

Rhetorical Visions of Unmarried Mothers

Thomas G. Endres

Bormann's fantasy theme analysis and Q-methodology are combined to examine the symbolic reality of unmarried mothers. A dramatic humanistic analysis of rhetoric produced by and about unmarried mothers identifies three rhetorical visions: the Down and Out Vision, the Making the Best Vision, and the Yummie Vision. The visions are composed of fantasy themes, types, and cues in relation to the following issues: Parents, Birthfather, Society, Relationship with the child, Disclosure, New men, Loneliness, Control, and the Future. Images from the rhetorical analysis are transferred to a Q-sort card deck and sorted by 64 unmarried mothers into a "most like me—least like me" continuum. QUANAL is used to identify the extent to which unmarried mothers accept or reject the dramas about them. Five transcendent type rhetorical visions are identified within the subject pool, and these visions are discussed and interpreted in light of the rhetorical analysis. Communicative implications and suggestions for future study are also provided.

KEY CONCEPTS BORMANN, Fantasy theme analysis, Q methodology, Q sort, Quanal, Rhetorical Vision

THOMAS G. ENDRES (Ph.D) is an Assistant Professor in the Speech-Theater Department, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN 55057.

Unmarried mothers constitute a large and ever-growing percentage of our country's demographic structure. Though exact numbers may be difficult to verify, incidences of out of wedlock births appear to be on the increase. The U.S. Census figures from 1980 show that 18% of all live births were to single women. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, that represents an 11.4% increase from the previous census. Two factors, antithetical in nature, combine to make this an issue of great social relevance. The first issue of concern is that adolescent pregnancies are on the rise, with over one million teenage girls (approximately two in twenty) becoming pregnant annually (Witt & Michael, 1982). Secondly, there has also been an increase in the number of women in their thirties who have opted for single parenthood. Morrisroe (1983) states that the birth rate for women aged 30 to 34 has risen more than for any other age group of single mothers.

Such large scale changes certainly impact the way that society must view out of wedlock pregnancy and unmarried mothers. So, too, must it impact the way that these mothers view themselves. Unfortunately, many unmarried mothers are often at a loss to define themselves or their situation. The messages they receive from their social network may be outdated, conflicting, and confusing. As Klein (1973) notes, we "must view today's unmarried pregnant girl against a backdrop of social realities that

are far more flexible than they have ever been before (p. 28)." Klein goes on to berate the use of limited and negative stereotypes used to classify these women, as "it is an injustice to the single parent experience not to see how nonhomogeneous a group single parents can be. Like any other behaviour, unmarried motherhood has a variety of meanings in the light of a particular person's life (p. 64)." The very flexibility of this backdrop creates a problem, however, when the unmarried mother attempts to define her new identity and discovers that she has no common linkage to a million other women in her same situation.

These feelings of isolation are fostered by comments from authors who, in their attempt to combat stereotyping, refer to the millions of unwed mothers, "each with her own story" (Oettinger & Mooney, 1979). Typical of this is Hansen's (1980) decision-making guide on unmarried pregnancy, in which the women are told, "No matter if a million young women find themselves pregnant and single every year, your exact combination of personality and background and circumstances will never be duplicated (p. 11)."

It is difficult to believe, however, that such a pervasive element of our society could be entirely chaotic. What was needed was a research project that could examine the complicated and seemingly unrelated definitions of unwed motherhood, and assess the extent to which those definitions are used by the unwed mother as she searches to understand herself and her experiences.

The goal of this study was to identify which elements of the "backdrop of social realities" come into play in an unmarried mother's view of herself. This was accomplished through a humanistic dramatic analysis of the messages made available to the unmarried mother through her rhetorical community. Bormann's (1972, 1982a) fantasy theme analysis was used to identify and examine the recurrent and shared dramatic storylines that exist by and about single women with children. The appropriateness of the methodology can be seen in Golden, Berquist, and Coleman's (1983) statement:

People seldom understand events in all their complexity. Yet most human beings have a desire to understand some of the things that happen around them and to them. The way they come to some understanding is by participating in fantasy themes in which an explanation for events is acted out by the personae in the dramas (p. 436).

