Title
Understanding Relational Experiences of Low-Income, Cohabiting Parents: A Qualitative Investigation

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Publication Date
2019

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Understanding Relational Experiences of Low-Income, Cohabiting Parents: A Qualitative Investigation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Social Welfare

by

Ioana Dana Schmidt

2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understanding Relational Experiences of Low-Income, Cohabiting Parents:

A Qualitative Investigation

by

Ioana Dana Schmidt

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Laura S. Abrams, Chair

Background and Aims: Unmarried, cohabiting couples account for an increasing number of childbirths in the United States today. These relationships generally face different challenges than those of married couples. Because of their heightened risk for economic and social problems and family dissolution, these disadvantaged, unmarried parents have been called "fragile families." While previous studies have focused on the stressors and challenges these families face, this study uniquely uses an ecological framework to understand the strengths and protective factors that help these couples sustain their relationships over time.

Methods: This qualitative secondary data analysis study uses couple interviews collected as part of the Time, Love, Cash, Caring and Children Study, an intensive longitudinal study of a subset of 49 couples who had non-marital births across three cities, Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York. This dissertation focuses on the couples (N=12) in the study who maintained their

relationships over the 4-year course of the study. This study also selected negative cases (N=2) \ to test emerging hypothesis and patterns.

Results: The analysis revealed multiple ecosystem levels impacting the couples, although the level emphasized most heavily was the dyad, specifically relational strategies and commitment. At the interpersonal level, couples described strengths of active fathers, effective communication, and teamwork around managing finances. In terms of social support, couples benefitted from two forms of support primarily from family: intangible and emotional help, such as free childcare, and tangible support in the form of financial assistance. At the contextual level, these low-income couples emphasized the importance of neighborhood safety and recreation as well as availability of certain public assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). This study highlights the ecological and interpersonal factors that may be important in sustaining relationships for low-income, cohabitating couples over time. Implications for social work practice, policy and future research are discussed.

The dissertation of Ioana Dana Schmidt is approved.

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EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Today, nearly 40 percent of all children are born to unmarried couples. The percentage of non-martial births is even higher among African American and Hispanic couples, at 72 percent and 53 percent, respectively (Hamilton et al., 2013; Lundberg, Pollack & Stearns, 2016). The more economically disadvantaged couples are, the more likely they are to be unmarried when their children are born (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Some scholars have adopted the term "fragile family" to describe unmarried parents who are raising their children together as a couple (see, for example McLanahan, Haskins, & Donahue, 2005; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997). This study will focus on heterosexual, unwed parents who are residing together at the time of the child's birth, also called cohabiting couples (Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Although the majority of these parents plan to eventually marry, their relationships tend to be relatively short in duration, with 63% of couples experiencing relationship dissolution within five years of the child's birth (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Smock & Manning, 1995). Data suggests that approximately 15% of children born to cohabiting mothers experience the end of their parents' union by age 1, half by age 5, and two thirds by age 10. For children born to married couples, instability is much less, with only 4% and 15% experiencing their parents' separation by ages 1 and 5, respectively, and roughly 28% by age 10 (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004). As the well-being of children depends heavily on the stability of the family setting, policy makers have become increasingly concerned about the prevalence and temporary relationships of unmarried parents (Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010)

Out of wedlock childbearing is commonly defined as a social problem contributing to family instability and compromised child development (Coley, 2001). Specifically, compared with children who grow up in families with married partners, children born outside marriage

reach adulthood with lower educational attainment, income, and occupational status. They are also more likely to be disconnected as adults (meaning not employed and not in school), have non-marital births (particularly daughters), encounter marital difficulties and higher rates of divorce, and report more symptoms of depression (Amato, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). However, some research has indicated that fathers' greater involvement in childrearing (in the forms of time spent and closeness to the child) can benefit children both directly, as evidenced by improvements on behavioral and psychological measures, as well as indirectly through the greater emotional support that father-child contacts provide to mothers (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Jackson et al., 2000; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). For adolescents, the presence of a highly involved father is associated with lower rates of externalizing behavioral problems, including aggression and antisocial behavior, as well as lower levels of delinquent behavior (Carlson, 2006). Efforts to encourage marriage are grounded in family scholarship on children's living arrangements and their relationship to well-being (Brown, 2010). Yet, little is known about the quality of unmarried parent relationships compared to what is known about relationship quality among married couples with children (Brown, 2010). The dynamics of family experiences are complex and call for a greater understanding of both individual diversity as well as structural factors that may be contributing to family outcomes (Brown, 2010).

Furthermore, race and ethnicity are particularly salient for understanding family processes within cohabitation. This is because there are pronounced racial and ethnic differences in the outcomes of childbearing unions and the likelihood of having or raising children in a cohabiting relationship (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning & Smock, 1995). Among all cohabiting

couples, 35% of White cohabitators, 54% of black cohabitators, and nearly 60% of Hispanic cohabitators have children present in the household (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

Partnership instability is especially pronounced among low-income populations and racial/ethnic minorities (Ventura & Bachrach 2000), suggesting changes in family processes may differentially affect low-income and ethnic minority families, thereby exacerbating race and class disparities (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Further, researchers have linked non-marital cohabitation at birth to greater risk of late instability relative to parents who are married at birth (Osborne& McLanahan, 2007). Family instability is associated with increased anxious, depressive, and aggressive behaviors in young children (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007).

There is also growing evidence concerning the important role that human capital characteristics (i.e. employment and education) and family relationships (between, e.g., fathers and mothers, grandmothers, and others) play in affecting fathers' behavior and involvement with their children (Coley, 2001). For example, research has indicated that the quality of the mother-father relationship affects involvement of unmarried fathers with their children (McLoyd, 1990). Studies that focus on understanding everyday concerns in this population can ultimately help sustain and strengthen these relationships so that the co-parenting bond can be maintained throughout changes in the couple's relationship (see, for example, Edin et al., 2004).

Although the scope and rigor of scholarship on co-parenting and relationships in unmarried couples is currently expanding, substantial gaps in the knowledge base remain (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Prior research on the meanings of cohabitation and unmarried parenting falls short in providing the details needed to understand the relationships that unmarried parents forge and maintain (Reed, 2006). The majority of academic work on parents has focused on married and middle-class samples. There is far less information about low-income, unmarried

parents' perspectives and a greater need to expand the conceptual and empirical knowledge base featuring both parents' voices (Coley, 2001; Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008). Further, in analyzing strengths, it is beneficial to place these relationships within the context of larger systems and complex social relationships.

Qualitative research on unmarried parents has examined reasons for postponing marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & Mclanahan, 2005); and has described a prevalent gender distrust fueled by suspected infidelity and the sometimes-reality of multi-partner fertility (Edin, England, & Linnenburg, 2003). Further, one key study explained that cohabiting parents often move in together as a practical response to their own unanticipated situations as new parents, but they do not feel compelled to marry simply due to having a child together (Reed, 2006). This research, although richly descriptive, tends to almost exclusively address the problematic aspects of unmarried couples (Roy, 2009).

In sum, low-income and ethnic minority parents are more likely to be in cohabiting relationships and more likely to have children out of wedlock than their higher income and white counterparts. A substantial gap exists in our understanding of how low-income, unmarried parents relate to each other as well as how larger contextual systems influence these relationships. Although there is some work on risk factors within these "fragile families," little qualitative research exists that examines the strategies that contribute to successful relationships (i.e., maintaining stable and positive relationships) over time (Roy, 2009). Studies that focus on understanding strengths and resources in those couples with lasting relationships can ultimately help inform policies and practice interventions aimed at supporting these families and their children.

The current study will explore how heterosexual, low-income parent cohabitators negotiate their relationships, placing these dyads in their social and environmental contexts. Overall, this study will deepen our understanding of relational processes in unmarried, low-income parents. This can ultimately help inform research seeking to understand the strengths and relational dynamics of unmarried parents as well as how to support these families in maintaining positive relationships across time.

Purpose

The overarching purpose of this study is to understand how low-income, unmarried parents and navigate their relationships over time within their relevant ecological contexts. The study considered the following research questions:

1. What relational strategies, individual characteristics, and patterns shape parenting and partnering among low-income, cohabiting parents over time?
2. How do low-income, cohabiting couples employ social supports and community resources in order to sustain their relationships over time?

These questions are informed by a conceptual framework and theoretical assumptions based in an ecological perspective. This framework will be presented in detail in chapter 3. These research questions were addressed using qualitative data collected through the Time, Love, ad Cash in Couples with Children Study (TLC3), a qualitative, longitudinal intensive interview study of 48 low-income, unmarried and 26 married couples who had a child together in 2000. This study focused on a sample of 12 unmarried couples who maintained their relationship throughout the course of the study and 2 who did not remain together, from 2000 to 2005. Ecological and family systems theories helped inform this secondary qualitative data by a set of working assumptions. These assumptions, derived from theory and prior research, include:

1. Within the co-parental dyad, relational strengths, as such commitment, shared cooperation and flexibility, communication skills, and trust in one another will be critical to lasting relationships

    1b. These qualities may buffer against adversity and individual struggles.

2. Social support in the form of emotional, instrumental, or tangible support form family and friends will enhance social integration and serve a buffering effect, helping low-income couples overcome stresses and challenges.

Factors at the community level are related both to social support, as well as to the availability of resources such as schools, churches, and other agencies that can foster resilience and opportunities in both the couple and as well as the dyad.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 describes the relevant literature that has previously examined low-income parents' relationships and multi-systemic factors that influence them. Chapter 3 defines the theoretical approaches-the ecological perspective and family systems theory- that were used in this study and explains their utility. Next, this chapter presents a conceptual model that will guide the deductive qualitative analytic method. Chapter 4 describes the methodology of this study including description of the data, management, and analysis. Chapter 5 details the study's main findings and explains the major themes that emerged from the data. Chapter 6 discusses the major findings of the study and its contributions to the existing literature and development of knowledge concerning low-income, unmarried parents' relationships. Chapter 6 closes by providing implications for policy, practice, and research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter is comprised of four components. The first part reviews empirical data related to factors that influence the relationships between unmarried parents. The second part summarizes research on the influence of social support for intimate relationships more generally, as there is little research on cohabiting couples specifically. The third part reviews studies examining the relationships between neighborhood and community contexts and family functioning. The chapter concludes with a summary of knowledge that is pertinent to this study.

Factors Important in Couple Relationships

Existing literature has identified several mechanisms through which marriage promotes well-being, such as emotional support, health, life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Robles et. al., 2014). However, the extent to which the benefits of marriage extend to cohabiting unions is not entirely clear, and likely depends on the nature of the union (Manning and Smock 2002; Musick and Bumpass, 2012). As cohabitation is considered to be a less committed relationship and it is less institutionalized than marriage, it may not award the same benefits as marriage in terms of economic resources, familial support, and relationship quality, which may weaken the stability of the union (Osborne, Manning & Smock, 2007). Findings from the Fragile Families study indicate that cohabiting unions are less stable than marital unions union (Osborne, Manning & Smock, 2007). However, little research specifically examines strengths that promote relationship stability in low-income, cohabiting parents. Scholars have recently began to examine whether cohabiting unions, especially those that are of longer duration and involve children, may provide the same advantages for health and well-being as marriage (Perilli-Harris et. al., 2017).

In married couples, dynamics related to communication, conflict, and commitment may be central in large part because of the ways in which each contributes to a sense of safety in

intimate relationships. In this view, safety can be divided into two broad categories: safety in interaction and safety in commitment, or relationship security (Stanley, Blumberg & Markman, 1999). In a mostly white sample of engaged, cohabiting, and married heterosexual couples, individuals who reported higher levels of commitment were less likely to report thinking seriously about alternative partners, less likely to report feeling trapped, and more likely to report being satisfied with their relationships (Stanley, Markman, Whitton, 2002). Further, partners who share a high level of dedication by placing the needs of a partner and relationship at high priority and being willing to sacrifice for one another report a strong desire for a long-term future together (Whitton, Stanley, Markman, 2007).

Researchers have conceptualized commitment along different dimensions related to factors that originate in the relationship itself or are imposed from outside the relationship. Endogenous commitment factors derived from the couple members themselves can include personal commitment (Johnson, 1991). Exogenous commitment factors derived from outside of the relationship can include structural commitment or external include from close others.

Commitment also involves affective, cognitive, and conative components (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). The first component, psychological attachment to the relationship, refers to the affective connection that develops between committed partners (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). The second component involves a cognitive assumption that the relationship will remain intact in the distant future (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). The third component, intention to persist in the relationship, is a state of being intrinsically motivated to continue a relationship beyond the present tine (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). In a mostly White sample of young (mean age 19) couples who reportedly "dating steadily," each of the three components of commitment described above was positively associated with couple functioning (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001).

The authors of this study suggest that these are individual characteristics of persons who remain in committed relationships. However, it is also possible that these are characteristics that develop and strengthen as a result of staying in a committed relationship. This research studied college-age, mostly White, heterosexual couples in relationships for relatively short lengths of time, and points to the need for exploring factors contributing to commitment, and relatedly, relationship success in racially diverse, low-income couples.

Furthermore, an individual's assessment of relationship quality is related to partner responsiveness (Reis & Gable, 2015). Responsiveness is defined as perceiving one's partner understands, validates, and behaviorally supportive of the other's core needs and values (Reis & Gable, 2015). This can be especially crucial during major relational events or conflicts, and constructive responses are related to both relational conflict and stability. Communication processing such as active empathy and a sense of shared meaning have been linked to a actual and perceived responsiveness (Reis & Gable, 2015). Existing scholarship provides strong evidence that marriage and divorce are correlated with economic well-being. Studies have demonstrated that the occurrence and stability of marriage are linked to more positive economic circumstances; however, the direction of these relationships is not entirely clear. It is well known that individuals with higher education and better economic prospects are more likely to become married, to stay married, and to have children within marriage (Carlson, McLanahan & England 2004). Studies also suggest that the male partners' economic well-being (as measured by indicators such as earnings, education, or employment) is positively associated with the transition to marriage among cohabitators (Manning & Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 2003). Indeed, financial concerns and low relationship quality are the most commonly listed barriers to

marriage among lower-income couples (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Without adequate resources, low-income couples may be reluctant to become more committed.

In a sample of mostly White, married couples, economic pressure was associated with emotional distress (symptoms of depression, anxiety, and hostility) for both husbands and wives (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999). This increase in emotional distress was positively related to conflict in the marriage, which, in turn, led to relatively greater marital distress over time. Conger and colleagues (2002) posit that when economic pressure is high, romantic partners are at increased risk for emotional distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, anger, and alienation) and for behavioral problems (e.g., substance use and antisocial behavior). Angry responses to economic pressure are expected to increase couple conflict and despondency which is expected to lead to withdrawal of supportive behaviors and reductions in pleasurable interactions (Conger et. al., 2002). This highlights the ways in which economic factors place stress in couple relationships and decrease relationship quality.

Scholars have also explored how economic factors play an important role in perceived relationship quality among cohabiting couples. Specifically, research has indicated that economic well-being, as measured by family earnings, improve positive measures of relationship quality, as measured self-reports of affection and overall relationship quality among unmarried couples (Hardie & Lucas, 2010). In cohabiting couples, the likelihood of long-term relationships decreases as household income increases (Wu & Pollard, 2000). Further, economic hardships can play a role in instigating couple conflict in both unmarried and married couples (Hardie & Lucas, 2010). Economic hardship is related to greater relationship discord in unmarried couples with children (Willams, Cheadle & Goosby, 2013). Specifically, during times of economic hardship, mothers view fathers as more reactive and less favorable relational partners, which, in

turn, weakens a mother's commitment to the relationship, as measured by relationship distress (Willams, Cheadle & Goosby, 2013). Thus, economic circumstances play a role both in relationship formation as well as couple dynamics among unmarried couples.

As the existing research on cohabiting is focused on relationship formation, there is a notable lack of work on commitment and other family processes, often studied in married couples, that may contribute to lasting relationships for cohabitating couples (Stanley, Rhoades, Markman, 2006; Rinelli, 2010). Further, researchers have theorized that cohabitation plays a different role in the family formation process across race and ethnic groups; African Americans and Mexican Americans reportedly view cohabitation as more of an alternative to marriage, whereas Whites consider cohabitation as a step toward marriage or trial status for their relationship (Manning & Landale, 1996; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). Other analyses using the Fragile Families study data have also noted that relationship quality decreases after the birth of a child and have shown that this decrease is stronger for cohabiting couples than those who were married at birth, and that it persists through the child's fifth year (Carlson, 2007). Another Fragile Families study found that relationship supportiveness reported by both parents one year after the child's birth is significantly correlated with relationship dissolution (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Lower levels of emotional supportiveness at one year significantly increased the chances that the couple would end the relationship by the time their child was five years old (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

An additional study conducted with the Fragile Families data found that among both married and unmarried low-income parents, emotional support can protect against the likelihood of separation (Osborne, Manning & Smock, 2007). Further, couples who reported higher household income, better relationship quality, and parents who have another child within 3 years

of the focal child's birth have a significantly lower risk of separation (Osborne, Manning & Smock, 2007). Scholars studying unmarried parents argue that the symbolic commitment of father involvement, especially for unmarried couples, may be associated with a greater level of union stability or with transitions to marriage (McClain, 2010). Indeed, another study using data from cohabitating parents in the Fragile Families study, found that father involvement and co-parenting were associated with lower odds of separation (McClain, 2010). Fathers who are more involved with their children are likely to remain in long term unions with mothers but not necessarily transition to marriage (McClain, 2010).

In another study from the Fragile Families study, co-parenting style was found to be related to level of father engagement (Waller, 2012). Cooperative co-parenting was defined as sharing of parenting responsibilities while supporting each other and keeping conflict low (Waller, 2012). The four co-parenting categories utilized in analyses, were cooperative (high cooperation, low conflict), disengaged (low cooperation, low conflict), conflicted (low cooperation, high conflict), and mixed (high cooperation, high conflict) parenting (Waller, 2012). Specifically, fathers in families with disengaged or conflicted co-parenting styles spent significantly less time with their 3-year-olds than those in families with cooperative co-parenting styles (Waller, 2012). Some scholars have posited that father involvement and co-parenting in Fragile Families may be representative of commitment to the mother and family (McClain, 2011). Further, higher rates of father involvement and co-parenting are associated with lower likelihood of relationship dissolution (McClain, 2011). These findings highlight the ways in which family processes are central to maintaining union stability in low-income, cohabiting parents over time.

Taken together, the current literature highlights a host of factors that appear to contribute to successful relationships among both married and unmarried couples. These can include factors internal to the couple relationship, such as commitment, communication, trust, and co-parenting. However, structural factors, such as economics, race and ethnicity, and the decision to marry or cohabit appear to play an important role as well. This body of research also illustrates how relationship stability and success is a multi-dimensional process; this is likely magnified in low-income, ethnically diverse, cohabiting couples.

Social Support

Social support requires social relationships, which have the potential to provide emotional resources to individuals. One composite definition of social support resulting from a critical appraisal of the existing literature includes: emotional expression which may sustain an individual in the short or long term; instrumental emotional support which may help an individual master their emotional burdens; coherence support which may be overt or covert information resulting in confidence in an individual's preparation for a life event or transition; validation which may result in an individual feeling someone believes in them; and inclusion which may result in a sense of belonging (Williams, 2005). Social support can also include assistance with material resources such as the provision of goods, money or tools, skill or labor resources, time resources such as when one provides companionship, accompaniment or extended care, and cognitive resources which may be direct or indirect cognitive guidance, usually regarding a specific problem (Williams, 2005).

