

**Maybe Someday:
Marriage and Cohabitation Among Low-Income Fathers**

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Abstract

Drawing upon a life course framework and grounded theoretical analysis, I explore the family circumstances of low-income, single fathers and their expectations to marry. In-depth interviews were conducted with 37 low-income men living in a metropolitan area of the western U.S. Findings suggest that most of these men are actively engaged in parenting their children, either while living with their partner or sharing parenting between two households. Many of the cohabiting relationships these men formed included periods of separation due to conflict. Among these men, those who fathered children as adolescents were less likely to marry or assume parental responsibilities than those who fathered children at older ages. Overall, these fathers expect to marry sometime in the future, but, because of uncertainties in their current relationships, choose to cohabit rather than marry. The primary challenges to marriage or long-term commitment that men reported were economic strains due to a lack of educational and occupational opportunities, and parenting stresses due to a lack of parenting and family interaction skills. In addition, men raised concerns regarding their ability to discipline their children without being abusive.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, the proportion of births in the U.S. occurring outside of marriage has increased dramatically. At the same time, the formation of informal unions has risen as formal marriage has declined (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Goldscheider and Kaufman (1996) argue that the declining importance of marriage and parenting has been greater in the lives of men than the lives of women. In particular, marriage rates are lower and cohabitation rates higher among low-income couples relative to couples of higher socioeconomic status (Seltzer, 2000; Manning and Smock, 1995). This lack of formal commitment by low-income men to their partners and the children they father has serious consequences not only for women and children, but also for men. Nonmarital births, in particular, have been linked to health risks and poverty among women and children, as well as poverty among single fathers (Nock, 1998; Da Vanzo and Rahman, 1993; Brown and Eisenberg, 1995).

Among men who become fathers, the sexual unions they form, as well as their background experiences and attitudes, influence their early involvement in parenting. To date much of the family research has focused largely on the participation of men in marriage, with little attention being given to low-income, never-married men and their attitudes and commitment to family life (Furstenberg, 1988; Marsiglio, 1995; Goldscheider and Waite, 1991; Gerson, 1993; Blankenhorn, 1995). In addition, low-income, single men are generally under-represented in national surveys (Lerman, 1993; Bachu, 1996). Thus, little is known about the challenges to marriage experienced by economically disadvantaged fathers (Hamer and Marchioro, 2002).

Based on in-depth interviews with low-income fathers living in a western metropolitan area, I explore how these men perceive their role as fathers and their attitudes toward marriage.

In particular, I explore the barriers to marriage and long-term commitment experienced by these low-income fathers. The use of in-depth interviews with low-income fathers provides valuable insights as to how these men define and perceive their familial responsibilities, as well as the forces that facilitate or inhibit their involvement in parenting and marriage. An understanding of single fathers is particularly important given the increases in nonmarital childbearing over the past few decades and the rise in female-headed households (Moore, 1995; Ventura et al., 1995). Research on this under-represented group is particularly important in order to inform policies related to marriage, welfare, child custody, and child support (Greene, et al., 1996).

Previous Research

The organization of men's lives has changed significantly over the past several decades. Men are now spending less time in marriage and with children than before (Goldscheider and Kaufman, 1996). As alternatives to fatherhood have expanded over time, fatherhood has increasingly become a more voluntary role (Gerson, 1993). In some instances, men may not know if they have fathered a child, but when men are aware, their responses to paternity vary. Some men choose not to be involved in the child's life. Such men are increasingly less attached to their sex partners and are forming informal relationships in which social norms defining roles and responsibilities are less clear. In contrast, other men embrace with vigor the role of father and spend more time with children than previous generations of men (Gerson, 1993). Why some men choose to invest time and money in family life, while other men reject parental and spousal obligations, is a question central to the current debate about men and their role in the family.

Drawing in part from a life course framework, I explore the family formation process and early parental involvement of young, disadvantaged men. The life course perspective emphasizes the sequencing, timing, and ordering of roles. Based on this framework, life events

are dependent upon prior life transitions, and in turn, influence subsequent events in the lives of individuals; thus, the past influences the present, and the present influences the future (Rindfuss, et al., 1988). Sets of interlocking roles and transitions place an individual on a life course trajectory that is then modified by further events and transitions over the life course (Rindfuss, et al., 1988; Elder, 1985).

