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**MARRIAGEABLE WOMEN:
CHALLENGES IN A DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY**

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MARRIAGEABLE WOMEN: CHALLENGES IN A DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT

This paper builds on the extensive barriers to marriage literature that emphasizes the lack of marriageable men as well as the current federally-funded marriage initiatives targeted at the disadvantaged. Using qualitative data collected from single women participating in a marriage initiative, we introduce the concept of marriageable women- the notion that certain limitations may make women poor marriage partners. Like their male counterparts, we find women also possess qualities that are not considered assets in the marriage market, such as economic constraints, mental and physical health issues, substance use, multiple partner fertility, and gender distrust. We also consider how women frame their marriage options and some opt-out of the marriage market.

MARRIAGEABLE WOMEN: CHALLENGES IN A DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY

A popular explanation for the decline in marriage is the lack of marriageable men, specifically among disadvantaged populations (Wilson 1987). Certainly, the lack of marriageable men (defined in terms of employment) alone does not explain changes in marriage patterns (McLaughlin & Lichter 1997), although it is certainly tied to lower odds of marrying (Lichter, Anderson, & Hayward 1995). The problems faced by young men and women in inner-city neighborhoods include a lack of employment prospects, poor education opportunities, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system. These factors are undoubtedly interrelated and cumulative in nature. For example, issues surrounding substance abuse may prevent men from engaging in more stable economic activities and potentially lead to problems with incarceration and domestic violence. Waller (2002) finds that single mothers are aware of these marriageability limitations and may avoid marriage to prevent interacting with men who may destabilize their families.

An implicit assumption of much prior work which adopts the marriage market perspective is that all women are marriageable. Researchers have considered how specific female characteristics influence women's transition to marriage (e.g. earnings or children from prior relationships) (e.g., Carlson, McLanahan, & England 2004; Lichter, Roempke, & Brown 2003) but have not integrated these findings into discourse about marriage markets. Thus, it is possible that similar as well as some distinctively gendered factors relate to women's marriageability.

Co-existing with scholarly research are new marriage initiative programs established across the country. The federal government has attempted to buttress marriage by providing

financial and political support for initiatives that reinforce stable marriages and relationships, particularly targeting poor and disadvantaged groups. These programs often focus on identifying characteristics of ‘good’ marriage partners and providing tools to obtain and sustain healthy relationships and marriages. However, little work has focused on the views and experiences of women who are the targets of current policy efforts, the actual participants in marriage initiatives. Further, while research and programmatic emphasis is often focusing on men’s characteristics, we examine the characteristics of women that make them more or less competitive in the marriage market.

Using open-ended interviews we examine women’s perspectives of the barriers to marriage within their own lives, specifically how the complexities of daily life, previous negative experiences with men, and attitudes about marriage converge to influence women’s marriageability. Our work is guided by previous quantitative and qualitative studies of marriageable men and contributes to an understanding of the challenges that exist in the formation of marriages and relationships, especially among disadvantaged populations. This qualitative approach allows us to not only investigate the factors that put respondents at risk of not marrying but also consider how these factors interconnect. We introduce the notion that not all women are ideal marriage partners, especially when they have economic constraints, substance use, physical and mental health issues, multiple partner fertility, and gender distrust. Our work provides an important supplement to prior research and introduces a new conceptualization of marriage among disadvantaged women who are the targets of marriage initiatives.

BACKGROUND

Researchers have studied the marriage attitudes and views of low-income or poor populations (e.g. Edin & Kefalas 2005; Lichter, Batson, & Brown 2004; Waller 2002), with special attention to single mothers. Existing research suggests that low-income parents desire to get married (Lichter et al. 2004); however, there are many barriers preventing them from doing so (Raley & Bratter 2003; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter 2005). While the literature has focused on men, some research has focused on the characteristics and experiences of women that are related to marriage such as economic factors, mental and physical health issues, substance use, children, and gender distrust.

Economic Factors and the Marriage Ideal

Of particular importance for disadvantaged populations are the substantial institutional economic constraints that prevent many individuals from developing healthy relationships. As Wilson (1987) notes, unemployment rates are high for many inner-city men, and this may dramatically hinder their marriage prospects. Being a financial provider is the traditional and perhaps most important role, for men in families (Nock 1998; Townsend 2002). Many women still desire the traditional male provider role as the ideal in a husband (Raley & Bratter 2003). Providing financial security for a family can be exceptionally difficult for men in low-income communities because of poor economic structural opportunities in their communities. As Edin and Kefalas (2005) state, “the bar for marriage is high” (p. 202). However, both men and women are aware of the importance of being economically “set” (e.g. homeownership or job stability) before they get married in lieu of establishing themselves during the early years of marriage (Smock et al. 2005). At the same time, women with greater economic resources are more likely to marry (Goldstein & Kenney 2001; Raley 1996; Sweeney 2002). Thus, women are

valued as economic providers in their own rights. In some communities men's dwindling economic prospects results in greater reliance on women as economic providers. Edin and Kefalas (2005) find that economic self-sufficiency is especially important because single mothers may not be able to rely on their partners' financial support to provide for a family. Being employed and having financial security also provides women with more leverage to negotiate their relationships and challenge traditional gender roles (Edin 2000). Gibson et al. (2005) report that among cohabiting couples both partners' economic prospects are believed to be important for marriage. Women's employment and economic stability is one component related to union formation that can make women more attractive marriage partners. We examine how women frame their economic role in marriage and economic goals for their families.

Mental and Physical Health Issues

Mental and physical health impairments may adversely affect potential romantic relationships, and may make individuals less than ideal partners. Research to-date focuses on whether those who are healthier and happier tend to marry more often than those who are not, or whether marriage makes individuals healthier and happier (Waite 1995; Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson 2008). Nock (2005) argues that if the former is true then the number of unmarried individuals who are also unhealthy and unhappy will be disproportionately high. Similarly, if the latter is true then unmarried individuals will still be disproportionately more unhealthy and unhappy than married individuals. Arguments have been made in support of both theories, but most of attention focuses on the implications of marriage for health and not health as a predictor of marriage.