There is a significant gap in the research about how both married and unmarried parents' relationships are influenced by social relationships outside of the dyad, though some work has focused on the importance of the interparental relationship as a source of social support (Howard

& Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Scholars have examined the positive role of social support in relation to low-income, single mothers (McLanahan, & Sandefur, 1994). Emotional and practical support from extended family members and friends may enhance maternal behavior by protecting against depression and fostering positive parent–child relations (McLoyd, 1990, 1998). Mothers with higher levels of social support are generally more nurturing and consistent in their parenting and less likely to use punitive strategies such as scolding (McLoyd, 1990). Instrumental support may enhance parenting behavior by providing parents with additional resources for child-care assistance, emotional guidance, and economic support (Taylor, 2011).

To gain a better understanding of relationships in low-income, unmarried parents, research must consider the social resources available to support and strengthen them (Goodwin, 2003). Social resources, such as positive relations with extended family members and connections to social networks through religious institutions, are beneficial because they increase the size of the couples' networks that are available for support and guidance (Goodwin, 2003). As the research specifically examining how social support influences couple relationships among cohabiting and married parents is limited, this discussion will also address existing research regarding the beneficial effects of social support. Researchers have conceptualized social support as a resource that protects individuals from potential negative effects of stressful situations (Cobb, 1976). Thus, the notion that supportive social relationships help individuals cope with negative circumstances may also extend to low-incomes couple relationships.

One study of young, heterosexual, couples in dating relationships found that couples whose social networks are composed of a higher proportion of friends common to both members report higher commitment, relationship satisfaction, and investment (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001). Moreover, couples whose social networks consisted of a higher number of

common friends were significantly less likely to end their relationship six months later (Agnew, Loving, Drigotas, 2001). The authors conclude that social networks can have an important impact on the success of failure of a relationship.

One qualitative study of low-income, African American women and their sources of social support resulted in a theory of support called "Mutual Intentionality" (Coffman & Ray, 2001). The theme "Being There" summarized the women's definition of support. Being There meant that "the support giver was available and willing to provide help when needed" (p. 479). Other constructs emerging from the data were caring, respecting, sharing information, knowing, believing in, and doing for (Coffman & Ray, 2001). Women described the ways in which these supportive relationships enhanced their well-being and positively impacted their social relationships. Although the impact on the couple relationships is not specifically discussed, the authors note that social support is both a process and an outcome and serves to improve interpersonal relationships (Coffman & Roy, 2001).

Broadly, social support may help facilitate coping and adaptation by buffering against life stress associated with poverty (Cobb, 1976). This explanation is part of the buffering model of social support, which states that social support protects individuals from the harmful effects of stressful events and facilitates coping (Stewart, 1993). Others have proposed that social support serves as a buffer of stress by providing emotional support, informational support, self-esteem support, social companionship, and instrumental support (Cohen & Willis, 1985).

The context of the support is also important. Perception of available support, quality of actual support received, and a match between an individual's support needs and actual support provided are also important determinants of the buffering effect of social support (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Uchino, Carlisle, Birmingham, and Vaughn (2011) proposed three contextual

processes or received support to be effective: (1) task-related factors such as the type of support and its match to the needs associated with distinct stressor, (2) recipient-related factors like whether one has chosen to receive the support, and (3) provider-related factors such as the quality of the relationship. Kelly et al. (2000), utilizing an ecological perspective, described processes of reciprocity, networking, and communication within social settings and establishing relationships with outside systems as a means to establish links between settings. This conceptualization illustrates the ways in which social resources can serve an integration function beyond the family system. These diverse forms of support can likely also impact the co-parenting relationship.

Goodwin (2003) argued that social resources, such as positive relations with in-laws and connections to religious organizations are beneficial in married couples because the increase the size of the couples' networks that are available for support and guidance. In a married sample of both African American and White married couples, positive relations with in-laws were associated with higher levels of well-being only among African American wives (Goodwin, 2003). Other research conducted with African American couples indicates the importance of strong family ties for support and guidance; relationships with in-laws are likely to influence couple functioning (Goodwin, 2003). Some scholars suggest that kinship social support is an important feature of family relations in African American homes as it may influence child-rearing practices and moderate the impact of stressful experiences on family relations (Taylor, 2010). Thus, research highlights the diverse impact social relationships can have on experiences of dating and married couples, although there is a notable lack of scholarship focusing specifically on racially and ethnically diverse cohabiting parents.

Neighborhood Context and Community Resources

Factors beyond the dyad also exert a powerful influence on unmarried parents' relationships. Conditions in neighborhoods and community settings are associated with families' functioning, opportunities, satisfactions, and commitments (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). The term community can be viewed as a social rather than a geographic unit, but the concept of neighborhood implies local communities that are bounded spatially (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 2002). Neighborhoods are unevenly distributed into areas of concentrated poverty and affluence, often in association with racial or ethnic minority status (Massey & Denton, 1993). Economic stratification by race and residence contributes to the neighborhood concentration of cumulative forms of disadvantage, intensifying the social isolation of low income, minority, and single-parent families from resources (Massey & Denton, 1993). Disadvantaged families face many challenges, including housing that is either inadequate or unaffordable, crowding, and high rates of crime. These conditions can produce environments that interfere with family processes and increase their risk for adverse effects, including dissolution of the couple (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998). Conversely, meaningful resources in a community can make a positive difference in the everyday life of residents (Caughy, O'Campo, & Brodsky 1999). Although there is no published literature directly addressing the effects of neighborhood contexts on low-income, cohabiting couples, research on neighborhood effects suggests environmental conditions and community resources can strongly influence fragile families (Sampson, Morenoff, Earls, 1999).

According to Wilson (1996), the long-term socioeconomic and marital prospects of residents of socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods become compromised because of high rates of joblessness, poor systems of education, and residential instability within the community. Individual socioeconomic status must be considered in light of the structural

features of the communities in which they reside (Silver, Mulvey, & Swanson, 2002). The absence of community resources appears to be an important consequence of impoverishment in poor neighborhoods, and ethnographic interviews of community residents reveal that the absence of resources is keenly felt. Residents of low-income communities have described feeling insulted by a lack of convenient services, such as banks and post offices, and also described a shortage of safe public areas for children to play (Korbin & Coulton, 1997). The simple existence of community services (such as hospitals or businesses that provide jobs) may be important to well-being, and community resources that focus on welfare may vary in how well they support disadvantaged families (Shinn & Toohey, 2003).

Community participation may be associated with resources that influence quality of the relationship in low-income, unmarried parents. Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) propose that one mediating mechanism may be the availability and quality of resources such as social and recreational activities, childcare, schools, medical services, and opportunities for employment. However, scant research has examined the effects of community integration on couple relationships. One study examined participation in and affective resources associated with activities of married parents based on three aspects of community: the local community as a whole, the neighborhood as a small, geographically based area, and friends who serve as a major source of informal, nonfamily interaction (Voydanoff, 2005). Affective community resources based on community integration can include sense of community, neighborhood attachment, and support from friends. Findings indicated that when an individual's sense of community, neighborhood attachment, and support from friends are high, marital satisfaction is increased and marital risk is reduced (Voydanoff, 2005).

Additionally, scholars have argued that neighborhood institutional and social conditions are key factors that contribute to resilience in the face of structural and economic disadvantage (Connell & Aber, 1995). Exposure to healthy neighborhood institutions (such as churches and schools, among others) and positive role models may have a social contagion effect, whereby positive social influence is spread. Moreover, these community resources provide the infrastructure through which parents can meet the social and educational needs of their children. Schools and other institutions such as Boys and Girls Clubs and Little Leagues provide opportunities to link children to caring adults in neighborhoods where adult supervision and alternate activities are scarce (Connell & Aber, 1995).

In sum, access to and involvement in community activities may ameliorate some of the risks associated with living in a poor neighborhood for low-income, unmarried parents as well as providing resources for advancement. Sense of community has been related to positive outcomes in students, individuals in work settings, as well as at risk-adolescents (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). It may buffer some of the effects of economic and emotional stress (Maton, 1989). Although there is no published literature specifically addressing the effects of neighborhood context and community resources on low-income, unmarried couples, overall, the above scholarly work suggests such neighborhood effects might be an important source both of both stress and support for fragile families.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented relevant literature regarding the factors that help unmarried parents stay together in a relationship, the potential significance of social support in the lives of low-income unmarried parents, and the relevance of neighborhood context in the lives of low-income parents. Broadly, studies have found that cohabiting, low-income couples may be

particularly vulnerable to relational challenges. Cohabiting relationships are more likely to be characterized by instability and lower relational quality than marital relationships, and cohabiting couples with children, on average, tend to be more socioeconomically disadvantaged than married couples with children (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). However, research indicates that neighborhood contexts and social support may have a buffering effect against individual and relational outcomes in both married and unmarried couples. The availability of community resources and involvement with community organizations can have a positive impact on low-income families with small children. Additionally, social support may help reduce parental distress and increase low-income individuals' coping abilities. These findings are relevant to this study in highlighting the significance of environmental context in the lives of low-income, unmarried couples. Although they may face increased challenges due to living in poverty, the availability of community and social resources may serve as a significant strength in allowing parents to better cope with some of these challenges and as a result, persevere in their relationships with one another.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The previous chapter reviewed the empirical literature examining factors relevant to the relationship between unmarried, parents' relationships, neighborhood context, and social support. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the relevance of the ecological and family systems perspectives to this study. The first part focuses on Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, second part of this chapter describes family systems theory, and third component presents an integrated framework or model that will be used to formulate this study's working hypotheses.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Perspective

Multiple contexts influence the course of a person's development and relationships over time. A human ecological perspective presupposes that all living systems have some processes and properties in common; human ecosystems are a particular kind of living system comprised of humans in interaction with their environment (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). In an ecosystem, the parts and wholes are interdependent (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the dyad, or two-person system, as a reciprocal familial relationship that is influenced by other family members, neighbors, friends, employers, and other components of the community and society. He further defined development as the "person's evolving conception of the ecological environment…as well as the person's capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties" (1979, p. 9). Each individual is dynamic and changing, and if one member of the dyad undergoes a development change, this usually triggers change or adaptation in the other member.

Further, Bronfenbrenner viewed the individual as a growing, dynamic entity that continuously interacts with and restructures his or her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is a bidirectional relationship, characterized by reciprocity of influence between the individual and his or her environment. Environments do not exclusively determine human behavior but pose limitations and constraints as well as possibilities and opportunities for individuals and families (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Theorists assume that proximal processes, or the processes operating in different ecological contexts, are interrelated. Proximal processes are characterized not only by reciprocal interaction but also by their occurrence on a fairly regularly basis over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Proximal processes can occur between parents and children and between mothers and resident and nonresident fathers. Moreover, according to the person-process-context model, the biopsychosocial characteristics of the individual, the immediate and distant environments in

which the proximal processes occur, and the developmental time being examined all determine the efficiency of proximal processes. Specifically, a person's traits, including demand, resource, and force characteristics influence proximal processes. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) defined demand characteristics as physical traits such as gender, age, and race. Resource characteristics are less readily visible and relate to mental and emotional resources such as past experiences, skills, and intelligence and also to social and material resources (access to good nutrition, housing, caring family, and educational opportunities). Finally, force characteristics are those that have to do with personal differences in temperament, motivation, and persistence. Individuals may passively affect their context simply through their presence, or more actively through a personal drive or force characteristics.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) described the contexts that influence people's lives as concentric spheres, where the smallest sphere of the nuclear family is encircled by the larger sphere of extended family and friendship networks, which is, in turn, contained within the social context of neighborhood and local institutions, which is further contained within the economic, social, educational, and legal systems of the culture. Individuals and couples are influenced by interactions within multiple levels of systems. Microsystems consist of immediate settings in which a person interacts often (but not always) on a daily basis, as well as subjective meanings attached to these interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Activities, roles, and interpersonal relations are the three factors that constitute elements, or building blocks, of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, microsystems include contacts between parents, their children, as well as close family members and friends. A critical component of the microsystem is the way the individual experiences or perceives his or her system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Drawing on the phenomenological tradition of the study of human consciousness,

Bronfenbrenner argued, “the aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are overwhelmingly those that have meaning to the person in a given situation” (1979, p. 22).

Kurt Lewin’s (1939) field theory defined the “life space” as one’s social and physical environment as well as the person’s psychological environment. The psychological environment is the environment as the person perceives it and understands it, and can include needs, motivations, goals, and (Lewin, 1939). Drawing on these concepts, Bronfenbrenner emphasized the person’s subjective experience and internal meanings of his or her physical and social environment, as well as the influence of these various levels of the environment on a person’s motivations and behaviors (1979). Environments can be characterized as subjectively experienced, and the family and its individual members perceive, interpret, and create meaning on the basis of their needs, values, and goals (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Furthermore, events or experiences in one setting, or microsystem, initiate behavioral patterns and activities in the developing person that can be carried over to his or her interactions in other settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For unmarried couples, this means one parent’s interactions or experiences at church or interactions with another community resources may shape the relationship with the other parent who does not participate in these settings.

Mesosystems are composed of connections between or among two or more microsystems that contain the person. For mothers, these might include not only their relations with fathers, their children, their friends, but also social service agencies, employment settings, and their children’s schools. For unmarried fathers, mesosystems might also include law enforcement agencies and other relations that do not necessarily include the mothers. These mesosystems can serve as risk factors or protective factors for the individual and play a critical role in relational

outcomes. Exosystems refer to processes between or among two or more settings, only one of which contains the focal individual. One such relevant relationship to this study is between unmarried fathers and other women with whom they may be involved and have children. Another example may be relations between mothers or fathers, employment attachments, or family attachments that involve only one of the parents, but affect the couple relationship.

The macro-system includes broad cultural values and belief systems that interact with the microsystem and exosystem levels, such as attitudes toward gender roles or individuals of certain races. The exosystem level frames all of the dynamics of families is the historical context as it occurs within the different systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989*)*. Bronfennbrenner (1979) defines second-order effects as the indirect influence of third parties on the interaction between two individuals in a dyad. Applied to low-income parents, this concept highlights the ways in which family members or friends might influence the couple relationship. He further stated that the ability of a dyad to function well is dependent on the existence of other, mutually positive relations with third parties.

From a person-in-environment perspective, the social and structural contexts that shape interpersonal relationships within low-income unmarried couples warrant attention. Low-income parents often live in environments fraught with disadvantage, yet many are able to draw on individual and community resources in order to overcome adversity and maintain a stable family to raise their children. In order to better understand the dynamics between these parents, it is necessary to interpret both across relationship strengths as well as challenges as arising in part due to factors beyond the individual dyad. Macrosystem factors such as classism and racism may influence the mother-father expectations with their intimate relationships as well as their ability to parent together. At the micro level, factors influencing the parental relationship can

include both the parents themselves as well as positive or negative interference from extended family members. A deeper understanding of these complex dynamics allows researchers to better grasp the relational experiences of low-income, unmarried parents, and, in turn, how these experiences influence their co-parenting and children's' developmental trajectories.

Family Systems Theory

A systems approach to studying families is also useful in exploring issues related to low-income unmarried parents. Similar to ecological theory, this approach also points to the multiple levels of influence within and outside the family, as well as the dynamic nature of families (Cox & Paley, 1997). The organismic metaphor characterizes the family as a relational environment with system-like qualities. Furthermore, the family can be considered a complex, integrated whole, wherein individual family members are interdependent, exerting reciprocal and ongoing influences on each other. Thus each individual family member is embedded in the larger family system and cannot be fully understand without the context of this system. Family patterns are developed and maintained over time, and serve to regulate the behavior or family members (Minuchin, 1985). The family is a goal-oriented system, capable of making decisions and taking action to some extent affecting outcomes. Additionally, the environment has components that individuals do not control but to which they are able to adapt (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Like ecological theory, a central assumption of family systems theory is the subjective, social construction of meaning. Human communication facilitates self-reflexivity by allowing humans' creating of meaning and their simultaneous activities of transmitting and receiving messages of symbolic content. Individuals act on information processed through a subjective understanding of a shared social reality. Within the family system, patterns of interaction are created and maintained by all participants (Minuchin, 1985).

Family systems theorists have used the term hierarchy to denote the layering of systems of increasing complexity. For example, a family system could be further divided into subsystems, and is embedded in larger systems called suprasystems (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). An analysis of suprasystems might include exploration of families in relation to extended family, racial or ethnic subculture, as well as community and geographic boundaries. This approach views change as processed and experienced by the entire family system, rather than a single family member. Within the family itself, boundaries between subsystems must be flexible (Cox & Paley, 1997). Each component of the family, or individual, must be able to function independently but at times draw on emotional, informational, or physical resources from other family members.

Moreover, through identifying the components of a family, family systems theorists necessarily draw boundaries between the family system and the environment. These boundaries are permeable; that is, matter, energy, and information are exchanged between the family system and its environment. A systematic view of families is implicitly contextual, taking into account the sociocultural, historical, political, and economic matrices in which particular families are located (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). The family is thus an interconnected system that, through establishing boundaries between its own internal relationships and the external world, is continually constructing its reality. Furthermore, since systems exist at multiple levels, individuals can be regarded as family subsystems as well, as long as they are not considered in isolation from the family. Other important subsystems include the spouse subsystem, the parent subsystem, the parent-child subsystem, and sibling subsystems (Minuchin, 1985). Each individual, considered as a system its own, is dynamic, open to revision, and characterized by reciprocal mutual influence with the other systems in which it is embedded (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Continuing the biological metaphor, systems strive to maintain equilibrium and adapt in ways developed to maintain this homeostasis (Garbarino, 1992). The action of one influences the status of the other; this process is referred to as feedback (Garbarino, 1992). Systems are also characterized by the ability to compensate for changing conditions in the environment through a process termed adaptive self-stabilization. By making coordinated changes in the internal workings of the system, the family is able to buffer itself to some extent from the effects of the external environment (Cox & Paley, 1997). Regulations, rules, and processes maintain the features of the family even when significant deviations occur. These can be positive, adaptive processes or, in some cases, dysfunctional and contribute to disorders in family interaction.

Similarly, family systems are also able to undergo adaptive self-organization, a term that refers to the capacity to reorganize in response to changes from external forces (Cox & Paley, 1997). The process of change in the structure of the family system or circumstances is called morphogenesis. In terms of the metaphor relating to family processes, it suggests there will be challenges to family patterns during certain normative or non-normative transitions, such as departure of a partner or the addition of a new child. The birth of a child impacts both the individual and the system as parents must learn to reorganize around new caregiving responsibilities as well as shifting relationships with social networks of family and friends. Such transition points may be especially risky for families in initiating disruptions and challenges in the family system (Cox & Paley, 1997). The process of family change involves challenge to existing patterns, the exploration of alternatives, and the emergence of new patterns, that, ideally, are more appropriate to the changed circumstances and that are often more complex (Minuchin, 1985). To understand the process of adaptation of any individual or relationship in the family, it is necessary to consider the changes that occur at all levels of the family system and the mutual

influences between levels. The family serves as a bridge between the individual and the community contexts and is central to the process of developing resilience (Patterson, 2002).