As such, when individuals or collectives produce and share fantasies, they can make sense out of the experiences that prior to that may have been confusing. To examine the link between the rhetoric and the audience, the images discovered in the rhetorical analysis were then presented to a subject pool of unmarried mothers, and Q-methodology was used to identify whether or not certain women share similar composite sets of fantasies, or rhetorical visions.

Fantasy/Q-Methodology and Communication Study

While no communication research currently exists on unmarried mothers, fantasy theme analysis and Q-methodology are gaining popularity as research methods for identifying and understanding the symbolic realities of specified rhetorical communities. Bormann first introduced the idea of fantasy theme analysis in this seminal 1972 article. He and his colleagues have further explicated the methodology over the last fifteen years (e.g. Bormann, 1980; Bormann, 1982a; Bormann, 1985; Cragan &

Shields, 1981). Fantasy is a technical term which refers to the "creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need" (Bormann, 1985, p. 5). In this study, the term fantasy is used synonymously with the terms images, storylines, dramas, and scenarios. These terms may refer to either fictitious or non-fictitious stories.

The actual content of the message in which the fantasy is elicited is called the fantasy theme; complete scenarios which contain major dramatic elements such as *dramatis personae* (characters), plotline, scene, and sanctioning agent (justification of the drama). When these symbolic units are shared, they constitute the base of social reality. Once an individual has shared in the drama of a fantasy theme, they may then be able to understand and respond to rhetorical imagery of either a fantasy type or an inside-cue. The fantasy type is a stock scenario that has been repeated again and again with the identical or similar characters, scenes, and outlines. An inside-cue is a cryptic symbolic allusion, such as a code word, gesture, slogan, or phrase that evokes the same response from the individual as did the originally shared fantasy theme.

When a variety of dramas come together to form composite views for a collective, this is known as a rhetorical vision. Bormann (1985) describes this as "a unified putting together of the various scripts which gives the participant a broader view of things" (p. 8). The goal of the rhetorical criticism within this study is to identify the rhetorical visions found within the dramatic messages communicated by and about unmarried mothers. Bormann (1972) indicates that the evidence should come from audio and video tapes, manuscripts, participant recollections, and direct observations. Shields (1981a) lists similar sources of rhetorical artifacts, such as literature searches, personal interviews, and focus group interviews. The critic looks for evidence that these fantasies are shared, searching for "similar dramatizing material such as word play, narratives, figures of speech, and analogies" which crop up in a variety of messages in different contexts (Bormann et al., 1984, p. 289). Essentially, the search for shared messages continues until the dramas begin repeating themselves and no new fantasy themes, types, or symbolic cues are found among the rhetoric available to the audience. The critic then attempts to describe and interpret the shared consciousness of the community based upon the recurring patterns of dramatic imagery found within their discourse.

Once the rhetorical critic has completed their analysis, they may then wear the cap of the social scientist and assess their interpretations against the perceptions of the rhetorical community being analyzed. This is done using Q-methodology; a form of factor analysis that correlates people based upon their similar sets of responses to perceived stimuli. It is a sophisticated form of rank ordering which clusters individuals based upon their own self-referent and operant interpretation of the rhetorical artifacts. As described by Brown (1980):

If two persons are like-minded on a topic their Q-sorts will be similar and they will both end up on the same factor. Hence, we do not classify them: they classify themselves on their own terms . . . (p. 208).

The end result is a typology of differential rhetorical visions that reflect the self-perceptions of the audience being studied. Unlike typical rhetorical analysis, which is not generalizable, the findings from a Q sort offer a degree of external validity. The visions identified by the Q sort do not necessarily mirror the structured visions identified by the rhetorical analysis. Rather, they demonstrate the extent to which the audience accepts, rejects, or is neutral to the rhetorical imagery. Once

those visions from the Q sort have been identified, the critic once again employs humanistic analysis to fully interpret the social consciousness of the collective.