The recent empirical evidence is mixed. Analysis of single mothers indicates that self-reported health of the mother or father is not a significant predictor of marriage (Carlson et al.

2004). Good health appears to be associated with marriage among unemployed women, but the same is not true for employed women (Nock 2005; Waldron, Hughes, & Brooks 1996).

Addressing a dearth of research on the consequences of marriage for single mothers, Williams et al. (2008) find that single mothers do not garner mental and physical health benefits from marriage in the same way that childless women do, especially when their marriages are short-lived. They argue that marriage initiatives may fail to adequately address the special mental and physical health needs of single women and mothers (Williams et al. 2008). Waldron et al. (1996) also report that poor health increases the chance of divorce for those who are already married. This is not surprising given that the stress of poor health and drain on finances are likely to adversely affect the quality of one's relationships. Poor adults may be more heavily influenced by health issues because they suffer from more health problems and are limited in their ability to receive treatment than their more advantaged counterparts. Additionally, these issues affect mobility and lifestyle, and may hinder employment and relationship potential. We extend beyond these studies by examining how women's perceptions of their mental and physical health influence their perceived marriageability and marriage expectations.

Substance Use

Substance use, including drugs or alcohol, can have detrimental effects on relationships, and prevent union formation such that women avoid forming unions with men who abuse drugs or drink excessively. Most prior work has focused on men's substance abuse. Fathers' substance use is negatively associated with cohabitation and marriage and negatively associated with the stability of cohabiting unions (Carlson et al. 2004; Waller & Swisher 2006). This suggests that substance use and abuse negatively influences interactions with partners and family. Substance abuse is also a problem for those who are already married and tied to greater marital dissolution

(Amato & Previti 2003). Substance abuse may be a more salient issue among disadvantaged populations because of higher prevalence rates and the limited access to treatment. Little is known about how women's abuse of drugs and alcohol negatively influences their experience in the marriage market. Men may not want to be involved with women who have substance dependencies, and women may not consider themselves marriage material while they struggle with substance-use dependencies.

Children and Multiple Partner Fertility

The presence of children from prior relationships often acts as a deterrent to marriage among both men and women (Goldscheider & Sassler 2007; Stewart, Manning, & Smock 2003; Waller 2002; Upchurch, Lillard, & Panis 2001; Lichter & Graefe 2001). Even among disadvantaged subgroups of women who experience high levels of premarital childbearing, the effect of children on marriage is still negative (Lichter et al. 2003).

An extension of this work focuses on multiple partner fertility, (Carlson & Furstenberg 2006) which entails having children with more than one partner. Compared to middle- and higher-income groups, disadvantaged adults are more likely to have children with multiple partners (Carlson & Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo & Furstenberg 2007; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe 2008). Multiple partner fertility, rather than single partner fertility, may amplify the negative influence of having children on women's marriageability. For example, single mothers may face a greater struggle to establish paternity, encourage non-resident parent involvement, and manage child support issues when there are multiple partners involved (Manning & Smock 2000). Navigating relationships with multiple mothers or fathers may also threaten current relationships and create tension between previous and new partners (Carlson & Furstenberg 2006). As a result, men and women may be hesitant to enter relationships that

involve potentially complicated parenting demands. The empirical evidence indicates that men with multiple partner fertility have reduced odds of marriage while women's multiple partner fertility does not influence their marriage prospects (Goldscheider & Sassler 2006). However, if the couple already has a child together it significantly increases their odds of being in a union a year after the birth (Carlson et al. 2004). We further explore women's reports of ways that children from a prior union as well as multiple partner fertility influence decisions about dating, partner selection, relationship timing, and marriage expectations.

Gender Distrust

Gender distrust has been addressed in previous literature as a possible explanation for the divergent marriage patterns of low-income families compared to their middle-class counterparts. The notion of gender distrust has been addressed in both qualitative (Waller 2001; Coley 2002) and quantitative (Waller & McLanahan 2005; Carlson et al. 2004) assessments of union formation among disadvantaged populations. Relying on focus groups of low-income mothers, Furstenberg (2001) argues that there is a culture of gender distrust that has an enduring effect on women's beliefs about marriage and romantic relationships in general. He notes that many women expect romantic relationships to fail, and will carefully monitor the behavior of men waiting for them to fail at the relationship, in effect, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of male failure. Waller and McLanahan (2005) find that mothers and fathers who report high gender distrust, measured by the questions "men/women cannot be trusted to be faithful" and "men/women are out to take advantage of women/men", have lower expectations to marry. In fact, mothers with high gender distrust have lower odds of entering either a cohabiting or marriage union after the birth of the child (Carlson et al. 2004).

Some scholars (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor 2007) have begun to study the underlying cause of gender distrust. Disadvantaged women are more likely to have experienced childhood abuse (Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen 1996) and as a result may develop greater gender distrust in adulthood; yet many are actively seeking romantic relationships with men. Burton et al. (2007) assert that much of gender distrust stems from previous experience with abuse and can have serious ramifications for healthy romantic relationships. Abuse that takes place during childhood can also have a long-term influence on adult relationships by making women less trustful of all men. Women who experience abuse as children are less likely to be in stable marriage and long-term cohabiting unions as adults, and more likely to have multiple and short term romantic unions (Cherlin et al. 2004). Larson and La Mont (2005) find that sexual abuse during childhood is significantly related to negative attitudes and feelings about marriage and lower levels of readiness for marriage. Physical abuse can adversely affect family relationships and prevent romantic relationships by increasing gender distrust (Cherlin et al. 2004).