Family systems theory is relevant to this study because it highlights the ways in which reciprocal relationships both within the family system, as well as levels beyond the system, impact the family. Dynamics between families and their environment are reciprocal and constantly changing, and a resilient family system is able to adapt to changes within its environment. Family systems also impact their environment. Applied to this study, this theory indicates that low-income, cohabiting parents are likely both to impact their social and community context as well as actively adapt in relation to these contexts.

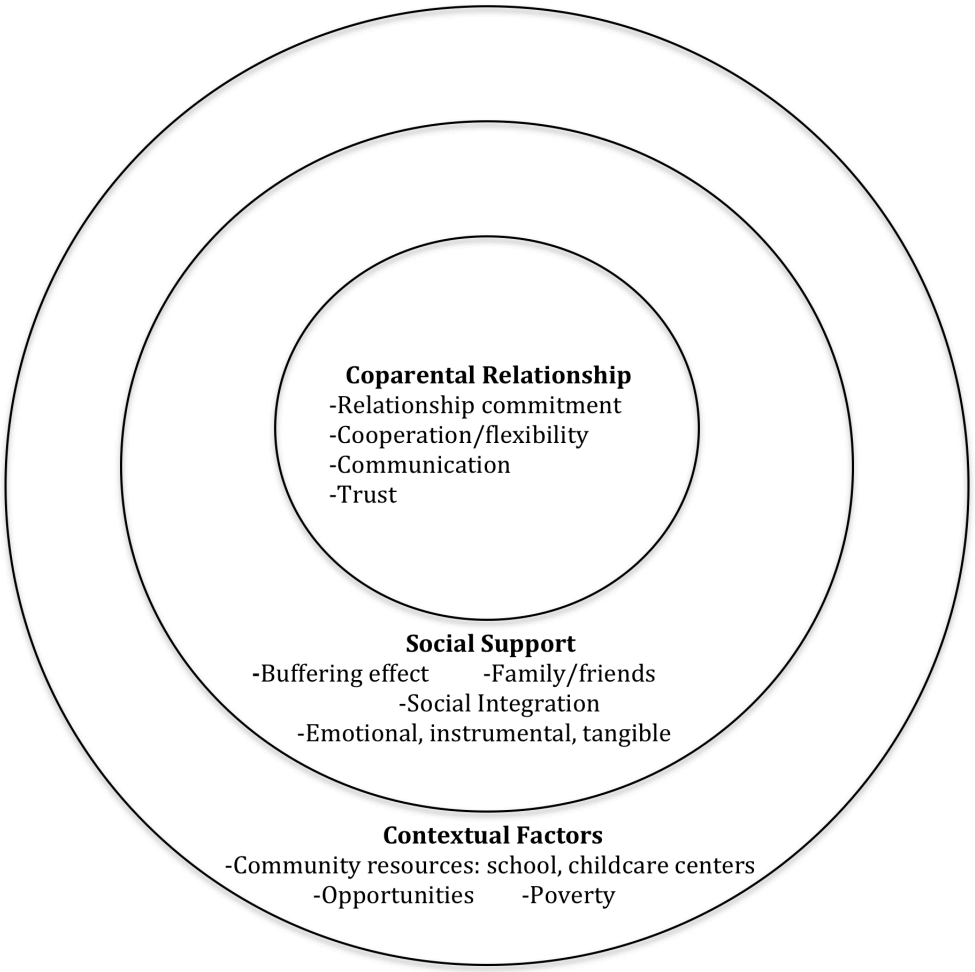
Conceptual Model

Based on the research literature, prior theoretical work on families, and the the ecological framework, the preliminary conceptual model is presented below (see Figure 1). This Figure depicts the hypothetical influence of both individual and contextual factors on unmarried parents' relationships. The focus is on factors that may help to facilitate and maintain a lasting bond despite adversities. This model attempts to transcend a dyadic focus by also emphasizing larger systems' influences.

The conceptual model employed builds on these ideas in considering factors at the individual, dyadic, and environmental levels that influence the relationship between cohabiting parents. The model highlights individual factors of the father, and mother; mother-father relationship factors, social relationships of both members of the dyad, as well as the influence of larger contextual factors in the environment. Within each of these domains, the model outlines a number of specific factors that can be supported by the research literature. The system levels or

domains are bidirectional, representing permeable boundaries and reciprocal influences between these systems.

Figure 1



At the microsystem level, the center of the model is the mother-father dyad , each formulating meanings and enacting behaviors that influence each other. In successful family relationships, members provide one another mutual support, recognition, and respect, and they are willing to make sacrifices if necessary to preserve the well-being of the relationship (Garbarino, 1992). This mother-father dyad is embedded in a broader social context that impacts them as individuals and affects the quality of their relationship. Adaptability relates to dyad's

social connectedness and relations to family, friends, and neighbors (Garbarino, 1992). This can serve a buffering effect in helping the dyad to cope with stressful events, as well as serving as a source of various forms of support. The perspective employed here recognizes parental strengths, family dynamics, interrelationships, and the social milieu (Black & Lobo, 2008).

The greater community, or macro context has institutional, economic, and cultural components. Neighborhoods serve important social functions, and qualities of the family's community exert powerful influences on the internal dynamics of family microsystems (Garbarino, 1992). While poverty can have a negative effect on the couple's ability to maintain their relationship over time, a strong and healthy neighborhood can provide multiple connections and social resources that enhance the family relationship (Garbarino, 1992). Social support can offer a rich, protective sense of belonging and cohesion. Particularly for couples living in impoverished or isolated conditions, the availability and use of quality support systems that may be promoted through community organizations, such as churches and schools, can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes, such as perseverance, hope, education, and companionship (Conger & Elder, 1994).

Conclusion: This chapter presented the relevant theories that guide the theoretical framework for this study. Bronfenbrenner's biopsychosocial model of human development emphasizes the ways in which multisystemic levels beyond the mother-father dyad are likely to influence dynamics between unmarried, cohabiting parents. Family systems theory utilizes the metaphor of a family as an organism that experiences a reciprocal influence with its environment and has the capacity to adapt to changes. Like systems theory, ecological theory includes ideas such as the links between parts and wholes; input, throughput, and output processes, levels of feedback; and negative and positive feedback loops. These are useful in describing interactions

within the family as well as transactions with the environment (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Based on these theories and the relevant research on family processes, I presented a conceptual model that guided the formulation of my study. This model posits that there are certain characteristics within the cohabiting parent relationship that will likely contribute to sustained relationships over time. The conceptual model also indicates that couple relationships are likely affected by social and community level influences as well.

CHAPTER 4: METHOD

This chapter consists of three parts and will present the structure and methodology for the study. The first part explains the qualitative data set which was analyzed for this study, including data collection, sampling methods, and procedures. The second part describes data management and analysis. The third part will conclude the chapter by discussing secondary data qualitative analysis and sample limitations. Issues related to reflexivity will be addressed in the conclusion.

Data and Sampling

This study utilized a subsample of data from the Time, Love and Cash in Couples with Children study, (TLC3) a qualitative study embedded in a national probability sample, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey (FFCWS) (England & Edin, 2007). The Fragile Families study is nationally representative study of all births to parents in cities with populations over 200,000. Researchers collected four waves of qualitative data yearly from 2000-2004. The study used a probability sample that oversampled for non-marital births, making them two thirds of the sample, although they actually account for one third of births annually (nationally). Overall, about 4,800 unmarried couples who had a child together in the year 2000 participated in the study.

The TLC3 study consists of in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with 75 of the Fragile Family couples living in the following cities: Chicago, New York, and Milwaukee. While Fragile Families were sampled from multiple hospitals in each city, TLC3 used only one hospital in each of the three cities. In Chicago, the hospital served a largely poor, African American population; in New York the hospital served a mostly Hispanic clientele, and in Milwaukee the hospital catered to an economically and ethnically diverse population. Like FFCSW, this study also oversampled for non-marital births and recruited a stratified random sample which ultimately included 47 unmarried and 28 married couples. To be eligible to participate in the TLC3 study couples had to meet the following criteria: 1) they had to be romantically involved at the time of the birth; 2) the mother's household income had to be less than seventy five thousand dollars (though most had much lower income levels); 3) both mother and father had to be geographically accessible to interviewers; 4) the father could not be incarcerated; 5) the child had to reside with at least one of the biological parents; and 6) they had to be English-speaking. The average household income of cohabiting couples was $22,500. A sizable proportion of mothers and fathers (26 percent and 29 percent) had neither a high school diploma nor a GED (Edin & England, 2007).

Over four waves of data collection, 756 interviews were conducted (Edin & England, 2007). Couples were interviewed together and individually 2 months after the birth and again at 14, 26, and 50 months. Most interviews took place in respondents' homes and typically lasted 2-4 hours, were digitally recorded, and generated about 150 - 200 pages of transcripts per interview per couple. The interviews followed a structured guide in order to address all areas of interest, but interviewers were allowed to vary the order of questions, to probe, and to encourage open-

ended responses (Shafer, 2007) .[1] The total TLC3 sample consisted of participants from the following racial categories: African American (47 percent of mothers and 49 percent of fathers), Hispanic (33 percent of mothers and 36 percent of fathers), and White (20 percent of mothers and 13 percent of fathers). The mean age of mothers in the study was 25 and the mean age of fathers was 27. Of the 48 unmarried parent dyads, 37 were cohabiting and 11 were romantically involved but not cohabiting at the time of the baby's birth (Edin & England, 2007). At the end of TLC3, 33% of the original unmarried couples were no longer together.

To address my study questions and hypotheses, I utilized interviews from approximately 12 unmarried, cohabiting couples who maintained their intimate relationship through the end of this study.[2] I also selected 2 unmarried, low-income couples whose relationship did not last the course of the study in order to conduct a negative case analysis and test my working assumptions. I used data from the first, third, and fourth wave of the study. This was a purposeful selection that omitted couples without complete data for all waves. The first three couples were analyzed at all 4 waves of the study, however, there was significant repetition between the third and fourth wave. Due to this saturation, subsequent analysis omitted the third wave. This selection allowed me to trace the relational patterns and strategies employed by the couples who remained together over the course of several years, as well as explore how their relationships evolved over time.

Data Management and Analysis

This secondary data analysis study was reviewed and approved by the Office for the Protection of Human Subjects at UCLA. Additionally, my faculty sponsor and I submitted an agreement contract that included a security plan to Interuniversity Consortium for Political and

[1] Appendix A
[2] Appendix B

Social Research (ICPSR) in order to obtain approval to utilize the data. According to the agreement, I received the interviews in electronic format already transcribed and organized by individual and couple from the data source, ICPSR. The original researchers had a team that transcribed each interview verbatim, resulting in approximately 2000 pages of data per couple across all four waves. The research team then coded each transcript using paper format and then electronically sorted sections of text into topics. This transcription and coding process resulted in the extensive TLC3 database used for this study, searchable by couple or topical category (Shafer, 2007).

There were up to 12 interviews for each couple: including 4 waves of interviews, and within each wave, separate interviews with each member of the couple, as well as a joint interview. To maintain confidentiality, the original researchers changed the names of respondents and their identities are unknown to me. I stored the data in a password protected file on my secure desktop computer.

This study utilized a deductive approach that began with a conceptual framework (presented in Chapter 3) to facilitate identification of the social processes attribution of meaning to the data (Gilgun, 2005). This conceptual model as explained was informed by ecological and family systems theory and consists of a set of working assumptions that I derived from theory as well as existing research on low-income, unmarried parents. The assumptions were used as a guide to exploring the data that may lead to refuting it, refining it further, or developing a "better" set of concepts and hypothesis implied by the data (Gilgun, 2005).

This study was guided by the following a priori assumptions, as described in the conceptual model (figure 1):

1. Within the co-parental dyad, relational strengths, as such commitment, shared cooperation and flexibility, communication skills, and trust in one another are critical to lasting relationships

    1b. These qualities may buffer against adversity and individual struggles.

2. Social support in the form of emotional, instrumental, or tangible support form family and friends enhance social integration and serve a buffering effect, helping low-income couples overcome stresses and challenges.

These assumptions were tested using a deductive qualitative analytical approach informed by my conceptual model to code for concepts or variables related the components of the model. I also looked for data that could add to the set of assumptions number of ways such as adding dimensions to the concepts or challenge or undermine the concepts through negative case analysis of a small number of couples whose relationship did not survive the course of the study.

The analysis was conducted both by hand and using the Atlas.ti a qualitative software program to store the codes and manage the data. The analytic procedure generally followed recommendations by Gilgun (2011), for deductive qualitative analysis (DQA) including the use of a prior set of sensitizing concepts as outlined above to orient the research. In DQA, coding, analysis, and interpretation can be done any number of ways, including the generic three-level codes described in grounded theory (Strauss & Cordin, 1994). Deduction is a process of testing working hypotheses, for the purpose of confirming, refuting, or modifying them. Hypotheses, or assumptions, can be considering working when the researcher does not consider them final conclusions, but as emerging understandings that are open to further testing and change (Gilgun, 2011). Negative case analysis involves the selection of cases that are likely to undermine the

emergent understandings; when the researcher finds that the findings contradict the hypothesis or assumption, it can be changed to fit these new findings. In this instance, "cases" would include "utterances, actions, individuals, emergent phenomena, settings, events, narratives, institutions, organizations, or social categories, such as occupations, and cultures" (Ragin et al., 2004, p. 10). I also selected 2 couples whose relationships dissolved by the end of the study as a negative case analysis. This was used to "falsify" emergent findings by searching for negative instances (Gilgun, 2005) in an attempt to prove initial conclusions false and determine whether or not they hold up under scrutiny.

Further, Gilgun (2013) explains that Strauss and Corbin's (1998) coding scheme is a set of generic procedures that can be applied to various types of qualitative research other than grounded theory. She states that many of the notions of grounded theory fit well with DQA, including the coding scheme, notions of core concepts and dimensions, definitions of hypotheses (i.e. hypotheses as statements of relationships that link two or more concepts), and commitment to identifying and representing the points of view of informants (Gilgun, 2013). Researchers also note that Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory methods are complementary with the idea of starting with a mental lens to help process data and are guided by theoretical assumptions the researcher brings to the data (LaRossa, 2005).

This study utilized a modified version of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) triadic coding scheme. Coding involves staying closely anchored to the data by sorting it into various categories that organize it and render it meaningful (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In this instance, only chunks of data identified as potentially relevant to the variables of interest were analyzed using open coding. The terms category and variable are used interchangeably in this study. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) requires the researcher to go through the transcript line by

line, considering each discrete item or chunk of information, and extracting ideas and categories from each participant's statements. Gilgun (2011) also argues for a deductively informed analysis that uses open coding as part of negative case analysis, as well as to refine and expand a priori codes as appropriate. Discovering variation or contradiction allows researchers to extend the dimensional range of a variable and give it greater explanatory power (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial ideas and insights about what is happening with the data that pertains to the variables of interest were preserved in initial theoretical memos. In initial memos, events, actions, and interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences, and some memos attempt to specify a particular analytic issue that cuts across a number of particular incidents (Emerson et al., 1995).

This process of open coding led to next phase of axial coding. Axial coding consists of analysis centered around one variable at a time, in terms of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During axial coding, data are also culled for answers to questions such as why, where, when, how, and with what results and in doing so they uncover relationships among variables (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding focuses on studying both structure and process through examining conditions, strategic actions/interactions, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The memos formulated during axial coding sought to relate categories and to continue developing them as well as to develop a preliminary understanding of how they related to this study's assumptions. Initial logic diagrams were used at this stage to sort out various relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The final stage of analysis involved selective coding relational statements between variables that were finalized, with interrelations between major categories delineated into a lucid story or narrative (LaRossa, 2005). Memos at this final stage sought to integrate cross

relationships and consider the emerging relationship of the data analysis to the guiding theoretical framework. The initial assumptions of this study were refined in order to achieve a better fit with the data.

Theoretical notes and operational notes were used integrate the findings and to revise the original conceptual framework as appropriate. Direct quotations were sorted into sets, based on their bearing on interrelationships among the central concepts of the study. This allowed for in-depth exploration of a broader spectrum of the dimensions and salient properties of these variables (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The use of Atlas.ti to code and retrieve the data and multiple stages of memoing also served as an audit trail to provide documentation of the data analysis process. DQA is an iterative process, and through close systematic analysis of the data, initial assumptions guided by ecological theory helped lead to more coherent final insights closely anchored to the data.

Limitations of the Sample

The data utilized from the Time, Love, and Cash Among Couples with Children study (TLC3), featured a stratified random sample of 49 unmarried couples, selected from the broader sample of 4,700 couples in the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study. The FFCWS was a large nationally representative study of an urban birth cohort of just under 3,800 children of unmarried parents (Edin & Reed, 2005). This study features a small sample drawn from only three U.S. cities: Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York. It is unclear if the experiences of low-income parents in these three large cities are similar or different to those living in larger cities or rural areas. Additionally, because of the small size sample, it was not possible to make reliable comparisons across racial and ethnic subgroups to see whether experiences differ by race and

ethnicity. Finally, the sample consists entirely of parents, and thus, the findings cannot be generalized to couples without a child.

Qualitative Secondary Analysis

Qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) involves the use of pre-existing data derived from previous research studies to either investigate new questions or apply a novel perspective to original questions (Heaton, 2008). When conducting a secondary analysis, the researcher must assess the quality of the dataset available and whether the primary dataset has the potential to answer the questions of the secondary research (Long-Sutehall, Sque, & Addington-Hall, 2010). There must be sufficient discussion in the primary transcripts about the topic of interest so that it would be reasonable to assume that the secondary research questions can be answered. The extent of detail in the primary data will significantly affect the degree to which new knowledge may be elicited during a secondary analysis (Long-Sutehall, Sque, & Addington-Hall, 2010). The strengths and limitations of the study as well as the specific limitations of qualitative data analysis will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This study sought to examine how low-income, unmarried parents navigate their relationships over time within their relevant ecological contexts. It focused on the ways in which relational strategies, social supports, and community resources played a role in sustaining relationships over time. Results are presented in three main thematic segments. As an overview, the analysis revealed three main findings:

1. Within the context of interpersonal factors, couples described communication, particularly regarding disagreement, finance, and co-parenting, as crucial to a strong relationship.

2. Within the context of social support, couples expressed the positive impact of primarily two forms of support from relatives. These included intangible support primarily in the form of assistance with childcare and tangible support in the form of assistance with finances and necessary purchases.
3. Within the context of community factors, couples expressed the importance of community resources such as safety and outside recreational space, as well as the utility of certain social services, particularly Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Interpersonal Factors

Certain factors emerged as particularly relevant between the mother-father dyad, under the broader theme of "interpersonal factors." Notably, fathers expressed a desire to be actively involved parents in their children's lives, beyond simply fathering a child or acting primarily as the breadwinner. Communication was identified as an important tool across different contexts within the relationship, including 1) communication on co-parenting issues 2) "talking things out" in general and 3) communication to effectively cope with disagreements. Overall, couples' approaches to communicating positively and patiently across difficult circumstances helped strengthen their bond and commitment. Additionally, as many couples experienced financial strain, managing finances as a team emerged as another key factor that contributed to interpersonal strengths.