According to this perspective, men who become fathers but lack the financial resources to provide for a family experience role strain. The disparity between expectations and resources results in a loss of control over one's life situation that requires some form of accommodation or adaptation in order for control to be restored. Control may be regained by increasing resources, or by denying familial obligations. Responses to life changes and the loss of personal control involve choosing from alternatives structured by social expectations and individual resources (Elder, 1985). Thus, the response of men to fathering a child is influenced by their own personal resources, as well as by social expectations that shape their options.

Within the life course framework, age expectations mark appropriate times for major life events and transitions such as leaving home, getting married, and having children. Life events that occur out of sequence, as well as other departures from the normative life course, can have negative consequences (Hogan, 1981; Elder, 1985). Of particular concern in the U.S. is the rise in nonmarital childbearing (Moore, 1995; Ventura et al., 1995). This concern is underscored in a study by Zill and Nord (1994) in which they identify three risk factors increasing the likelihood of poverty among children. These factors include (1) low parental education, (2) young parental age, and (3) single-parent families (Zill and Nord, 1994). Thus, children born to single, teen parents are particularly at risk of living in poverty.

The initiation of sexual activity and the formation of sexual unions are primary factors in family formation over time. Although current research demonstrates the benefits of marriage relative to remaining single, since the 1970s both divorce and cohabitation have increased as time spent in formal marriage has declined (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Bumpass and colleagues (1991) argue that young people continue to form sexual unions at about the same ages as they did in the past, but, many more are choosing cohabitation over marriage. Cohabitation is increasing as a family form, and although it is less stable than marriage, one in six cohabiting couples have a child together during their union. Even more tenuous are dating relationships which account for the majority of nonmarital births (Bumpass, et al., 1991; Ventura, et al., 1995).

In particular, the likelihood of cohabitation relative to marriage is greater among low-income, less educated individuals than their higher status counterparts (Seltzer, 2000; Manning and Smock, 1995). Cohabitors with more economic resources are more likely to expect to marry their partner and more likely to do so than more economically disadvantaged cohabiting couples. Higher earnings and cumulative education increase the likelihood of individuals forming unions and, in particular, marriages. In contrast, among those with unstable job histories and low education, cohabitation is more likely than marriage (Clarkberg, 1999; Thornton, et al., 1995).

Residence with children is an important factor mediating father involvement with children. Past research has found that non-custodial fathers exhibit a weaker attachment to their children than do fathers who reside with their children (Landry and Camelo, 1994; Furstenberg, 1988). The type of sexual union men form with their partners is a strong predictor of men's involvement in parenting. Studies of young unwed fathers of AFDC children indicate that child support declines as the relationship with the mother of the child becomes more distant (Rangarajan and Gleason, 1998). However, not only do men's relationships with the mothers of

their nonresidential children influence their involvement in parenting, but also do their current partnerships. Single men or men currently in cohabiting relationships are less likely to maintain contact with nonresidential children than are men currently married (Cooksey and Craig, 1998).

Current knowledge of why some low-income men are actively involved in family life and others are not is vague at best. The experiences and attitudes that shape economically disadvantaged men's perceptions of marriage and fatherhood, as well as the barriers and obstacles they encounter in accepting and fulfilling familial obligations, require further understanding. Many have advocated the need for government programs to support and encourage marriage because of the benefits it provides not only individuals, but society as a whole (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). However, is marriage the best option for low-income, single fathers? Seltzer (2000) argues that low-income couples value marriage, but choose cohabitation because they lack resources. If this is the case, what resources are needed in order for disadvantaged men to marry? It is these issues I explore through in-depth interviews with low-income fathers.

Method

Data for this study come from personal interviews with fathers living in a western metropolitan area. Initially, interview participants were identified by an agency that services children in the area. The director of the agency advertised the study to patrons by posting notices in the agency soliciting participation from single fathers. Single fathers indicating interest provided their names and phone numbers to the agency director for contact by the study investigators. Potential subjects were contacted by phone and interviews were held in an agency office, generally after hours. Thus, interviews were conducted in a private and neutral environment.

From the initial sample obtained via contacts at the agency, snowballing techniques were used to expand the sample. The men interviewed provide a unique sample of economically disadvantaged or “fragile fathers” of children born outside of marriage (Greene, et al., 1996). In particular, most of the fathers interviewed exhibited at least two of the three high risk factors noted by Zill and Nord (1994): less than high school education, young age at fatherhood, and single-parenthood. The children born to these fathers are at greater risk of living in poverty relative to children born to married parents.

