

Together but Not "Together": Trajectories of Relationship Suspension for Low-Income Unmarried Parents*

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Abstract: We identified and examined relationship trajectories among low-income parents, with particular attention to fathers and mothers who never marry but maintain potential for greater commitment. Through analyses of life history interviews with a diverse sample of 71 fathers in the Midwest, we used a life course framework to examine the process of relationship suspension. Findings indicated that partner support was critical in overcoming environmental and family barriers to long-term relationships. By delinking partnering from parenting, unmarried mothers and fathers found a basis for prolonged interaction, apart from intimacy. Relationships persisted because of daily investments during many years of waiting to formalize relationships. Implications for research on relationship trajectories among low-income families and for policy and programs are discussed.

Key Words: close relationships, fatherhood, low-income families.

Historically, successful long-term relationships have been marked by the achievement of marriage, cohabitation, and childbearing. In recent decades, however, marriage rates have declined, cohabitation rates have increased, and increasing numbers of children have been born outside of marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). However, relationship researchers have continued to focus primarily on relationships in which these three events co-occur. Demographic changes suggest the emergence of alternative pair-bonding sequences, in which each event is an independent choice (Pinsof, 2002). For example, low-income parents are less likely to marry than parents with adequate economic resources (Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003). Do relationships between unmarried parents continue over time, and if so, how? Parents may cycle in and out of coresidence or even reestablish positive interaction after marriage. Conceptualizing long-term relationships as trajectories, not statuses, may allow researchers to attend to

the processes of how unmarried parents interact with each other over time.

Using a modified grounded methods approach (LaRossa, 2005), we examined life history interviews with a sample of 71 low-income unmarried fathers in the Midwest, who described long-term, positive, but essentially unresolved relationships with mothers of their children. These men indicated that they turned to their children's mothers for emotional support, and some anticipated these stalled relationships leading to marriage "when we get things going right." In this paper, we develop the concept of *suspension* as a viable relationship trajectory over the life course of low-income unmarried parents. We then explore three critical dimensions of this trajectory: partner support despite environmental and family barriers to long-term relationships, presence of children and delinking of partnering from parenting, and hard-earned investment during the wait to formalize relationships.

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Background and Significance

Recent shifts in conceptualization and experience of marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Coontz, 2005) have challenged understanding of successful relationships. Marriage has taken on new relevance as a confirmation of formal relationship success for low-income couples (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005; Waller, 2001). Despite this emergent belief, marriage alone is unlikely to pull families out of poverty (Lichter et al., 2003). Moreover, the rate of marriage among low-income couples has declined, and researchers have struggled to identify specific barriers to marriage (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004). An accumulation of sufficient resources, as well as men's stable employment, shapes prevalence and timing of marital transitions (Manning & Smock, 1995; Osbourne, 2005; Tucker & Taylor, 1989; Wu & Pollard, 2000). Relationship dynamics and quality may also underlie decisions to marry. Women's fear of infidelity may lead to a lack of trust and poor evaluation of low-income men as marital partners (Edin, 2000), indicative of a "culture of distrust" (Furstenberg, 2004) and decreased rates of cohabitation and marriage (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Edin and Kefalas (2005) underscored that mother-child relationships took priority over couple relationships and fathers became "complementary" to family life.

Perhaps because of doubts about their own chances for satisfactory and mutual relationship with men (Farber, 1990), low-income women with children are more likely to cohabit than to marry (Graefe & Lichter, 2007; Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005). Half of cohabiting relationships end after 1 year and up to 90% end within 5 years (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), although poor women tend to cohabit longer than nonpoor women simply because fewer of them marry (Lichter et al., 2003). Research has repeatedly shown variation in rates of cohabitation and marriage between and within ethnic groups (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). For example, African American couples are more likely to cohabit or remain involved over time without marriage than White couples (Brown, 2000).

