What Do Low-Income Single Mothers Say about Marriage?

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Current theories of marriage under-predict the extent of non-marriage, have not been adequately tested, or do not apply well to women with low-socioeconomic status. Furthermore, scholarly research on marriage attitudes among low-SES women suffers from a lack of up-to-date qualitative work. This study draws on qualitative interviews with 292 low-income single mothers in three U.S. cities. Inductive analysis reveals five primary motivations for non-marriage among low-income single mothers. Most mothers agree that potential marriage partners must earn significantly more than the minimum wage, but also emphasize the importance of stability of employment, source of earnings, and the effort men expend to find and keep their jobs. Mothers place equal or greater emphasis on non-monetary factors such as how marriage may diminish or enhance respectability, how it may limit their control over household decisions, their mistrust of men, and their fear of domestic violence. Affordability, respectability, and control have greater salience for African American mothers, while trust and domestic violence have greater salience for whites. The author discusses these findings in relation to existing theories of marriage and in light of welfare reform.

When marriage rates among the poor plunged during the 1970s and 1980s, the American public began to blame welfare. During that time, an unmarried mother who had little or no income or assets could claim welfare until her youngest child aged out of the program (this was the case until 1996, when welfare became time-limited). If she were to marry, her access to welfare would be restricted. Up until the late 1980s, only about half of the states offered any benefits to married couples. By 1990, all states were required to offer welfare benefits to married couples with children who met certain income and eligibility criteria. Yet these benefits were hard to claim because the husband’s income and assets were counted in determining the family’s ongoing eligibility for the program (all of his income if he was the children’s father, and a portion of his income if he was not), and the couple had to prove the principal wage earner had a recent history of work. One study indicates that few welfare recipients understood these complex rules regarding marriage; they generally assumed that marrying would mean the loss of welfare, food stamp, and Medicaid benefits (Edin and Lein 1997).

Not surprisingly, the public viewed the program as one that discouraged the poor from marrying. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) has many aims, but one is to increase the costs of non-marriage by decreasing the resources an unmarried mother can claim from the state (see Corbett 1998). To accomplish this goal, PRWORA mandates states to ensure that recipients comply with certain requirements and offers them new flexibility to go beyond these mandates and impose further requirements. At minimum, PRWORA requires that states limit cash benefit receipt to no more than five years in an adult recipient’s lifetime. A second minimum requirement is that

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1. In many states, even part-time work on the part of a husband could have rendered the family ineligible.
states must impose a 20-hour work requirement after two years of receipt. States can opt for other requirements such as school attendance for minor children and participation in “work-related activities” like job search or short-term training. Violations of these requirements can result in a full cut-off or a partial reduction of benefits (these are referred to as “sanctions”). These new time limits and participation requirements sharply limit (or make more costly) the resources that single mothers can claim from the state. Meanwhile, the welfare rolls have fallen to nearly half their early 1990s levels. Though some of the decline is a response to improving economic conditions, the decline is much greater than the improvement in the economy would lead us to expect. Some scholars have claimed that the remainder is due to the “signaling effect” of welfare reform (e.g., that PRWORA has signaled to current and prospective clients that the rules have changed and that welfare is no longer an acceptable or feasible way of life), though there is little clear evidence in this regard.

One recent study of welfare programs in four large cities documents that from the state level to that of the local office, the welfare system has indeed changed in profound ways (see Quint et al. 1999), both in the operation of the welfare office and in the perceptions of the clientele. Yet despite this new world of welfare that confronts low-income adults, an analysis of ethnographic data from two cities suggests that the large majority of welfare recipients who are experiencing the changes with regard to welfare reform, are not planning on marrying in the near future. Furthermore, these recipients report that welfare reform has not changed their views on marriage. This is the case even though recipients said they believed welfare reform was “real” and would indeed be implemented (Edin, Scott, London, and Mazelis 1999).

This begs the question of what the views of marriage among low-income single mothers are, which is the question I address in this paper. I utilize data drawn from in-depth, repeated ethnographic interviews with 292 low-income African American and white single mothers in three U.S. cities, to add qualitative grounding to our understanding of these trends. I seek to explicate the social role that marriage plays in the lives of low-income single mothers more fully. Drawing from these data, I show that though most low-income single mothers aspire to marriage, they believe that, in the short term, marriage usually entails more risks than potential rewards. Mothers say these risks may be worth taking if they can find the “right” man—and they define “rightness” in both economic and non-economic terms. They say they are willing, and even eager, to marry if the marriage represents an increase in their class standing and if, over a substantial period of time, their prospective husband’s behavior indicates he won’t beat them, abuse their children, refuse to share in household tasks, insist on making all the decisions, be sexually unfaithful, or abuse alcohol or drugs. However, many women also believe they can mitigate against these risks if they forgo marriage until the tasks of early child rearing are completed and they can concentrate more fully on labor market activities (e.g., holding a stable job). These women believe that by forgoing marriage until they can make regular and substantial contributions to the household economy, they can purchase the right to share more equally in economic and household decision-making within marriage. Additionally, an income of their own insures them against destitution if the marriage should fail. Mothers often say that they are hesitant to enter into marriage unless they have enough resources to legitimately threaten to leave the marriage if the previously mentioned behavioral criteria are violated. In this way, they believe they will have more control over a prospective husband’s behavior and insurance against financial disaster should the marriage ultimately fail.

**Literature Review**

The median age at a first marriage is the highest it has been since the United States began keeping reliable statistics: twenty-four for women and twenty-six for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991b). The propensity to remarry has also declined (Cherlin 1992). Furthermore, more women and men are choosing not to marry during the prime family-building years, and
thus, more children are living with a single parent. Both non-marriage and single parenthood are particularly common among the poorest segments of American society (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991a; Schoen and Owens, 1992:116).

There is a strong association between single parenthood and child poverty. Just under half of all unmarried mothers have family incomes below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). Growing up with a single parent is associated with a number of other poor outcomes for children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Half of the disadvantage these children face can be explained by the poverty so often associated with single parenthood, and half by other factors such as lower parental involvement, supervision, and higher residential mobility.

Both rates of entry into first marriage and remarriage are far lower for poor women than for their more advantaged counterparts (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Once a woman has children, her chances of marrying are also lower than a childless woman’s (Bennett, Bloom, and Craig 1991). There are also large differences by race (Bennett, Bloom and Craig 1990; 1989; Staples 1988). Yet it is poor women with children, a disproportionate share of whom are African Americans, on whom social welfare policy has focused.

Current theories that attempt to explain the decline in marriage have generally focused on four areas: women’s economic independence; the inability of men (particularly minority men) to obtain stable family-wage employment; the role that welfare has played in creating marriage disincentives among the poor; and on what might be called cultural factors, such as the stalled revolution in gender roles (see Luker 1996:158–160).

Many scholars argue that women’s prospects for economic independence through work make it possible for them to raise their children apart from fathers who are wife beaters, child abusers, or otherwise difficult to live with (Becker 1981; South and Trent 1988; Teachman, Polonko, and Leigh 1987; Trent and South 1989). In the classic version of this argument (Becker 1981), women who specialize in child rearing and household management, while their spouses specialize in market work, will find marriage very attractive. Women who combine such tasks with work will be less dependent on men to fulfill the bread-winning role. As wages rise, women’s employment also rises, and the attractiveness of marriage declines. The evidence for this perspective is quite weak (Oppenheimer 1994). Trend data show that a decline in marriage has roughly coincided with increases in women’s employment and earnings. However, analyses drawing on individual-level data show no such relationship. Indeed, they sometimes show that women’s education and earnings are positively associated with entry into marriage, particularly for women with few skills (Bennet, Bloom, and Craig 1990:106; Lichter, et al. 1992).