Once the agency director made initial contact with potential candidates and obtained permission from them to release their names, potential subjects were tracked via phone calls in order to schedule interviews. At the beginning of each interview written consent from each subject to participate in the study was obtained; also the purpose of the study and steps to maintain confidentiality were explained. Interviews were conducted by male interviewers of similar age to the subjects. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer for analysis. Subjects were given an honorarium for their participation.

The interview guide used a flexible format with leading questions. Questions were asked regarding the mother of their first child, as well as current partners and later children. Other questions in the interview focused on how respondents interpreted and defined their expectations, obligations, and experiences as fathers. Questions included issues related to marriage and parenting and explored factors inhibiting or facilitating involvement in family life. The contributions men made to their children and partners, both in terms of child care and financial support, were also considered.

In this study I used a grounded theoretical approach to data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I did not seek to confirm a particular theory prior to data analysis, but

instead began with general topics related to family life. After transcription, the interviews were sorted based on topics and themes through a process of coding and memoing. Finally, diagramming techniques, such as typologizing, and concept or flow charting, were used to map out relationships between important concepts found in the interview data (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). From this process, categories were derived and a conceptual framework emerged. In particular, patterns regarding men's relationships with the mothers of their children and their attitudes toward marriage were identified.

This study, therefore, explores the relationship low-income, single men have with their children and the mothers of their children. The interviews underscore the stresses and challenges these men face in parenting and the parameters that shape their involvement in family life. In particular, this study identifies attitudes toward marriage among single, low-income men, as well as resources needed to encourage successful family relationships.

The Fathers

The average age of the 37 fathers interviewed was 29 years and ranged from 20 to 41. All of the fathers experienced fatherhood outside of marriage and only two were legally married at the time of interview. The interview sample was relatively diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Half of the sample interviewed were white, 22 percent African American, 11 percent Hispanic, 8 percent Native American and another 8 percent identified themselves as being from other or multiple race and ethnic groups. Most of the fathers were employed at the time of interview with 11 percent reporting unemployment. All of those employed were in low-paying occupations or self-employed. The education levels of the men varied: 22 percent had less than a high school education, 16 percent reported receiving their GED, 24 percent had a high school

diploma, 24 percent had attended some college and 14 percent had completed a bachelor's degree. Thus, almost two-thirds of the fathers reported completing only high school or less.

Results

The family arrangements of the fathers interviewed were of four general types: (1) single father households (no partner present), (2) two-parent households (couples generally cohabiting together), (3) shared parenting in separate households, (4) and single mother households (father generally had contact with children on a visiting basis). A few of the fathers were raising children alone either because the mother had died, or more commonly, because the mother left the household and was not involved in parenting. These men struggled with the challenge of providing both financially for their children and full-time child care.

More common in the sample were two-parent households and shared parenting households. Only two of the fathers interviewed were currently married to their partner at the date of interview; in contrast, many others were cohabiting with their partners. In most of the cohabiting households, both partners contributed financially to the household and assisted in child care responsibilities. In several other cases, the couple jointly shared financial and child care responsibilities but did not live together. These separate households were located near each other so that children could spend part of the week in each household on a regular basis. These two household types (cohabitation and shared parenting in separate households) appeared to be different phases in a general pattern of living together, separating for a period of time, and then moving back in together again.

The final type of family arrangement involved the children living full-time with the mother, and the father visiting on an occasional basis. In some cases, particularly if the mother was on government assistance, the father had been contacted by an agency and required to pay

child support. Unless required to pay child support, most of these fathers contributed only occasionally to their children's financial needs, including presents on holidays. In two cases, the fathers did not know about the birth of the children until served papers by the state. These fathers had no contact with their children or their former partners, but were paying child support.

Several of the fathers had experienced multiple family arrangements throughout their teen and adult years. Many who fathered children as teens had little or no contact with their first child. These children generally were living in single mother families. These same fathers, however, were often cohabiting at the time of interview with another partner and involved in parenting subsequent children. Respondents were asked in general about their desire to get married someday, and specifically about whether they had wanted to marry the mother of their first child, as well as their current partner. Thus, responses in the interviews provide a snap-shot of men's expectations to marry their partner under varying circumstances in their lives.

Too Young to Marry

In general, most men had no desire to marry their partner if they experienced paternity at a very young age. They felt that either they and/or their partner were too young to accept the responsibilities of family life. In these teen relationships, individuals were dating and sexually active when a pregnancy occurred. Often, the relationship ended prior to the birth. In most of these circumstances the young mother later formed a household with another man, or lived with extended family as a single mother. The tenuous nature of these relationships is evident in the comments of a respondent who discovered a year after high school that his eighteen year old girl friend was pregnant. He explains why they did not stay together:

She started seeing this other guy. I didn't agree with that so I broke up with her. So then of course I became the asshole that broke up with her after I got her pregnant. And then she married him during her eighth month. So not even a month later she marries this guy. They're still married now, so it ain't all bad.