Most research on relationships between unmarried low-income parents focuses on status transitions to marriage, cohabitation, or romantic relations. The categories of cohabitation or marriage obscure

the importance of understanding relationships as trajectories (Musick & Bumpass, 2006), particularly among young couples whose dynamic patterns of cohabitation result in "incomplete" relationships (Reed, 2006). Romantic relationships continue outside of marriage and cohabitation but as they drift in and out of multiple statuses, including cohabitation, romanticism, friendship, or lack of contact (Sassler, 2004). Unresolved relationships may be stalled or they may represent cycling in reconciliation and living apart (Binstock & Thornton, 2003).

Relationships among unmarried parents often are embedded in complex configurations of extended family networks (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002). Relationships between parents with multiple partners and children (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006) hint at the prevalence of long-term relationships that are distinct from normative marital and cohabiting relationships. In these alternative trajectories, men and women take part in an ongoing coconstruction of kinship boundaries (Hertz, 2002). For example, African American men and women are uniquely challenged by sociohistorical experiences that have led to stereotyping and communication problems (Cazenave & Smith, 1988). Pinderhughes (2002) suggested that African Americans live with "constant conflict, confusion and contradiction while trapped within a system that undermines functional roles" (p. 272). These relationships may be marked by more collaboration and friendship—and therefore may require more flexibility and vigilance.

Extant literature on unmarried parents is limited by two additional factors. Most studies are based on women's perspectives of relationships, and we know little about men's relationship expectations and experiences (South, 1993). Some studies even suggest that fathers' perspectives on relationship quality may be more important than mothers' perspectives in predicting marital outcomes (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Also, a strong focus on successful achievement of marriage as a status has left few studies to identify relationship trajectories that reflect positive relationships among unmarried parents. In a review of research on marriage, Fein, Burstein, Fein, and Lindberg (2003) indicated the need for "more direct research on the processes that affect the development of commitment within cohabitation and decision making about marriage" (Fein et al., p. 18; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). Graefe and Lichter (2007) urged examination of specific mechanisms of mate selection that may disadvantage unwed mothers

over time. Of particular relevance for low-income families, few researchers have examined how alternative patterns of pair-bonding, such as those that do not lead to marriage, have emerged in recent decades.

Suspension as a Relationship Trajectory Over the Life Course

In this study, we asked *how did the relationships of unmarried low-income fathers and mothers shift over time?* Although prior studies have used snapshots of a relationship status, we focus on relationship trajectories through multiple periods of friendship, intimacy, cohabitation, or marriage over time. To our knowledge, few studies have addressed long-term relationships that do not result in marriage or cohabitation—but continue to remain significant for both partners. We define these trajectories as *suspension*, during which intimate relationships were put “on hold” and premarital stages were elongated. In this paper, we will explore three dimensions that make these trajectories unique: (a) partner support despite environmental and family barriers to long-term relationships, (b) presence of children and delinking of partnering from parenting, and (c) hard-earned investment during the wait to formalize relationships.

A life course perspective provides a framework to explore how changing social contexts transform normative role expectations for partners and parents (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). We define *relationship suspension* as a process by which low-income unmarried parents maintain *lives that are linked* through the integration and internalization of social expectations, norms, and meanings of partnering and parenting (Giele & Elder, 1998). Fathers’ role transitions through work and family domains shape mothers’ role transitions through the same domains. They continue to engage with each other and interact often on a daily basis, typically because of their roles as parents of a biological child. What is unique about these trajectories is the open-endedness of relationship commitments. Fathers’ and mothers’ lives are linked as potential partners, many of whom choose not to terminate relationships but to put them “on hold” for a future time.

Few studies have focused on low-income men’s perspectives on intimate relationships. We emphasized men’s *agency* (Giele & Elder, 1998), as they actively make meaning and organize their lives through daily

negotiation with mothers. For example, men accorded high status and powerful meaning to the relationship with “babymamas,” by nature of women being the mothers of their children. Although our data are limited to men’s role construction, relationship trajectories are coconstructed to the extent that both parents participated in redefining unresolved relationships.

Trajectories of relationship suspension seldom look alike, suggesting the explicit consideration of *diverse social contexts* (Giele & Elder, 1998). Many parents endured dangerous neighborhoods, threats to health and well-being, and stresses of immigration and incarceration. Poor fathers emerged into dramatically altered economic landscapes, piecing together provider and caregiver roles, often confined to the margins of work (Young, 2006). They have attempted to build and sustain relationships with mothers of their children in complex family configurations, including multiple partners or shifting residential patterns (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Mott, 1990).

