Validity of Adolescents’ Report of Maternal Age

Marc A. Zimmerman, Karen Rowe, Lisa Tuttle, and Alison Bryant

University of Michigan

Examined the validity of adolescents' reports of their mother's age. Most research on the validity of self-report focuses on personal behaviors such as alcohol and substance use, or response bias due to social desirability. Few studies investigate the validity of adolescents reporting of nonsensitive information. Data from 80 mother-adolescent pairs were collected. The sample included 9th graders from four high school English classes, equal numbers of males and females, and 15% African Americans. The correlation between mothers' reports and youths' reports of mother's age was .99, and 95% of the youth were within a year of their mother's correct age. No race or gender differences were found. These results allow researchers to examine adolescent outcomes for youth born to teen mothers without the expense of also collecting data from their mothers. Results also suggest that adolescents’ self-reports of other nonsensitive familial data may also be valid.

KEY WORDS: maternal age; adolescent report; validity.

The validity of self-report measures, especially among adolescents, is questioned when research includes sensitive or stigmatizing behavior, and when respondents may be invested in providing what they believe to be favorable or socially desirable answers (Bauman & Ennett, 1994; Campanelli, Diehlman, & Shope, 1987; Crockett, Schulenberg, & Petersen, 1987; Davis & Gergen, 1994). Another concern about youths' self-reports may relate to the validity of information provided about themselves or others. This study

1This project was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse Grant ROI DA07484 to Marc A. Zimmerman, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-2029. We thank Mr. Stobie for granting us permission to work in his high school, Lisa Walker for inviting us to work with her classes, and the students for agreeing to participate in the study. We also thank Irwin Sandler whose suggestion led to doing this study.

2All correspondence should be sent to Marc A. Zimmerman, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-2029.
examines the validity of information reported that is not particularly sensitive: adolescents' knowledge of their mother's age. The validity of adolescents' reports of mother's age is a significant issue because it could allow researchers to study effects of teenage parenting on adolescent outcomes without also collecting data from parents. It may also provide evidence that their self-reports of other nonsensitive familial information may be a valid indicator for variables such as family size, birth order, and family structure. Research on outcomes of the adolescent children of teen mothers may be extended in many studies if adolescents' reports of maternal age are valid. Few studies include linked parent–child data that enable assessment of adolescent outcomes for children of teen mothers (e.g., Dubow & Luster, 1990; East & Felice, 1990; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Geronimus, Korenman, & Hillemeier, 1994; Ketterlinus, Henderson, & Lamb, 1991). Thus, efforts to replicate findings and expand studies of outcomes for children of teen mothers would further our knowledge about the effects of teen parenthood.

**METHODS**

**Procedure**

Students from four ninth-grade English classes were asked by their teacher to complete a consent form and questionnaire during class time. They were not told the specific purpose of the study. All four classes had the same teacher; however, two classes included accelerated students and two classes consisted of average students. Students placed their questionnaire in an envelope, sealed it, and returned it to the teacher. The teacher put a code number (linked to mother) and indicated the race and gender of each youth on the outside of the envelope. She kept these envelopes, and provided the research team with a list of names and home telephone numbers of students who had agreed to participate.

We then telephoned the students' homes, asked to speak with the student's mother, briefly explained the study, requested a verbal consent to use their own and their child's data and then asked mothers their age and the age of their oldest child. Students' data for those mothers who consented to participate were collected from the teacher.

While the consent procedure protected youth from the use of their data if parental permission was not granted, we did not obtain parental consent prior to students completing the questionnaire (parental permission should typically be obtained prior to questionnaire administration). The data collection procedure was, however, integrated into a classroom exercise about social research, permission was obtained from school officials, and the information obtained was limited and not sensitive.