We contribute to prior literature by integrating research that relies on sexual fidelity as an indicator of gender distrust and that which considers the origin of women's gender distrust. The current work explores how gender distrust, more broadly conceptualized, influences respondents' partner choices and marriage expectations. While we do not suggest that one's experience of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse makes them inherently unmarriageable, we do consider the ways that these experiences negatively influence women's attitudes toward men thus establishing barriers to marriages.

Marriage Options

One of the major goals of the marriage initiative is to encourage healthy romantic relationships; however, not everyone is actively pursuing such relationships. Edin and Kefalas (2005) partially address this issue with a sample of low-income single mothers. Of the women the authors interviewed, 30% stated that they did not plan to marry in their lifetime or did not have an opinion about marrying in the future. Similarly, Lichter et al. (2004) report that 31% of single mothers do not expect to marry. Together, these studies suggest that a significant minority of this target population do not expect to marry. A strategy employed by some single mothers is to focus on their children and avoid potentially unstable relationships and marriage as a way to provide stable healthy family environments (Edin & Kefalas 2005). Edin and Kefalas (2005) find some women want to be financially independent before moving into a marriage in the event that their relationships end in divorce and leave them financially vulnerable. These women invest in education or employment, rather than marriage, to ensure their future family stability. These women are not rejecting marriage altogether, instead they are trying to improve their life circumstances before getting married. There are still questions yet to be explored regarding how women evaluate their marriage options. We focus on how women frame a permanent strategy of removing themselves from the marriage market versus a more temporary strategy (e.g. delaying marriage) which may eventuate in marriage.

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

This paper applies a qualitative perspective to analyze the views of participants in a marriage initiative. We examine qualities of women that limit their marriageability. We focus specifically on how respondents' views about the marriageability of women align with current literature on factors that make men less marriageable. This literature finds that men's lack of employment, low education levels, incarceration history, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse,

and substance use are reasons for their lack of marriageability (Edin & Kefalas 2005). While most research on marriage has highlighted the inadequacies of men, claiming that women do not marry because they lack a pool of marriageable men, these studies have neglected the characteristics of women that may make them less suitable marriage partners. We examine the characteristics of women that may limit their marriage prospects and indicate how these influence their relationship options.

In this work we acknowledge that the concept of women's marriageability cannot be captured with one item. We examine a wide array of factors and evaluate how a combination of an individual's characteristics (e.g. economic position, mental and physical health, multiple partner fertility), and past experiences (e.g. fertility, experience of childhood abuse, domestic violence, and gender distrust) affect their marriageability. We expect that these factors are all interrelated and combine to define an individual's unique marriage potential. Thus, we build on previous work by providing a more nuanced assessment of marriageability while extending the concept of marriageability to include the limitations of women in the marriage market.

This study contributes to existing literature in three key ways. First, we use a unique sample of participants in a marriage initiative program. Some of these individuals are actively seeking relationship education and guidance in part because they have failed to achieve relationship goals (i.e. marriage). These women share a number of key factors that contribute to their poor marriageability including multiple partner fertility, low employment, low education, and previous negative experiences with male partners. Their active participation in relationship education programs suggests an acknowledgment of their relationship struggles, and some willingness to better their circumstances. Second, our work supplements current research by including respondents' own views on marriage and the marriage market, moving beyond the

scope of prior work to include a broader set of factors that are not always fully captured in large-scale surveys. We provide a direct assessment of respondents' attitudes and opinions as well as their statements linking previous experiences to marriage. Third, our study highlights the impediments that women face as participants in marriage markets. Like their male counterparts, women's economic potential, family responsibilities, and attitudes toward relationships influence their marriageability. Our work emphasizes the important life circumstances and marriage beliefs of low-income women who are the target of federal marriage and relationship programs.

DATA AND METHODS

From July through September 2006, 57 participants were interviewed shortly after completing a program at a large marriage initiative in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. Individuals voluntarily participated in the program after being recruited from class leaders, flyers and word-of-mouth. Though not religiously-oriented, the classes are sometimes held at places of worship and some instructors are religious clergy. Participants chose to participate in the relationship education classes because they were eager to learn about and improve their relationships. The marriage initiative draws on two specific programs – one based on the family in general and one specific to finding a good marriage partner. In general, the classes provided skills to promote healthy relationships in different areas of the participants' lives. The views of respondents do not appear to vary according to the specific marriage program attended. Our sample mirrors the participants in the larger marriage initiative in terms of age, presence of children, education, and marital status. A final sub-sample of 45 respondents was analyzed after limiting the sample to unmarried women. Of the original 45 unmarried women, 38 were re-interviewed representing an 84% retention rate.

To be included in our study, individuals must have completed 4 of 6 relationship classes offered in either one of the two primary programs. We sampled respondents from each of the ten program sites. The respondents were sent a letter about the project and were reminded about the interview opportunity by class leaders. Sample participants were selected in an attempt to closely mirror the diversity of individuals from the complete list of participants. Data from the 2006 American Community Survey is used to contrast our respondents to national estimates and to women living in the areas within which our sample reside. We find that respondents are more disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment, employment, and poverty than national estimates and closer in representation of the women who live in our sample city.

We were able to garner information from respondents on relationships experiences and expectations through the use of open-ended questions that highlight respondents' own voices. For example, respondents were asked "What would have to be in place for you to get married?" to elicit information concerning barriers to marriage. Similarly, respondents were asked "Is there anything going on in your life that makes it tough to have a healthy relationship?" We obtained information concerning the influence of children on respondents' relationship decisions by asking "As a single mother, how do your children factor into your decisions about dating?", "Do you think it is a good idea for single mothers to avoid relationships for the sake of children?", and "Do you think having children helps or hinders you in finding a good partner?" The open-ended nature of these questions allowed respondents to elaborate on topics in a less-restricted manner than is offered by traditional survey methods.