"**It Takes a Man to be a Daddy:"** For some fathers, having an unplanned pregnancy with their partner outside of marriage can be an opportunity to change their life course. Although Tony and Dahlia, a Puerto Rican couple living in New York, were not explicitly planning to have a child together, Dahlia told Tony several times she hoped to have her first child before she turned 30. Tony recounted being frightened by this and when he first learned of

the pregnancy asked Dahlia to terminate it. However, after doing some reflecting, he decided to move forward and chose to be involved in the child's life and remain with Dahlia. Tony contrasts his own challenging history in which he "ran the streets" with the positive opportunity he has now has as a "daddy:"

> Like I told you before, when I ran away from home, I ran the street. The majority of my life, I mean good and bad, I've done everything there is to do. I thank God that he's given me an opportunity to come this far… And I tell a lot of people, once you become, anybody can become a father. But it takes a man to be a daddy.

Other fathers echoed this contrast between simply fathering a child and being an involved parent. Although financial stability remained a concern, fathers emphasized the importance of being closely involved in their child's life. Matt, a 23-year-old Puerto Rican father living in New York, shares a 5 year son with partner Maria, age 21, as well as their new baby. For Matt, who is employed full time and sometimes works long hours doing construction, the idea of an active father is a sort of parenting mentality, distinct from simply providing financial support. Rather, fathering involves hands-on, interactive time spent with the child:

> Like, most of my friends, they all have kids, right. But…they consider themselves a father, but they're not a real father, they're just a money father…It's different between giving money to your kids, or just being a father. Before I give them money I'd rather be a father, you know.

Matt continues, providing more details from his recollections of his own father:

> My pops is a good father. I love my pops with all my heart. But like I say, he's just a money father…I can't recall me going to a park with my father... He never sat down and

did A,B,C's with me. He never, he never, you know, never been a father. Played baseball with me. None of that….

For Matt and others, parenting meant spending time engaging in meaningful activities with one's child. Fathers described spending time with their children, working on their academic skills or playing sports outside together. All of these activities involved time together.

For several couples juggling employment with family responsibilities, fathers described caring for their children almost as much, if not more than, the mothers. Jason, 23, is another such actively involved father, living in Chicago with his partner, Veronica, who is 21. They have been together 3 years and share responsibility for the focal child together. Both parents were employed during the course of the interviews, working full time with differing schedules. Although they have some help with childcare from her mother and sister, Jason is caring alone for the baby several days a week. He explains his perspective on father involvement:

> In most situations, a lot of guys now days are not involved, or as involved, with their children's lives. I think that's a big thing. I think a child needs both of his parents involved whether they're together or not. Both his parents should be equally involved. Veronica might disagree. She feels that as long as a child has his mom he'll be okay. I think the best part about that though is just knowing that you have the opportunity to raise a child and be responsible for another life. It's just a good thing.

In some cases, financial necessity places the father in the role of primary caregiver. Beverly and Andre are one such couple. They are both age 22, African American, and living in Chicago. She is employed full-time at a fast food restaurant and due to some health issues he receives Social Security disability benefits and stays home full time, caring for their daughter,

Akira, as well as Beverly's two sons from a previous relationship. Andre affectionately describes the bond he has formed being the primary caregiver for their daughter:

> We go to sleep together, we go lie down together. I mean, every time we go to sleep we lie down together. It's like she, about me and her being together for so long. I mean we have been together every morning, right to supper. If I'm over there, she'll go to her mama, but she goes to me for everything. Cause she don't see her mama, all she knows is they go off to school or to work, and she be happy…Because she don't need to be with nobody but me.

Many of the fathers lovingly described everyday care of their infants and young children. For Calista and Gavin, an African American couple from Milwaukie, both age 35, their only child together, Renessa, was a planned pregnancy with some complications. The couple recounted how Calista was on medical bedrest, with Gavin taking care of her much of her pregnancy. Their baby girl was born two months early and spent some time in the neonatal intensive care unit before being allowed home. Given this background, it is not surprising Gavin is actively involved in the day-to-day aspects of the baby's care. He describes a special understanding of how to hold her:

> I know how to hold her. It's hard for her….the bowel movements. I know how to hold her, you know. I put my hand up under her butt and just hold her like this in my hand, and she can get out easy, like that.

Calista also recognizes their baby is attached to her father:

> But mostly she's a Daddy's Girl. She always wants her daddy. Might be because when she was smaller, like I went back to work some months old. He was always here and she knows that. He always here.

For Calista, who works full time, there is peace of mind in knowing her child is not left with a paid child care worker or another family member, but with her father. Their child herself seems to recognize the consistent care and affection from her father. Her mother positively notes she has turned into a "Daddy's girl" who frequently reaches for him.

While the stereotype remains that men shy away from the less pleasant tasks of childcare, such as changing dirty diapers, these fathers' actions and views of parenthood challenge this assumption. Often to due practical or economic necessities, they describe an intimate understanding of the children's habits, behaviors and needs. In several cases in this study, the father assumed the role of the primary childcare provider while the mother worked full time outside the home. Beyond practical considerations, however, fathers also express a genuine desire to be involved in their child's life. Fathers contrasted the experiences they had with their own fathers growing up with the way in which they wish to be active fathers. Some contrasted simply fathering a child, with the traditional expectations that fathers provide financial support, with being a true father by actively parenting.

Positive Communication Patterns: "Talking Things Out:" Positive communication is a core strength that emerged as a key component of healthy relationships. Couples recounted the importance of communication about daily life and ways to more effectively care for their children. They also noted the ways in which communication enhances the quality of their relationship and their fondness for one another. Talking things out, whether the situation is positive or negative, is a way to strengthen a couple's bond and couples describe how it brings them closer.

For Christina, 20 and Justin, 24, a young Puerto Rican couple living in New York, not only is communication crucial, but it also allows them to find humor and laugh in what may be trying

times. Christina warmly describes her dynamic with Justin:

> And we have real communication with each other. We got along with each other real good. And that was the good thing. Thank god we could laugh together because if not, pfff. I'd be like, (grunts). I don't want to be next to you. But, we get along…we're like good friends.

For Jason, an involved father and partner to Veronica who is the primary caregiver some days when his partner works, communication seems to be key to avoiding escalation of disagreements. He states:

> We get along pretty well, you know. We have our differences like every couple does, but I mean we get by. We just talk things out. It might take a couple of days. She might not talk to me for a couple of days but she comes around.

Here, Jason acknowledges that challenges are inevitable in every relationship. However, in addition to the approach of "talking things out", Jason offers an implicit understanding of the importance of giving his partner space. He is also suggesting his commitment to the relationship, and by extension, to his partner, by stating that he waits several days until she "comes around." He continues, explaining how this improves the quality of their relationship:

> …We haven't argued at all, for the most part. We haven't had any big arguments. We pretty much talk things out. I like the relationship a lot. I think the relationship is very good.

Veronica seems to echo Jason's feelings and a sense of their constructive communication patterns. She chimes in to add: "We talk. We just talk it out. If it comes to an understanding, you know…" The willingness on the part of both Veronica and Jason to openly communicate is likely to help ease disagreements and stressors. It allows them to each feel heard, and instead of

an antagonistic stance, they are more able to reach a compromise, working together to resolve disagreements.

Communication to Cope with Disagreements: "Without Communication, You Got Nothing:*"* Communication can also be key to resolving disagreements. Couples often experience struggles as a result of financial strain and competing responsibilities, such as work, parenting, and leisure time. Several describe arguments over limited resources, particularly time and money. These issues can be difficult to overcome and oftentimes even more so for relationships in which a new baby challenges couple dynamics further.

For Suzanne (22) and Myron (23), a White couple from Milwaukee, such competing responsibilities do contribute to disagreements. In the first two Waves of the study, Suzanne stayed home to care for their new baby while Myron was working long hours, first at a bank then with a cable company. Suzanne sometimes felt frustrated by having limited time to spend together as a couple, as well as what she saw as Myron's irresponsible spending habits. Myron admits, "She usually budgets the money, 'cause I'm bad with money." He notes he sometimes spends money without realizing where it went, leading to bills being paid late. In this context, Suzanne explains their disagreements:

> I get upset, then he feels guilty. We just talk it out, basically. Our arguments really aren't yelling and screaming. It's more of a tense discussion. We're just really frustrated with one another. We've kind of gone around in circles with the talking and stuff.

It is notable that although frustrated, the couple strives to communicate. They express a desire to work it out, or at least discuss the issue through respectfully to reach a reasonable compromise. For this couple, the temporary solution was implementation of separate bank accounts once Suzanne started working part-time, which relieved some of their tension over finances.

For Calista and Gavin, the African American couple that experienced a medically complicated pregnancy, both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies prove crucial to working through disagreements. For these parents, the mother working outside the home while the father is the main childcare provider can sometimes result in difficulties connecting as a couple, with both individuals finding themselves tired and drained from their day to day work. Calista recounts one disagreement:

> It hasn't happened in a while…But sometimes we get in arguments, he just go in the backyard of go sit on the porch. He'll say, "I'm gonna go sit on the back porch." Then he'll be out there for a while. Then he'll come by and let me know he's still on the back porch, but- It really hasn't got like that…I don't think so.

Although this couple has their unique challenges, they have developed some strategies to work through tensions. It seems to be understood that Gavin "sitting on the back porch" represents his need for space to cool down. By allowing him time to process, he is able to perhaps come back and be more clear-headed in communicating with Calista. Even while he is outside, he comes back to "let me know he is still on the porch." This checking in might serve to remind Calista he is still emotionally present and committed to working things through with her, even if he is not able to talk immediately about the problem.

Although Tony and Dahlia from New York experienced some initial struggles with an unplanned pregnancy, Tony describes not only striving to be an active father, but also engaging in healthier coping strategies when the couple argues. He describes his mentality regarding handling disagreements and the importance of communication:

> And you know certain things you got to respect. Respect her privacy or whatever, you know, sit down, talk rationalize, not vent, yell, whatever, what's going to get off your mind,

> off your chest. And that's it. Most people can't do that. You know, I got to go to the bar. I'm going to get me a drink. Well, we can't do that. You can't do that. You got to think a little more. You know, you have to sit down and communicate. Without communication you got nothing.

Here, Tony is contrasting potentially dysfunctional reactions to an argument, such as yelling or using alcohol with being more thoughtful and slowly processing. He recognizes the importance of maintaining respect for his partner even if at the moment, they are at odds. This approach echoes the sentiment expressed by other mothers and fathers as well. It implies a sense of commitment to the relationship and the partner that, even in the heat of a disagreement, is preserved through intentional, thoughtful decisions in when and how to communicate with one another.

Communication on Parenting Issues: Being committed to one another has an impact not only communication during disagreements, but also communication around parenting issues. Couples in this study who were able to maintain mutual respect and open communication also appeared better able to face parenting challenges together. Instead of taking an antagonistic stance during frustrating family episodes, some couples described monitoring each other for cues. Fathers in particular expressed a sense of openness on communication about parenting issues, finding a balance between being ready to assist their partner while also maintaining respect for the other person's parenting authority. This type of reciprocal support is likely to contribute to overall stronger and happier relationships even in the face of competing pressures all couples experience.

Such is the case for Dahlia and Tony, the Puerto Rican couple from New York. Both worked long hours together at the same bank early on, then later both mother and father continue

to maintain full time employment but report having difficulties paying bills. Despite financial strain, the couple reports "splitting bills 50/50" and this teamwork approach applies to their parenting as well. They also live with her father to help with costs. Her mother, although separated from her father, lives next door and provides childcare while the couple is at work. When they are not at work, they describe sharing of childcare responsibilities. Tony recognizes sharing these duties might be stressful for some parents. However, he states he and Dahlia are able to reach an easy consensus most of the time:

> Yeah, it's not like a problem. And it's not like most people. "Oh, come ON! I don't want to do it! YOU get up this time!" "No, I ain't getting up." No, it's whoever. "Fine, I'll get up." No argument, no disagreement. I'll take on that responsibility. Changing him, bathing him. Like giving him a bath, he's laughing and…

Tony is consistent in providing positive support to Dahlia with their baby's needs. Not only has he chosen to actively co-parent; they are equal participants in their parenting, even during unpleasant moments such as getting up in the middle of the night. The division of childcare tasks is not source of disagreement for this couple because they have both contributed to positive communication about their parenting expectations and approaching it is a team.

This also applied to disagreements regarding their child. Although Dahlia and Tony maintain an overall positive outlook on their young family, they also describe times when their son's behavior becomes problematic. Tony states, half jokingly, that Dahlia and her mother "spoiled him." "You did it to yourselves" he says of how Dahlia and her mother did not maintain a "routine" for the child. This can sometimes result in Dahlia feeling frustrated and overwhelmed, eager to pass on the child to Tony when he gets home from work later than her. However, when discussing their perspective on discipline in general, Tony once again describes

it as teamwork:

> We never feel that one person should have more say than the other. It's fifty-fifty. You know we have to sit down and we have to make an agreement and we have to do it together for his sake. I can't have sixty and she has forty or vise versa. You know we sit down and we compromise. And sometimes he gets to the point where he'll drive her up the wall. Without a cause. And I will really have to man handle him and sit him down. If he cry he'll get over it. Sit there, watch a program with me and stay with me and deal with it. You're driving your mother crazy…

Although Tony is describing stepping in to "handle…and sit him down" when their child has overwhelmed Dahlia, he also states their approach is "fifty-fifty." Tony overall recognizes that the couple feels the tone for parental discipline and expectations set for their child should be shared equally. By setting the tone and goals together, they are creating an atmosphere of cooperating and supporting one another, even in the face of parenting challenges.

Beverly and Andre, the African American couple from Chicago, also describe a positive communication dynamic in the face of challenging behavior from the children. Like Tony and Dahlia, these two are able to rely on maternal grandparents to assist with childcare during the weekends but they also describe cooperative co-parenting. Much like Tony, Andre describes stepping in to "help" when Beverly appears overwhelmed:

> If I don't like the way she's doing something with my kids, you know, like she's telling them something and they won't listen to her. I want to step in, but I don't want her to think I'm trying to step on what she's saying. So basically, if she can't handle this, I help her. And for the same reason, if she feels I'm doing something that she feels is not for her benefit, than she'll stop it right there. …. So if she say something than I just got to roll with

it. If she don't say anything, for nothing. That's basically how we break it down.

Here, Andre is describing a situation in which he may not agree with Beverly's parenting because the children "won't listen to her." Although his first instinct may be to "step in," he is also careful to avoid undermining her own parental authority. He appears sensitive during these instances, carefully looking and listening for cues as to whether or not he should intervene. He also describes a reciprocal line of communication, one in which his partner lets him know whether or not she needs the parenting help, while at the same time he feels comfortable monitoring her needs relating to parenting their children.

Managing Finances: In addition to maintaining healthy communication patterns across relational contexts, another key issue that emerged as part of interpersonal dynamics for these couples is managing finances. Budgeting and finances can be challenging for all couples to manage, but may be uniquely stressful for low-income couples. Just as with other interpersonal strengths, couples described working together as a team in tackling their finances as well as supporting each other during times of struggle.

For Beverly and Andre, the African American couple from Chicago, Andre's health issues that render him unable to work outside the home place strain on their household income. Beverly is the primary earner working full time at a fast food restaurant. Andre describes the way they distribute spending money equally:

> Most of the time we doing something, we doing it together, but if we're not doing it together, yeah, we'll split what we do have to spare. You know whatever she got, like say we got $40 to spend and we're both going our separate ways, we're going to split it, but besides that, we mostly be doing stuff together. We… ain't no set like, no set allowance or nothing like that…whatever we have, whatever we have that we can use, we split.

This approach conveys a cooperative mentality for this couple. Despite the fact that only Beverly is earning income outside the home, the couple either spends money on items or activities together, or splits it. They appear to be making the most of money left over after paying bills by enjoying it together. This is likely to further strengthen their bond, despite financial struggles.

For another couple from Chicago who are both employed, Veronica and Jason carefully work together to plan and maintain a budget. Jason states they have to be "responsible with how much money we spend on ourselves" and getting the bills paid is the top priority. He explains:

> Well, we have a certain budget, and the things that she covers, I let her take care of, and the things that I cover, I'll take care of. And then, you know, at the end of the week, we'll go back and make sure that everything that needed to be paid is paid, and everything that hasn't gotten done, then I'll make sure that we get it done on our off day.

This teamwork approach appears to work well for this couple, who express fond feelings about each other and their relationship, despite considerable challenges. Although they only share one child together, Jason also has two sons from a previous relationship and is involved in their lives as well. He recognizes having an unplanned pregnancy impacts his ability to achieve his personal and financial goals. However, he has "no regrets" and looks to the future with a positive outlook:

> Like I said there's no regrets. I love all three of my children the same. I have a ball with all three of them and I still plan on becoming more financially stable but it's just a harder load now...There's a lot of hard work that has to be accomplished, the goals I want to accomplish. But I mean it's just gonna build my patience. It'll build a lot of my character I think because I still have my mind set on accomplishing those goals and becoming more

financially stable. So I'm not going to give up on that and I'm not going to give up on them. So I'm just gonna have to work it out.

This perspective is likely to contribute to long-term resiliency for this couple. Jason has decided he will "not give up" on his goals or his family. He recognizes the financial challenges in his family's life, but instead of succumbing to hopelessness he sees hope for the future. He also describes overcoming these challenges to reach his goals as an opportunity to "build patience" and "character." This perseverance and connection with his family appears to be a tremendous source of strength for this father and couple.

For Dahlia and Tony, the Puerto Rican couple from New York, limited finances are also a source of strain and frustration. Although both are employed full time, Tony had recently experienced a lay off and was out of work for a few weeks until he found a new job working delivering automotive parts. Dahlia earns more than Tony and although he states it "doesn't bother" him, he is upset when he is unable to contribute equally to the total bills shared by him and Dahlia. Dahlia explains:

> He gets frustrated because he can't help like he wants to help, so he gets frustrated, and then I get frustrated because he gets frustrated. And I say, you know, calm down, things are going to get better. We're not always going to be in this financial situation. But he feels, oh, you know, I'm not helping. I feel bad. He goes I want to help you. I say you're helping, don't worry, things are going to get better. Because he's not paying, you know, half of the stuff, doesn't mean anything. He feels bad.

This is a powerful example of this couple committed to supporting each other through difficult times. Dahlia does not find it important that Tony is unable to pay for "half the stuff" and instead supports him through his frustrations. She empathizes with and soothes him, asking him

to "calm down." Much like the optimism expressed above by Jason, Dahlia also implies optimism about the future, stating, "things are going to get better." Thus, for this couple, much like for Veronica and Jason, this positive outlook despite adversity is likely to be a long term source of strength and resilience.

Beyond the Dyad: Social Support

Social support, primarily from family, helped these couples function through stressful times. Couples expressed the positive impact of primarily two forms of support from relatives 1) intangible support primarily in the form of assistance with childcare, and 2) tangible support in the form of assistance with finances and necessary purchases, such as food and baby items. Several couples also described either living with family or very close to family, which served as an on-going source of support for couples working on becoming financially stable.