A second argument is that there is a shortage of marriageable men among some groups. Most work in this area has focused on African Americans, since it is among blacks that marriage rates are lowest. Some have addressed the question of whether this is due to an insufficient supply of marriageable black men, either because of rising unemployment and incarceration (Wilson 1996, 1986), declining earnings (Oppenheimer 1994), or sex-ratio imbalances (South and Lloyd 1992; Tucker and Mitchell Kernan 1996). Most analyses show there is some evidence to support each of these variations on the male marriageable pool hypothesis, but the proportion of families headed by a single mother is simply much greater than this approach would predict (Fossett and Kielcolt 1993; Lichter, LeClere and McLaughlin 1991; South and Lloyd 1992).

Third, some have argued that the government may keep poor parents apart by making it more rewarding for the mother to collect welfare benefits than to marry a father with a menial job (Becker 1991; Murray 1984). According to this theory, welfare, rather than work, provides the economic independence that makes it possible, and even profitable, for mothers to eschew marriage. There is little evidence that out-of-wedlock birth rates are affected by either state variations in welfare levels or by changes in state benefits over time, though there is a modest negative effect for remarriage (Bane and Ellwood 1994; Hoffman 1997; Moffitt 1995).

Finally, some scholars argue that marriage decisions are influenced by what are generally termed “cultural” factors, even though these factors can sometimes be traced back to material
realities. One argument points to the stalled revolution in sex roles. Although many men are earning less money than previously, and although wives are much more likely to work, few men truly share the household labor and childcare tasks (Hochschild 1989). Kristen Luker argues that when “men are increasingly less able to contribute financially to the household and when they show little willingness to do more work around the house, women will inevitably revise their thinking about marriage, work, and the raising of children” (1996:132). The gender gap in sex-role expectations has grown in recent decades. Scanzoni (1970:148) found that the divergence between husbands and wives over what constitutes legitimate male authority is widest at the lowest class levels. He also found that low status husbands exercised more power in conflict resolution than higher status husbands (1970:156). White women’s views tend to be more egalitarian than white men’s, both in terms of work and household duties. Black men and women both hold egalitarian views in terms of women’s work, but black men lag behind their female counterparts (and white males) in their view of gender roles (Blee and Tickameyer 1995; Collins 1987). No study I know of estimates the strength of the relationship between the gender gap in sex role expectations and marriage rates.

Many qualitative analyses have invoked similar arguments for non-marriage. In their study of Chicago’s black belt, Drake and Cayton argue that inadequate and unsteady income flows result in an increased emphasis on the instrumental value of marriage (1962:584). Rainwater’s (1970) study of the Pruitt-Igoe projects in St. Louis offers a similar argument. Stack’s study of a housing project in Southern Illinois shows that female kin pressure young women to avoid marriage in order to preserve their exchange networks (1974). These studies are valuable, yet the most recent of them is based on data that are three decades old. Indeed, the huge declines in marriage among the poor had yet to occur! More recently, Wilson has analyzed 1980s life-history data from a sample of Chicago residents and argues that low marriage rates among African Americans result from mistrust of men (1996:87–110).

In general, most previous analyses show that contemporary marriage rates are lower than the previous theories of marriage would predict, do not seem to apply well to disadvantaged groups, have not been supported by social science research, have not been fully tested, or need updating.

**Method**

I chose to study the social role of marriage among low-income single mothers for three reasons. First, they are the targets of recent legislation that attempts to encourage marriage. Second, the majority of low-income adult women, for whom the costs of non-marriage and child bearing are presumably the highest, are neither childless nor married (either because they never married or they divorced), and this trend appears to be growing stronger over time (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). Indeed, for low-income African American women, only a tiny proportion are married, childless, or both. Since only half of the difference in the poverty rates of married and unmarried women is due to marital status (25% of white women and 75% of black women were poor before becoming single mothers), poverty is not merely an effect of non-marriage, but an important predictor (Bane 1987). Third, it is most appropriate for the method I employ. Qualitative research designs typically focus on a single group or “case” and involve an in-depth investigation of the rich interplay of factors involved in some aspect of that group’s shared experience (Becker 1992:209–210). Alfred Lindesmith (1948) studied opium addicts to learn about the social processes involved in becoming addicted, while Howard Becker (1963) studied marijuana smokers to investigate and understand how one became a marijuana smoker. Quantitative research might, instead, focus on which variables best predict drug use within a diverse (representative) population that included both addicts and non-addicts.

These data consist of transcripts and field notes from in-depth, repeated, qualitative interviews with 292 low-income single mothers in three U.S. cities. In each city, my collaborators
and I interviewed roughly 100 low-income single mothers: 87 in Charleston, South Carolina, 105 in Chicago, and 100 in Camden, New Jersey/Philadelphia, PA. In Chicago and Charleston, the sample was evenly divided between African Americans and whites. Interviews were conducted between 1989 and 1992. In Camden/Philadelphia, the sample is also predominantly African American and white. These interviews were conducted between 1996 and 1999. About half of the respondents in each city and racial group relied on welfare, and about half worked at low wage jobs (they earned less than $7.50 per hour).

The cities vary in a number of interesting ways. Chicago offered average welfare benefits ($376 for a three-person family) and had an average labor market in the early 1990s, when we did most of our interviewing there. Charleston, South Carolina had very modest welfare benefits ($205 for a family of three) and a tight labor market. Camden, New Jersey is an industrial suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In both states, residents received better-than-average welfare benefits in the mid-1990s (roughly $420 for three persons) but the labor market in the Philadelphia region was quite slack.

We did not select a random sample of mothers in any of our cities, but gleaned referrals from a variety of trusted third parties—representatives of community groups and institutions—to refer us to roughly half of the mothers in each city. We then asked mothers to refer us to one or two respondents who they thought would not be contacted using these third-party sources. This helped minimize the risk of contacting only those who were well connected with local groups. In each city, we drew respondents from a broad range of neighborhoods within the metropolitan area and the samples in each city represented between 33 and 50 non-overlapping social networks. I chose a heterogeneous non-random sampling technique because of concerns about rapport and response rates. The response rate was very high (about 90 percent in each city), and interviewers rated the degree of rapport as very high overall. Since we had repeated interactions with our respondents, we were able to query them about inconsistencies in their accounts and encourage them to expand on responses that were initially unclear. Thus, the data is probably more reliable than if we had engaged in a single interaction with our respondents.

The initial study (in Chicago and Charleston) was not designed primarily to elicit views about marriage. Yet, in both cities, I asked respondents to describe the circumstances surrounding the births of each of their children, their current family situations, and their views about how these family situations might change over time. I also asked each mother to describe her relationship with each child’s father. Finally, I asked mothers to describe their views of marriage in general.

An inductive analysis (Corbin and Strauss 1990) of the data regarding marriage was the basis for the study of Camden/Philadelphia mothers. In Chicago and Charleston, questions regarding marriage and family formation were relatively unstructured, and constituted only a small part of the focus of the interview. In Camden/Philadelphia, two issues were the primary focus of our conversations with mothers: why women choose to have children in precarious

2. The author conducted roughly 80 percent of the interviews in Chicago and Charleston and about 15 percent of the interviews in Camden/Philadelphia.