As mentioned, no current communicative research has been done on the subject of unmarried mothers, though both fantasy theme analysis and fantasy theme analysis/Q-methodology studies exist which examine a variety of rhetorical communities and situations. The diversity of topic areas addressed using fantasy theme analysis attests to the flexibility of the methodology, and its sensitivity in identifying and interpreting symbolic realities. Bormann (1972) originally analyzed the Puritan rhetorical vision. Other studies have interpreted the visions of such diverse groups and individuals as the Disciples of Christ (Henley, 1975), the American Communist Party (Ilkka, 1977), and Malcolm X (Shields, 1981b). Many of the studies which employ fantasy theme analysis focus on images in politics. Topics of coverage have included the Eagleton Affair (Bormann, 1973), McGovern's image (Bantz, 1975), Watergate (Porter, 1976), the Reagan inauguration and Iranian hostage release (Bormann, 1982b), and the 1984 Reagan mandate (Aden, 1986). Studies of abstract political and social dramas are evidenced by Cragan's (1972, 1981) interpretations of the Cold War rhetoric, and Bormann's (1985) analysis of the rhetorical visions that shaped our culture, including the Puritan and Evangelical rhetorical styles, the rhetoric of the anti-slavery movement, and the vision of Abraham Lincoln.

The review of literature also reveals that fantasy theme analysis/Q-methodology are gaining in popularity as a symbolic assessment tool. Political imagery has been the focus of many of these studies. Areas of research include the public's image of Jimmy Carter (Rarick et al., 1977), response to political cartoons (Bormann et al., 1978), the 1980 response to Reagan, Carter, and Anderson (Bormann et al., 1984), and the 1984 Minnesota Senate race (Bormann et al., 1985). More relevant to this study, Q-methodology has been used to discover the rhetorical visions of several diverse collectives, including fire fighters (Shields, 1974), obese women (Madden, 1982), and law professors, students, and practicing lawyers (McFarland, 1983). Similar to this project, these latter studies each identified a typology of rhetorical visions that constituted the base of social reality for the members of the collective being studied.

Method

Procedure for Fantasy Theme Analysis

Evidence for the rhetorical criticism was gathered from searches of both academic and popular literature resources. Most useful were the variety of self-help and psychology manuals published over the past 25 years. These were available in the public libraries, public bookstores, and through support groups. Dramas were also found in such popular periodicals as *Ebony*, *Glamour*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Ms.*, *New York*, *New York Times*, *Psychology Today*, *Saturday Review*, *Seventeen*, *Time*, and *USA Today*. Non-print media was also examined for dramatic scenarios. Included were the 1976 film "I Want to Keep My Baby" (Lee & Thorpe: CBS Television Workshop Production), and a videotape produced in 1985 by the Children's Home Society. Information was also gathered through personal and focus group interviews. Interviews were held with counselors, state department workers, single parent researchers, and unmarried mothers. All interviews were conducted in an open-ended manner, with interviewees being asked to provide examples of issues that were pertinent to the unmarried mother's picture of herself. Interviewees were

asked to elaborate and support their ideas with actual or hypothetical examples. The interviews were ended when the images being presented became redundant, and no new scenarios could be elicited.

Once the evidence was collected, the manifest content of the messages was analyzed for patterns of characterizations, dramatic situations and actions, and settings. The criteria for identification and selection of fantasy themes, types, and cues is similar to that used by Rarick, Duncan, Lee, and Porter (1977), who used the criteria of: frequency of appearance of the image, range of media in which the themes appeared, and dramatic content of the themes. Dramatic content was the overriding criterion in the initial analysis. Then, once the review of scenarios was complete, the criteria of frequency and range came into play. Only those images that occurred at least three times and in at least two independent sources were included in the final rhetorical analysis and subsequently transferred to the Q-sort in the next step.

In order to provide a structure for the rhetorical analysis that would be amenable to Q-methodology, the interpretation of the dramas was housed within a "visions x issues" framework. The visions plane refers to the overriding differential dimensions that separate and make distinct the composite dramas. The distinct visions identified in the discourse are composed of nine differential issues (i.e. the issues plane) that represent the recurring fantasy themes, types, and symbolic cues. Cragan and Shields (1981) state that most people attach themselves to one of three major visions, so the identification of that number is sufficient for the rhetorical analysis. This author felt that deciding a priori to search for three major visions would be unnecessarily limiting. As such, no pre-imposed framework for assessing the visions plane was used; the findings emerged from the data. As the reader will note, this study did identify three major visions. While this offers support for the Cragan and Shields claim, using the "three competing visions" rule-of-thumb when beginning the rhetorical analysis is not recommended.