Finally, suspension trajectories weave linked lives, agency, and context through *multiple time perspectives*. Individual fathers and mothers each face unique imperatives at different times during their development, but their relationships have their own trajectories as well. After the first flush of dating and early parenthood that does not result in marriage, as each parent “moves on” in their lives as parents or workers, they may suspend relationships with the parents of their children. The life course framework also relates individual development with social change (Elder & O’Rand, 1995). In effect, higher prevalence of suspended relationships suggests the emergence of a new pair-bond paradigm in the midst of ongoing changes to marriages and families.

Method

Sample

In the Life History Studies, we recruited 146 low-income fathers in four different projects, linking eligibility to children’s receipt of public assistance or attendance in Head Start programs. Retrospective life history interviews were conducted with 40 African American men in a community-based fathering program in Chicago, 40 incarcerated men in a work release correctional facility in Indiana, 35 young African American men in a community-based fathering program in Indianapolis, and 35 low-income

men from communities matched with the *Welfare, Children, and Families Three City Ethnographic Study* in Chicago. The sample was diverse in terms of race/ethnicity (66% African American [$n = 96$]; 20% European American [$n = 29$]; 13% Latino [$n = 19$]; and 1% Asian or Native American [$n = 2$]) as well as age (35%, 18 – 24 years [$n = 51$]; 36%, 25 – 35 years [$n = 52$]; and 29%, 36 years and older [$n = 43$]). About 45% ($n = 66$) of the fathers had used alcohol or drugs consistently, with most of these men recruited from the work release program in Indiana. Just under half of the men (49%, $n = 72$) were employed for 20 hr per week or more at the time of the interview. Men who chose to be interviewed tended to participate more actively in the programs than other fathers, which suggested that they placed greater emphasis on involvement as parents. However, their partnering relationships did not differ from those who did not participate in interviews. This sample may be selective in how salient father-child relationships became in guiding interaction between unmarried parents.

Data Collection

In this study, we used qualitative methods to examine the processes, contexts, and constructed meanings of low-income unmarried parents' relationship trajectories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Ethnographic field methods allowed us to study multilevel processes and patterns that are missed by less intensive methods. Interview data provided insight into the social construction of the meaning of commitment in relationships over time.

In each project, the research team conducted fieldwork and participant observation in community-based programs. Over the course of many months, team members served as case managers or classroom facilitators for life skills curricula. During 2-hr life history interviews at program sites or in men's homes, we adapted a semistructured retrospective protocol, which was based on the life history calendar methodology (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-Demarco, 1988). We developed life history grids to mark approximate dates of transitions in five key domains: relationship trajectories with partners and children, residential change, involvement with family of origin, work in mainstream and underground economies, and education. Interviews were transcribed and imported into qualitative analysis software for data management and retrieval.

During interviews and in the course of working with fathers in programs, we found that some of their most important relationships were not with current intimate partners, but with mothers of their children, many of whom were former (and potentially future) partners. For this study, we relied on an open-ended approach to ask participants about their relationship trajectories and to capture a full range of meaning of relationships, which Manning and Smock (2002) asserted was the next step in a comprehensive conceptualization of partner relationships.

Life history grids with multiple person-year measures were developed for each father. For this analysis, a pair of coders independently rated partner relationships for each mother of a father's children, for each year since the age of 18, on a scale of 0 – 5 (0 = *no contact*, antagonistic relations; 1 = *1 – 2 contacts per year*, usually antagonistic; 2 = *1 contact per month*, both parents aware of each others' residence and daily activities, more positive interaction; 3 = *weekly contact*, usually more positive than negative interaction, better reciprocal information on each others' daily activities; 4 = *2 – 3 contacts per week*, likely to involve intimacy, investment, commitment; 5 = *daily contact*, coresidential or not, intimate relationships with strong investment). Coders discussed each score and if they disagreed, they reassessed the score by rereading interview text and reached agreement. Long-term relationships were defined relative to the age of fathers and the length of a given relationship. A relationship trajectory was determined to be "long term" if it met the following criteria: a score of 4 or 5 in 2 – 3 continuous years for relationships up to 5 years in duration, in 4 – 5 continuous years for relationships 6 – 10 years in duration, in 8 – 9 continuous years for relationships 11 – 15 years in duration, and in 11 – 13 years for relationships 16 years or more in duration. We did not include men with low-quality relationships (a score of 0 – 3) in the sample. As a result, men with limited interaction with mothers of their children or estranged multiple partners were not considered to have suspended relationship trajectories.