3. Though one might assume that major policy changes in regard to welfare might have made women difficult to compare across these years, none of the changes mandated by PRWORA (time limited welfare) had taken effect in New Jersey by the end of 1998. (In the mid-1990s, various waiver experiments were fielded in select counties across the state, including Camden County. These included both a “family cap,” which had affected only a tiny portion of the mothers we interviewed—roughly 5 percent.) Furthermore, the Philadelphia metropolitan area, of which Camden is a part, experienced no large fall off in caseload, as was common in many areas of the country. Philadelphia County had no waiver experiments.

4. Though we had enough data from the Chicago and Charleston interviews to analyze each mother’s views of marriage in general, as well as their own plans regarding marriage, not all discussed the reasons behind these views and plans in enough depth to allow for an in-depth analysis of motivations. Roughly three-fifths of mothers in each city and racial group did so, so the N for lines 2–6 of Table 1 is 122. Of those who did not, the percent with positive views and plans regarding marriage matched the percentages for those who shared their feelings more in-depth.
economic circumstances, and why these same women fail to marry or remarry. The Camden/Philadelphia interviewers covered a broad range of specific topics in these domains.

In all three cities, we scheduled conversations with each respondent at least twice to insure that there was sufficient time to develop adequate rapport. Within the context of these conversations, we addressed a predetermined set of topics, as well as additional topics brought up by the respondents. The order and precise wording of the questions regarding each topic was not prescribed, but followed the natural flow of conversation.

The primary goal of this analysis is to show what a relatively large, heterogeneous group of low-income single mothers say about the declining propensity of poor mothers and fathers to marry. The analysis is not meant to prove or disprove existing theories of family formation among the poor, but rather to give an in-depth account of the social role marriage plays in the lives of a relatively heterogeneous (in terms of city and race) groups of mothers within a single social category. The analysis will show that much of what poor mothers say supports existing theory, though mothers' accounts show a greater degree of complexity than these theories recognize. The reader will also see that poor mothers' accounts reveal motivations that existing approaches generally neglect. The result is a complex set of personal accounts that can lend crucial qualitative grounding to other representative studies of the retreat from marriage among the poor.

Results

Analysis of the Chicago and Charleston low-income single mothers' accounts reveals five primary reasons why poor parents do not form or reform a legal union with a man (see Table 1).

5. Factors discussed in relation to marriage by less than one-third of respondents are excluded. These include marriage as a "package deal"—or the importance of finding a man who will love and support both the mother and her children (4 percent), a shortage of time to pursue relationships (7 percent), welfare disincentives (2 percent), and drug and alcohol addiction (4 percent). Accounts of the drug and alcohol addictions of past partners permeated the accounts of women who talked about mistrust and domestic abuse.

6. See previous footnote.

7. I utilize quotation marks to refer to sentences, phrases, and terms that are direct quotes from respondents.

affordability

Men's income is an issue that matters enormously in poor parents' willingness and ability to stay together. Though the total earnings a father can generate is clearly the most important dimension for mothers, so is the regularity of those earnings, the effort men expend finding and keeping work, and the source of his income.

One African American mother in Chicago summed her views about contemporary marriage this way: "Men simply don't earn enough to support a family. This leads to couples breaking up." When we asked mothers specifically about their criteria for marriage, nearly every one told us the father would have to have a "good job." One reason was their recogni-
Table 1 • Percent of Low-Income Single Mothers with Positive Views Regarding Marriage, Plans to Marry, and the Percent who Discussed the Importance of Various Factors on Marriage Attitudes by City and Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chicago African American</th>
<th>Chicago White</th>
<th>Charleston African American</th>
<th>Charleston White</th>
<th>Sig of F Race</th>
<th>Sig of F City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Orientation toward Marriage</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectability</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
*p < .10 **p < .05 ***p < .001

tion that the couple would probably not be able to sustain an independent household unless the father made a “decent” living. One African American Camden respondent told us:

You can’t get married and go on living with your mother. That’s just like playing house. She expects your husband to be able to provide for you and if he can’t, what is he doing marrying you in the first place! She’s not going to put up with having him under her roof.

When mothers judge the merits of marriage, they worry a lot about the stability of men’s earnings simply because they have to. At the bottom of the income distribution, single mothers who must choose between welfare or low-wage employment to pay their bills face a constant budget shortfall and thus, must continually find ways of getting extra money to pay their bills (Edin and Lein 1997). To generate extra cash, mothers must either find a side job or another adult who can provide regular and substantial economic support. Meanwhile, any given father or boyfriend is likely to have limited skills and a troubled employment history. In sum, while mothers have constant income needs, the men who father their children often cannot consistently meet these needs.

Mothers said their men often complained that women did not understand how difficult it was for men to find steady work. Yet, even mothers who were inclined to sympathize with men’s employment difficulties were in a bind: they simply could not afford to keep an economically unproductive man around the house. Because of this, almost all of the low-income single mothers we interviewed told us that rather than marry the father of their children, they preferred to live separately or to cohabit. In cohabiting situations, mothers nearly always said they enforced a “pay and stay” rule. If a father quit his job or lost his job and did not (in the mother’s view) try very hard to find another one, or drank or smoked up his paycheck, he lost his right to co-reside in the household. Since her name, not his, was generally on the lease, she had the power to evict him. A black mother from the Philadelphia area explained her practices in this regard:

We were [thinking about marriage] for a while, but he was real irresponsible. I didn’t want to be mean or anything, [but when he didn’t work] I didn’t let him eat my food. I would tell him, “If you can’t put any food here, you can’t eat here. These are your kids, and you should want to help your kids, so if you come here, you can’t eat their food.” Finally, I told him he couldn’t stay here either. Right now, I think I would never [get tied to] a[nother] man who is irresponsible and without a job.

Keeping an unemployed man in the house puts a strain on a mother’s, already overstrained, budget. It also precludes a woman’s ability to offer co-residence to an alternative man who is employed. One African American mother from Charleston told us:
I've been with my baby's father for almost 10 years, since high school graduation. He's talking marriage, but what I'm trying to do now is get away from him. He just lost his job [at the Naval base]. He worked there for 18 years. [Now] he's in work, out of work, then in work again. Right now he's just working part-time at McDonalds. I can do bad by myself, I don't need no one helping me [do bad]. I want somebody better, somebody [who can bring home] a regular paycheck. [So] I'm trying to get away from him right now.

If they are not married, she has the flexibility to lower her household costs by getting rid of him, and the possibility of replacing him with another more economically productive man (or at least one who is working at the time).

Women whose male partners couldn't, or wouldn't, find work, often lost respect for them and "just couldn't stand" to keep them around. A white Chicago divorcee told us:

I couldn't get him to stay working. [T]he kids would be hungry and I'd throw a fit and he'd have a nerve to tell me, "Who cares? You're always over [at your mother's], why can't you ask her for some food?" Talk about a way [to lose someone's respect]. It's hard to love somebody if you lose respect. . . . [Finally, I couldn't take it and I made him leave].

