

Poverty, Marriage, and Trust: New Insights for Policymakers

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Are Policymakers Asking the Right Questions About Marriage Among Low-Income Mothers?

- For over half a century policymakers have been concerned about declining marriage rates among low-income women with children. The concern emanates from soaring rates of poverty among children with unmarried parents. In 2008, 42.9% of children growing up in single-mother households were poor compared to 8.5% of children in households with married parents.
- But, are policymakers asking the right questions about marriage and poor mothers? Should the concern be about relative declines in marriage rates or about factors that lead mothers to serially seek and enter unhealthy romantic unions?
- Results from the study reported here suggest that in addition to marriage rates, policymakers should be concerned about the trusting behaviors mothers create and use to serially enter unhealthy romantic unions that have little or no chance of becoming sustainable marriages.
- We discovered four types of trust — misplaced, suspended, compartmentalized, and integrated — that led mothers to enter various forms of romantic unions some of which put them and their children at significant risk for abuse and financial ruin.
- Each form of trust was differentially related to whether mothers witnessed and/or experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse as children and/or as adults.

About the Study

- The findings we report are from the ethnographic component of the *Three-City Study*. This study examined the impact of welfare reform on the lives of low-income families residing in poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. The study involved 7 years of in-depth interviews and observations of 256 mothers and their 685 children. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the children were under 4 years of age.
- 42% of the mothers were Latino or Hispanic; 38% were African American; and 20% were White;
- 58% were age 29 or younger, and 57% had a high school diploma, GED, or had attended trade school or college;
- 49% were receiving TANF and 33% were also working;
- 17% said they were married; 56% indicated that they were neither married nor cohabiting; but 82% were involved in some type of romantic union over the course of the study;
- Two years into the study we discovered that 65% of the mothers had been sexually and/or physically abused in their lifetimes. Sexual abuse included rape, molestation, parentally-enforced child prostitution, and witnessing incest acts. Physical abuse comprised physical beatings, attacks with weapons, or witnessing extreme physical family violence.

Important Insights for Policymakers

Pay more attention to trust. It matters, but not in the way you think.

Most marriage promotion and education programs for low-income couples do not address the issue of how partners develop trust in their relationships. These programs are not designed to attend to the needs of women (or men) who have severe lifetime histories of sexual and physical abuse that adversely impact their adult relationships. Providing women (and men) with programs that address these issues will likely enhance their abilities to make sounder judgments about how to develop healthy forms of trust and choose partners more wisely.

Domestic violence and sexual abuse prevention and treatment programs should be a top priority for all strengthening families initiatives.

Our data clearly demonstrate the long-term deleterious effects of domestic violence and sexual abuse on women's romantic choices and on their children's physical and mental well-being. Well-funded programs that address the prevention and treatment of domestic violence and sexual abuse must be a top priority in social policies aimed at building stronger families.

More research-based evidence on romantic relationships within low-income populations is needed to inform marriage promotion and education programs.

Most marriage promotion and education programs available to low-income couples are based on research about romantic relationships in economically advantaged populations. These programs would be more informed by research that focused on low-income couples' actual relationship dynamics. Federal funding of such research is critical for building relevant pro-marriage policies and programs.

Results: Forms of Trust and Patterns of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse

MISPLACED TRUST

(53 Mothers)

Helena is a 42-year-old African American mother of eight children. Her boyfriend, Reggie, frequently climbed out of their bedroom window at night to visit the woman down the hall. Helena said, "He won't leave me. We need each other." Within one week of making that statement, Reggie moved in with the other woman. Helena became very depressed and had to be hospitalized for three weeks. When asked what she would do if Reggie returned, she said, "I would marry him. I know way down inside I can trust him."

Misplaced Trusters . . .

- Enter relationships rapidly
- Take an unrealistic "romantic fantasy" approach in their relationships
- Gather virtually no evidence about their partners' trustworthiness
- Haphazardly intertwine their lives with their partners' across multiple domains
- Develop insecure emotional ties to their partners

87%

of these mothers experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse in both childhood and adulthood



Tim at 6-years-old

Phyllis is a 43-year-old White mother of four children from different fathers. She has a history of being sexually abused as a child and has been abused by all of her intimate partners. Her children have either witnessed and/or become victims of this violence, particularly her son Tim. Tim witnessed Phyllis being abused at the hands of one partner, Everett, who also attempted to kidnap him. Tim also was sexually abused by Les, another one of Phyllis' partners.

SUSPENDED TRUST

(60 Mothers)

Angie, a 29-year-old White mother of two daughters said, "I need a man to help me for a minute and he's out of my house after that. I get what I need, he gets what he needs, and it's a done deal. I don't need to know nothin' about how he gets the money he gets. I don't want to know nothin' that particular. I'm in control. I run this shit up in here."

Suspended Trusters . . .

- Enter relationships rapidly
- Take a "real world" business-like approach in their relationships
- Gather very little evidence about their partners' trustworthiness
- Minimally intertwine their lives with their partners' across limited domains
- Develop casual and easily dispensable emotional ties to their partners

75%

of these mothers experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse primarily in adulthood



Lisa at 2-years-old

Gwen, the 24-year-old White mother of Lisa said, "She saw him hit me 3 times when she was 2-years-old. She was shaking and it scared me so bad that I got out of that situation. I will never let her see a man hit me ever, ever, ever again.

COMPARTMENTALIZED TRUST

(60 Mothers)

Hortensia, a 28-year-old Latina mother of three sons, said, "I trust my partner, but only to provide financially for my children and to send money to support my family in Central America. Our relationship is not love. I do not trust him with my heart. I have someone else that I trust with my heart. My husband and I trust each other only for some things. It's like a business agreement and I can depend on him to do his job."

Compartmentalized Trusters . . .

- Enter relationships gradually
- Take an unreal "romantic fantasy" approach in their relationships that is gradually replaced by a "real world" business-like approach
- Gather considerable evidence about their partners' trustworthiness
- Deeply intertwine their lives with their partners' across limited domains
- Develop guarded and easily dispensable emotional ties to their partners

63%

of these mothers experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse in childhood and/or adulthood



Serena at 13-years-old and Julio at 11-years-old

Santina, a 37-year-old Latina mother of seven children, was attacked with a machete by her husband Antonio in the presence of her daughter Serena and her son Julio. Santina got a restraining order against Antonio but still let him live in their home. Serena's reaction was to give up her dream of going to college and stay home to protect her mother. Julio's response was to think a lot about death. He was afraid to close his eyes because he believed he would die when he did.

INTEGRATED TRUST

(55 Mothers)

Shana, a 26-year-old African American mother of two children recalled that she pursued a relationship with her husband after "checking him out" for a year. "I watched how he handled his business and treated other people's feelings, and if he did what he said he was going to do and he did." Shana and her husband tend to their relationship daily. She stated, "We trust each other very much. I don't know what we would do without each other."

Integrated Trusters . . .

- Enter relationships gradually
- Integrate balanced forms of "romantic fantasy" and "real world" approaches in their relationships
- Gather considerable evidence about their partners' trustworthiness
- Deeply intertwine their lives with their partners' across multiple domains
- Develop stable emotional ties to their partners

31%

of these mothers experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse in childhood and/or adulthood



Alexis at 3-years-old

Chantel, an African American mother of five children stated, "Of course my husband and I argue. But we have ground rules. NO HITTING! We could not live with ourselves if Alexis or any of our kids saw us doing something like that. Never in a million years . . . never. You can take that to the bank and cash the check. It won't bounce."