The remaining sample of 71 men (49% of total sample) suspended high-quality relationships at some point in their lives. Over one third of this sample ($n = 28$; 39%) had more than one long-term partner, and we chose to focus on the relationship that was longest in duration—typically with mothers of their oldest children. Over a third (37%) of the men had relationships that lasted 16 years or more, with close to another third (29%) with relationships

that lasted between 6 – 10 years. Half of all African American fathers (50%, $n = 48$) and just over half of all White fathers (55%, $n = 16$) were involved in suspended relationships. Only 37% ($n = 7$) of all Latino fathers were involved in suspended relationships; all the remaining Latino men ($n = 12$) were in stable marital relationships and were not included in the final sample.

Data Analyses

We drew upon basic elements of grounded theory method, including the technique of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the first wave of open coding, we identified common and important relationship themes. We used sensitizing concepts from prior research to orient our consideration of the data (van der Hoonaard, 1997) and developed new codes that emerged from our reading of the interviews. For example, fathers' "fear of abandonment" was used in coding in previous studies of incarcerated fathers (Roy & Dyson, 2005). In the second wave of axial coding, we compared and contrasted men's reports of relationship trajectories. For example, we explored contexts in which fathers felt comfortable opting out of marriage, whereas other fathers were adamant in their pursuit. Finally, during the final phase of selective coding, we developed the core category of suspension through close attention to its three related dimensions.

We also used a range of methods to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility and dependability of the data were enhanced by the use of multiple sources of data (fathers, family members, and program staff) and multiple methods of data collection (interviews, life history grids, and participant observation), as well as many months of interaction in field settings. In many cases, we used in-person discussions with some fathers weeks after their interviews (i.e., member checks) to validate initial understanding of relationship trajectories.

Within the 71 long-term relationships, 30% ($n = 21$) led into and out of marriage. Five of the men were currently married, but we defined their relationships as unresolved, as they were living apart from their partners because of immigration, incarceration, or estrangement. Over half (55%, $n = 39$) of these men had ended nonmarital intimate relationships in past years, and the remaining 45% of men ($n = 32$) were currently involved in intimate relationships.

Commensurate with our coding of high quality (scores of 4 or 5), each of the past or ongoing relationships involved some degree of cohabitation. Relationships were often cyclical, with cohabitation or intimacy ending and starting again. Suspension implies a redefinition of a normative premarital stage of engagement. For example, the relationship between Leon and his common-law wife (see Figure 1) shifted in relation to his/her work participation, cohabitation, childrearing, hustling, and substance use. Leon moved in and out of his partner's household. Relationship statuses changed in a trajectory of suspension: at one point, he was a cohabitor and at another point, he was not considered to be involved with his children's mother at all.

Findings

In these sections, we examine how relationships between unmarried parents persisted despite challenging circumstances. We explore three dimensions of the process of suspension: mothers' support of fathers despite environmental and family barriers, prioritization of children through delinking parenting from partnering, and hard work of daily investment during the wait to formalize relationships.

"She Knows What I'm Going Through": Support Despite Barriers to Relationships

As a young, poor father in an impoverished community in Indianapolis, Parrish faced formidable barriers to normative markers of success, such as a good job, marriage, or home ownership. He noted that his relationship with the mother of his child was one of the only "good" and consistent things over years of change and difficulty. Like many men in this sample, their relationship began decades earlier, during childhood with neighbors in close-knit communities.