As one can well imagine, men in this situation knew they were purchasing their place in the household and, to some extent, their hold on the woman's affections. The women we interviewed said this made men feel that their girlfriends "only want me for my money." They told us their children's fathers resented their girlfriends' "materialistic" attitudes. Holding fathers to these standards was often emotionally wrenching for mothers. One African American Camden mother expressed her emotional dilemma as follows:

It was like there was a struggle going on inside of me. I mean, he lost his job at the auto body shop when they went [bankrupt] and closed down. Then he couldn't find another one. But it was months and months. I was trying to live on my welfare check and it just wasn't enough. Finally, I couldn't do it any more [because] it was just too much pressure on me [even though] he is the love of my life. I told him he had to leave, even though I knew it wasn't really his fault that [he wasn't working]. But I had nothing in the house to feed the kids, no money to pay the bills. Nothing. And he was just sitting there, not working. I couldn't take it, so I made him leave.

An African American mother from Charleston emphasized the fact that women not only value earnings, but respect a man who is making his best effort to support his family. She said, "Am I gonna marry him? Of course! If he didn't have a steady job? No, no. [But] If he's helping out the best he can, yeah, I would. He drives a truck [right now]." According to these mothers, a man who could not find work in the formal sector had two choices: he could stay home and wait for the children's mother to kick him out, or he could try to maintain his place in the family by finding work in the underground economy. Sometimes this technique worked, but more often, it backfired. Work in criminal trades was generally easier to get, but mothers said that fathers who engaged in crime for any length of time, generally lost their place in the family as well. When a father began to earn his living by selling drugs, a mother feared that he would bring danger into the household. Mothers worried that fathers' criminal companions might "come for them" at the house, or that fathers might store drugs, drug proceeds, or weapons in the house. Even worse, mothers feared that a father might start "using his product." Mothers also felt that a drug-dealing father would be a very poor role model for their children. Thus, mothers did not generally consider earnings from crime as legitimate earnings (they said they wouldn't marry such a man no matter how much he earned from crime).

Chicago respondents were more likely to discuss economic factors than Charleston mothers were. This difference could be due to the fact that, when the interviews took place, Chicago's unemployment rate was higher than Charleston's, or possibly due to more traditional values among Southerners regarding marriage. Blacks also discussed economic factors more often than whites. This is presumably because black men's earnings are lower than those of whites with similar skill levels.
### Respectability

Even within very poor communities, residents make class-based distinctions among themselves. Most of our mothers’ eventual goal was to become “respectable,” and they believed that respectability was greatly enhanced by a marriage tie to a routinely employed partner earning wages significantly above the legal minimum. However, mothers said that they could not achieve respectability by marrying someone who was frequently out of work, otherwise underemployed, supplemented his income through criminal activity, and had little chance of improving his situation over time. Mothers believed that marriage to such a man would diminish their respectability, rather than enhance it.

Mothers seldom romanticized a father’s economic prospects when it came to marriage (though they sometimes did so when conceiving the man’s child [see Kefalas and Edin 2000]). They generally knew that if they entered into marriage with a lower-class man, the marriage was unlikely to last because the economic pressures on the relationship would simply be too great. Even if they had contemplated marriage to their children’s father “for love” or “romantic feelings,” their family members and friends generally convinced poor parents that such a marriage would collapse under economic strain (see also Stack 1974). For these mothers, marriage meant tying oneself to the class position of one’s partner “for life.” Even if a woman could afford to marry a man whose economic prospects were bleak, her decision would have signaled to her kin and neighbors that he was the best she could do. Mothers expected that marriage should pull them up the class ladder. Community notions of respectability help to explain sentiments like the one revealed by this African American mother in Charleston:

> I want to get married. I’ve always wanted to get married and have a family. [My baby’s father,] he is doing pretty good, but I am not going to marry him until . . . we get some land. [We’ll] start off with a trailer, live in that for about 10 years, and then build a dream house. But I am not going to get married and pay rent to someone else. When we save up enough money to [buy] an acre of land and [can finance] a trailer, then we’ll marry.

Many mothers told us that their children’s fathers also said that they planned to marry them, but wanted to “wait till we can afford a church wedding, not just a justice of the peace thing.” Marriage made a statement to the larger community about each partner’s current and prospective class standing. Thus, marriage could either confer respectability or deny it. If a low-income woman had a child with an erratically employed and unskilled man to whom she was not married, she had not tied herself in any permanent way to him or his class position. Most mothers weren’t willing to sign an apartment lease with the man they were with, much less a marriage license. Mothers who remained unmarried were able to maintain their dream of upward mobility. “Marrying up” guaranteed the woman the respect of her community, while marrying at her own class level only made her look foolish in the eyes of her family and neighbors. When we asked mothers whether they would marry the erratic or low earners that had fathered their children, the most common response was “I can do bad by myself.”

In addition to the importance women placed on respectability, they also had strong moral (and oftentimes religious) objections to marrying men whose economic situation would, in their view, practically guarantee eventual marital dissolution. Mothers often talked about the “sacred” nature of marriage, and believed that no “respectable” woman would marry under these circumstances (some spoke of such a marriage as a “sacrilege”). In interview after interview, mothers stressed the seriousness of the marriage commitment and their belief that “it should last forever.” Thus, it is not that mothers held marriage in low esteem, but rather the fact that they held it in such high esteem that convinced them to forgo marriage, at least until their prospective marriage partner could prove himself worthy economically or they could

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8. This interview was done in the outskirts of Charleston, South Carolina, where a “dream home” means a trailer with a brick façade and a chain link fence.
find another partner who could. To these mothers, marriage was a powerful symbol of respectability, and should not be diluted by foolish unions.  

Respectability was equally important for respondents in Chicago and Charleston, though it was somewhat more important for African Americans than for whites (and probably for the same reasons that affordability concerns were). Respondents' discourse in regard to respectability, however, varied quite dramatically by race (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993). Many African American respondents who claimed they wanted to marry “up or not at all” knew that holding to such standards might well mean not marrying at all. Whites had less of these anxieties. White respondents typically had sisters, other kin, and friends who had married men who earned a “decent” wage, and were somewhat more sanguine about their own chances of finding such a man than were blacks. A handful of white respondents even told us they planned to “marry out of poverty” so they could become housewives. Only one black respondent reported such plans.

Control and the Stalled Sex Role Revolution at Home

In a non-marital relationship, women often felt they had more control than they would have had if they married. Even if the couple cohabited, they nearly always lived with her mother or in an apartment with her name on the lease. Thus, mothers had the power to evict fathers if they interfered with child rearing, or tried to take control over financial decision-making. Mothers said that fathers who knew they were “on trial” could do little about this state of affairs, especially since they needed a place to live and could not generally afford one on their own. One African American Philadelphia-area respondent’s partner quipped, “her attitude is like, ‘it’s either my way or the highway.”

Why was control, not power, such an important issue for these women? Most mothers said they thought their children’s fathers had very traditional notions of sex roles—notions that clashed with their more egalitarian views. One white cohabiting mother from Charleston said, “If we were to marry, I don’t think it would be so ideal. [Husbands] want to be in charge, and I can’t deal with that.” Regardless of whether or not the prospective wife worked, mothers feared that prospective husbands would expect to be “head of the house,” and make the “final” decisions about child rearing, finances, and other matters. Women, on the other hand, felt that since they had held the primary responsibility for both raising and supporting their children, they should have an equal say.