In one example, the teen parents decided to give up parental rights and place the baby for adoption because they were too young to marry and provide a home. The young man explains:

I didn't know what we were going to do. We were both kids. She didn't know what to do. When she told me she was pregnant she came to my house, told me... we talked about it for a little and then she left. And then I didn't see her for a long time. I tried contacting her and everything and then I received these papers from Texas and it was about [the baby] and adoption papers and stuff like that. . . . I feel like I'm a better person because I did give him a life instead of trying to be a child and taking care of a child. And I kind of pat myself on the back for that one... it was the most mature and responsible thing we could have done.

Many of these young fathers indicated that they were enjoying their freedom and were not ready to settle down and take on family responsibilities, or they were too young to have the necessary skills to provide for a family at that point in their lives. Marriage was not seen as an option by these young men. One man who became a father at age 15 explained that he did not marry because, as he said, "I was too young. I was working at a bar and grill. I wasn't making any money." In another example, a young man related his concern about getting married at age 16 when he found out his girlfriend was pregnant. He said, "I was like, how am I going to support a child and me? Am I supposed to get married? What now?" Another respondent expressed concern about getting married too young; he and his girlfriend were about 19 when they had a baby:

I just think that we both just knew without even saying anything that we weren't ready, that we were just too young. If we got married this early and weren't ready it'd just push a divorce and that's the last thing I want is a divorce.

Many young fathers resented the availability of programs to support teen mothers so they could finish schooling, whereas fathers were expected to provide child support with very limited financial or educational resources. Some men were frustrated that they were not able to

participate in the decision to either give up a child for adoption or parent a child they fathered.

In a few cases, the men were unaware that they had fathered a child until notified by the courts.

One father explained:

She didn't let me know she was pregnant. I basically carried on with my life and then five years later I get notices from the courts saying that they'd had court without me because they couldn't find me. I've been paying child support for years and years and years. I feel like I was cheated with her. She never told me she was pregnant, so I never had the opportunity to be responsible. She took my responsibility away by not telling me. We should have discussed what was best for the child; maybe adoption. She went ahead and had the kid without me and as a result I'm paying for it for 18 years.

Resentment was strongest among those young men required to provide child support for children they could not parent. Young fathers that gave up their parental rights through adoption, or to married partners or relatives, described the decision as difficult, but for the best. They considered themselves good fathers because they gave the child a more stable home life than they could have provided as a teen father.

Several young fathers expressed regret that they did not take responsibility early on for their sexual behavior and delay parenting until they were ready. As one man explained, "when you're younger you just don't think about that sort of thing. And now, later on in life, I think honestly, why couldn't I keep it in my pants? If I'd have had half a brain back then I wouldn't be in the spot I'm in now." Once sexually active, none of the fathers reported using contraception consistently, and several explained that they thought they could not get someone pregnant, or that their partner told them they could not get pregnant. Whether this explanation for unprotected sex was a rationalization or whether they actually thought they could not get pregnant is uncertain; but several of the respondents or their partners seemed to think that if they had not experienced a pregnancy after a period of unprotected sexual activity, that they were unable to have children.

For these young men, early age at sexual intercourse and unprotected sex resulted in the assumption of adult roles before they were mature enough or ready financially to take on family responsibilities. Marriage under these circumstances was perceived, not as a solution to early parenthood, but as an additional burden. In most cases, negating the fatherhood role, rather than accepting the additional role of husband, was the option these young men took.

Lack of Trust

The majority of fathers interviewed were willing to accept the role of parent in their children's lives, but not the role of spouse in their partner's lives. In many cases, men were willing to provide financially for their children and to have an active role in parenting, however, they preferred to cohabit with their partner rather than marry. In general there were two primary reasons given for choosing cohabitation over marriage. Some men indicated a lack of trust in their partnership and their ability to commit to a long-term relationship. Others acknowledged their inability as a couple to work out differences and get along with each other. These men lacked confidence that the relationship could be long-term.