I met Erika in eighth grade, and she was the only person who was real while I was in a foster home. She always said, "How you been doing?" I told her . . . she's a keeper, and she's smart. I've known her for seven years, and I still don't know her well enough to marry her. But it's a deeper bond now. Nothing will break us up. It's like, that's my blood now.

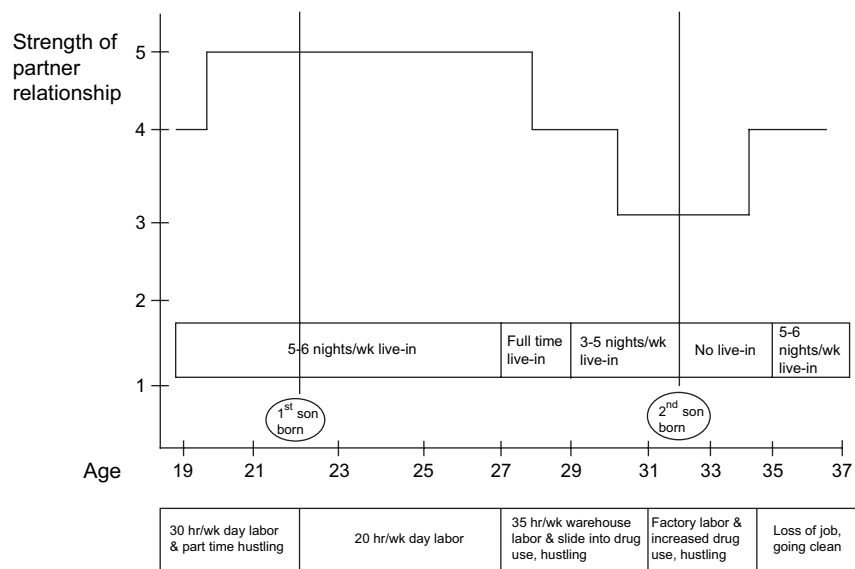


Figure 1. Sample Trajectory of Relationship Suspension (Leon, age 37).

Parrish embraced his relationship in large part because there were few viable family alternatives for social support. When he and Erika “got into a little altercation,” he returned to his family in his old neighborhood, but he found “I wasn’t even there two weeks when I came running back. Nothing but broke people, the whole family doing bad. You can’t get help from nobody.”

Our focus on relationship dynamics showed how local labor markets transformed parenting and partnering relationships over time. Men on the margins of work were not locked out of work force, but they were not guaranteed a spot within the work force either. Erratic patterns of work engagement forced parents to redefine family relationships, to “make sense” of family configurations in a new way each month. Miguel, a father with three children, left his wife and two daughters in Mexico to live for 8 years by himself in Chicago. When he finally reunited with his family, he expected to end a period of separation, only to find the marriage tested again.

I brought my daughters to the United States, but they didn’t like it. They went back to live with my mother-in-law. One minute my wife says both parents should be in their kids’ lives, then she wants to move away and do things on our own. She says, “We have different cultures—my people are different from your people.” She’s more oriented to her family than our own.

We looked beyond the marital status of Miguel and his wife’s relationship and found a trajectory that was similar to suspension, with “stalled” expectations and uncertainty about future relations.

Growing into adulthood in dangerous neighborhoods, most fathers went through periods of great threats to their well-being as young men. Over 70% of the sample had a history of incarceration or drug use, or both. These challenges put their stable relationships in jeopardy, and often mothers of their children assessed fathers as “risky partners.” However, men remained committed to unstable relationships if mothers continued to support positive changes in their lives. Marley was a 26-year-old father in the work release program in Indiana. Despite a painful breakup and her subsequent remarriage, Marley and the mother of his children maintained a complicated, unresolved relationship.

Economical situation sucks, living day to day, the pressures of life. This place is so racist, I’m just angry. I didn’t know how to cope with it, so I drank. And certain things happened in the relationship that you can’t manage anymore. She was eight months pregnant, and I struck her. It’s killed me for the longest time. Like broken glass all over the place, and you’re basically walking over it. You can’t mend it, you can’t just pick up the pieces and glue them together . . .