Interviews were conducted and tape-recorded in private at the program sites. The interviews were on average 90 minutes long and include an average of 63 pages of single-spaced text. Re-interviews conducted 6 to 8 months later were shorter with an average length of 30

minutes and 14 pages single- spaced text. We use data from both waves to further our understanding of women’s marriageability. Following the interviews, we generated a code list that covered most of the themes or topics included in the interviews. We coded the interviews using Atlas/ti and analyzed our findings. This process involved considering how multiple themes intersect in an effort to adequately portray the complicated nature of respondents’ lives.

To supplement data garnered from interviews we also include results from a Marriage Attitudes Survey that all program participants are required to complete before starting the class. The questionnaire provides information about respondents’ general attitudes toward marriage, and complements the more in-depth interviews completed subsequent to the classes. One item taps a general attitude toward marriage (e.g. “People should marry”) and two items address respondents’ own marriage views (e.g. “I expect to get married one day” and “I am scared to get married”). Gender distrust is measured by two items, “Men cannot be trusted to be faithful” and “Women cannot be trusted to be faithful.” Participants could respond in one of the following ways: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, and (4) Strongly Disagree. Responses from the quantitative attitude survey are used to supplement the qualitative work that emphasizes the importance of respondents’ own words and unique experiences.

RESULTS

Table 1 (below) reveals the socioeconomic characteristics for our sample of 45 unmarried respondents. Half of our sample (50%) is African-American, 30% are White, 17% are Hispanic, and 2% are Native American. The average age of respondents is 36 and ages range from 18- to 68-years-old. With respect to relationship status at wave 1, most are single (58%) followed by dating (36%) and cohabiting (7%). Twenty-four percent of our sample has divorce experience in the past (not shown). The majority of our sample (89%) has at least one child present in their

lives, either biological or otherwise. Among all respondents, 24% have one biological child, 11% have two biological children, and 46% have three or more biological children. Among those with children, 59% have experienced multiple partner fertility. That is, a large portion of our sample has children with the same mother but with different fathers, thus creating many half-siblings. Most of the sample was not raised by two biological parents (61%).

This sample is quite disadvantaged although most (80%) have a high school degree or greater education. Specifically, 43% have a high school degree or GED, 24% have some college or trade school experience, and 13% are college graduates. In our sample, 76% report annual household earnings of \$15,000 or less, with 15% without any income whatsoever. Only 4% earn more than \$20,000 a year. Participants originate from relatively disadvantaged communities. According to 2000 census data, 44% of our sample resides in census tracts where more than one quarter of the population lives below the poverty line. In other words, nearly half the respondents in our study live in areas characterized by high poverty. The majority (65%) of this sample is unemployed. Given the high poverty rates, low incomes, and employment record, the high use of benefit programs in participant households is not surprising. Eighty-five percent of our sample currently receives public assistance in the form of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food stamps, cash assistance, Medicaid, and subsidized housing.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Nonmarried Women at Wave 1 (N=45)

<i>Age</i>		<i>Employment</i>	
Mean Age	36	Unemployed	65%
		Employed (Full- and Part-Time)	35%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		<i>Household Income</i>	
Black	50%	Zero dollars	15%
White	30%	\$1,000 and \$5,000	30%
Hispanic	17%	\$5,001 and \$10,000	22%
Native American	2%	\$10,001 and \$15,000	9%
		\$15,001 and \$20,000	9%
<i>Relationship Status</i>		\$20,001 and \$30,000	4%
Single	58%	No Information Provided	11%
Dating	36%		
Cohabiting	7%		
<i>Childhood Household Structure</i>		<i>Public Assistance*</i>	
Lived with Both Biological Parents	39%	Receives Public Assistance	85%
Single Parent Family	28%	No Assistance	7%
Step-Family	11%		
Other	22%	<i>Presence of Children</i>	
		Presence of At Least One Child	89%
<i>Educational Attainment</i>		Biological Children	81%
Less than or some High School	20%	One Biological Child	24%
High School Graduate	43%	Two Biological Children	11%
Some College/Trade School	24%	Three Biological Children or more	46%
College Graduate	13%	No Biological Children	20%
		<i>Multiple Partner Fertility**</i>	
		Multiple Partner Fertility	59%

N=45

*Does not add up to 100% because of missing information

**Among those who have own biological children (N=37)

Marriage Attitudes

The results of the Marriage Attitudes Survey illustrate the general attitudes of respondents toward marriage, divorce, and childbearing. Although this is a disadvantaged population, the general assessment of respondents is that marriage is the ideal relationship status. The majority of respondents (85%) think that people should marry and most (87%) expect to marry; however, 48% claim that they are scared to get married. This demonstrates some of the complexity in attitudes about marriage. Thirty-seven-year-old Tanisha, a single mother of four,

rationalizes that “it’s good to be married ... I guess that’s just a dream everybody wants ... to be married and have a happy little family.” Interestingly, some respondents do have a fear of marriage. Tania, a 24-year-old cohabiting mother of three explains, “I’m scared to get married ... and being committed to somebody for so long.” Although Tania is scared to marry, she still expects to marry one day. In the qualitative interview Tania elaborates, “‘cause I know some people do get married and there’s a lot of arguments in the house. It really depends on the relationship and on the person. And I know there can be a lot of arguing ... And I think that’s what scares me.” Overall, there is a positive view of marriage among respondents but many still have reservations and are realistic about the nature of marriage

Marriageable Women

Respondents in our study often cite lack of employment, incarceration history, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and substance use among men as reasons for why they are not married. At the same time, our interviews reveal that women also have characteristics that may limit their marriage prospects and influence their relationship options. We find that the notion of marriageability is complex and is represented by a combination of individuals’ characteristics (e.g. economic position, mental and physical health, multiple partner fertility), and past experiences that affect one’s attitudes (e.g. experience of childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, and gender distrust). These factors are all interrelated and combine to define an individual’s unique marriage potential.