When we asked single mothers what they liked best about being a single parent, their most frequent response was “I am in charge,” or “I am in control.” Mothers seemed willing to take on the responsibilities of child rearing if they were also able to make and enforce the rules. In most mothers’ views, the presence of fathers often interfered with their parental control, particularly if the couple married. Most women also felt that the presence of a husband might impede their efforts to discipline and spend time with their children. Mothers criticized men for being “too demanding” of their time and attention. A white Chicago mother answered the question, “What is it like being a single mother?” as follows: “It’s great in terms of being independent. I’m just thrilled being away from my ex-husband. The joy of that hasn’t worn off. I feel more freedom to be a parent how I want [to be]. We did not agree on parenting at all.” A white Charleston respondent said, “[Marriage isn’t an option] right now. I don’t want any man thinking that he has any claim on my kids or on how I raise them.”

Mothers were also concerned about losing control of the family’s financial situation. One African American Chicago mother told us, “[I won’t marry because] the men take over the money. I’m too afraid to lose control of my money again.” Still another said, “I’m the head of the household right now, and I make the [financial] decisions. I [don’t want to give that up].”

9. Mothers were sometimes willing to have children with such men, figuring that if they waited for the right man to come along, they might have to forgo childbearing altogether.
Finally, mothers often expressed the view that if they married, their men would expect them to do all of the household chores, plus “cook and clean” and otherwise “take care of” them. Some described their relationships with their ex-partners as “like having one more kid to take care of.” We asked another divorced white Charleston mother whether she would ever consider marriage again. She answered,

I don’t know. I can’t think that far ahead. I can’t see it. This guy I’m with right now, I don’t know. I like being by myself. The thought of having to cook and clean for somebody else? I’m like, “No.” I’m looking for somebody who is going to cook and clean for me!

Concerns over control did not, however, mean that most women had abandoned their plans to marry. But they felt their own situations had to be such as to maximize their chances of exerting control in the marriage relationship. The primary way mothers who wanted to marry thought they could maintain power in a marriage relationship was by working and contributing to the family budget. One African American mother living in Charleston told me,

One thing my mom did teach me is that you must work some and bring some money into the household so you can have a say in what happens. If you completely live off a man, you are helpless. That is why I don’t want to get married until I get my own [career] and get off of welfare.

Mothers also wanted to get established economically prior to marriage because men had failed them in the past. This is why they often told us that if they did get married, they would make sure “the car is in my name, the house is in my name” and so on. They wanted to “get myself established first, and then get married” so if the marriage broke up, they wouldn’t be “left with nothing.” One African American Camden mother commented, “[I will consider marriage] one day when I get myself together. When I have my own everything, so I won’t be left depending on a man.”

The experience of breakup or divorce and the resulting financial hardship and emotional pain fundamentally transformed these women’s relational views. I heard dozens of stories of women who had held traditional views regarding sex roles while they were younger and still in a relationship with their children’s fathers. When the men for whom they sacrificed so much gave them nothing but pain and anguish, they felt they had been “duped.” Their childhood fantasy of marriage was gone, as was their willingness to be dependent on or subservient to men.

Because of these painful experiences, formerly married white mothers generally placed as high priority on increasing their labor market skills and experience as their black never-married counterparts. They felt that a hasty remarriage might distract them from this goal (possibly because their husbands’ income would make them too comfortable and tempt them to quit school or work). Like the African American mothers who had seldom been married, whites also said that once they remarried, they would keep working no matter what. The “little money of my own” both African American and white mothers spoke of was valued, not only for its contribution to the household economy, per se, but for the power it purchased within the relationship, as well as its insurance value against destitution if the marriage should fail.

Mothers told us that the more established they became economically, the more bargaining power they believed they would have in a marital relationship. The mothers they knew who were economically dependent on men had to “put up with all kinds of behavior” because they could not legitimately threaten to leave without serious financial repercussions (due to the fact that they could not translate their homemaking skills into wages). Mothers felt that if they became more economically independent (had the car in their name, the house in their name, no common debts, etc.), they could legitimately threaten to leave their husbands if certain conditions (i.e., sexual fidelity) weren’t met. These threats would, in turn they believed, keep a husband on his best behavior.

Taking on these attitudes of self-reliance and independence wasn’t always easy. Some formerly married women whose partner failed them had never lived alone before, having gone straight from their parents’ household to their husband’s. In addition, some hadn’t held a job
in years, had no marketable skills, and had no idea about how to make their way in the world of employed women. One white Chicago resident was a full-time homemaker until her divorce. After getting no child support from her ex-husband for several months, this mother decided she had better get a job, but the best job she could find paid only minimum wage at the time. Her journey from her first job to her current position (which paid $7 an hour) was a painful one. Giving up this hard-won self-sufficiency for dependence on a man was simply too great a risk for her to take. She said, “I don’t want to depend on nobody. It’s too scary.”

The often difficult life experiences of these mothers had convinced them of competencies they might not have known they had before single motherhood. Because of these experiences, their roles expanded to encompass more traditionally male responsibilities than before. The men, in their view, weren’t respectful of these competencies. Instead, they expected them to revert to more traditional female roles. When we asked a white Chicago mother whether there were any advantages to being apart from the father of her children, she replied:

You’re the one in control. The good thing is that I feel good about myself. I feel more independent. Whereas when I was with Brian, I didn’t. I had never been out on my own, but I took that step to move out and, since I did, I feel much better about myself as a person, that I can do it.

While it was true that some women were poorer financially than before their relationships ended, the increased pride they felt in being able to provide for themselves and their children partially compensated for economic hardship. Another white Chicago mother said “You know, I feel better [being alone] because I am the provider, I’m getting the things that I want and I’m getting them for myself, little by little.”

Concerns about power might explain why childbearing and marriage have become separated from one another, particularly among the low-income population. Though we did not ask our Chicago and Charleston mothers questions about the ideal time to bear children and to marry, we did ask our Camden/Philadelphia mothers these questions. Most felt childbearing should ideally occur in a woman’s early 20s, but that marriage should ideally occur in a woman’s late 20s or early 30s. These answers are somewhat suspect because respondents might simply have been rationalizing past behavior (most hadn’t been married when they had had their children, and half had never married). Even more confusing is the fact that these same respondents generally said that one should be married before having children. When interviewers probed deeper, respondents revealed that, though the goal of getting married first and having children second was indeed their ideal, it was hardly a practical choice given their economic situations and those of their partners.

Respondents’ explanations of their views also revealed that many felt that childbearing required at least a temporary or partial withdrawal from the labor market. Childbearing within marriage and the labor market withdrawal it required, made women “dependent” and “vulnerable” and weakened their control. When mothers told us they wanted to wait to marry or remarry until their late 20s or early 30s, most assumed that, at this point, their youngest child would be in school. Thus, they would be free to more fully pursue labor market activities and, in this way, enhance their potential bargaining and decision-making role in any subsequent marital relationship. One African American Camden mother said,

One guy was like, “marry me, I want a baby.” I don’t want to have to depend on anybody. No way, I [would rather] work. [If I married him and had his baby], I’d [have to quit work and] be dependent again. It’s too scary.”