Family Help with Childcare: Intangible Support: This study defines intangible support as instrumental or emotional assistance, as opposed to assistance with concrete resources. A crucial component in the lives of many of the families in this study is the availability of extended family for childcare. For couples where one or both parents are employed outside the home, the availability of free or low cost childcare allows them to earn a living while managing family responsibilities. Parents also expressed a general distaste for the idea of strangers caring for their children and felt much more at ease leaving their children with trusted family members. Family childcare provides not only practical benefits, but also emotional benefits to both parents and children. Parents described feeling less worried and supported by family help as well as the healthy bonds their children form with other family members.

Veronica and Jason are one such couple for whom family childcare is a crucial support. As

they are both employed full time, Jason states that the couple relies primarily on his sister to babysit when they are working during the week. Both Jason and Veronica agree they are uncomfortable with the idea of strangers caring for their young child. Jason explains this, emphasizing how much more comfortable he is with his son being cared for by his family members:

> There's just too many things going on, as far as putting a child in a day care center. I just feel like…. I would like it to be somebody who's close to us, like family. Family before anything, and if we can't find someone who's family to do it, then we'll look for a friend of the family or something like that. But I just feel like someone who's family will put more effort into making sure he gets everything he needs and he's getting the attention that he should get, as far as the treatment he's getting. So I just feel that family will do a much better job than anyone else.

In addition to having his sister available for childcare, Jason and Veronica are also living with Jason's mother, who works with him at the same airport and shares a similar schedule. The couple state that Jason's mother will help with childcare on Sundays, when all three are off work or whenever the couple wants to "step out for a few hours" on the weekend. They also state that his mother "does the cooking during the week" and likes to "clean everything a certain way" during the weekends. This sort of family help is likely to have a positive impact on this couple's life and relationship, easing their burden of completing daily tasks and allowing them to spend more quality time together as a family.

Family assistance with childcare is an invaluable resource even for couples in which only one parent works outside of the home. Melissa (age 27) and Ted (age 34) are a White and Native American couple, respectively, living in Milwaukee. Although only Ted works outside the

home, both describe that Melissa's mother is a huge help in their day-to-day lives in terms of assisting with their children. The couple planned the focal child, baby Mark, and are also raising Melissa's son from a previous relationship, Augustine, who was 7 years old at the start of the study. Ted states that having the maternal grandmother helping with Augustine in particular is extremely helpful in allowing the couple to manage their day:

> Well, everyday stuff, cause she picks him up in the morning and takes him to school. Then after school, she picks him up from school and takes him either to her house for a couple hours or he comes back here, depending upon if somebody's going to be here. So, that's little things you don't have to worry about, you know?

The couple further explains that Melissa's mother providing transportation for Augustine allows them to better manage responsibilities associated with parenting their younger child, Mark. This help gives the couple one less thing to "worry about" and is likely enriching both for the grandmother as well as their children. Further, Ted says "without grandma, I really don't think we could do it." This reflects the value of involvement of extended family, even when only one parent is working outside of the home. Beyond instrumental support, Melissa's mother is also an important source of emotional support that allows the couple to maintain a warm relationship with each other and their children.

In the case of Beverly and Andre, the African American couple from Chicago, Beverly works outside the home and Andre is the primary caregiver for their child together, Akira, as well as Beverly's two older sons from a previous relationship, ages 5 and 4. Although Andre is usually available to care for the children and completes most of the household tasks, the couple is able to rely on his mother and sister, and Beverly's grandmother for assistance with childcare. The couple states they are able to either leave some or all of their children in the care of these

different family members as needed. Beverly describes the bond that forms between the children and Andre's mother and their desire to go to her house:

> They like to get out and go too, 'Ma, we want to go over granny's house. We want to go here.' She wanted to leave yesterday,, I said …'No, you can't leave, you can't leave, we doing this thing tomorrow, you got to stay here.' She had her grandma by the leg and her grandmom said, 'Well, they can come over to my house.' And I was like, 'No…we'll bring her tomorrow. She just loves to go with her grandma, …and I'm saying, 'Stay here with me.' She be like, 'I want to go.' That's how she was, that night, 'I want to go with nana.' Right there, that's how she was…she was sitting right there when they left.

Beverly here conveys the closeness and enjoyment that her children feel from spending time at their grandmother's house. Even her young daughter "loves to go with her grandma" and has a wonderful time playing with her brothers and cousins. Beverly clearly feels safer knowing that her daughter is being well cared for by family. The couple mentions that they frequently leave their children with Andre's mother on the weekends, allowing them time to spend alone as a couple. Although Andre is a very involved father, having his mother as a support takes some of the burden from him managing three young children alone, and enables him to run errands knowing they are well cared for. His mother provides the childcare free of charge, which is crucial for this family who might otherwise be unable to afford paid childcare.

Family Financial Assistance: Tangible Support: In contrast to intangible support, tangible support involved assistance with concrete resources such as finances of needed items. Several couples lived with or very close to extended family. Not only does this arrangement provide support with childcare and household tasks, it also allows low-income families some financial reprieve. Couples described communal living which often resulted in assistance paying

for food, bills, as well as baby items. This arrangement can have a positive impact on families, both in terms of relieving financial stress, as well as feeling supported.

Justin (24) and Christina (20) are a Puerto Rican couple living in New York with their daughter together, Christina, as well as Justin's 6 year old daughter from a previous relationship. Justin works full time as an electrician and often works long hours up to seven days a week. Christina explains that Matilda, her friend's mother who is "like a mom" to her is living in the unit connected to theirs, along with her 11 year old daughter. Justin favors traditional gender norms in that he wants to be the financial provider and prefers his partner home taking care of children and fulfilling domestic duties. He states, regarding the benefits of the living arrangement: "They don't have to work as hard." Christina also states how much family help has lessened the burden of purchasing items for their baby:

> It's covering a lot, because like, practically all the clothes that I have for her is from her...That's the good thing because, like I really don't have to go shopping, because not only does she give me, but my aunt from Delaware she send me a couple of stuff, you know. Not as much as Matilda has done, but she sent me a couple of stuff. And wow, this girl got that whole thing full of clothes.

For a low-income family struggling to support themselves on one income, this support is likely to improve their circumstances as a whole. Justin states he feels he's "not doing too good" at being the provider, whereas Christina states "everything is going good, you know. I mean, it's not great but, it's good enough. You don't have to kill yourself working." Christina having the support of a maternal figure in the home is likely to contribute to her positive outlook. Despite difficult circumstances, the couple benefits from family financial assistance in purchasing food as well as baby items, which alleviates some of the financial strain on Justin.

Christina also reflects a positive outlook on their life in general, stating she's got "everything:"

> I feel so good, I got everything now. It feels like I have everything…My house, perfect father, perfect husband. Beautiful baby. Stepdaughter, she's beautiful. What could I have to complain? For real. I got all the love I need. It feels so good. (laughs)

The relational strengths reflected in this sentiment are likely positively influenced by the presence of extended family living communally. This arrangement provides not only support and companionship for Christina, but also allows for pooling of some limited financial resources, lessening the demand on Justin and providing extra time and a bit of money for this family to enjoy each other.

Claudia (19) and Don (24) are another young Puerto Rican couple living in New York, with a similar arrangement to that of Christina and Justin. Claudia works full time as a receptionist and Justin works part time delivering newspapers. They take care of their daughter, baby Melanie, as well as Melanie's four-year-old son from a previous relationship, Ryan. The family lives with Don's parents, and they report they contribute $75 in monthly rent, as opposed to about $650 required to rent their own apartment. Although Claudia hopes to be able to afford their own private home in the future, she notes this will be challenging compared to their current situation:

> It's going to be hard, we have it, you know, easy here because of that. We just, you know, we buy, we do the grocery shopping, help with the light bills and pay our bills. Credit cards, phone bills, cause we have our own phones. So um, we just got to cut down on some stuff.

By living with Don's parents, this couple is able to save money and live more comfortably, since

they only have to worry primarily about paying for food and their own personal "light bills." They do share the goal of living on their own, but recognize this would involve stricter budgeting in order to afford rent. Although not their preferred situation, living with Don's parents is also allowing this couple to set aside income for larger expenses in the future.

Additionally, Claudia explains that Don's mother helps them by purchasing necessary items for baby Melanie:

> She helps out when she sees that Melanie is running low on wipies and stuff like that. Like the next day she'll come in with a box of wipies. Or she'll come home with a little t-shirt for her, you know, little onesies, stuff like that, little pajamas every once in a blue moon. If she sees that Melanie doesn't have juice and she's coming home from work, she'll bring a bottle of juice. Even if we've already bought one, she'll bring one home and she'll always have extra. She's always thinking about Melanie that way. And sometimes she'll come home with something for Ryan.

The cost of baby necessities such as wipes or clothing certainly accumulates, and to have family help in purchasing even small items can be very helpful. These small gestures also make one feel supported and cared for by family. Thus, not only is communal living helpful in terms of family assistance purchasing items, but it also provides a sense of support and family bonding.

The assistance that couples receive from family members also appears to relieve parenting stress, allowing parents to be more present with their children and each other. Dahlia and Tony, for example, share their apartment with Dahlia's father, easing finances. Although her parents are no longer together, Dahlia's mother is a close neighbor in a nearby apartment and a strong support. Both Dahlia and Tony work outside the home, and the presence of maternal grandparents nearby lessens the burden on each individual, making for a more cooperative

family environment. Dahlia explains how much help with baby items the couple receives from Dahlia's mother and father, who live in a neighboring apartment:

> No, everybody, I mean, if he needs diapers, then somebody will give money for diapers, he needs food, and all that stuff, they'll give me or whatever. They'll ask me does Anthony need food, I'll say yes does, and they'll give me the money....So I don't worry about that part.

In addition to being supported by their maternal grandparents, both parents find raising their baby to be "fun," and express positive sentiments regarding their family. When asked how the couple spends their time, Tony replied:

When the weekend comes, that's it, that's the whole family. That's just us three. That's our time together…wherever we go, we take him with us While all of the couples in this study struggle to make ends meet in the face of financial adversity, couples who had family helping consistently with finances, baby items, and childcare seemed to express a more optimistic outlook. Like Dahlia and Tony, living with family is especially beneficially as a source of support and a means to pool resources. This is likely to allow parents to worry less about purchasing necessities, such as baby items and food, and to be more supportive of each other.

Contextual Factors: Neighborhood and Social Services

Another major area of exploration was neighborhood context and broader availability of social services. Couples mentioned the importance of neighborhood safety, particularly outdoor space for children to play outside. They also described outdoor spaces like parks as important in spending quality time together and as a family. Although couples mentioned awareness of several available social services, most couples positively described their connection to WIC and several also mentioned Head Start. For low-income families struggling to balance competing

responsibilities, these services can be crucial helping couples stay afloat and provide for their children.

Neighborhood Resources: Families expressed the importance of community context in a variety of ways. In particular, as parents with one or more young children, many couples stated the significance of living in an area where they feel comfortable allowing their children to play outside. For Christina and Justin, a young couple living in New York with her extended family, neighborhood safety is important. Christina states, "I don't want to just go to any neighborhood, because I don't want her to grow up in a bad area." Justin expands on this: "I don't want my kids locked up inside, you know, they should be able to go outside." For families frequently sharing small living quarters with extended family, safe outside space was especially crucial.

Veronica and Jason echoed a similar sentiment. This couple states that a major future goal is own their own place, as opposed to renting. Jason states he is "picky when it comes to a place" and wants to be "comfortable." When asked to clarify what he means by "comfortable," Jason states: "I want to find a place where we can both be comfortable. A nice area. It doesn't have to be anything extravagant, you know. Just something that's decent and in a nice area." Jason also states that a major outlet for him is going to the local park to play basketball, as he really loves sports and "played a lot" when he was younger. Jason also mentions "going for a walk" is something he and Veronica do when they spend quality time together. This also highlights the importance of spending time outside as a way for couples to bond and enjoy leisure.

Several other couples in this study expressed the importance of outdoor space. Calista and Gavin, for example, also mention spending time outside, walking around their neighborhood, as a pastime they engage in together with their daughter. She states: "Actually… we go somewhere

and we go and walk. Like we go to the park or something. That's what we do, is go the park or to the lake." For this family living in Milwaukee, the availability of outdoor space has been important throughout the various phases of their relationship. The couple describes walking as how they spend "quality time" together, and early in their relationship, they would walk around the parks and lake "talking and getting to know each other." Now, as a family, the couple acknowledges spending the day outside at the park can be an important opportunity for bonding beyond their normal routine. Calista explains:

> We went to the park for the 4th. Most of the time I was sitting right under canopy and he was there; I can relax and listen to music and he did the cooking…I enjoyed myself then. Most of the time, when I come home, he'll be upstairs watching TV. I'll come down here and watch my soaps. It seems like, maybe we could be together more sometimes…

Gavin agrees, stating "we communicate more when we're outside. Like when we're here, she's down here. I'm up there." Their daughter enjoys these outings as well; Gavin says "She like going on the swing and things and walk around." For this family, outdoor space not only provides a venue for family recreation, but it also allows the couple to reconnect in a meaningful way, as they are more likely to communicate with each other and relax with less distractions.

Ted and Melissa who also live in Milwaukee, were initially sharing the home they live in with Ted's parents but eventually were able to purchase the home. This is an incredible source of pride for Ted and he expressed positive feelings about the neighborhood:

> Oh yeah, it's a great neighborhood. There's no crime whatsoever. All the neighbors are excellent people. Like I just had to meet the new neighbors that bought the house two houses down. And they're from Australia or England or somewhere.

For Ted, like many of families, positive features of a neighborhood include both lack of crime, as

well as the neighbors themselves. Ted is conveying a sense of pride in his community in describing getting to know new neighbors. Furthermore, Ted and Melissa are one of the few couples who were able to purchase their home. Ted recounts that he also grew up in the same neighborhood and it was important for him to raise his children in a certain kind of community where they can play outside or in their backyard. Both parents describe the ways in which having a family has shifted their priorities, and both described the importance of raising their children in a safe, child friendly neighborhood.

Beverly and Andre are another couple who utilize outdoor space for their family by allowing their children outside of their home to play under the care of neighbors. Beverly explains:

> So I like them to play right here. If he's not with one of the neighbors down on the first floor, or the kids that are right in the next building, cause they watch them for us, too …then I don't let him go out there (outside alone).

This description indicates trusting neighbors to supervise children playing outside. Feeling supported by neighbors in this way likely allows Beverly peace of mind in knowing where her child is when he is out of her sight. Neighbors looking out for neighborhood children in each other's homes or yards also allows children healthy freedom to play outside and socialize.

Several couples in this study mentioned the importance of neighborhoods in terms of resources for families, a feeling of safety and community, and ability to utilize outside space. Tony and Dahlia are another couple who mention they want to feel safe in their neighborhood. Tony, in particular, discusses the need for tax dollars to be focused on neighborhood improvement:

> All these abandoned lots and places that's run down or whatever have you, in certain

neighborhoods. It shouldn't be like that. You should build up your own backyards. Take some of that money and build up these neighborhoods that don't have it. Instead of having a lot, you should build a recreation center or some type of park where kids can go in. Or just a day care or something that, you know, will keep some of these kids off the street…

This statement not only reiterates the importance of safe neighborhoods, but also the need for families to have safe community gathering spaces, such as recreation centers and parks. Especially for low-income families with limited transportation, such community assets are important. Spending leisure time together as a family, walking to the local park, or allowing children to play outside are important themes that highlight the ways in which neighborhood context can influence the day to day lives of low-income families.

Social Services: Many couples described accessing social services and benefits as additional resources to supplement their finances. The most commonly mentioned public welfare programs were TANF (welfare known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), Food stamps, and WIC, although families also mentioned being connected programs such as Section 8, Headstart, disability (SSI), and child development resources. Those that did not directly qualify or utilize any social services still noted some basic knowledge of many available services, usually through family or friends. However, they described differing experiences largely dependent on the specific program and the helpfulness of caseworkers.

Suzanne and Myron, a White couple living in Milwaukee, are receiving both WIC and Food stamps. Myron works outside the home for a cable company and Suzanne stays home to care for their child, Samuel. Suzanne explains that "they have programs at the hospital where they come and talk to you about it" however, she still feels there is a lack of adequate information on available resources. She states:

> I think there's stuff out there, but again, it's just, tough to find it like that. I think that there's some kind of program, or something out there for almost everything nowadays. But it's so hard to find them. Society's got to do a little bit better job in helping to reach people, so people know where to find these programs…

Suzanne is aware of programs such as cash aid, mainly through word of mouth. Like other families discussing cash aid, or welfare, Suzanne acknowledges the policy shift from Aid for Families with Dependent Children to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), along with the associated stipulations:

> I know since it switched over from just being A, AFDC or whatever to W2, they really try to promote you to go out and work instead of being on the system, because you have to do a lot of social work. In order to get a check or money or whatever, you have to do a lot of work, and the work that you're doing, they're paying you, basically, less than minimum wage, so it's kind of a promotion to get off. And there's time limits and stuff, but I guess they help you with school and stuff like that.

This employment requirement is likely to influence young, low-income parents' perception and use of cash aid. For Suzanne and Myron, although both are currently employed, Myron is also looking into the job corps to help pay for trade school in the future. Although they express mixed feelings, they do emphasize the utility of job support and training programs in supporting low-income families.

WIC (Women, Infants and Children) is a social service providing primarily providing nutritional and breastfeeding support to families with infants and young children. Notably, the majority of families in this study connected to this program made positive comments regarding the assistance. Especially for mothers who are not breastfeeding, the assistance with baby

formula, which can cost hundreds of dollars a month, is a huge financial support.

Beverly and Andre are an African American couple living in Chicago who felt very positively about WIC. As only Beverly is employed outside the home, the services provided by WIC are a welcome financial help for this family. Beverly explains that not only does WIC provide assistance with baby formula, but also necessary baby items, such as diapers. Furthermore, she explains WIC also offers a variety of programs for new parents:

> WIC is a great help too because that formula is $5 a can. So if you not on WIC then you spend a lot of money…They give you, like, some WIC offices, they have a little different programs. There's this one program called MAC where you have these sponsors, you have these mentors where your mentor, you can call them and say, well my baby needs Pampers and milk, and you get here you get your baby Pampers, they'll give you items at home, Pampers for your baby, wipes for your babies.

The assistance with baby items is likely to alleviate some financial strain for this family, but Beverly also expressed feeling supported by the program in general. She describes a mentorship model she has experienced in WIC that allows her to have a specific person for her to contact regarding her family's needs. Furthermore, she mentions case management and referral services available at the WIC office as well:

> When you go to WIC they give you these forms. The forms they tell you, everything, and when you go to WIC they ask you questions, you know, like, what you need, you think you gonna need this. And then that right there, once they get to ask the questions they open up the door to let you know about the programs they have.

Beverly here understands the WIC office can be a referral source for other needed resources. Since many families mentioned using WIC and no other social services, one on one case

management at WIC offices appeared to support the dyads in relieving some financial strain while also offering parenting assistance. Families perceived this service as genuinely helpful and were open to educational services as well as other programs WIC might offer.