Economic Factors and the Marriage Ideal

Many individuals in our sample find it difficult to establish stable employment due to factors such as low education, poor job opportunities, or lack of skills. Lack of employment is directly related to stress in current relationships, and negatively influences the possibility of

future relationships. Sabine, a 57-year-old single woman explains, “I wish I had a job. I would feel much better about myself if I had a job ... I'm the kind of person that, that works ... I'm the person that will work and not just sit around the house and do nothing ... That's important to me, and I think that's important probably to a man.” Sabine recognizes the importance of having a job and contributing financially in a relationship. Existing literature suggests that employment and providing income is a priority for men; however, we find that it is an equally important consideration for women. Many women recognize the need for dual-income households, and much as they are unwilling to accept lack of employment in a partner, they accept that their own employment problems may hinder relationship potential.

Several respondents express concerns about relying on public assistance, and feel that they should not marry while receiving aid. Tori, a 34-year-old single mother of six suggests that, “... a man, a woman shouldn't be on welfare and married.” Respondents view financial stability not only as a prerequisite for marriage but also as a way to maintain a stable marriage.

Finally, establishing personal independence prior to marriage is important for some respondents. Even though marriage is desirable, some women delay marriage until their lives are in order. Jill, a 21-year-old dating mother of two explains:

I'm just not ready to get married. I want my career ... I want my house. I want my children to be stable. And from there, I can think about me. But right now, I'm on the grind and I'm trying to get myself together. I just honestly I just really want to get what I need to get out of the way before I look at the whole thing of marriage.

Mental and Physical Health Issues

Many respondents admit to having mental and physical health issues (e.g. bipolar disorder and high blood pressure) that not only affect mobility and lifestyle, but also hinder employment. Furthermore, these health concerns sometimes affect their dating and marriage potential as they believe themselves to be less than ideal partners. For example, 31-year-old

Mary, single with two children, says that being depressed makes it difficult to start a relationship because she has to take care of herself first, “it makes it hard to sustain a relationship, I believe. Because I’m moody. My mood swings ... I feel like if I’m gonna be in a relationship ... I should be able to be in that relationship and be focused on what I need to do, what’s going on in our lives.”

Physical impairments are also a concern for many respondents in our sample. Respondents like Tania, a 24-year-old cohabiting mother of three, have preexisting conditions that negatively influence fertility, and may make them unsuitable partners for someone who would like to have additional children. She explains how abusing diet pills when younger made it difficult to conceive children, “‘cause when I was young I ended up taking diet pills from my grandma ... so through all three pregnancies I was constantly going to the hospital ... It messed up my uterus ... So, ever since I had my daughter she messed me up even more. So now it’s really hard for me. If I wanted to have [a child] right now it would be hard for me to have one.” Respondents with physical disabilities often feel isolated and guilty because of their condition, and they do not want to be a burden for potential partners. Fifty-nine-year-old Madeline, single with no children, explains how her smoking-related emphysema inhibits dating, “if I can get better in the next six to seven months and wean myself off of this ... oxygen ... and I could get back to where I can do my own walking without a wheelchair, without a walker, I might [date].” When physical health issues impair mobility it becomes increasingly difficult to leave the house thus limiting the potential for dating relationships.

Substance Use

Respondents cite their partners’ drug and alcohol use as a key factor that creates instability and stress in their relationships yet they also acknowledge that their own struggle with

substance use limits their potential as marriage partners. Mary, a 31-year-old single mother of two notes “I’m slowly trying to change ... I have to abandon smoking cigarettes ... and drinking ... I mean, you can drink. But, just drink social. Not drink as in everyday ... Cigarettes and drinking are bad for you.” Mary recognizes that smoking and drinking are not necessarily desirable qualities in a potential marriage partner. Similarly, Holly, a 53-year-old single mother of one, acknowledges that, while sobriety provides an opportunity to better herself, it is difficult to resist temptations, “I’ve been clean for, umm, since ’96...that’s a blessing...You feel guilty to when you...fall back...I had made a promise to God that ... I would never get high again...But, you know, the devil’s always busy too.”

Some of the issues surrounding drugs and alcohol are tied to money and employment. For many, addressing these problems is a step toward marriage. Melinda, a 51-year-old mother of three who is currently incarcerated, notes how her excessive drinking has disrupted her economic potential and her relationships,

[My dating partner and I] drink too much ... I’m dried out already ... I’m not gonna be a drunk when I get out [of jail]... I like the way I feel these days ... I want a life. I don’t want to live paycheck to paycheck ... I’m too old to keep coming to jail. And when you keep getting so drunk, you’re bound to go to jail sooner or later ... it made me think I want a more serious person in my life, because I’m sick of partying everyday ... I think I’ll have to ... find somebody I’m better suited to ... it’s like everybody expects you, you know, to act a certain way. But, I’m not drunk anymore. So, nobody really knows who the real [Melinda] is.

Melinda acknowledges that her substance use is taking a financial toll of her economic stability, and notes her desire to change for the sake of her relationship, or to potentially find a partner for whom she is better suited now that she is sober.

Children and Multiple Partner Fertility

There are issues related to the presence of children that may make unmarried mothers less marriageable. Among unmarried mothers in our sample, 56% are single, 37% are dating, and

7% are in cohabiting relationships. Child support issues are a complication for most unmarried parents, but they are exacerbated by multiple partner fertility. Respondents who are single mothers tend to rely on formal and informal child support from the fathers of their children. Child support orders and visitation rights often entail ex-partners being engaged in one another's lives even after the relationship has ended. Previous relationships that bear children often continue to influence new relationships because children forever tie a couple together for better or for worse. Women who are attached to previous partners by child support requirements may experience difficulty moving forward with other relationships. Similarly, ex-partners are a reminder of previous romantic relationships that may illicit feelings of jealousy and insecurity, especially when these ex-partners are also co-parents. Tori, a 34-year-old single mother of six, explains the difficulty of managing ex-partners while forging new relationships,

We decide to move on, 'cause his baby mama jealous of him trying to talk to somebody else and my baby daddy is, don't want nobody else to have me ... if me and him end up being, we end up being together. So if not, then we just be single ... he ain't got to get rid of baby mama drama. It's just that I don't want him having no problems, because he don't want to be with her and he's with me. Her taking his son away from him and all that ... I don't want him to have to choose between his kids and me.