A distinguishing aspect of relationship suspension was that mothers recognized fathers' mistakes relative to barriers as a parents and partners. According to Marley, his former partner "gets it"—how his failures and efforts were shaped by the challenges in their lives. Over time, she became a catalyst in his own personal changes—and neither one had foreclosed on a second chance for their relationship.

I admitted that yes, there was love, and she wanted to hear that. I think she still has feelings for me. She wished I could be more like this before, then maybe she would not have walked out. When her husband's not around, she may take me home to see the kids and say, "Here, you drive." Like for a moment, we're together again. She'll say, "You are one of the most intelligent, creative . . ." just start complimenting me. I love the woman, man. I still care about the woman. She's the mother of my children. I can't help but to.

Reflecting on the strength of these relationships, many fathers spoke explicitly of a fear of abandonment. They had perhaps burned many bridges, they did not trust their own family members, and they were skeptical that a partner would stand beside them through the dramatic ups and downs in their lives. Their appreciation of partners' dedication and loyalty reflected how deeply they feared being left alone to deal with the challenges in their lives. Ben, with four children by the age of 23, explained that his relationship was still standing because of his partner's consistent support.

She can't be with me because of the money, because I don't have any of that. When I had my second child, she accepted me with open arms. When I was going through trials and tribulations on back to jail, she would still find me. When my father passed, she was there for me. When I was not working, she made sure I had things I needed. I didn't have a pair of church clothes, no slacks, none of that. She's always been there for me, no matter what.

Negotiating the margins of work and risky neighborhoods was perhaps most challenging for the one third of fathers with multiple partners and multiple

children ($n = 22$; 31%). At times, tensions between different partners could quickly put an end to relationships, which until that point had offered promise for change. Complex family configurations often demanded that unmarried fathers and mothers practice collaboration and flexibility (Pinderhughes, 2002) if their relationships were to survive competing partnerships. For example, Roland had been deserted by two wives, and he faced severe penalties in child support court. He relied on his girlfriend to argue for continuing access to his children. He said, "She knows what I'm going through. She was like, 'I ain't letting you go nowhere.' Without her, I would have still been in prison. I had to let her take control, I gave it all to her."

"I'm Married to My Kid": Delinking Partnering From Parenting

A second unique aspect of relationship suspension was that it unfolded between unmarried partners who shared children. Men's commitment to the mothers of their children could not be understood outside of the context of their father-child relationships. Many fathers reported that their commitments were unique simply because, "she's the mother of my children." These relationships indicated a wider embrace of family as well. Bryan, a 21-year-old father of an infant boy, tied his commitments to his child and his child's mother so closely that they became synonymous.

We really did help each other. The love I have for her . . . it's the same love I have for my son, in a fatherly kind of way. When I see my son, I see her. So by me and my baby mama having a good relationship in the future, because of my son . . . we could just be a big happy family.

Most fathers in the study spoke of the foundations of their relationships built on commitment to their children, with the subsequent development of mature partnering relationships. In contrast to normative assumptions that couple relationships are the most central of men's commitments to families, relationship suspension reflected a pedi-focal model in which children were at the core of unmarried parents' commitment to each other. Bird, a young former gang member with an infant daughter, offered the most concise view of the implications of

delinking partnering and parenting. He said, “When she wakes up, I’ll be holding her hand. I’ll be there, beside her. I feel like I’m married to my kid. Through thick and thin, rain, sleet and snow, whatever you need, I’m there.”

Men in suspended relationships had unclear expectations as fathers. By delinking partnering from parenting, they gave priority to their relationships with their children, which required innovation and flexibility in crafting parental roles. For example, men left promising relationships if new female partners would not accept their children, or if mothers put up enough resistance about children spending time with new girlfriends in men’s lives. Danny, a 33-year-old father and recovering addict in the work release program, admitted that “I’m not staying sober for myself, I’m doing it for them. If I don’t make it about them, I don’t deserve them. I’ve given up a girlfriend for all this.”

Children were often the impetus for relations between unmarried parents, and they also promoted continuity of suspended relationships. If they were involved in their children’s lives, unmarried parents remained in communication with each other. Often, they considered returning to their former partners or they chose to stay in conflicted relationships to preserve contact with their children. Akida, a 23-year-old father of two children, struggled to make sense of his partnership and its relation to his fathering.