Several families also used the services of Head Start programs. These programs are intended to provide high quality childcare and early learning from birth to age 5 for children from low-income families who qualify. Families in this study primary described using the service for childcare or preschool. Beverly and Andre describe consistency with their children's teacher which they feel has had a positive impact on their children's development. Andre states: "All my kids have the same kindergarten, pre-school, and Head start teacher. So she's going to stay in her same class two years. All my kids went to her." Andre expands further on this in terms of his daughter, Akira's behavioral issues at her Preschool:

> For two years, the same teacher had all my kids for pre-school and Head Start, so she pretty much know how to deal with them…she's one of these characters doing their own thing, she just don't care. Right now she knows she can get away with it, I told her she better have fun, because they ain't going to take it, the teachers ain't going to take it too much neither.

The continuity provided by having the same teacher for several consecutive years increases this father's confidence in the educational services provided by Head Start as well as their ability to deal with potential behavioral issues. Having this support at school may help reinforce positive family relationships at home as well.

Christina and Justin also had an experience with Head Start for the daughter Christina, age 3.

> She was going to school, she was going to Head Start, and I took her out of there once we

moved over here because it was too far . I just enrolled her into school up here, hopefully she gets accepted, but…she's been doing pretty good. Real good, she learned so much in that year.

Christina sounded pleased with the care and instructed provided by Head Start and stated little Christina learned "everything you could possibly think of" including counting basic numbers, ABCs, and how to sing and dance to several popular songs. Availability of high quality child development services seemed crucial for all healthy family development, but may be particularly important for families of young children challenged with balancing employment, finances, and enriching opportunities for the children.

Negative Cases

The selected negative cases of couples who did not stay together throughout the course of the study illustrate some potential, although more hypothetical divergences from those who managed to stay together. For example, one of these couples had an unplanned pregnancy after only knowing each other briefly and moved in together shortly after that. Of all the couples studied, this seemed to be the most limited time together before the pregnancy. More importantly, at the interpersonal level, both of the couples who did not stay together expressed difficulties in communicating effectively as a team, particularly regarding parenting stressors. In terms of social support, one couple received very little help from family, whereas the other couple did receive some help with childcare but also utilized paid daycare. For this couple, an additional challenge was the father's child from a previous relationship. Finally, at the contextual level, similar to the couples who maintained their relationship, the two negative case couples were connected to WIC and Head Start.

Interpersonal Factors: Antonia (22) met Moises (33) while she was on a trip to Miami

with friends. He came to New York to visit her and she became pregnant shortly after. They had known each other 3 months when they found out she was pregnant. He moved to New York to join her and they stayed temporarily with her family until they found their own apartment. Antonia describes stressors in taking care of their baby and feeling misunderstood by Moises when she is overwhelmed:

> I can not take it anymore, so, you know, sometimes…he can't expect to be like, to see me everyday like happy cause I have a lot of things, heavy weight on my shoulders, too…so sometimes I just can not take it and, I just, back off and let me, give me a time off. So he's "what's wrong" and I just need my time off, don't talk to me, just let me be, and you know but he doesn't understand that so he gets on my nerves and, you know…

Antonia also describes struggling not only in their communication when she is upset but also states "it hasn't been easy…getting used to living together." She does mention early on that the couple "hopes to work things out" for their baby, but also says that sometimes, Moises "doesn't even notice and doesn't even know what he did wrong." This couple had a second, unplanned pregnancy when their focal child, Daria, was only 8 months old, likely contributing to further strain in the relationship.

Given that Moises works outside of the home the majority of the week and Antonia has little support, the bulk of childcare falls on her alone. Moises states that he does not want Antonia to work or go to school when they are together, as he feels her role should primarily involve caring for their children. During the evenings and on Sunday when Moises is home, Antonia describes some difficulties in teaming up to care for the children. She states:

> Cause sometimes I tell him, he goes like "Daria's hungry. So I'm like, "Go make the bottle! If you know she's hungry, go make a bottle!" "No!" Sometimes I'm like, "Why

not? If she's hungry, then go make a bottle, you know?" … Sometimes he doesn't and sometimes, like, I have to.

Although Moises is able to recognize his baby is hungry, he agrees there are times when he does "nothing," despite his partner's requests for help. Moises ignoring Antonia's attempt to engage him in caring for their baby is likely to cause strife for this couple, creating some antagonism in their co-parenting relationship.

Donte (30) and Sierra (29) are another couple that were separated by the close of the study, 4 years after the birth of their daughter, Belinda. This couple decided to move in together after four weeks of dating and planned their pregnancy with baby Belinda after they had been together for two years. Donte also has another son, Eugene, age 5, from a previous relationship, who spends increasingly more time with the couple. Both Donte and Sierra are employed full time and Donte is committed to helping care for both children. Sierra describes a change in her mentality that enabled her to allow more help from Donte:

> It was because, once she…When she was crying a lot, I knew he had to go to work. He'd say, "Baby, you got to do it. I got to get some sleep." And I am at home, so I have to say to myself, "Stop complaining. Leave him alone. Take care of the baby." Once I did that, then I was in that mode of just doing everything. So when I was doing everything too much, he was like, "Give me a chance." It was hard for me to let that go. I had just got myself in the mode of doing everything. So it took me a while to let go.

Initially, Sierra stayed home on maternity leave and grew accustomed to handling the baby's needs on her own. She felt she should be the one to handle the majority of the childcare since Donte was waking up early and continued working full time. Once Sierra's maternity leave ended and she returned to work, the couple learned to communicate in order to negotiate

caring for the baby. Donte explains:

> She might not like what I'm telling her, but after a while, she gets to understanding. It takes a minute. I understand that, by me having to go to work all the time and she had to do it by herself, that she used to doing it by herself. But why burn yourself OUT? If I can help, let me help.

Donte made an effort to be an active father both to his new baby as well as his son, Eugene. Since both partners are employed outside the home, the changes in responsibilities required communication and agreement. For this couple, however, it was issues with Donte's son that led to a separation. Sierra states:

> Donte, Sierra, Belinda, and Eugene are not able to live in one household because we cannot come to an agreement. We're both firm on what we believe on what should and should not happen. And…because we're not able to come to that decision, we're not able to live in the same house.

Both Donte and Sierra explain that Donte's son Eugene was neglected while living with his mother and her family extended family early in his life. Although Sierra loves Eugene and attempted to parent him as her own, she feels his emotional and behavioral issues warrant residential treatment.

The relational issues for Donte and Sierra appear to extend beyond the dyad. This couple continues to care for each other and works together to care for their daughter, Belinda. Donte continues to assist with childcare and finances and both state they love each other. However, despite positive communication skills, they are not able to agree on the best course of action for Donte's son, Eugene, which has led to separation.

Social Support: For Antonia and Moises, only her family lived near to their house and

provided occasional help. For most of the time the couple is together, Moises is working as a temp in a construction business. He states he works at least ten hours a day, six days a week, with Sunday his only day off. Antonia is therefore largely alone at home caring for the baby. She does state that when the baby first came home, her mother would "come if I have to go something, to go out or whatever." Although after the first few months Antonia's mother no longer visits their home as often, she does that that she goes to her mother's home sometimes "to visit, but not to let them take her." Overall, Antonia primarily takes care of baby Daria alone the majority of the time.

Although Antonia mentions that she receives some help from friends and family in terms of items for the baby, Moises states he prefers to keep others' involvement to a minimum, stating "I don't like too many people make their opinion on my family." He explains further:

> No, no, no, no, no, I don't like it (help from others). I am too old, I am 33 years, she have 22 years, we are two people, we don't need like somebody support, we, you know, like they have a hand in working like that…nobody to hold my hand…

Moises prefers for his family to be self-reliant in order to avoid others' unwelcome advising on their lives. However, given that Moises works long hours and is not able to be home to support his partner with childcare very much, this may place additional strain on Antonia. As Antonia does have family nearby, under different circumstances she might benefit from additional social support, perhaps lessening her isolation and stress.

For Donte and Sierra, help from her family has been a valuable support at different stages with their daughter, Belinda. Although the couple planned to have this baby, Sierra mentioned the baby was very colicky and sensitive to formula early on, leaving both partners overwhelmed. Sierra's parents are nearby and her mother helped with the baby quite a bit early on. Sierra

states, "She came over every day. She made me stay in the bed, which helps. So she took care of the baby pretty much." Later, after the couple separated, Sierra states:

> When she's not in daycare, if I'm working my mother will pick her up and she'll spend the night over there. Or Donte will pick her up and she's over there... 'Cause I want her here at night. I don't like the whole travelin', you know just having to spend the night everywhere… Of course Dad can come, he can spend the night with her whenever he wants, but I really want somebody to just be here when I have to work so she can keep her bedtimes together and things like that, so.

Sierra is explaining the challenges in piecing together care for Belinda while she works two jobs, sometimes up to 80 hours per week. Her mother continues to remain a huge support but is not able to provide full time care. Donte is still involved and the couple maintains a positive relationship despite the separation, however his long work hours in construction leave him with little time to care for Belinda.

Contextual Factors: Antonia and Moses, like many of the couples in this study, relied on some form of public social services. They state they do not receive cash aid but do qualify for Medicaid and are connected to WIC. Antonia states that pays for "milk of beans or whatever, egg, you know, certain foods" but Moses states that "WIC doesn't pay for the Pampers, I pay myself. " Throughout the study, Moises is working "off the books" in construction. He states he earns about $120 a day and this is the only income source for the family.

At the final interview, the couple share two young daughters together and were separated. Moises no longer lives in the home but continues to provide financial support for his former partner and their children. This situation remains a source of contention as Antonia would like Moises to provide financial support for her education. She hopes to earn a technical degree, such

as nursing aid, that will allow her to be more self-sufficient and provide financially for herself and her children. However, besides finances, Antonia must navigate the issue of childcare. She states:

> So the stuff like if I work or I go to school, I was just telling him that I have to wait til Thursday when I get the answer and if they give the daycare, I'm outta here you know. I will go to school, I'll work, I'm outta here. The only thing that's holding me back is them (the children)"

Antonia states she is waiting to hear if her daughters will be accepted into a Head Start Program because "private daycare is like a lot, like 1,000 dollars a month. And we cannot afford that!" Although this couple is estranged, they are continuing to maintain a co-parenting relationship for the sake of their young daughters. Despite limited finances, Moises remains the primary source of income even though he is no longer part of the same household. Antonia is eager for the opportunity to obtain an education and paid employment, and given limited informal social support with her children, family programs offering free or low cost child care are essential.

Summary of Main Findings

Overall, factors that emerged as central to sustaining couples and families were located at the interpersonal, social, and contextual levels and couples provided rich examples for illustration of how these factors kept them together. Interpersonal, or the characteristics of the relationship dyad, emerged as the core. Interpersonally, couples emphasized strengths of active fathers, effective communication, and teamwork around childcare and managing finances. In terms of social support, couples benefitted from two forms of support primarily from family: intangible help, such as free childcare, and tangible support in the form of financial assistance. At the contextual level, these low-income couples emphasized the importance of neighborhood

safely and outdoor space. Many couples were also aware of the availability of social services, and most spoke positively about WIC and Head Start as services that help to support their family. For the negative cases, analysis revealed additional contextual issues that may have placed unique strain on the relationships. For one couple, this includes an unplanned pregnancy after knowing each other only a short while as well as isolation from social support. Although the couple in the other negative case analysis did report some support and help from family, major issues in the relationship resulted from disagreements over the father's child from a previous relationship. These issues demonstrate the ways in which contextual levels beyond the dyad influence sustainability of low-income families over time.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This qualitative study sought to examine the ways in which interpersonal factors and ecological context influence and support the relationships of low-income, unmarried parents over time. Previous research has demonstrated that degree of flexibility and adaptability in family functioning as well as supportive co-parenting is related to more positive outcomes for unmarried families (Feinberg, 2003). Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn (2008) also reported that positive co-parenting support is associated with fathers' engagement with children over time. Thus, interpersonal factors are likely to play a crucial role in family functioning and long-term stability.

Beyond the dyad, research has indicated that unique environmental risk factors for low-income families, such as living paycheck to paycheck, can place strain on the relationship (Edin, Kefalas & Reed, 2004). Several studies have examined the greater instability and higher likelihood of dissolution of relationships of cohabiting couples (Gibson-Davis, & Rackin, 2014; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Having a child may contribute to further challenges. Specifically,

research indicates that the risk of dissolution remains very high for cohabiting couples with children compared to couples who wait until after marriage to have children (Lichter, Michelmore, Turner, & Sassler, 2016). Although selection may be an explanation for this finding, scholars have also considered causal arguments that emphasize the fragility of cohabiting relationships and the destabilizing effects of childbearing, especially if it is unplanned or unintended (Lichter, Michelmore, Turner, & Sassler, 2016).

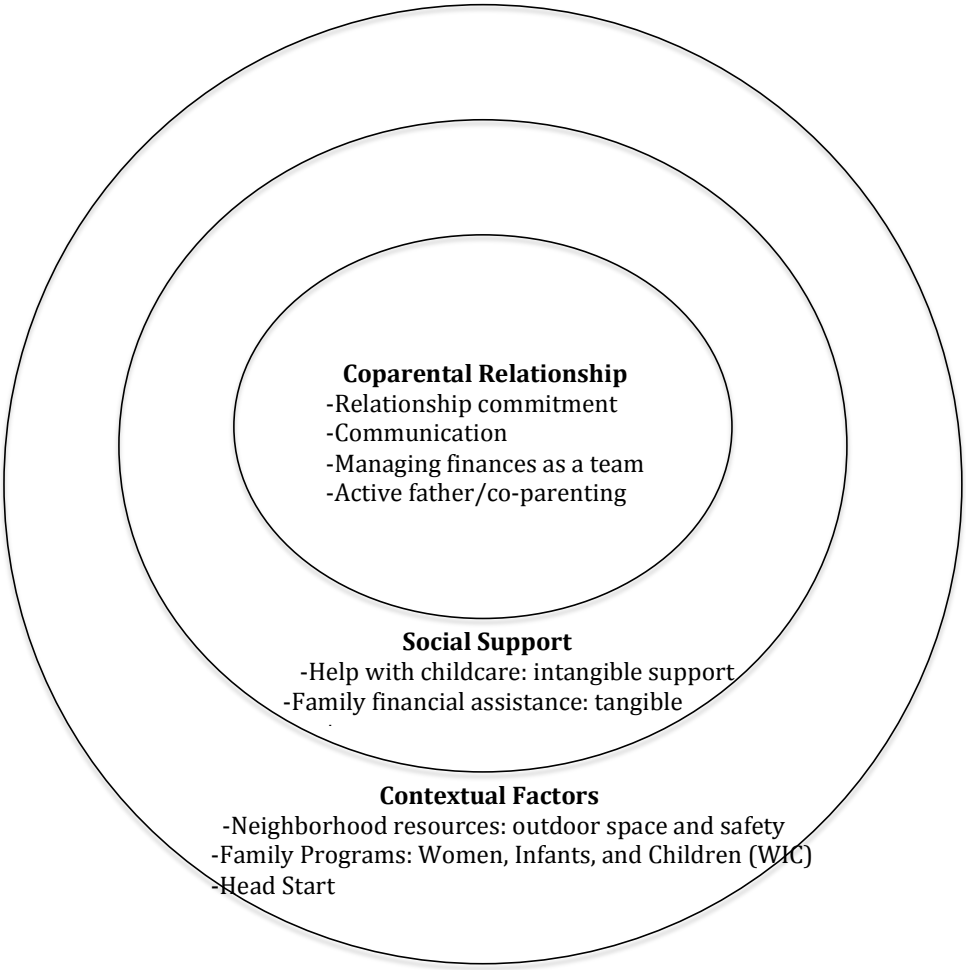
The findings of this study serve to further highlight the importance of utilizing a strengths-based, ecologically informed perspective to explore factors that may support "Fragile Families" in maintaining their relationships over time. Taken together, family systems theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework helped provide a deeper understanding of factors that helped sustain the relationships of couples with children in this study.

Overall, this study sought to identify factors at the interpersonal, social, and contextual level that aid the couples in sustaining their relationships under often challenging circumstances. Although multiple ecosystem levels were considered, the core level couples emphasized most heavily was the dyad and relational strategies and commitment. At the interpersonal level, couples described strengths of active fathers, effective communication, and teamwork around managing finances. In terms of social support, couples benefitted from two forms of support primarily from family: intangible help, such as free childcare, and tangible support in the form of financial assistance. At the contextual level, these low-income couples emphasized the importance of neighborhood safety and recreation as well as availability of low-cost family support programs.

The modified conceptual framework (Figure 2) illustrates this study's unique findings concerning the ways in which the different system levels influence couples' abilities to sustain

relationships over time. As stated in Chapter 3 (Figure 1) the model first highlighted how dyadic factors between the couple, such as commitment and communication, social relationships of each member, and the larger environmental context may influence the functioning of low-income, unmarried couples with children. Ecological theory and family systems theory provided a lens to understand how the broader social context impacts family microsystems and the well-being of the relationship. In the modified model (Figure 2, see below), the embedded layers impacting the family illustrate the importance of social factors as well as economic context for low income families. The figure below features revised focal points for each system level couples described. At the interpersonal or dyadic level, communication remained a core theme, but couples also recounted the strengths of active father involvement as well as the importance of managing often-tight finances as a team. This level carried the most weight in terms of emphasis by couples. At the level of social support, couples primarily described the importance of family support, particularly in providing instrumental support, such as free childcare, as well as tangible support, such as financial assistance. At the neighborhood context, couples mentioned the importance of outdoor space and safety for children to play outside, as well as the use of certain family programs such as WIC. Overall, these findings highlight the complex, multi-system dynamics that may impact couple relational patterns and family functioning over time.

Figure 2: Modified Conceptual Framework



Interpersonal Factors

The purpose of the present study was to explore several questions related to how the ecological context and multiple systemic levels impact low-income, unmarried parents. The first question explored relational strategies, individual characteristics, and patterns that shape parenting and partnering among low-income, cohabiting parents over time. Reinforcing prior literature, one of the core findings of this study related to the importance of communication in the intimate relationships (McClanahan & Beck, 2010; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Individuals in married couples with positive relationships (i.e., relationships with high mutual support and empathy and with low conflict) have reported greater satisfaction with their

relationships and are more likely to stay together than couples with negative relationship dynamics (Cowan et al. 1994). Among the couples in this study, communication within the contexts of parenting, conflict, and managing finances emerged as central to staying together. Couples recounted "talking things out" as a positive approach to work through issues. This involved a commitment to maintaining patience and providing space to one's partner across both positive and negative relationship circumstances, ultimately strengthening the couples' bond. Several couples described positive communication features including supporting one another, optimism, and utilizing humor. Couples with the strongest relationships and those that expressed the most positive feelings about their relationships overall were those that utilized healthy communication and were attuned to their partners. In this sense, the unmarried, low-income parents in this study reflected the findings of similar research with higher income, married couples.

Another important focus of communication that emerged in this study was co-parenting issues. Several fathers differentiated between simply fathering a child versus being an active, involved parent. Often due to financial concerns or limitations, fathers described close involvement in caring for their young children. Previous research has found that a close mother-father relationship (defined as supportive behaviors) promote fathers' positive engagement in activities with their young children (Carlson & Mclanahan, 2006). Thus, a pattern of a respectful and affectionate relationship between mother and father may contribute to greater and higher quality father involvement in the couples in this study.