Children not only serve as a constraint to dating and forging new romantic relationships, they also represent a connection to relationships that have since ended. Some men are not interested in assuming parental responsibility for others' children. Marie, a 39-year-old single mother of five, explains her experiences with prior dating partners, "because a lot of times, like me, I get into a relationship and come to find out that the kids weren't a part of his agenda." Mothers in our samples are aware that men may not be interested in dating women who have children by another man, especially if there is the potential that they would have to financially support these children in the absence of the biological father.

Forty-one percent of parents in our sample have children with multiple (at least two) partners. Multiple partner fertility often means there is some maintenance of ties to former romantic partners and other parents. When women bring children from a previous relationship, there is sometimes a problem with what respondents refer to as “baby daddy drama” — the involvement of a male former partner in a current relationship. This can be a deterrent to becoming involved with women that have children. Jackie, a 30-year-old single mother of three, explains how her ex-partner intervenes in her new relationships, “[one of my children’s fathers] was always trying to intervene between me and [my new partner] ... still trying to come back and be with me ... Yes, it gets complicated. Because they always try to come over and make it look like there’s something going on between me and them ... and it makes my partner start wondering, are you cheating on me?” A 33-year-old single mother of six, Ida is well-versed in managing multiple relationships among her three ex-partners and their children together,

[One father] he didn’t want to be the daddy. He would spend time with them. Go to parks, walks. But he wasn’t trying to be the dad ... [Another father] was trying to be the dad; he was trying to prove something ... I think he was trying to prove he could be a good dad. [The third father], he did a good job with the boys. He always spent time with them; he spent more time with them than me ... but see, he would, like, drill my kids when he get ‘em. ‘What you all doing?’ ‘Ahh, what is she doing?’ And, he, he would threaten me ... Just say, well I’m gonna have them look up [the other fathers’] records ... I just tell him ... I don’t want no daddy drama.

Although Ida appreciates that one of the fathers is involved in his children’s lives, she resents that he monitors their access to her other ex-partners, and is offended that he thinks her previous partners may be bad influences on the children. As is evidenced by Ida’s situation, some men have a difficult time reconciling the presence of other men in their children’s lives, even when these men are the fathers of their own children’s half-siblings.

Gender Distrust

There are numerous complexities in the lives of the respondents that lead to a general distrust of others. Marie, a 39-year-old single mother of five, explains how negative life experiences have led her to distrust others and be leery of new romantic partners, “I’m gonna have to at least date a person six months before I really can say, well okay, I can go to your house and sit and watch TV ... Because ... I don’t trust anyone ... and that comes from when I was robbed in the supermarket; I was robbed on the city bus.” For Marie, her global distrust of others is a barrier to all types of relationships particularly romantic. Lydia, a 22-year-old dating mother of four, explains that distrust of others is the rule rather than the exception for herself and others,

Interviewer: Does he trust you?

Respondent: To a certain extent.

Interviewer: Why do you think he doesn’t trust you fully?

Respondent: Just in life in general, who do you trust to the fullest?

Lydia recognizes that others too have global distrust which can influence her own marriageability.

The marriage survey results indicate that 38% of the respondents agree that “Men cannot be trusted to be faithful”, while 20% believe that “Women cannot be faithful”. We find being faithful represents just one facet of gender distrust. Gail, a 24-year-old divorced mother of one explains, “I was with someone and he cheated on me ... there’s no trust anymore.” Women too can be unfaithful. Candice, a 20-year-old dating mother of three, explains her experience, “...when he was supposed to come and get me he didn’t end up coming. So I just went out with my friends, and I just thought, in my head I thought he was cheating on me. ‘Cause that’s why he didn’t come get me. So I just got stupid and drunk and ... [ended up cheating on him].”

For some women in our sample, infidelity is at the root of gender distrust for both women and men, and can directly influence attitudes toward potential or current romantic partners.

Experience of abuse is another facet of gender distrust that affects the relationship quality and expectations of this sample. One third of our sample (37%) has experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and 7% have witnessed abuse between family members. Many respondents experienced childhood abuse at the hands of parents, or witnessed violence between their parents, thus inciting an abiding distrust of men. Mary, a 31-year-old single mother of two, explains how experiencing childhood abuse influences her current relationships, “the reason why I think I probably acted like that towards ... I guess I was molested when I was younger. But I don’t really know. Physically I don’t want a man touching me. It is just weird sometimes.” Often, gender distrust stems from childhood experiences witnessing mothers and fathers cope with infidelity and lack of commitment. Vicky, a single 20-year-old with no children, explains how childhood abuse at the hands of her stepfather, and abandonment by her biological father, makes her distrustful of men in her own romantic relationships, “[My mother] got married ...he started beating her or whatever, and he started beating us ... after that she started dating this other guy. And she’s still with him today ... He used to beat me. And my dad has never laid a hand on me, but he has totally not been there for me my whole life. And I just don’t trust men.”

Abuse or even potential abuse affects more than the immediate romantic dyad. When children are present in the relationship, violence can have a spill-over effect that adversely influences children. Women are often reluctant to bring men into their lives when they have young children (especially daughters) living in the house because they fear sexual abuse. For some mothers, parenting and dating cannot coincide. Most mothers, especially those with daughters, are cautious about bringing men into their families. Holly, a 53-year-old single

mother of one daughter, explains that “by having a teenager I got to be able to trust the guy that he’s ... not gonna touch my child in an inappropriate manner ... like, putting his hand on her where he’s not supposed to ... It’s hard to trust a man ... And you hear so many times that a child is being molested by the stepfather, and I don’t want that.” For Holly, the presence of children, especially a daughter, and underlying issues with gender distrust make her leery about pursuing romantic relationships.