I don’t see us having a future. [The mother of my daughter is] struggling, I’m struggling, two people struggling can’t do nothing. I’m always considering how I’d rather raise my daughter without her mother. I realize it’s impossible, she’s got to be in her mother’s life, just like she’s got to be in my life. It comes back to “it’s all about her,” and keeping her mother happy.

However, remaining in an unresolved relationship could be the worst option when conflict became too damaging. Alfred was a hair stylist who failed in his attempts to open his own shop in Chicago. As a consequence, he and his wife divorced, and she moved with their two sons to live with her family in Boston. Alfred spent the next 5 years with another partner, who struggled with drug addiction and their young son. After multiple bouts of domestic violence and confrontations with the police, he admitted that his involvement could do more harm than good.

Sometimes you have to leave. Not saying that you have to forsake the kids, but sometimes you have to do it to stay out of trouble. Somebody will pull you down. If and when we are ready to get together, maybe it will happen then . . .

Alfred continued to plan to visit his children in Boston, hoping that “if I start making good money, I can buy me a house and bring my kids and their mom back with me.” He also tried to craft a flexible arrangement to spend time with his younger son, without seeing the boy’s mother. As with many fathers, Alfred’s partnering relationships appeared voluntary and contingent to parenting relationships that took precedence in his life.

“We Just Ain’t Really Right”: Investment and the Wait for Formalized Relationships

A final dimension of relationship suspension was the day-to-day hard work of investment in ambiguous relationships. There were no roadmaps for unmarried parents on how to survive suspension over many years. A Latino father in Chicago described the process of creating a life together as “dreaming with eyes open,” indicating honest and often painful discussion about limited possibilities for formalizing his relationship through marriage. Unmarried parents could not label their relationships with familiar terms but by investing in continuing struggles over custody, respect, limited resources, and stress because of poverty, they often became the most critical family members in each others’ lives.

Both partners grew and changed perspectives over time, and men discussed the intensive daily work that was required to “checkup” with mothers of their children. Patrice had five children with two different partners, and he returned repeatedly to his former partner to solidify commitments.

We’re together but not “together,” as far as a relationship. She asked me if there was a chance we could get back together. We’ll never be apart as mother and father—we have a bondship that can’t be broken. But we cooled off for a minute. We needed to find ourselves again. Get back in tune with each other. Basically, figure out what went wrong for me to go out and have another child and another relationship. It took some soul searching and some hard thinking.

Suspension required the emotional work to resolve ambiguous expectations for family life. Unmarried fathers and mothers tried again and again to resolve their past mistakes and to plan ahead about potential life choices. Many relationships faltered on basic questions of marital readiness. One couple broke up in the face of numerous rejected marriage proposals—by both partners—over 14 years. Life changes were also required of both partners in order to move to the “next level” of commitment. An ex-football star and medical technician, as well as drug addict, Rich pushed to be forgiven by his common-law wife, whom he had known since grammar school. As he overcame his addiction and found a job, he realized that she needed to change her own parenting and partnering expectations.

Our marriage will never come to be until we both change. I’m not saying my change is so great, but if she don’t change, she’s still doing the same things we’ve been doing for years. I’m out of my mold, into something else. If she discourages me, I’m not going to invest anything.

As unmarried parents worked to formalize long-term relationships, they foundered on barriers that could erode potential relationships. Some fathers acknowledged an emerging mismatch of values with the mother of their children. Amir, a 26-year-old father of a toddler, was uncomfortable with a nontraditional relationship in which both parents were not “a force together.”

She has a serious grudge about marriages. She didn’t experience them—her mom works at a ticket house and her father is a playboy. Structure like that, she didn’t know. And I didn’t know marriage for too long, but I know where it’s at. I see myself one day having that, being married.

Unmarried parents could not dismiss the persistent need for more resources that wore at the potential for successful relationships. The sporadic nature of work participation teased both men and women with promises of formalizing relationships, and it obscured future plans for establishing family households. Leon (see Figure 1) felt ill-prepared to settle down with his common-law wife of 20 years.