Many of these young men had been involved in a carefree lifestyle before becoming fathers. Some met their partners while clubbing or at parties. In some cases, when becoming fathers, they felt a commitment to their children, but did not trust their partner or themselves to be faithful or remain sexually exclusive. One young man explained why he could not see himself getting married:

Mostly I don't feel a lot of trust for women so my feeling on that is I'm not going to stand in front of another person and promise to love them the rest of my life and to be faithful and that sort of thing when I don't have trust. I think trust is a big part of love. It'd be a lie if I went before the honorable judge or priest or whatever and said, "I do" because I just don't.

In several instances, the respondent acknowledged not only his lack of trust in his partner, but also in himself to remain committed to a long-term relationship. One father talked about cohabiting with the mother of his children:

Yeah we still lived together but there was changes in our lifestyles. She was going to college at the time and we already had our little thing going on where we started getting distant from each other. Myself, I think I caused a lot of problems being so suspicious and all this. When it came down to it, we were already seeing other people but we wanted to stay together for the kid's sake.

Some respondents indicated a lack of faith in the institution of marriage; they believed that formal marriage no longer represented a commitment to one's partner over time. One father explained:

I think marriage has lost its true meaning in a relationship. I think that people have damaged the meaning of marriage so much that they're doomed to be divorced from the day they say I do . . . I think society has worn out a true meaning in relationships. Somewhere it's lost its meaning. . . To me the true meaning of marriage is to be determined to love that person through all of the commitments that it takes through bad and good and to always work on it. That marriage should be forever. It's something you chose to work with whether it goes wrong or not it's your responsibility to make it work for your family.

Fear of Divorce

Several respondents were afraid to marry, not because they did not believe in marriage, but because they were afraid of divorce. The majority of the respondents interviewed grew up in divorced families and did not want their children to experience a similar childhood. Respondents viewed divorce as more complicated than separation following cohabitation. They did not want to deal with the legal ramifications of divorce and felt it was better just to live together in case things did not work out. One father explained his choice to live with his partner rather than marry:

You know, I've been with her twelve and a half years and I don't think marriage would change anything other than if we was to separate there'd be more problems with us. You know, we'd have to go to the court, do this, do that. And right now we could just

separate and not have to go to court to get visitation rights because we don't do that. She lets me see him whenever I want to and that's fine. But like I say, if we was married, there'd be a lot more problems that could occur through that.

In general, many of the fathers reported a cohabitation history that included living with their partner and separating when problems arose, then getting back together again. Separation seemed to be a way of working out differences in these relationships. One father explained his relationship with the mother of his child:

Well, we both lived together, and I moved out when things went sour. I moved out, and for a couple of months we tried again, and I moved out again because things didn't work out. Three different times where I moved in and had to move out because she would bleach my clothes or do things... lock me out of the house for a couple of days. Things like that.

In addition, cohabitation was viewed as a way to get to know one's partner, to determine if they were compatible and right for each other before considering a long-term commitment like marriage. As one 34 year-old father of five children by four different women explained, "People need to live together before they get married. You learn a lot about somebody when you live together." Some relationships eventually ended after several trials if the couple just could not work out living together long-term. As one young man explained, "I ended up being with her for two and a half years and just... went our separate ways."

Maybe Someday

Several of the respondents were in relationships at the time of interview that they thought could result someday in marriage. Some were waiting until they finished schooling or considered themselves in a better position to marry. One young man explained he wanted to get married in "another year or so at least. Yeah, because she wants to be at a certain point; like done with a certain amount of school. I would too. I'd like to be done with my associate's at least before I get married." Some men indicated that they had talked with their partner about

getting married, but had just not gone through with it yet. “We talked about it a little bit, but we didn’t do much to make it happen,” was the way one respondent explained it. Another said they talked about marriage, but “every time we really got serious about it something [came] up and it just never really happened.”

Others were hesitant to make a formal commitment until they were sure that the relationship would last – that they had found the “right one.” One father, planning to marry his partner next year, explained:

I love her still to death. There’s time where I’ve thought it wasn’t working out. But when I’d leave, she’s all I’d think about and every time we’d get in a fight... I don’t know, there’s just something about her. Even when I first seen her, when we first made eyes, I was attracted to her. And then we went from there. But ever since my child was born, it’s made me have much more love for her. I don’t think I could ever leave her.

Another father, feeling that he had met the right partner, indicated his desire to get married after living together for more than five years and having two children together. He said:

She’s everything I need. I need to marry her. I want to grow old with her and pass on with her. I want to be with her for the rest of my life. I want to legally consummate our relationship. We’re married spiritually and have been for years. Plus I want to get married because I believe it’s the right thing to do and shows a serious desire for commitment. Your kids will all have the same last name and you become a family. . . . Society dictates that that is what you do. I need to be financially and legally tied to her and her to me. I’m getting married because I’m supposed to and because it’s the ultimate way to consummate your bond.