Some respondents leave at the first signs of abuse, others retaliate after being victims for too long. Jill, a 20-year-old dating mother of two, explains that she, “quit because I got tired of him being abusive towards me. And I quit. And I threw the first lick and I threw a lot of things and I messed him up real bad.” This quote illustrates that, while Jill was provoked, women are also capable of enacting violence, and are not always innocent victims in domestic strife. For a small number of women, perpetrating abuse upon their partners indicates that women are not only capable of abuse, but that these behaviors may make them less than suitable marriage partners. Although serious injuries are more prevalent when violence occurs male-to-female (Johnson and Ferraro 2000) national estimates show that women report intimate partner violence at a higher rate (22.1%) compared to men (7.4%) (U. S. Department of Justice 2000). Both being a victim of abuse and perpetrating intimate violence can have an influence on marriageability for women.

Opting Out

When studying factors associated with marriageability it is important to recognize that not all women are actively seeking a romantic partner. Some women actively choose to ‘opt out’ of the marriage market on a temporary or more permanent basis for a variety of reasons (e.g. parenting demands, lack of time, desire for education) that may not be commensurate with

forming a healthy relationship. Marie, a 39-year-old single mother of five, acknowledges that she does not want a relationship right now but may be open to one in the future. When asked if she sees herself getting married she states, “I want to. But I’m saying now my most important thing to me with the way the world is going that I really need to take my kids-my youngest two kids-into adulthood.” Other respondents view opting out of the marriage market as a more permanent decision. These women often suggest that chronic health problems, older age, or desire for independence are reasons to permanently avoid romantic relationships. Madeline, a 59-year-old single mother of one explains, “boyfriends, I could care less anymore ... I’m getting up there in age.” Others like Pam, 45-years-old with no children, cherish a sense of personal independence that they believe would not be possible in the context of a relationship, “I plan on pretty much just being by myself ... that works for me ... you don’t have to argue with anybody, clean up after anybody. You can do what you want, when you want.” Women who permanently opt-out of the marriage market indicate that they participate in relationship education classes for socializing and interaction with similar others, and not necessarily to better relationship skills for potential romantic relationships. Others utilize the lessons that are tailored for romantic relationships in other facets of their life—with family, friends, and co-workers.

Qualitative data allows for more detailed explanation for why women are not currently looking for romantic relationships. A major theme that emerges in this data is the influence of children. Women like Holly, a 53-year-old single mother of one, choose to delay dating until their children have grown, “until my daughter gets where she’s more independent and on her own and not dependent on me as much ... then it will be better for me [to be in a relationship] ... Right now it’s not that important to me.” Other women believe that the demands of a romantic

relationship will distract them from working toward their life goals of furthering education or gaining stable employment. Ramona, a 25-year-old single mother of one states,

I think it's just that I'm not out there really looking for anybody right now. I'm more self-centered on myself right now. I want to get through school, and I want to get into employment ... And I want to get things going for myself before I do anything ... It's just for me and my son. I got a son to raise. I think that's why I haven't looked into, you know, having a relationship.

Opting out of the marriage market can be a temporary situation when life circumstances, such as getting additional education, requires a specified amount of individualized focus. Women may also claim to opt out of the marriage market on a more permanent basis if they surmise that their potential as and for a romantic partner has diminished.

DISCUSSION

We use qualitative data collected from interviews with participants in a marriage initiative to examine women's marriageability in terms of economic factors, mental and physical health issues, substance use, and multiple partner fertility. We also consider how gender distrust that emerges from childhood or adult experiences with domestic abuse and violence influences attitudes and expectations for marriage. We suggest that, like their male counterparts, some women possess certain characteristics that make them less ideal marriage partners. In addition, we introduce the notion that some women are voluntarily opting out of the marriage market temporarily or more permanently to raise children, pursue education, or find employment.

Our results indicate that many women in the marriage initiative programs do possess characteristics that even in their own views make them less competitive on the marriage market. It is well known that economic factors are an important consideration in marriage decisions (Goldstein & Kenney 2001; Raley 1996; Sweeney 2002; Gibson et al. 2005; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Smock et al. 2005). Respondents recognize that maintaining stable employment, reducing

reliance on public assistance, and providing for their families improves their marriage potential. Financial stability and independence not only enhances women's market value it may allow them to be more selective of marriage partners.

Another topic frequently addressed in the literature is how children limit women's marriage potential (Goldscheider & Sassler 2007; Stewart et al. 2003; Waller 2002; Upchurch et al. 2001; Lichter & Graefe 2001). Women report that men are sometimes reluctant to partner with women who have children from previous relationships because of issues related to responsibility, economic support, and dealing with ex-partners who remain a persistent presence in their lives. The presence of ex-partners raises concerns about fidelity, trust and loyalty and brings challenges to new men who enter women's lives.

Multiple partner fertility is a further complication that is more common in disadvantaged populations (Carlson & Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo & Furstenberg 2007; Manlove et al. 2008). Mothers' accounts show that multiple partners can create additional stress on relationships as mothers must negotiate their own and their children's relationships with more than one ex-partner. While Carlson and Furstenberg (2006) address multiple partner fertility among both men and women, other research has focused solely on men's experiences. The current study adds a detailed assessment, not only of the incidence of multiple partner fertility, but also the ramifications for all involved parties, especially mothers and their children. It is those who are intimately enmeshed in the complicated relationships forged through multiple partner fertility who are best able to express this phenomenon of "baby daddy" and "baby mama" drama. Women's multiple partner fertility may further compound the negative influence of children on relationships and further hamper their marriage potential.