These findings are in line with previous qualitative research by Carlson et. al. (2005) using the Fragile Families data, which also identified the following strengths:

1. At the time of their child's birth most unmarried parents, who are romantically

involved, have high hopes for marriage and believe that marriage is better for their children and themselves.

2. Many unmarried parents have supportive and affectionate relationships.
3. Most fathers are involved in their family and committed to their child.

However, despite these interpersonal strengths, low-income families must often weather economic challenges. Research with low-income, unmarried couples has described several concerns, including a need for financial stability, or the ability to consistently "make ends meet" (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005). Another concern was their ability to acquire assets, or their ability to work together toward accomplishing long-term financial goals. This concern is in line with the findings of the current study, which detailed the importance of communication regarding finances to work together as a team. Couples in this study not only described a positive dynamic in budgeting with limited resources, but also a mutually supportive approach to making ends meet, together. Several couples also described optimistic hopes for the future despite present struggles. As with previous studies, couples described aspirations to achieve the American Dream, such as acquiring a home and enough finances to afford an engagement ring and respectable wedding (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005). Not surprisingly, these goals indicate the crucial role economic uncertainty plays in the lives of low-income families.

Using an ecological framework, family adaptive systems have been proposed as a form of synergy between system levels which serve to accomplish specific family tasks within ecosystems (Masten, 2001). Family adaptive systems, also provide positive adaptations that allow the family to fulfill certain functions such as regulating emotion, making meaning, and meeting basic needs such as adequate food and shelter. Family resilience is fostered by shared beliefs that help members make meaning of their stressful situations, facilitate a positive, hopeful

outlook, and provide transcendent or spiritual, values, practices, and purpose (Walsh, 2011). When family stressors occur, through interactions among family members over time, family systems engage in a process of constructing shared meaning about the stressor, available resources, and capabilities to navigate the specific situation (Walsh, 2011).

Alternatively, scholars have coined the term family resilience factors to describe family strengths that protect families against the potential detrimental effects of significant risk (Black & Lobo, 2008). Examples of such qualities include a "positive outlook, optimism and hope for the future, family member accord, flexibility, time together, mutual recreational interests, and routines and rituals." (Black & Lobo, p. 37). Of particular relevance to this study is the importance of communication, which can consist of open expression and collaborative problem solving as well as community connections and social support (Black & Lobo, 2008). In terms of supporting one another, several couples described a sense of splitting responsibilities equally, likely increasing their trust and commitment to one another and their children. For couples facing financial uncertainty, this ability to rely on each other may serve a crucial role in family functioning through adverse circumstances.

Social Support

The second research question sought to understand how social and community contexts impact the couples' trajectories and support system. Although the interpersonal relationship likely carries more significance, this study examined ways in which social support and community resources also played a role in supporting the dyads to stay together.

Couples described two primary forms of support from family: intangible support and tangible support. Intangible support consisted primarily of help with childcare and

transportation. Tangible support from family included financial assistance with bills, living expenses, and purchasing necessary baby items. Several couples in this study mentioned either living communally or very close to one or more grandparents, increasing access to social support and frequently pooling resources. Studies on perceived social support have consistently found it to be associated with reduced stress and improved physical and mental health (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, Bolts, 2007). Thoits (1986) argues that social support assists individuals' coping efforts in a similar manner to their own coping strategies. He posits that the positive effects of social support stem directly from the quality of support behavior in the environment, as determined by a match between the needs of the support recipient and the type of support provided. For the couples who expressed a warm, loving relationship with relatives, there is likely to be such a balance. In fact, couples described feeling a sense of happiness and feeling they have more than "enough" to meet their needs largely due to feeling surrounded by love from family.

Social support in the form of instrumental and emotional assistance meant to improve well-being, may help low income families enhance their abilities to cope with the stressors of financial instability. Social support from informal networks is also associated with less material hardship in economically disadvantaged families (Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2003). The results of this study are in line with these findings, as parents described the invaluable impact of grandparents assisting with caring for children and purchasing necessities. This time as an intergenerational family also served to strengthen bonds and a sense of closeness. In providing child-care, relatives may also be helping minimize other stressors experienced as a result of economic hardship.

Contextual Factors

The second research question also set out to examine how neighborhood context, community resources, and social services may support low-income, unmarried parents. Couples in this study described the importance of outdoor space for family time and recreation, a safe neighborhood, and utilization of certain social programs; in these cases, WIC and Head Start. These factors can also be understood from a family resilience factors perspective (Black & Lobo, 2008). In particular, multiple family benefits of shared recreation and leisure time have been found to facilitate family health. Enjoyable family time can yield healthy attachments, intrinsic rewards, happiness, humor, and the pleasure of shared experiences (Black & Lobo, 2008). For low-income families like those in this study who are often cramped on indoor living space, outdoor space that facilitates recreation and positive family time may be an even more crucial protective factor. Couples mentioned not only feeling that outdoor space was important in terms of neighborhood quality, but also that spending time outside, in nature increased their connection and was an enjoyable way to spend quality time as a family.

Scholars have also argued that residential contexts influence the lives of residents through institutional mechanisms, as well as peers and networks. In this study, parents stressed the importance of feeling safe letting their children play outside and knowing what kind of people their neighbors are. Connections to social supports also are potential sources of strength for low-income families that may be provided by the neighborhood. When the interpersonal connections in a neighborhood are strong, parents are also more likely to get their children into organized programs and in general feel safe being part of the community (Furstenberg et al., 1999). These findings support this general argument. Despite often sparse economic resources, parents mentioned knowing who their neighbors are and feeling comfortable allowing their children to

play in certain public areas or in the homes or yards of certain neighbors. This is likely to create an informal system of support and allow families to help one another.

Another source of support for low-income families is the stable safety net of services and support for the poor and working poor (Seccombe, 2002). Notable programs include assistance with health care, welfare (Temporary Aid to Needy Families [TANF]), WIC, Social Security Income (SSI) and food stamps. Parents in this study were generally aware of most social services available, with some stating they were approached and informed about available services while at the hospital for the birth of their child. Almost all couples described being connected to WIC and the positive impact of financial assistance with food and formula. However, despite this study's emphasis on utilization of an ecological lens, parents did not emphasize the importance of social services as much as they considered the significance of social support and their own relational dynamics.

Little is known regarding the impact of the various of public assistance programs on families how these are characterized across dimensions of subjective experiences associated with living in poverty (Maupin, Brophy-Herb, Schiffman, & Bocknek, 2010). Although parents demonstrated resilience in mobilizing resources and engaging with their community and social networks, perhaps other processes are also important to understand. Consistent with this, Boss (1992) suggested that if researchers simply focus on resources alone, they may miss critical intervening variables that are more powerful, above and concrete resources in predicting resiliency in families. This research, and the findings of the current study, support a growing appreciation for a broader, systemic view of resiliency—the recognition that overcoming the deleterious toll of extreme poverty requires the complex interaction of individual, familial, and community contingencies (Walsh, 1998).

Negative Cases

This study also examined two negative cases of couples who did not maintain their relationships throughout the duration of the study. Although utilizing the ecological perspective shed some light on contextual issues pertaining to these two couples, patterns were less consistent than those of the 12 couples who maintained their relationships throughout the four years. Almost all of the couples in the study were together a short while, on average a year or less, prior conceiving a child. At the dyadic level, both of the couples who did not stay together expressed difficulties in communicating effectively as a team, particularly regarding parenting stressors. In terms of social support, one couple received very little help from family and the mother described feeling socially isolated and overwhelmed The other couple did receive some help with childcare but also utilized paid daycare. Finally, at the contextual level, similar to the couples who maintained their relationship, both the negative case couples were connected to public assistance. Although these couples were connected to some resources, it appears the core interpersonal connection and commitment to the relationship was not sufficiently strong to withstand long-term challenges.

Although the negative cases were utilized to test the qualitative findings of this study, the results of this exercise were inconclusive. Whereas factors that contributed to couple dissolution were ambiguous, a broader, systemic view of family dynamics offers the insight of a multidimensional perspective. These couples did appear to have many of the same stressors as they other couples who did stay together over the course of the study. It may be that in these negative cases, as with the couples who did stay together, the interpersonal dynamic is crucial and must be nurtured, in addition to connections to outside support.

Summary of Discussion

While previous studies have focused on married couples or risk factors unique to low-income, unmarried parents, this study contributes to the literature by examining not only how low-income, unmarried parents positively interact as a dyad but also how multiple system levels may influence couples' trajectories over time. Returning to the revised conceptual model, (Figure 2), this study contributes to the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of the ecological context impacting low-income, unmarried parents. In adding to the theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory and family systems theory, this study demonstrated how low-income families coped and drew on myriad resources in order to sustain family functioning. Parents engaged in supportive communication regarding difficult circumstances, parenting issues, and finances. They drew on instrumental social support for family help with childcare and often pooled resources with relatives. Parents also noted the importance of outdoor space and safe neighborhoods as well as the positive role of public assistance programs that support their children. On a promising note, findings from this study show that even under extreme loss, fear, trauma, and economic stress, families displayed tremendous resilience in the face of economic instability and navigated barriers to survive and flourish under challenging circumstances.

Strengths and Limitations

There are several limitations to this qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) study. Researchers have defined three major limitations of re-use of qualitative data: 1) the problem of 'data fit'; 2) the problem of not having 'been there'; and 3) the problem of verification (Heaton, 2008). The problem of data fit refers to whether data originally collected for one primary purpose can be re-used for another purpose (Heaton, 2008). Another major issue is the lack of contextual knowledge that accompanies interpreting data collected by other researchers (Heaton,

2008). Some have argued that only through a personal involvement in data production, and the reflexive relationship between researcher and researched, can a researcher grasp the relevant context that is required to interpret interview transcripts; due to this limitation, secondary analysis should be restricted only to 'methodological exploration' (Blommaert, 2001). However, this argument seems to ignore the 'usual' process of data generation in that a researcher collects data that is then prepared and shared with the principal investigator, or the research team, for analysis (Long-Sutehall, Sque, & Addington-Hall, 2010). These individuals will not have developed a 'reflexive relationship' with the participants, yet their analysis is valuable and produces rich, "thick description" of participants' experiences.

Additionally, the problem of verification refers to whether the results of qualitative research should be verified in the same ways as quantitative studies (Heaton, 2008). The secondary researcher must consider the fit between the original data and secondary question as well as making a defensible judgment as to the scope of the original consent (Thome, 1998). In this study, the secondary analysis was a limitation as the research was limited by the original interview protocol used by the original researchers.

Scholars have also expressed concern about the "flat" quality of transcripts based on oral interviews and what is "lost in translation between listening to an interview and reading one for the purposes of analysis and interpretation" (Gladstone, Volpe, & Boydell, 2007). However, others have discussed the advantage of working with transcribed data, described as temporally dislocated from the immersion of an interview in such a way as to allow for a different, and potentially constructive analytic relationship to the data to develop (Watson, 2006). The passage of time and re-use of data by a researcher who did not take part in the original research can perhaps generate new insights.

One advantage of QSA when working with sensitive, vulnerable, or hard-to-reach populations is that it limits the overall burden placed on particular participants. It allows researchers to remain sensitive to the stressful lives of these often "hard-to-access" participants (Gladstone, Volpe, & Boydell, 2007). Thus, some suggest that there are questions that can be answered using data collected for new purposes and that this may have a salutatory effect on an already burdened research population. Therefore, QSA studies like this one are likely to help avoid duplication of efforts and decrease the likelihood of rich datasets being underused.

Additionally, this research is also subject to the same limitations as all qualitative research, namely issues of credibility of the analytic process and trustworthiness of the researcher. Some strategies employed to strengthen credibility include considering alternative explanations and negative case analysis (Patton, 1999). Negative case analysis involves considering instances that do not appear to fit the developing patterns and trends (Patton, 1999; Thome, 1998). As secondary data analysis involves a form of triangulation between the researcher and the source of data, it may strengthen some sorts of accuracy claims of qualitative findings (Thome, 1998). This study includes features an exploration of alternative explanations and consideration of why certain cases to not fall into the main patterns.

This study is also limited by use of one primary data analyst. Others have suggested this methodological concern can be partially mitigated by making the analytic process explicit through careful contraction of a detailed audit trail (Thome, 1998). Through this process, the researcher provides documentation regarding the original data collection procedures, the processes used to categorize the data, and processes by which conclusions were derived from the dataset (Thome, 1998). This research utilized such a trail, as well as memoing at different

phases of analysis in the program Atlas.ti. This detailed audit trail and peer debriefing with an experienced advisor are methodological strengths.

Another strength is that the study used triangulation of sources by analyzing dual interviews of each member of the couple as well as theoretical triangulation by employing two theoretical perspectives to inform analysis; this is a strength. The purpose of theory triangulation is to understand how different assumptions and fundamental premises affected findings (Patton, 1999). LaRossa (2005) advocates the use of explicitly stated theory to guide hypotheses in qualitative research. He states one goal of qualitative analysis should be hypothesis development or offering plausible suggestions (as opposed to definitive tests) of variable relationships. This study utilized a conceptual framework informed by theory in order to engage in hypothesis testing and development. This study also checked the consistency or changes in what participants say over time, leading to richer findings and a less often employed longitudinal qualitative analysis. These are all techniques for reducing researcher bias. Also, the use of a longitudinal data set allowed this study to track the trajectories over time of couples, whereas most research is only able to capture a perspective at a single point in time.

However, it should be noted this study purposely selected a sample from the original research of couples who had complete datasets for all four waves of the study. This applied to the negative case couples as well. This selection criteria likely influenced the types of couples this study focused on, namely those stable enough to avoid attrition over the course of the original research.

As is customary qualitative methods, the findings of this study are context and case dependent, and thus are not intended to be generalizable in the traditional, probabilistic sense of the term. This study used a purposive sample strategy, as the focus was on understanding and

illuminating important cases rather than on generalizing from a sample to a larger or defined population (Patton, 1999). Specifically, the focus was on those mother-father dyads in the original sample who maintained their relationship throughout the course of the study in order to learn more regarding those couples in this vulnerable population of parents who are able to maintain their relationship long term.

Because cohabiting unions are often unstable, there is a much greater breadth of research focusing on the risk factors that may contribute to the dissolution of these relationships (Edin & Reed, 2005; Dush, 2011; (Lichter, Michelmore, Turner & Sassler, 2016). However, fewer studies have examined the factors that increase the likelihood that cohabiting, low-income couples will enter and remain in a committed relationship (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). Instead of focusing on detriments or deficiencies this study adds to the research knowledge by examine the ways in which seemingly vulnerable families build on strengths and resiliencies. By learning more about what makes these at-risk couples successful, policy makers and practitioners can gain a better understanding of the types of resources and interventions that might help other at-risk families maintain their relationships.

Statement of Reflexivity: As this study utilized only one primary researcher, potential bias of the researcher as instrument must also be noted. The researcher is a 32-year-old female doctoral candidate working towards a doctorate in social welfare. The researcher holds a strengths oriented perspective and is interested in factors related to couple and individual resiliency. The researcher has conducted fieldwork with low-income, unmarried urban parents in the greater Los Angeles area and utilized an ecological, biopsychsocial framework to guide previous research with couples and families. These experiences led to the researcher's interest in studying family dynamics over time and the factors that may help support those struggling

economically in maintaining their relationships. The researcher utilized deductive a priori assumptions guided by theory and previous research with Fragile Families.

Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice

Implications for Policy: As the trend towards cohabiting, unmarried unions increases, there is a need to understand the ways in which family policy can shape and support these relationships. Given that many of these unions also involve childbearing, it is also important to consider how to sustain these families and encourage positive child outcomes. For the couples in this study, it is also notable that many of the pregnancies were unplanned and were the catalyst for moving in together, transitioning couples into more serious relationships. Other scholars have examined reasons such unions do not transition into marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin, McLanahan, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Gassman-Pines, Lehrman, 2018) while others have focused on the marriage and relationship enhancement initiative research aimed at strengthening relationships ultimately leading up to marriage (McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012).

It is especially important to consider these issues given the policy climate following the era of welfare reform in the 1990s and current government-run programs placing an emphasis on marriage. Most of what empirical research has shown about the effectiveness of relationship skills programs—and hence much of the evidence used to make a case for continued government support for these programs- is based on the experiences and outcomes of a particular social group. This group was significantly more socially and economically advantaged than parents who are most likely to be living in poverty and in need of welfare (Teitler, Reichman, & Nepomnyaschy, 2007). Moreover, by their very nature as premarital and marital enrichment classes, the programs evaluated in these studies targeted couples who had already decided to marry. The effectiveness of research supporting these policies is beyond the scope this study. It

is, however, notable that the research used to support these policies is likely based on participants who may not resemble the complex, "real-life" dynamics demonstrated by many of the couples in the current study.

This study explored the ecological factors that may have contributed to the success of fragile relationships among low-income, unmarried couples with very young children. Although all system levels likely impact family functioning and resilience, participants in this study most heavily emphasized interpersonal strengths, with a focus on communication and teamwork. Thus, family intervention policies may need to shift focus from marriage promotion to couple promotion and programs centered on enhancing communication, listening to one's partner, and learning to work together to problem solve. Although the healthy, supportive intimate relationship quality appears to be a crucial factor in sustaining relationships over time, almost all couples mentioned relying on a public assistance program that supported their parenting and care for their young children, materially or educationally. Therefore, social policy should also take into account economic needs for low-income families. Relationship quality alone is not the only factor to sustain these families; programs assisting in child development, nutrition and income assistance, job training and education, and housing are also crucial. In addition to strong individual attributes, an involved family, and a supportive community, developing sound policies designed to strengthen all families can go a long way in giving adults and youth the necessary tools to master resiliency. Within the current climate where policy is leaning towards reducing funding to programs like Healthy Start, this study highlights the necessity of public assistance programs that support children within low-income families. Without sound policies, individual attributes, involved families, and supportive communities will have limited effectiveness (Seccombe, 2002).

Implications for Social Work Practice: This study's findings contribute to implications for social work practice as they highlight the experiences of often-vulnerable, low income couples following the birth of a child. The birth of a child often put strain on parents' intimate relationships, impacting mood and depression and adding additional financial responsibilities (Carlson 2007). Social work practitioners often come in contact with these families through family programs and child development centers, schools, community resource agencies , and public assistance programs. As several couples reported being approached by hospital social workers, the birth of a baby might be a critical time for resource outreach to low-income couples.

Low-income couples may also face different problems than more affluent couples and those problems may not be easily addressed by improved relationship skills such as communication (Trail & Karney, 2012). As Fragile Families are typically experiencing financial struggles, clinical practice at the micro and mezzo levels should focus not only on psycho-social support, but also on assistance with tangible resources such as employment referrals, housing and legal assistance, and education and training services (Carlson, McLanahan, England & Devaney, 2005). The couples this study focused on provide a positive model of couple resiliency and highlight factors practitioners might build on in helping other families like these stay together.

