healthy sexuality, etc., etc. In my own research, I have found that the tragic "teen mother" is a character constructed, in part, by people lobbying for safe and legal abortion or sex education. She is the problem "we" (non-teen mothers) are called to solve by keeping sex education in schools or by keeping abortion accessible. In telling this story, lobbyists, politicians, journalists and others have helped to create the embodied exigence experienced by everyday pregnant and parenting people.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How can rhetorical scholars help to address these exigences while being mindful of not pathologizing particular bodies and reproductive experiences as always and only an urgent problem?

2. How do rhetorical scholars not reproduce pathologizing rhetoric as we stress the urgency of these human rights issues? Or, to put it another way, how do we avoid producing what Eve Tuck calls "damage centered research"? She defines such research as ". . . a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community."

## TAKEAWAYS

**Facilitating Workshops with Young Parents:**
As I write in my article, the research that challenges the idea that "teenage pregnancy" is a social problem is not well known. As a young mother, I found something liberating in the discovery that all those "facts" I had heard about women who become parents before the age of 20 were wrong—like a weight had been lifted off me, like I could quit blaming myself for whatever happened to my kids (though, honestly, I still struggle with this). If you would like to help in circulating this information by conducting workshops like the one I describe, I recommend looking for places in your communities that have youth empowerment as part of their mission: nonprofits that serve pregnant and parenting teens, schools with young parent programs, hospitals with childbirth classes for young parents, summer enrichment programs, and even programs receiving government grants to lead "teenage pregnancy prevention" efforts. Often these latter programs include initiatives to avoid "repeat pregnancies"—a phrase designed to pathologize subsequent births to parenting people under the age of 20—and, thus, serve pregnant and parenting teenagers.

**Translating Research into Comebacks:**
As I write in my article, I hope that other feminist rhetoricians and scholar-activists think about how the research they are doing to interrogate and interrupt discourses that pathologize, shame, and blame those who are (already) marginalized could be shared in productive ways with communities beyond the academy. In support of this, I offer the template of my workshop handout. Adapting the template prompts reflection on how research might be put to work in everyday encounters. Just open the file and replace the image and instructions typed in red font with your own visuals, language, and research. Imagine ways to sum up information that confronts particular commonplaces. Be sure to consider your target audience for the handout—those who experience judgmental comments reflecting dominant discourses about "them" as a group. They will likely want creative but easy-to-say quips for these spontaneous and slippery moments. It's okay if they get silly. When this handout is used as a talking point during community workshops, it can educate and break the ice. For example, the line in my handout "Children actually can't have children. It is physically impossible" usually gets a good laugh from young parents.

## ADDITIONAL LINKS

- Proud2Parent: STEPS
- Brigham and Woman's Hospital's Center for Community Health and Health Equity Stronger Generations Program
- Proud2Parent Blog Post