There was no significant difference between cities in the salience of sex roles and power. Blacks were more concerned about these issues than whites, yet the differences are probably smaller than other studies of racial differences in sex role attitudes would suggest. 10 Many of

10. National-level data cited above shows that black women’s views are more egalitarian than white women’s and that, though black men are more likely to approve of women who work than their white counterparts, they are more conservative than white men about other aspects of gender roles (Blee and Tickameyer 1995; Collins 1987; King 1988).
the white women we interviewed had been married in the past and most of them reported that they had begun their marriages thinking that they would stay at home or work part-time (at least while their children were young). Their husbands, they assumed, would be the primary breadwinners, while they specialized in household management and parenting. After the breakup of these relationships, white mothers were often shocked by how vulnerable their withdrawal from the labor market had made them. It was after learning these hard lessons that most white mothers developed the conviction that it was foolish to marry unless they had “established themselves” first.

Trust

For some mothers, the reaction of their partner to an unplanned pregnancy became their first hard lesson in “the way men are.” Mothers said that fathers’ responses ran the gamut from strong negative responses to strong positive ones, but some men were clearly panicked by the prospect of being responsible for a child—particularly those who feared a child support order. Some fathers denied paternity even when they had encouraged the mother to get pregnant and/or carry the child to term. In these situations, fathers often claimed that the child was not theirs because the mother was “a whore.” One partner of a pregnant Camden mother told the interviewer (in the mother’s presence), “how do I know the baby’s mine? Who knows if she hasn’t been stepping out on me with some other man and now she wants me to support another man’s child!”

Subsequent hard lessons were learned when mothers’ boyfriends or husbands proved unfaithful. This experience was so common among respondents that many simply did not believe men “could be faithful to only one woman.” This “men will be men” belief did not mean that women were willing to simply accept infidelity as part of the natural course of a marriage. Most said they would rather never marry than to “let him make a fool out of me.” One black Chicago resident just couldn’t conceive of finding a marriageable man.

All those reliable guys, they are gone, they are gone. They’re either thinking about one of three things: another woman, another man, or dope. . . . [M]y motto is “there is not a man on this planet that is faithful.” It’s a man thing. I don’t care, you can love your wife ‘til she turns three shades of avocado green. A man is gonna be a man and it’s not a point of a woman getting upset about it. It’s a point of a woman accepting it. ‘Cause a man’s gonna do what a man’s gonna do. . . . [Other] black women, they say “once you find a man that’s gonna be faithful, you go ahead and get married to him.” [They] got it all wrong. Then they gonna [be surprised when they find out] he ain’t faithful. And the wife gonna end up in a nut house. It’s better not to get married, so you don’t get your expectations up.

A white mother from Charleston said, “I was married for three years before I threw him out after discovering that he had another woman. I loved my husband, but I don’t [want another one]. This is a wicked world we are living in.” A black Charlestonian said,

I would like to find a nice man to marry, but I know that men cannot be trusted. That’s why I treat them the way I do—like the dogs they are. I think that all men will cheat on their wives regardless of how much he loves her. And you don’t ever want to be in that position.

Mother after mother told us cautionary tales of married couples they knew where either the man or the woman was “stepping out” on their spouse. They viewed the wounded spouse as either hopelessly naive (if they did not know) or without self-respect (if they did know). They did not want to place themselves in a similar position. Demands for sexual fidelity within marriage had a practical, as well as an emotional dimension. Women often gave examples of married men they knew who “spend[ed] all his money on the little woman he [had] on the side.” Mothers often feared that men would promise them and their children “the world” and then abandon them. One African American Camden mother summed up her views as follows: “Either they leave or they die. The first thing is, don’t get close to them, ‘cause they ain’t
no good from the beginning. When that man ain’t doing right for me, I learn to dump [him].” A white mother from Chicago said: “I’ve been a single parent since the day my husband walked out on me. He tried to come back, but I am not one to let someone hurt me and my children twice. I am living on welfare [rather than living with him].”

Even the most mistrustful of our respondents generally held out some hope that they would find a man who could be trusted and who would stay around. One white Chicago mother said, “I want to meet a man who will love me and my son and want us to grow together. I just don’t know if he exists.” An African American mother living in Chicago said,

Maybe I’ll find a good person to get married to, someone to be a stepfather to my son. They’re not all the same; they’re not all bad. There are three things in my life: my school, my work, and my son. Not men. At first they love you, they think you’re beautiful, and then they leave. When I got pregnant, he just left. My father is like that. He has kids by several different women. I hate him for it. I say, “I hate you. Why do you do that? Why?”

A white divorcee from Chicago explained her views of the differences between the sexes in this regard as follows:

Men can say, “Well honey, I’m going out for the night.” And then they disappear for two months. Whereas, the mother has a deeper commitment, conscience, or compassion. . . . If [women] acted like men, our kids would be in the park, left. We’d say “Oh, somebody else is going to take care of it.” Everybody would be orphaned.

An African American mother from the Philadelphia area told us,

I’m frustrated with men, period. They bring drugs and guns into the house, you take care of their kids, feed them, and then they steal your rent money out of your purse. They screw you if you put your self out for them. So now, I don’t put myself out there any more.

Because their own experiences and the experiences of their friends, relatives, and neighbors has been so overwhelmingly negative, many women reduced the expressive value they placed on their relationships over time. Some instrumentalized their relationships with men to the point that they didn’t “give it away anymore,” meaning they no longer had sex without expecting something, generally something material, in return. A white Chicago mother put it this way: “Love is blind. You fall in love with the wrong one sometimes. It’s easy to do. [Now] I am so mean . . . [when] I sleep with a guy I am like, ‘Give me the money and leave me alone.’” Nonetheless, many of these same women often held out hope of finding a man who was “different,” one who could be trusted.

Chicago mothers were significantly more likely to voice trust issues than their Charleston counterparts. This difference may reflect regional differences (Southerners may be more trusting than Northerners). It may also be true that trust issues are least salient in a tight labor market where jobs for unskilled men are more plentiful. Whites talked about the issue more than African Americans and could reflect differences in spontaneous self-reports of domestic abuse (discussed below).

**Domestic Violence**

In Chicago and Charleston, we did not ask directly about domestic abuse, yet, a surprisingly high number spontaneously spoke of some history of domestic violence in their childhood or adult lives. In Table 1, we include only those mothers for which the abuse had some bearing on marriage attitudes. We see no important differences across cities, but rather startling differences by race.11 One white mother living in Chicago decided to have her child with

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11. Four recent studies on domestic violence among welfare recipients are summarized by Raphael and Tolman 1997.
the assumption that she would marry the father, but after a series of physically abusive episodes triggered by arguments about his drinking and drug use, she changed her mind.

The person I was with wasn’t quite what I thought he was. We were going to get married, [but] I don’t believe in making two mistakes. [There were about] four [big] blowouts before I finally actually [ended it]. The last one was probably the worst. We went to a friend’s house [and] he started drinking, [doing] drugs, and stuff. I said, “please take me home now.” So [we got in the car] and we started arguing about why he had to hang around people like that [who do] drugs and all that sort of stuff. One thing led to another and he kind of tossed me right out of the car.

Many women reported physical abuse during pregnancy. Several mothers reported having miscarriages because of such abuse. For others, the physical abuse began after the child was born. It was not uncommon for women to report injuries serious enough to warrant trips to the hospital emergency room. Two African American women from Charleston ended up in the emergency room following beatings from their boyfriends. One recounted:

My daughter’s father, we used to fight. I got to where nobody be punching on me because love is not that serious. And I figure somebody is beating on you and the only thing they love is watching you go the emergency room. That’s what they love. A lot of these chicks, they think “he [hitting] me because [he loves me and] he don’t want me looking at nobody [else].” Honey, he need help, and you need a little more help than he do because you stand there [and take it].