Two of the respondents were actually married to their partners when interviewed. One of these fathers, when asked if he was happy with his life, replied he was because “I’ve got a good job; I’ve got a son and a wife and a family.” The other father indicated that he was living with his partner when his first child was born, that “it was common law, but [then I] did make it right.” Thus, some men felt social pressure to legalize their union, particularly for their children. Others felt they had met the person they wanted to spend the rest of their life with and were expecting to marry within a year. Others were waiting until they had the resources to marry, or

to be sure the relationship would last. All of these relationships started in cohabitation, and even though many of the men indicated a desire to marry someday, the majority had still not yet formalized their union when interviewed.

Obstacles to Marriage

Overall, respondents opposed marriage in circumstances where they felt either or both partners were too young and immature to take on spousal responsibilities. However, when partners were older, most fathers were favorable toward marriage at some point in the future. At present the majority preferred cohabitation to marriage because of the unstable nature of their relationships. In particular, men seemed to be uncertain about long term commitment because they lacked financial resources as well as relationship skills. I examine each of these obstacles to marriage separately.

Beyond the teenage years, most of the fathers interviewed formed informal unions with the mothers of their children. Although considering marriage an option in the future, the majority preferred to just live together because of a high level of uncertainty in the relationship. One major factor contributing to uncertainty and instability in these informal relationships was a lack of economic resources. Many fathers indicated that financial stress and having the means to support a family were the biggest challenges they faced in family life. As one unemployed father with a GED explained, “for me, I wake up and every day that I don’t work I’m just like, Oh man, we’re broke, the bills are behind. I got to get up and do something. I got to get out and do something. But the finances is just boom... it’s always there, it’s never ending.” Additionally, as was the case with this father, many of the respondents’ financial difficulties were compounded by the need to pay child support for nonresidential children with former partners.

Several of the fathers had not had the opportunity to finish schooling much beyond high school or receiving a GED and were frustrated with the lack of job opportunities. One father with an 11th grade education shared his frustration:

I really, really want to go back to school. And for me especially it's hard for me because she claims him. It's hard for me to get financial aid or anything for school. And because I have him all the time... that's probably one of the toughest things right now. And I'm sure that if I just picked it up a little bit and started digging on that, I'd find a way... but that's just been difficult.

Financial concerns were one of the primary stresses mentioned by men influencing their ability to both parent their children and get along with their partner. Another father with a high school diploma explained that the pressure to provide for his family was “the hardest part... finances is the hardest part for me; trying to take care of them so I can take them to the doctor and the dentist, so they always have money for anything they need—is the hardest part.” In addition, several fathers noted the strain on relationships of having to live with relatives or of not having a home of their own.

In other instances, child care policies discouraged couples living together because of the financial burden. Some men moved out of the home so that their partners could receive child care assistance. As one father explained:

We were living together, but I moved out so she could still receive daycare assistance. She was getting daycare assistance for my son and they were asking for my information to get me for child support, so I decided to move out so she was able to get it. She stopped getting it for two months and was really hard for me to pay for daycare, so I moved out so she was able to get daycare assistance again.

Thus, financial challenges are a major factor influencing the lack of stability in these cohabiting unions. Without financial security, many fathers expressed concern about formalizing their relationships, and the strain of paying bills seemed to encourage conflict with their partners.

In addition to a lack of educational and occupational skills, fathers generally lacked relationship skills. Many couples appeared unable to resolve differences without conflict or separating. Some men commented on their inability to communicate with their partner and to develop a relationship of trust. One father explained why he and his partner separated:

I think it was a trust and a communication issue more than it was anything else. She wasn't able to trust me, and a lot of the communication between the both of us were not where it should have been. In any relationship, friendship, whatever, if you don't have trust and communication I don't think any kind of friendship or relationship will work.

Some of the couples chose to separate rather than fight in front of their children. Many of the respondents grew up in homes with conflict and they did not want that kind of environment for their children. Unable to resolve differences with their partner without conflict, some chose instead to separate. One young father explained why he and his partner separated and decided to split time with their son between the two households: "I don't want him to see us fighting. I don't want it to get bad or anything like that. That's what I didn't like to see. Because I saw my parents fight all the time. I don't want him to see that at all. I just want him to have a good life and be a kid."