Procedure for Q-Methodology

The first step in using Q-methodology is to create a Q-sort card deck whose items encompass the imagery uncovered in the fantasy theme analysis. The three visions x nine issues matrix developed above constituted the framework for the Q-sort. The dramas in each of the twenty-seven cells were replicated onto two cards each for inter-item reliability. Thus, a deck of 54 cards was produced. Each card presented a drama (50 to 60 words in length) in which the protagonist of the story was an unmarried mother. The deck was pretested for readability by eight adolescents, and the instructions were pretested on a support group for unmarried mothers. Fifteen coders (12 speech communication graduate assistants, 2 single mothers, 1 counselor) read through and sorted the deck for face validity. Confidence can be placed on the validity of the deck as evidenced by the high level of inter-rater agreement: 100% agreement—42 cards (78%); 93% agreement—5 cards (9%); 87% agreement—7 cards (13%).

Subjects

Sixty-four unmarried mothers from a metropolitan area participated in the study. Forty-eight of the subjects were contacted through support and educational programs designed for unmarried mothers, while sixteen subjects were contacted through word of mouth and newspaper advertisements. Since Q-methodology is a small sample

statistic, the subjects were divided into matched samples of 32 members each. The samples were matched on the demographic characteristics of age, ethnic background, and group (or no group) affiliation. The subjects sorted the deck of 54 cards into a "most like me—least like me" continuum composed of nine columns. The number of cards within each column was as follows: 2-4-6-9-12-9-6-4-2, thus forming a pyramid shape and insuring that the most salient cards were fully discriminated between. The average length of time for each Q-sort was 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was done using VanTubergan's QUANAL program. The program first computes a person-person correlation matrix, then extracts the principal components which indicate factors, or person types. The WRAP (Weighted Rotational Analytic Procedure) computes a z-score for every item within the factor/type, then lists each type in a descending order of z-scores. The researcher can visualize, in order, the most highly accepted and strongly rejected items in each type identified. Items (dramas on the cards) with a z-score above +1.00 and below -1.00 were those used to identify the persona of the Q-types. Once the Q-typology is identified, it is then reinterpreted in accordance with the rhetorical methodology.

Results

Fantasy Theme Analysis

As mentioned earlier, a three vision x nine issue matrix was identified. The three visions were labeled The Down and Out Vision, The Making the Best Vision, and The Yummie Vision. The composite dramas of the three visions were created from differential fantasy themes, types, and symbolic cues along the following nine issues: Parents, Birthfather, Society, Relationship with Child, Disclosure, New Men, Loneliness, Control, and the Future. Space here does not permit explication of the entire analysis (see Endres, 1986, 1988 for full analysis). A truncated version of the three visions, including example fantasy themes, will be provided in the descriptions below.

The Down and Out Vision

This mother is young; teens to early twenties. In over 90% of the cases her pregnancy was accidental. Those that were purposeful result from unrealistic expectations (e.g. get out of a bad situation, make boyfriend love me) that are detached from the responsibilities of motherhood. The pregnancy is a bad situation, and the mother of this vision doesn't see anyway out or up. She feels negative about herself and victimized by major figures in her life. Primary impact is from her family, who are nonsupportive. Dad is angry and disappointed. Mother is a central figure. There is a wedge between mother and daughter, almost hatred. Strong feelings exist for the birthfather. Mostly she feels angry, hurt, and "screwed over." There are also moments of "White Knight Syndrome," where she feels the birthfather will come around and love them and take care of them. She feels put down by society, as if she should wear the scarlet letter A. Her image of herself reflects a societal image that says she is bad and a sinner. She has an unrealistic "baby doll" fantasy about her child. Her baby is her private property; an all-loving doll that will love her more than anyone ever has.