Considerable attention has focused on the concept of gender distrust. Empirical work has drawn on the sexual arena and relies on indicators of infidelity as markers of gender distrust (Waller 2001; Coley 2002; Waller & McLanahan 2005; Carlson et al. 2004; Furstenberg 2001; Burton et al. 2007; Sorenson et al. 1996). Our findings support these studies and showcase that women's distrust of men is often framed around fidelity. These concerns can stem from current relationships or prior experiences. However, there are multiple dimensions of distrust extending to a more global distrust of everyone to concerns about commitment and reliability. Also our evidence suggests that women may not always be worthy of men's trust when they have cheated or have many prior partners. We contribute to research exploring the origins of gender distrust (Burton et al. 2007) by finding that abuse is often an underlying element to gender distrust. While experiencing abuse does not make a woman unmarriageable, per se, women with such experiences may possess a certain set of attitudes or dispositions that make them less trusting of men. These attitudes may deter their efforts to marry.

The influence of mental and physical health issues and marriage has received limited empirical attention (Waite 1995; Williams et al. 2008; Nock 2005; Carlson et al. 2004; Waldron, et al. 1996). Existing work does not extend beyond measuring instances of mental and physical health issues to examine how these impairments affect women's marriageability. Women who are disadvantaged face mental and physical health issues and they may go untreated or inadequately treated. In fact, women in our sample cite poor mental and physical health issues as obstacles to success in the marriage market, and challenges to the stability of existing relationships. Health concerns not only limit women's marriage potential, they are also a detriment to other aspects of their lives, such as employment which further confines their marriage options.

In most cases, these factors do not exist alone but act together to create a complex system of interrelated characteristics. For example, substance abuse may lead to unemployment which, in turn, may result in poverty and poor health. Traditionally, multivariate analyses include these factors as controls in models explaining marriage potential. The results from our qualitative data suggest that these characteristics are interrelated and should be examined in connection with other factors simultaneously. Controlling for characteristics like health or presence of children does not adequately account for women's marriageability. Future research should adopt a more person-centered approach rather than variable-centered approach.

Although factors like unemployment, mental and physical health problems, substance use, presence of children and multiple partner fertility, and gender distrust may reduce a woman's chances of marriage, it is important to note that, ultimately, romantic relationships are dyadic in nature—personal preferences and marriage ideals must be negotiated between partners. While we may predict factors that contribute to a greater likelihood of marriage, future studies need to account for the dyadic nature of romantic relationships, and the individual factors that partners bring to a relationship. For example, some men may consider the presence of children a deterrent to partnering with mothers, but for others children may add to the value of the relationship. Similarly, some women may consider their unemployment as a barrier toward marriage, while more traditional men may actually favor women who stay home and do not work. It is difficult to fully address the myriad of factors that may combine to make one individual more or less marriageable. This study aims to address some key factors that are shared by disadvantaged women struggling to achieve their marriage goals. Additional research is warranted to assess how factors like physical attractiveness or sociability may affect women's marriageability, and may, in some cases, negate other mitigating factors. Keeping in mind that

dating and marriage occurs within a dyadic union, we recognize that we cannot place value on which factors make women more or less marriageable. Ultimately, partners must negotiate and agree upon the relevance of characteristics that factor into a couple's decision to marry.

Finally, we find that some women in our sample are adopting a strategy of opting out of the marriage market to focus on parenting or to pursue educational and employment opportunities at the expense of dating and marriage. Although they may be temporarily limiting their marriage options by opting out, these women may actually be improving their odds of partnering in the future by improving their economic circumstances. Many of the women do not disregard the ideal of marriage and are actively seeking to better themselves in an effort to both be and attract a better man. It should be noted, however, that opting out of the market temporarily may result in these women losing out on marriage altogether. Returning to the market when they are older, more educated, and more accustomed to independence may be a detriment to women's marriage options.

This study highlights the factors that affect women's marriage market potential, much like other studies have illustrated for men. However, we are not able to determine statistically the extent to which these factors limit the marriageability of women. Additional studies are warranted to determine whether these factors affect the marriageability of women in the same ways they do for men. Our study is limited to the female perspective. Further research on men's perspectives on women's marriageability would be a welcome addition to the literature. While the qualitative approach allows us to present a detailed portrait of the characteristics that bar some women from dating and marrying, the small number of cases may limit generalizability. Our sample is focused on one city in the United States which may not represent the experiences across the country, especially those in rural areas and locations with more prosperous economic

climates. Moreover, the group is somewhat select – women from a disadvantaged population participating in a marriage initiative. Nonetheless, while Census data indicate that our sample is somewhat more disadvantaged in terms of income and employment, compared to other women in the U.S., they are more representative of those living in their area and possibly also women who are least likely to succeed in the marriage market.

The current work is also limited by a singular focus on the marriageability of disadvantaged women. Certainly, women who are better educated and have more education are more marriageable and have access to resources that improve their marriage potential. Women from all income and education groups may be subject to other dimensions of marriageability such as gender distrust, children from prior unions or poor health. At the same time, disadvantaged women are more likely to experience multiple partner fertility or poor health suggesting that these issues may be especially salient for them. Yet to some extent the role of all of these factors depends on the specific marriage markets and we acknowledge that even more advantaged women may have characteristics that affect their marriageability including advanced education and demanding employment. This study cannot determine the factors that may be common to all women, irrespective of income or education, or specific to those who are better off financially. Future research should examine the marriageability of various groups of women.

The findings from this project encourage a new conceptualization of marriageability to include women. Some of the same findings that apply to women may in fact also be part of men's marriageability; men's marriageability is not just limited to employment and especially in contexts with restricted labor markets. We argue that barriers to marriage should be considered in conjunction with another rather than as individual indicators. This approach does not attribute marriageability to single issues but acknowledges that there are multiple and varied factors and

characteristics that interact to influence union potential. Taken together, future research needs to address how characteristics of men and women coalesce together to influence relationship formation and stability. Our results also suggest that researchers should work in tandem with practitioners to develop and support programs which address the wide range of issues men and women face in their decisions about relationships. While the goals of marriage initiatives are straightforward it is important to address the relationship goals of participants and their union potential.

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