In addition to the challenges of communicating and interacting with their partners, fathers also expressed concern about disciplining their children. In several examples, differences in discipline styles were a source of contention between men and their partners. Generally, the fathers saw themselves as more strict in terms of discipline and the mothers as too lenient. One father explained, "Every time I try to discipline [our son], she gets mad at me for him. So I really just don't say nothing no more. And she'll be pissed off at me. He can do what he wants I guess." A father planning to soon marry his partner underscored a similar challenge when he said, "Our disagreements are surrounding our learning to be parents."

Meeting the daily needs of feeding, bathing, and dressing children did not appear to be a problem for these fathers. However, several fathers were unsure about how to discipline children or help with homework. One father explained the challenge of parenting in this way:

There is no right way it just depends upon the circumstances and you try to do the best you can because you don't know what is the right way. You just do what you feel and I want them to be special. I mean, they're already special but I want them to achieve to be somebody and I don't always know if I'm doing the right thing. I just keep trying.

Another father also expressed his uncertainty in parenting, "Do I wish I had more skills in rearing my son? Yes. Do I wish I had more patience and skills in being able to sit down and understand his homework and understand some of the things he's going through now? Yes, I do."

In general fathers expressed love for their children and a desire to be good parents, but they felt unequipped to discipline and teach their children. Many mentioned that they lacked support networks to assist them in parenting. The majority of the respondents did not have close ties or relationships with their own parents and none of the fathers interviewed were actively involved in any religious organizations. Many felt they had only themselves to look to in dealing with family challenges. One father raised in foster care and state institutions explained:

I wish I had someone like a grandpa to go to. I wish I had a father figure that I could get guidance from. I don't have that. I am smart enough and I do have a good heart and I am devoted. I feel like it's me against the world. [The hardest part is] doing it alone and not being equipped. Not having a support system or other sources to draw from. The decisions I've made in my life have put me in a place to not be the best father I can be.

The stresses of meeting financial obligations and interacting as a family were often difficult for men to deal with. Fathers spoke of the challenges of managing their anger and frustration without becoming abusive. Many of them were raised in abusive homes and they did not want their children to experience the same childhood, but were unsure how to discipline and interact without verbal or physical abuse. One father noted the frustration of trying to

communicate with his son. He said, “I got a tendency to scream, but [I’m] not as verbally abusive as my parents were to me.” Another father, on his own at age 14 after living in foster care, explained that disciplining his son without anger is a big challenge for him:

I get to the point when I get all mad and I’ve learned that it’s just best to walk away because I was abused when I was a kid. All of the men I knew would beat me. That’s how I was raised. They whipped me and used a strong fist and all that kind of stuff. I wouldn’t do that to my son. There are times when he’s gotten in trouble. And, I think that there are times when a spanking is appropriate depending on the situation. The biggest thing is the fact that I tell him something and he doesn’t do it and I do the grounding and time out and I just can’t seem to get through to him about certain things. Maybe it’s his age or a number of things. That’s my biggest issue.

Finding positive ways to deal with anger and stress appeared to be a continual challenge for these fathers in maintaining positive family relationships. One of the unemployed fathers explained how his frustration and anger over finances sometimes spills over into his interactions with his son:

I’ve got to go find a punching bag or something. I have to release that energy. Most of the time when I get angry and he’s around, it isn’t him at all. It’s just anger and I just... I try to stay with him because he’s my son and I love him and try and talk to him about it, but he’s four going on five now. There’s not much you can really explain to him. It’s just exasperation. It’s not really anger, it’s exasperation. It’s like, “Ah man, come on.” It’s like the same question for the sixtieth time.

In sum, the majority of the fathers interviewed were actively involved in raising their children and providing financially for them. Although some had children from earlier relationships that they had little or no contact with, most of the fathers were currently living with or near a partner with whom they shared parenting responsibilities. In general, commitment to the children they fathered was stronger than commitment to partners. However, most of the fathers recognized the importance of two parents in the lives of their children and wanted to have a positive relationship with the mother of their children.

Many of the fathers were in cohabiting relationships interspersed with periods of separation. Respondents in general were positive toward marriage at some point in the future, but because of high levels of uncertainty in their lives preferred to cohabit with their current partner. Overall, poor financial resources and poor relationship skills, as well as difficulty managing stress and anger, made it difficult for men to develop long-term relationships and to parent their children.