The other interjected: “Just leave him [if he abuses you], you get over [him]. You will be over [him eventually].”

The fact that women tended to experience repeated abuse from their children’s fathers before they decided to leave attests to their strong desire to make things work with their children’s fathers. Many women finally left when they saw the abuse beginning to affect their children’s well-being. One white Charleston mother explained:

... it was an abusive situation. It was physical. . . . [My daughter] saw us fighting a lot. The minute she would see us fighting, she would go into hysterics. It would turn into an all-out brawl. She was terrified. And this was what that did to her and I thought, “I’ve got to get out of here.”

But the economic pressures associated with leaving sometimes propelled mothers into another harmful relationship. One white Chicago mother explained:

I married [my first husband] a month after I had [our son]. And I married him because I couldn’t afford [to live alone]. Boy, was that stupid. And I left him [two years after that] when our daughter was five months old. I got scared. I was afraid because my kids were starting to get in the middle. [My son] still to this day, when he thinks someone is hurting me, he’ll start screaming and crying and beating on him. He had seen his father [beat me up]. I didn’t want him to see that. I remarried six months later because I couldn’t make it [financially]. And I got into another abusive marriage. And we got separated before the year was even up. He would burn me [with cigarettes]. He was an alcoholic. He was a physical abuser, mental [too]. I think he would have killed me [if I had stayed].

Another white Chicaguan said, “after being abused, physically abused, by him the whole time we were married, I was ready to [kill him]. He put me in the hospital three times. I was carrying our child four and a half months, he beat me and I miscarried.” A white Charlestonian said, “I was terrified to leave because I knew it would mean going on welfare. . . . But that is okay, I can handle that. The thing I couldn’t deal with is being beat up.” When we asked one black Charleston woman if there were any advantages to being a single mom, she replied, “not living with someone there to abuse you. I’m not scared anymore. I’m scared of my bills and I’m scared of I get sick, what’s going to happen to my kids, but I’m not afraid for my life.”

We are not sure why there is so much domestic violence among poor parents, but our interviews with mothers give us a few clues. First, mothers sometimes linked episodes of violence to fathers’ fears about their ability to provide, especially in light of increased state efforts
Discussion

Since the 1970s, a sharply declining proportion of unskilled men have been able to earn enough to support a family (U.S. House of Representatives 1997). These trends clearly have had a profound influence on marriage among low-income men and women. But even when a marriage might be affordable, mothers might judge the risks marriage entails as too great for other reasons, some of which reflect changes in the economy, but are not economic per se.

In these mothers’ view, wives still borrow their class standing from their husbands. Since a respectable marriage is one that lasts “forever,” mothers who marry low-skilled males must themselves give up their dreams of upward mobility. In the interim, single motherhood holds a somewhat higher status than a “foolish” marriage to a low-status man. Respectability concerns are seldom discussed in contemporary debates about the retreat from marriage. An exception is Oppenheimer’s (1994) recent work, which harks back to a much older theoretical tradition in the sociology of the family. This theory holds that marriage is largely a function of affordability. When a given couple has the resources to establish an independent household and live a manner that meets a culturally-defined minimum, the couple marry. This approach would predict that during a time period where many couples’ prospects for setting up a suitable lifestyle within marriage are good, many marriages will occur, and vice versa. Similarly, within any given time period, those whose social characteristics give them greater access to this lifestyle will marry more often than those with less favorable characteristics. Elijah Anderson’s (1990) ethnographic work on poor adolescent African Americans in Philadelphia supports this theory. He argues that these youths eschew marriage because they cannot “play house” to their satisfaction.

Respectability concerns might well have been heightened in recent years because both black and white unskilled and semi-skilled men’s wages have fallen dramatically and similarly skilled women can no longer assume that their prospective husbands will earn more than they do. Kristin Luker argues that, as older and white women’s wages are increasing relative to men’s, their marriage rates have begun to reflect those of younger women and nonwhite women whose marriage rates have historically been lower and whose earnings relative to men’s have been higher: “A situation formerly common among young women and black women is now becoming prevalent among whites and among men and women of all ages (1996:174).” Oppenheimer points out that income inequality has grown within skill groups as well as between them (1994). Thus, the same respectability concerns low-income mothers voice here might depress marriage rates among higher-skilled women as well, who may still seek a boost in their class standing (or at least a retention of their class level) through marriage. To the degree that women expect to marry men with higher incomes than their own, they may be expressing concerns about respectability by staying away from the altar.

Beyond affordability and respectability concerns, these interviews offer powerful evidence that there has been a dramatic revolution in sex-role expectations among women at the low end of the income distribution, and that the gap between low-income men’s and women’s expectations in regard to gender roles is wide. Women who have proven their competencies toward child support enforcement. This explanation was most often invoked in reference to the beatings women received when they were pregnant. Second, some mothers living in crime-ridden, inner-city neighborhoods talked about family violence as a carry-over from street violence. The Camden/Philadelphia mothers talked at length about the effect this exposure had had on their children’s fathers’ lives (and their own), and some even described the emotional aftermath of this exposure as “Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.”

12. Charleston’s child support enforcement rules mandated that nonpaying parents be brought to court on bench warrants and jailed for contempt if they could not pay their arrears.
through the hard lessons of single parenthood aren’t generally willing to enter subservient roles—they want to have substantial control and bargaining power in subsequent relationships. Some mothers learned the dangers of economic dependence upon men through the pain and financial devastation that accompanied a separation and divorce. Others were schooled by their profound disappointment at their baby’s father’s reaction to the pregnancy and his failure to live up to the economic and emotional commitments of fatherhood. Both groups of mothers equate marital power with economic power, and believe that the emotional and financial risk that marriage entails is only sustainable when they themselves have reached some level of economic self-sufficiency.13

The data also show that, though a small number of women want to marry and become housewives, the overwhelming majority want to continue working during any subsequent marriage. Since these mothers generally believe that childbearing and rearing young children necessitate a temporary withdrawal from the labor market, many place the ideal age at which to marry in the late 20s (when their youngest child is school age) and the ideal age to bear children in the early 20s—the age they say is the “normal” time for women to have children. Delaying marriage until they can concentrate more fully on labor market activity maximizes their chances of having a marriage where they can have equal bargaining power. The income from work also allows them to legitimately threaten to leave the husband if certain behavioral standards are not met and many women believe that such threats will serve to keep husbands in line. These data suggest that the bargaining perspective, which many studies of housework currently employ, may be useful in understanding marriage attitudes and non-marital relational dynamics, as well.

Mothers believe that marital power is crucial, at least partially, because of their low trust of men. I know of no data that demonstrate that gender mistrust has grown over time, but certainly the risk of divorce, and the economic destitution for women that so often accompanies it, has grown. Trust issues are exacerbated by the experience of domestic violence. Many mothers told interviewers that it was these experiences that taught them “not to have any feeling for men.” National-level data show that violence is more frequent among those with less income (Ptacek 1988). Presumably, such violence, along with the substance abuse that frequently accompanies it, is a way of “doing gender” for men who cannot adequately fulfill the breadwinner role. Though women’s accounts did not always allow me to establish the sequence of events leading up to episodes of violence, many of those that did showed that violence followed job loss or revelation of a pregnancy. Both are sources of economic stress.

