

Study: Pop-culture news helped destigmatize out-of-wedlock childbirth

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Celebrity news reports over the past four decades appear to have contributed to the changing makeup of the traditional American family by helping to destigmatize out-of-wedlock childbirths in the United States, according to a study by a University at Buffalo sociologist.

"Celebrities typically did not apologize for getting pregnant outside of marriage," says Hanna Grol-Prokopczyk, an assistant professor of sociology. "But the family model also changed over time. The early model dictated that you should marry by the time the baby is born. By the mid-2000s that had changed, and it became widely acceptable in the celebrity world to have a child without marrying first."

With People magazine as her proxy for popular culture news coverage, Grol-Prokopczyk analyzed nearly 400 cover stories dating from People's 1974 premier issue to the present to learn when the interest in celebrity pregnancies started and how the magazine's presentation of family norms changed over time.

She presented her findings at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. A more detailed study, including calculations of celebrity non-marital birth rates, is currently under peer-review.

"I used People magazine because it's reputable in the sense that it doesn't publish fictional stories; it has been in continuous circulation for over 40 years; and it remains one of the most widely circulating magazines in the country," says Grol-Prokopczyk. "It also has a strong online presence, with as many as 72 million unique views in a given month." Grol-Prokopczyk's curiosity about the media's fascination with celebrity baby news began when she was pregnant with her first child. She signed up for news alerts, expecting to get medical and nutrition stories relevant to expectant mothers, but instead received mostly news reports about celebrity pregnancies.

"Academics often scoff at celebrity news, but in fact there's evidence that celebrity culture is enormously influential in changing norms and has a very wide reach," she says. "For example, after Angelina Jolie wrote an op-ed after having her preventative mastectomy, a survey conducted weeks later found that 74 percent of Americans knew about

her surgery and the decision."

This became known as the Angelina Effect, and research on its impact was published in the journal *Genetics in Medicine*. "That attests to the fact that decisions celebrities make reach us and affect our thinking," says Grol-Prokopczyk.

Her research further illustrates that point.

The first *People* magazine cover that showed a celebrity pregnancy was in May 1976. Goldie Hawn was pictured and the text makes it clear that she's pregnant and unmarried, but the caption reads, "She's laughing with a baby and a new hubby on the way."

"There aren't many non-marital fertility stories in the 1970s, but when they do appear there's almost always a promise that the parent will marry by the time the baby is born," says Grol-Prokopczyk. "It's like saying, 'Don't worry, readers. They'll be married by the time the baby arrives.'"

The model was still the same when *People* magazine announced Melanie Griffith's pregnancy in 1989, with a caption that said she and Don Johnson were "thinking about an April wedding."

Beginning in the 1990s, the normative model began to change, and by the mid-2000s, *People* magazine regularly showed celebrity couples who didn't marry by the time the baby was born, according to Grol-Prokopczyk. These non-marital births were almost without exception presented as happy, morally unproblematic events.

"This includes women who were partnered but didn't plan to marry the partner, but it also includes so-called 'single mothers' who we now know were in committed same-sex relationships, in particular Jodie Foster and Rosie O'Donnell," she says.

Seven covers about Foster and O'Donnell appeared between 1996 and 2002. None of them acknowledge that the women were in same-sex relationships, and two of them directly referred to the women as "single mothers."

"Based on biographies of them now, we know they were in long-term, committed relationships at the time," says Grol-Prokopczyk.

"People magazine was slow to show acceptance of same-sex parents, preferring to present them as single parents. This example shows that while celebrity media coverage can serve as an agent for social change—by de-stigmatizing non-marital childbearing or transgenderism, for instance—it does not always do so," she says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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