Discussion and Policy Implications

From interviews with economically disadvantaged fathers, two primary conclusions regarding marriage are apparent. First, for teens or very young fathers, marriage is generally not an option. Young men unprepared to accept the responsibility of fathering children are even less prepared to accept the responsibilities of married life. As noted by the life course framework, the occurrence of life course events out of sequence can have negative consequences (Hogan, 1981; Elder, 1985). Efforts to promote marriage among these young men would likely fail. Instead, policies and program efforts are needed to inform teen parents of all options available to them in response to an unwanted pregnancy, especially when marriage is not a consideration. Both young men and young women involved in a pregnancy need to have input in determining outcomes for the child, including giving up parental rights.

Confronted with a pregnancy at a young age, some may choose adoption or giving up parental rights to the other partner. In other cases, if young fathers are expected to provide financial support, they will likely need assistance to finish school and obtain employable skills so that they can better meet child support payments and participate in shared parenting. In situations where the father takes full responsibility for his children, child care assistance will likely be needed so he can balance the demands of work and family. Young fathers report many

of the same frustrations and challenges experienced by young mothers, but feel less social support. Policy makers need to consider and address the challenges of teen parenting, not only for young women, but also for young men.

Greater efforts are needed to educate young people regarding reproduction. Youth need to better recognize the likelihood of pregnancy when engaging over time in unprotected sex. In addition, sex education curriculum in public schools should make stronger linkages between engaging in sexual activity and the consequences of early parenting. It appears from the interviews that young people need more opportunities to think through the consequences and responsibilities of sexual activity. In addition to curriculum on responsible sexual behavior, courses could include family life education and parenting. Policy makers and educators need to better prepare young people to avoid early parenthood, and to provide greater support if unwanted births occur.

Beyond adolescence, most young men who became fathers were committed to their children and wanted to be actively involved in their lives. In addition, they recognized the contribution of both mothers and fathers to child well-being. Stability in family relationships, however, was heavily challenged by a lack of economic resources and interaction skills. As noted by the life course perspective, a lack of financial resources produces role strain upon men. Such strain can be overcome by either increasing resources or by denying familial obligations. For low-income men, the latter is often a more viable option.

Past studies suggest that low-income couples would marry if they had the resources (Seltzer, 2000). Marriage may help promote stability and encourage long-term commitment among partners, but without economic stability and positive interaction skills, even marriages are not likely to last. The majority of men in this study ultimately wanted marriage and positive

family relationships, but did not have the skills or resources to make it happen. Support systems in the community to help them were very weak.

In order for these fragile families to experience greater stability and long-term commitment, policy efforts need to address three critical deficiencies. First, greater opportunities and support to further their education and job options are needed so that men can better provide financially for their families. Greater access to child care assistance, loans for school, work training programs, and so forth are needed for single fathers, whether they are living alone or with their partners. Couples that attempt to live together and share financial and child care responsibilities should not be penalized and forced to maintain separate households. Again, policies need to consider the needs of not only low-income mothers, but also low-income fathers.

Second, young parents need opportunities to learn parenting and communication skills. In particular, they need to learn positive ways to discipline and interact with their children. In addition, communication, decision-making, and conflict-resolution skills are needed so that couples can work through differences without having to leave the household. The low-income fathers interviewed in this study were anxious to learn how to be better fathers and to provide a positive environment for their children. They seemed less motivated to work through differences with their partners. However, it appears that fathers would respond positively to parenting classes and family interaction education if they felt it would help their children. Community centers and elementary schools could offer family and parenting classes, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. Child care for such classes could be provided to encourage attendance. Other state assistance programs such as daycare assistance could also be tied to participation in parenting/family classes.

Finally, counseling or anger management skills are needed so that young men do not perpetuate the patterns of abuse they experienced as children. Counseling or anger management instruction could be presented alongside parenting classes. Policy makers and community leaders need to look closely at ways to educate and support young men in their efforts to be actively involved in the lives of their children and committed to their partners. Policies are needed to encourage marriage but not punish cohabiting couples. Young adults, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, need better training in both employment skills and family interaction skills, in order to form committed, marital relationships. Without such preparation, they are likely to continue to remain in unstable, cohabitating unions.

These conclusions are based upon only 37 interviews with low-income fathers in one metropolitan area. Further research is needed to better understand the needs of economically disadvantaged families. To the extent possible, nationally representative studies are needed to determine the generalizability of this study's findings. However, if single, disadvantaged men continue to be under-represented in national surveys, this may not be feasible. Replication of this study in other localities nationally could also provide support for these findings, as well as increase confidence in their generalizability. Conclusions drawn from these in-depth interviews identify challenges faced by low-income fathers, but more research is required to determine the breadth of these concerns.

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