These data also reveal some interesting differences by city and by race, though the sample size is small. Charleston mothers worried less about affordability and trust issues than Chicago mothers. The first difference could result from the differences in local labor markets (tight versus somewhat slack) which disproportionately affect the employment of unskilled and minority men (Jencks 1992), or regional differences (Southerners might be more traditional than Northerners). The second difference is harder to explain, though regional differences and economic differences between the cities may also play a role. If men behave in an untrustworthy

13. The level of power the adult women in this sample exercise in their relations with men are in startling contrast to the adolescent respondents in Elijah Anderson’s (1990), Streetwise. Anderson’s analysis shows that the gender relations and power distribution in adolescent relationships are quite different than those presented here; adolescent boys exercise considerable power over their female counterparts. In adulthood, the tables apparently turn, and women have (or seek to have) greater power than men. The adult mothers in Camden/Philadelphia were asked detailed questions in this regard and often recounted such experiences as Anderson’s respondents related while in their teens. Their accounts offer a plausible reason why the tables may turn in adulthood. Respondents often described how they relied on their boyfriends for money in their teenage years, as boys were more likely to find odd jobs or participate in the drug trade than girls. As these respondents moved into the mothering role, they found some level of economic stability through welfare, low-wage employment, or both. Meanwhile, the economic situations of their male counterparts often did not improve, at least not enough for them to meet the “culturally defined minimum” discussed above. The typical result was that the man needed the woman more than she needed him.
manner (i.e., are “unfaithful”) in order to compensate for their inability to fulfill the provider role, we would expect that women in tight labor markets might find it easier to trust male partners than women in slack labor markets. The impact of labor market conditions and regional variations on the marriage attitudes and rates for low-skilled men and women would be fruitful topics for further study across a wider range of labor markets and regions.

The analysis also revealed some interesting race differences. In both Charleston and Chicago, African Americans were more likely to name affordability, respectability, and control concerns, while whites mentioned trust and domestic violence more often. Affordability and respectability might be more salient for blacks because their chances of finding a marriage partner with sufficient economic resources to satisfy such concerns are lower than for whites. The salience of trust for whites might reflect higher rates of domestic violence, though these figures reflect spontaneous comments and probably underestimate the actual rate of violence for women in the sample. They may also reflect the fact that whites who elaborated on these experiences generally stayed with the violent partner (to whom they were often married) longer than African Americans. Whites’ living arrangements might also have afforded less protection from violent men than blacks’ in that whites were more likely to cohabit with their partner, while blacks were more likely to live in an extended-kin household. Nationally representative data also show that low-income whites cohabit significantly more often than comparable African Americans (Harris and Edin 1996).

In relation to theories of the retreat from marriage, there is no doubt that economic factors are necessary, though not sufficient, criteria for marriage among most low-income women interviewed. Theories that posit the importance of the stalled revolution of sex roles and Wilson’s argument that non-marriage among blacks results from very low levels of trust, were both strongly supported, though our analysis revealed that trust was even more important for whites. Drake and Cayton and Rainwater’s notions of instrumentality in male-female relationships also received support. I will say more about the economic independence and welfare disincentives arguments below.

In sum, the mothers we spoke to were quite forthcoming about the fact that the men who had fathered their children often weren’t “worth a lifetime commitment” given their general lack of trustworthiness, the traditional nature of their sex-role views, the potential loss of control over parental and household decisions, and their risky and sometimes violent behavior. While mothers maintained hopes of eventual marriage, they viewed such hopes with some level of skepticism. Thus, they devoted most of their time and energy toward raising their children and “getting it together financially” rather than “waiting on a man.” Those that planned on marrying, generally assumed they would put off marriage until their children were in school and they were able to be fully engaged in labor market activity. By waiting to marry until the tasks associated with early child-rearing and the required temporary withdrawal from the labor market were completed, mothers felt they could enhance their bargaining power within marriage.

This complex set of motivations to delay marriage or remarriage (or less frequently, to avoid them altogether) has interesting implications for welfare reform. The authors of PRWORA explicitly sought to encourage marriage among the poor by increasing the costs of non-marriage (e.g., reducing the amount of resources an unmarried mother can claim from the state). Put in the language of the welfare disincentives argument, PRWORA decreases the disincentives to marry, or, according to the economic independence theory, limits one source of financial independence for women who forgo marriage. If single mothers have fewer resources from the state, it is reasonable to argue that they might become more dependent on men and men’s income.14 This may seem particularly likely given the fact that unskilled and semi-skilled ex-welfare recipients will probably not be able to make enough money in the low-

14. Edin and Lein (1997) have shown that the shortfall between income and expenditures is significantly larger for low-skilled working women than for their welfare counterparts (because of the additional costs that workers must absorb). In their analysis, men were the primary contributors to working mothers’ budgets.
wage sector to meet their monthly expenses (Edin and Lein 1997) and that the gap between their income and expenses is likely to grow as they move from welfare to work (at least after the increased earned-income disregards some states offer elapse at the five year point or sooner). To make matters worse, unless the labor market remains extremely tight, low-skilled mothers' wages are not likely to increase over time because of a lack of premium on experience in the low-wage sector (Blank 1995; Burtless 1995; Harris and Edin 1996).

If PRWORA is fully implemented, these new financial realities might well encourage some couples to marry. However, if men's employment opportunities and wages do not increase dramatically, these data suggest that mothers might continue to opt for boyfriends (cohabiting or not), who can be replaced if they do not contribute, rather than husbands who cannot be so easily traded for a more economically productive man. Even if mothers believed that they would be no worse off, or even slightly better off, by marrying than by remaining single, these data show that marriage is far more complicated that a simple economic cost-benefit assessment. The women's movement has clearly influenced what behaviors (i.e., infidelity) women are willing to accept within a marital relationship, and the level of power they expect to be able to exert within the relationship. Given the low level of trust these mothers have of men—often times rooted in the experience of domestic violence—and given their view that husbands want more control than the women are willing to give them, women recognize that any marriage that is also economically precarious, might well be conflict-ridden and short lived. Interestingly, mothers say they reject entering into economically risky marital unions out of respect for the institution of marriage, rather than because of a rejection of the marriage norm.

In the light of PRWORA and the new set of financial incentives and disincentives it provides, it is likely that cohabitation will increase, given the fact that cohabitation nearly always allowed the mothers interviewed to make a substantial claim on the male cohabiter's income. However, increased cohabitation might put women and children at greater risk if their partner is violent. In these situations, a separate residence may be a protective factor, as the race differences in the experience of domestic abuse I report here may indicate.

**Conclusions**

In short, the mothers interviewed here believe that marriage will probably make their lives more difficult than they are currently. They do not, by and large, perceive any special stigma to remaining single, so they are not motivated to marry for that reason. If they are to marry, they want to get something out of it. If they cannot enjoy economic stability and gain upward mobility from marriage, they see little reason to risk the loss of control and other costs they fear marriage might exact from them. Unless low-skilled men's economic situations improve and they begin to change their behaviors toward women, it is quite likely that most low-income women will continue to resist marriage even in the context of welfare reform. Substantially enhanced labor market opportunities for low-skilled men would address both the affordability and respectability concerns of the mothers interviewed. But other factors, such as the stalled sex-role revolution at home (control), the pervasive mistrust of men, and the high probability of domestic abuse, probably mean that marriage rates are unlikely to increase dramatically.

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