BOOK REVIEW

‘Adolescence’, pregnancy and abortion: Constructing a threat of degeneration
by Catriona Mcleod

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This book is the work of a very influential researcher, Catriona Mcleod who is a senior professor at Rhodes University. The title is catchy and gives the impression that the book is all about the first-hand accounts of adolescents with regard to pregnancy and abortion. When I started reading the book, this is exactly what I expected. How wrong I was!

Mcleod has written extensively on topics that relate to adolescence, teenage pregnancy and abortion. She has also worked closely with teenagers, especially in rural contexts. This book is therefore a timely synthesis of knowledge accumulated over many years. It is not, however, as I expected, directly about adolescents’ experiences of pregnancy, but rather about how a concept such as ‘adolescence’ is
socially constructed in the first place. The core of the book is concerned with how academics, health care professionals, media and the public in general talk about or portray adolescents, teenage pregnancy and abortion. So the focus shifts away from the more usual psychological and popular debate on the emotions, cognitions or behaviour of adolescents to a meta perspective on how this debate functions to create a particular type of consensus around adolescents, pregnancy and abortion.

The author makes sense of ‘adolescents’, teenage pregnancy and abortion by drawing on two theoretical approaches. The first is postcolonialism: She makes an argument that ‘adolescents’, pregnancy and abortion can only be understood in the context of how current power relations are embedded in colonial history. In particular, the colonial construction of ‘primitiveness’ continues to influence how we view adolescents – because of our colonial history, Black adolescents are perceived as primitive, ill disciplined, and as playing a pivotal role in a perceived threat of degeneration (see Chapter 6).

Second, Macleod bases her analysis on feminism: Power relations are multiple and shifting, as dominant discourses, social practices and social arrangements relating to gender compete for control, and it is within this contested terrain that adolescence, pregnancy and abortion come to take on particular meanings.

From the practice point of view, the author provides a critical discussion of how health care professionals, media and even academics who work with adolescents fail to address issues pertinent to this group. Too often, adolescents are viewed as troublemakers who do not listen to their elders (e.g., by falling pregnant), who engage in risky sexual behaviour such as sex without protection (especially in the context of high HIV figures) and who are seen as irresponsible (by, for example, failing to use contraceptives). What this leads to is that society paints a picture of adolescents as threatening the moral fibre of the nation, which is referred to as the ‘threat of degeneration’ in this book.

The relevance of this book is the fact that it is written taking into cognisance the South African context. The author clearly gives reasons for this, among them the uniqueness of South Africa with its diverse cultures, the history of the country as a former colony and the legacy of apartheid and how it has shaped our experience of race and class. Keep in mind the theoretical framework that underpinned the writing of this book (postcolonialism and feminism). Another important reason cited by the author relates to the high HIV figures in South Africa especially when one takes into consideration the ‘threat of degeneration’ construct.

One of the strengths of this book lies in the diversity and rigour of evidence that is drawn on. The author used research from, inter alia, North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and from a range of different theoretical and methodological traditions, to argue her position. Despite its strong theoretical focus, this book is an easy read and will come in handy for
people working with teenagers from all walks of life such as researchers, health care professionals, pastors, students, parents and even policy makers. Most importantly, it acts as a mirror to how we have been viewing and alienating our teenagers in the guise of trying to help them, and the long term impact of this.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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