As Jamison, Ganong, and Proulx (2017) note, one way to positively impact couple relationships and parenting in families may be to address the stressors they face day to day. Specifically, interventions designed to support and educate low-income parents could facilitate conversations within couples about resources they have and how they might use them effectively. Based on the strengths displayed by couples in this study, it may be useful to have couples make a budget, talk about community resources for which they may qualify, or discuss

which family members could help them with childcare. This study also highlighted the importance of couples' ability to communicate cooperatively regarding finances.

Many families in this study described struggling to make ends meet and their long-term goals of attaining the hallmarks of the "American Dream." Interventions with such families may need to first prioritize resources to families in the form of instrumental help (e.g., job training, child care assistance, help finding affordable housing) and address other needs second (Jamison et al., 2017). As all of the couples in this study discussed being connected to social services that support infants and young children, these agencies serve an important role in helping families bolster resources, and in turn, function better. Practitioners should utilize a holistic intervention approach when working with low-income couples, considering the ways the ecological environment may be impacting family functioning. Specifically, those working with adults should consider how to connect the family unit to particular childcare, family support, and educational programs that may bolter the family unit.

At the interpersonal level, low-income couples may benefit from practice interventions aimed at supporting their relationships as they conceptualize them. As demonstrated by the participants in this study, low-income couples who stay together are likely already committed to one another and hope to one day marry. These couple relationships are also characterized by a high level of trust. Interventions ought to provide concrete tools to help couples strengthen team work as well as communication about co-parenting.

There is also an increasing need to consider clinical and program needs of fathers specifically. The active fathers in this study challenge stereotypes about father involvement with their hands on parenting. Thus, practioners should avoid assumptions that fathers do not want to

be involved in child rearing and seek to enhance the strengths of fathers as active parents and partners.

Directions for Future Research

While previous studies have focused on dynamics related to challenges faced by Fragile Families, this study contributes to the literature by examining not only how low-income couples sustain their relationships over time, but also how multiple ecological levels contribute to these couples remaining together over time. Overall, this study found that although the interpersonal or dyadic level appears to be a core component, factors at the social and environmental levels are also important in bolstering family strengths and helping couples overcome the challenges associated with living in economic instability. This study found that interpersonal communication is a crucial factor, as is managing challenges as a team, but that couples may be assisted in doing so by tangible and intangible support from family as well as a safe neighborhood and connection to public assistance programs that support families with infants and young children. However, numerous questions on the topic remain, such as: How does such fragile families fare in the long-term, as the child grows older? How do families who are located in rural, versus, urban, areas manage? Are there important differences across low-income couples of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and those who plan their pregnancies or are childless? Future studies are also needed that focus on families who are more isolated and less likely to be connected to social services and other resources. Additionally, there is a need to explore dynamics in lesbian, gay, trans, queer and non-binary families as there is very little research targeting non-heterosexual low-income couples with children.

Future studies ought to examine how families negotiate challenges long-term, specifically in terms of mobilizing resources beyond the dyad, so that we may better support low-income

couples. Further research should employ mixed-methods to gain an understanding of the prevalence of factors that support healthy relationships in low-income families. Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, triangulated research is essential to continue to understand the lived experiences of this disadvantaged population. In order to improve the services that social workers provide to low-income and their families in the field, scholarship should advance greater knowledge to enrich the understanding of this phenomenon.

Appendix A: Couple Interview Protocol

Introductory Remarks

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose is to learn more about how parents raise their child together. The interview is designed to find out what is important to you about raising your child, how you make decisions, solve problems, and resolve differences with each other. First let me make sure I have the correct names and ages for you and your children. We can't use full names. Would you rather use real first names or made up names?

Module 1 – GENERAL FAMILY SITUATION

1. Tell me what life has been like since the birth of your baby? How have you been managing?
2. Can you tell me what yesterday was like, from the moment each of you woke up to when you went to bed? How did yesterday compare with other days this past week?
3. Babies differ a lot in their temperament/personalities. Some babies sleep a lot, other don't sleep much at all. How would you describe your baby's sleep schedule over the last week? Some cry a lot and some don't. Some need a lot of rocking and soothing, others don't. How would you describe your baby's temperament over the last week?
4. Some couples we talk to live separately, some live together but with her mother or his mother, some live together on their own, some are married and living together, and so on. What about your situation? Where does (INSERT MOM'S NAME) live? Who else lives there? How long have you lived with (FILL IN PERSON/S SHE LIVES WITH)? Is there a story behind how you decided to live with (FILL IN PERSON/S)? Since the baby was born, have you stayed (overnight) somewhere else? Since the baby was born, how many nights did you stay? About how many nights did you stay (LIST OTHER LOCATIONS WHERE DAD STAYED)? Where does (INSERT DAD'S NAME) live? Who else lives there? Is there a story behind how you started living there? Since the baby was born, about how many nights a week did you stay with (INSERT MOM'S NAME)? About how many nights did you stay somewhere else? So the two of you have spent about (FILL IN AMOUNT) nights together each week (or, if only a few nights, "in the month") since the baby was born. Is that about right?

Module 2 -- WHO DOES WHAT FOR THE CHILD

5. How many hours a day is the baby with one of you or the other? What about the other hours, where is the child then? How does the child get from place to place?
6. Some parents take their child to a day care center or a friends or relatives house for part of the day. What about you?
7. Just thinking about the two of you, tell me who does what for your child? Let's start with yesterday. How did yesterday compare with other days this past week?
8. Ideally, who do you think should be doing what for your child? What should a father do for his child? What should a mother do for her child? Does this depend on whether the couple lives together or is married?
9. (ASK MOTHER) Sometimes mothers don't want help from fathers in certain areas. How comfortable are you with him doing things for the child? (ASK FATHER) How comfortable are you with doing things for the child?

10. Now let's think about other people who might be doing things for the child. To start with, what other people help out with your child? What did (INSERT NAME OF EACH PERSON) do for your child this past week? How far away from you does (INSERT NAME OF EACH PERSON) live?
11. (ASK MOTHER) How much of the time are you the one who is taking care of the baby? (Get her to estimate a percent.) (ASK FATHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK FATHER) How much of the time do you think she takes care of the baby? (ASK FATHER) How much of the time are you the one who is taking care of the baby? (Get him to estimate a percent.) (ASK MOTHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK MOTHER) How much of the work do you think he does to take care of the child?
12. How do the two of you decide who does what for your child? (Get examples in specific domains listed above.) Which of you tends to have more say in these decisions? Tell me about that.

Module 3 -- WHO DOES WHAT AROUND THE HOUSE

(Interviewer note: Make sure couple knows they should exclude time spent on focal child.)
13. What about other household tasks, like cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, bill paying, care of older children, and so on? Who does what around the house your child lives in? Let's start with yesterday. How did yesterday compare with other days this past week?
14. People have different ideas about how men and women who have a child together should divide up doing things around the house. What part of the housework should the woman do and what part should the man do? Does that depend on whether the couple lives together or is married?
15. Is there anyone other than the two of you who does things around the house? To start with, what other people do things around the house? Since the baby was born, what has (INSERT NAME OF EACH PERSON) typically done what around the house? Where does (INSERT NAME OF EACH PERSON) live? How far away is that from where you live?
16. (ASK MOTHER) Overall, thinking of all the things that have to be done around the house-how much of the housework do you do? (Get her to estimate a percent). (ASK FATHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK FATHER) How much of it do you think she does? (ASK FATHER) How much of the housework do you think you do? (Get him to estimate a percent.) (ASK MOTHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK MOTHER) How much do you think he does?
17. Do the two of you sometimes discuss which of you will to what around the house? Which of you tends to have more say in these decisions? Could each of you give me an example? (Probe for relational power in specific domains listed above in Q. 14.) Does one of you ever feel like the other doesn't do their share of things around the house?
18. Do either of you have leisure time, you know, time to yourself when you are not at work, not doing things around the house, not taking care of the children? What about last week? How much time to yourself did you (mother) have? What did you do during that time? How much time to yourself did you (father) have? What did you do during that time?

Module 4 -- WHO PAYS FOR WHAT FOR THE CHILD

(Interviewer Note: If respondent begins talking about who pays for what in the

household, proceed with Module 5, then return to Module 4 when module three is completed.)
19. Can you tell me a little bit about how you handle your money as a couple? Do you keep your money separate, together, or what? Do either of you have a bank account – checking or savings? Do you have a joint account? Do either of you ask the other one before making a big purchase? (Interviewer Note: If money is completely pooled, questions have to be modified. If they claim money is pooled, ask question 20, which presumes nonpooling, anyhow to see if some separation really applies. If you're convinced it is ALL REALLY pooled, then only ask the questions in Module 4 and 5 that have * after the #.)
20.* I would like each of you to tell me about the new expenses you have because of the child? Who pays for what? (ASK FATHER) When you pay for things for the child, do you give [INSERT MOTHER'S NAME] cash, or do you just go ahead and buy the things child needs? Can you give me an example? (Probe for why he does it this way.) (Intent: Is father's contribution to child's expenses in cash or in kind?)
21.* Ideally, who do you think should be paying for what for your child? Which of the baby's expenses should the mother be versus the father responsible for? (Probe also for HOW MUCH of the expenses each should be responsible for.) Does that depend on whether the couple is living together or is married?
22.* Now let's think about people other than the two of you who might be paying for things for the child. To start with, what other people pay for things for the child? Since the baby was born, what has (INSERT NAME) typically paid for? Where does (INSERT NAME OF EACH PERSON) live? How far away is that from where you live?
23. (ASK MOTHER) Overall, thinking of all the things that have to be bought for the child--how much of it do you think you pay for? (Get her to estimate a percent.) (ASK FATHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK FATHER) How much of it do you think she pays for? (Intent: Get point estimate of HIS contribution of money for child's expenses.) (ASK FATHER) When you pay for things for child, do you give [INSERT MOTHER'S NAME] cash or just go ahead and buy the things child needs? (ASK FATHER) How much of if do you think you pay for? (Get him to estimate percent.) (ASK MOTHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK MOTHER) How much do you think he pays for?
24. How do the two of you decide who pays for what for your child? Is it something you talk about very much? Do the two of you sometimes disagree about who should pay for what for the child? Can each of you give me an example?

Module 5 -- WHO PAYS FOR WHAT AROUND THE HOUSE

(Interviewer note: Make sure respondent does not include child-related expenses covered above.)
25. Now let's think about other expenses for the household the child is living in.
Who pays for what in the household? **(**ASK FATHER**?**) When you pay bills/buy things around the house, do you give [INSERT MOTHER'S NAME] cash so she can buy them, or do you just go ahead and buy the things for the household yourself? Can you give me an example?'
26.* People have different ideas about who should pay for what when a couple has a child together. What do you think? Which household expenses should the mother versus the father be responsible for? Does this depend on whether the couple is living together or is married?
27. (ASK MOTHER) Overall, thinking of all the expenses for the household your child is living

in – the groceries, rent, utilities, and phone, how much of it do you think you pay for? (Get her to estimate a percent.) (ASK FATHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK FATHER) How much of it do you think she pays for? (ASK FATHER) How much of if do you think you pay for? (Get him to estimate a percent.) (ASK MOTHER) Do you think that's about right? (IF NO, ASK MOTHER) How much do you think he pays for?
28.* Now let's think about people other than the two of you who might be helping you with household expenses. To start with, what other people help you with household expenses? Since the baby was born, what has (INSERT NAME) typically paid for? Where does (INSERT NAME) live? How far is that from where you live?
29. How do the two of you decide who pays for what around the house? (Get examples in specific domains listed above in Q. 31.) Which of you tends to have more say in these decisions? Tell me about that. (Probe for relational power in specific domains listed above in Q. 31.)
30.* Do either of you have a little money you keep out for yourself -- money that doesn't go to the bills or to the kids -- money to go out with friends, go to the movies, things like that? How about last month? Did you (mother) have any money you kept out for yourself? What did you do with that money? Did you (father) have any money you kept out for yourself? What did you do with that money?
31.* In the past month, have either of you spent money on a fairly big purchase before discussing it with the other person? (Probe for who spent how much for what.)
Did that cause any problems or was it no big deal?

Module 6 -- RELATIONAL HISTORY

32. It seems like every couple we talk to has a story to tell about how they got together. What about for you? How did you two get together?
33. Another thing couples often have a story to tell about the moment she found out she was pregnant, and the moment he found out. What about for you? When you found out you were/she was pregnant, what was the first thing that went through your mind?
34. Having a baby can be an exciting time. It can also be stressful. What about when the baby was born?
35. Can the two of you agree on a high point in your relationship? Can the two of you agree on a low point in your relationship? How did you get through that time and other difficult times? Why do you think you stayed together?
36. We're interested in your ideas about what makes relationships between parents with young children work. Think of a couple with children you know who has a particularly good relationship. Now think about a couple with children you know who has particularly hard relationship. (Let them decide together who these couples are.) How would you compare these two relationships? How would you compare your own relationship to each of these couples?
37. What do each of your families think of you two being together? (Find out if they are supportive, not supportive, or mixed.)
38. (IF ROMANTICALLY INVOLVED BUT NOT CO-RESIDING, PROBE FOR INFORMATION IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS.)
--Do you have plans to live together? Tell me about that. (Probe for why or why not.)
--Have you ever considered living together? Tell me about that.
--How would things be different if the two of you were living together? For the child? For you?

--Why do you think you aren't living together right now?
--What would have to happen for you two to live together?
--When do you think this might happen?
--Do you think things will change in any way of you do live together? Tell me about that.
--Are there things going on in your live right now that are making it harder or easier for you to decide to live together?

Module 8 -- USE AND KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Now I'd like to talk to you about different resources families have other than their own income and the help they get from family members. People we talk to say there are a lot of changes going on with welfare these days.

39. What do people have to do to get help from welfare (TANF) these days? (Probe for understanding of eligibility rules and program parameters, particularly work requirements) How do people get welfare (TANF) these days? Tell me about that. Do you or anyone you live with get welfare/TANF? (Probe for how much per month and TANF/AFDC receipt history). How has your welfare status changed since the birth of the baby? (Probe for how much per month she expects now that baby is born, and for understanding of eligibility rules regarding this new birth).
40. (IF NO TO ABOVE) A lot of people tell us that they used to get welfare, but they don't receive it anymore. How about for you? (IF YES). In your case, what happened?
41. What do people have to do to get help from other programs these days? For example, how do people get food stamps these days? (Probe for understanding of eligibility rules and program parameters.) Have you or has anyone you live with ever gotten food stamps? How about now?
42. How do people get WIC these days? (Probe for understanding of eligibility rules and program parameters.) Have you or has anyone you live with ever gotten WIC? How about now? (Probe for how much per month and WIC receipt history.)
43. How do people get Medicaid these days? (Probe for understanding of eligibility rules and program parameters.) (Probe for source of information –formal versus informal.) Have you or has anyone you live with ever gotten Medicaid? How about now?
44. How do people get government housing subsidies these days? (Probe for understanding of eligibility rules and program parameters.) (Probe for source of information – informal versus formal.) Have you or has anyone you live with ever gotten a government housing subsidy, or lived in subsidized housing? How about now? (Probe for amount received per month and housing subsidy receipt history.)
45. How do people get government help paying for childcare? (Probe for understanding of eligibility rules and program parameters.) (Probe for source of information – informal versus formal.) Have you or has anyone you live with ever gotten government help paying for childcare? How about now? (Probe for amount received per month and how many months receiving child care help).
46. Since the birth of your child, have you tried to receive any of the programs we just talked about for your child?
IF HAVE RECEIVED WELFARE/CURRENTLY RECEIVING WELFARE:
47. Have you ever been sanctioned – had your benefits cut, or know of anyone who has? (If so, probe for the reason.) Are you worried that you might be sanctioned in the future? If you had

your benefits cut for welfare, would you still be eligible to receive Medicaid? Food Stamps? Help for paying with childcare?
48. Do you think you could get by if you never could receive welfare again?
IF HAVE NEVER RECEIVED WELFARE:
49. Have you ever applied for welfare or thought about applying? Under what circumstances do you think you might need to use one of these programs? **(**Probe if they tried to get welfare but failed, or knew that they could have received benefits, but chose not to, why that might be.)
50. In general, how do you view the welfare system? (Probe for reasons why). In general, is the welfare system helpful or harmful? Are there certain types of people who benefit from it more than others? What about for you? What about for your kids?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We've talked about a lot of things today --your child, your financial situation, and your relationship with each other. I just have a couple more questions about these issues.
51. What are your worries about being a parent? What are your hopes? If you could change other things that would make it easier for you to be parents or to take care of your children, what would you change?

Before I conclude the interview, is there anything that either of you would like to say?
Those are all the questions that I have to ask. Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix B

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Couples (N-12 stayed together; N= 2 negative cases)

Pseudonyms	Ages at Wave 1	City	Race	Wave 4	Length of Relationship Before Pregnancy	Ages of children at Wave 1
Veronica and Jason C-13	Mother-21 Father-23	Chicago	Hispanic-type unknown	Cohab	3 yrs	Focal Child only
Beverly and Andre C -08	Mother-24 Father- 22	Chicago	Black-Non Hispanic	Cohab-engaged	2 yrs	Focal Child Akira Mother- two sons previous relationship Renaul (4) Bradley (5) Father-daughter Talia (age 5) from previous relationship
Melissa and Ted M-06	Mother-27 Father- 34	Milwaukee	White and Native American	Cohab	3 yrs	Focal Child Mark Mother- son Augustine (7) from previous relationship
Suzanne and Myron M-08	Mother-22 Father -23	Milwaukee	White-Non Hispanic	Cohab	4 yrs	Only Focal Child
Calista and Gavin M-10	Mother-35 Father- 35	Milwaukee	Black-Non Hispanic	Cohab	3 yrs	Focal Child-Shetaria/ Renessa Father one 16 year old daughter previous relationship

Gloria and Oscar N-04	Mother-34 Father-27	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Cohab	4 yrs	Focal Child-Evan Mother-daughter Colleen (age 6) from previous relationship
Claudia and Don N -10	Mother-19 Father- 24	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Cohab	2 yrs	Focal Child-Melanie Mother, son Ryan (age 4) from previous relationship
Daisy and Paulo N- 09	Mother-22 Father-29	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Cohab	4 yrs	Focal child (twin girls), plus Mother 10 yr old, from previous relationship and 5 yr old, and an 8 yr old, all within relationship
Dahlia and Tony N-15	Mother-29 Father- 31	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Cohab	1 yr	Focal child Father has two daughters ages 18 and 15 from previous relationships
Christina and Justin N-18	Mother-20 Father- 24	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Married	2 mo	Focal Child Father has a daughter (age 6) from previous relationship
Maria and Matt N-20	Mother-22 Father -23	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Cohab	7 yrs	Focal Child-Madeline Son together,

						Matty (age 5)
Yasmine and Paco N-21	Mother-22 Father-26	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Married	6 yrs	Focal Child and 2 daughters, ages 6 and 3 yrs old, together
Antonia and Moses N-13 NEGATIVE	Mother-22 Father- 33	New York	Hispanic-Puerto Rican	Broken up	3 mo	Focal Child only
Sierra and Dante C-06 NEGATIVE	Mother-29 Father- 30	Chicago	Black-Non Hispanic	Separated	2 yrs	Focal Child, Belinda, and father's son, Eugene, (age 5) from previous relationship

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