I always say she’s my wife, we’ve been together since seventh grade, and there’s nothing stopping us from getting married. We just ain’t really right. I’m not working, but she’s working. When I was working, she wasn’t working. But I’m going to be with my kids, hoping that me and her will get married. The only thing I have to do is get my feet in the door, and we can get this thing going right.

Fathers’ accounts of relationship suspension partially supported findings that mothers wait for men to prove their economic potential (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Taylor, a 23-year-old father in Indianapolis, repeated the mantra of “I want to get a job” each year but found himself “losing everything, slowly vanishing, just like Monopoly.” The mother of his 3-year-old son told him “Six years and I’m done. I’m not going through this anymore—get yourself together.” However, attrition of relationships was not clear-cut with a definitive time limit. Taylor’s negotiations with the mother of his children continued as their relationship cooled. Involvement with his young son and efforts to find a job kept the two parents connected. As their 6-year-old relationship stalled, they remained significant actors in each others’ lives. Taylor’s experiences indicate that partnering roles are flexible over time, with unmarried parents ready to adapt expectations when there was no straight line to marriage.

Over time, fathers and mothers drifted in and out of intensive daily commitments to live together or to raise children together. For men, relationship suspension was cyclical and many believed that “when it comes back around,” they would still find a special bond with the mothers of their children. At times, this “return” took men by surprise. Thomas, a White father in Chicago, married Connie and lived in low-rise public housing shared with six children from previous relationships. Thomas’ ex-partner came by frequently to visit her children, and he found that she had changed her view of him.

She’s my kids’ mother; I can’t ignore her. But when she comes by, I usually go out the back door or upstairs. She’s been making comments lately. . . how she misses me. She’s probably starting to realize things now. She don’t see me struggling now, she sees me improving instead of failing, being with the kids and holding

a job. She realizes that this is the man she needed to know. I still have love for her, but not the love where I want a relationship.

Over time, both parents could grow resigned to their unresolved relationships that would not lead to marriage. In some ways, relationships suddenly seemed more manageable if fathers and mothers accepted that they were not “marriage-ready.” Many fathers, for example, downplayed their own inability to move forward by leaving the direction of relationships up to fate or to “God’s will.” Otis, a 23-year-old father of two infants, believed that “we gonna have to deal with each other for the rest of our lives. Ain’t no sense in being tied down. We decided if it was meant to be, if we happened to come back to each other, then it will happen.” Another strategy was to reframe suspension as success in itself. Muhammed was comfortable within an open-ended relationship and obligation only to his children. “I am not in a hurry—it isn’t all that serious to me,” he stated. “If something is working, why break it up? I was going to get married when I was 40, established and stable.” Other unmarried parents accepted the uniqueness of suspended relationships—complete with strengths, promises, and limitations. Young fathers, like Amir, realized that real relationships may be quite different than what they had expected.

The more times passes, we’re not in touch on no kind of level . . . I can only look down the line to when we’re 40 something. Maybe we’ll only have one other relationship and we’re both still around. Our lives probably won’t be a nice family barbeque or nothing like that, right?

Fathers noted that relationship suspension represented a perspective shift for rising young cohorts. For them, marriage seemed voluntary and relationships with children had become mandatory. Andre, a young 19-year-old father of an infant, told his grandfather about his girlfriend’s pregnancy.

My grandfather . . . really can’t understand what young guys are going through now. Certain old-fashioned standards, and we’ve moved on from that. If you have a baby now, you’re not necessarily going to marry that person. If

he was upset, he didn’t say anything, just kept watching TV. I think about marrying her, but more like a down-the-line type of thing.

Investment in open-ended relationships could take many forms for unmarried parents. Within the process of suspension, many interactions required hard work: resolving disagreements, coping with disappointments, adapting to the ebb and surge of resources in poor households, and finding perseverance to try again with former partners. To persist over time, promising relationships rested on flexible partner roles that mothers and fathers crafted.

Discussion

In this study, we have examined perspectives of low-income men to provide insights into processes that affect the development of commitment among unmarried parents. A focus on marital or residential status in previous studies may obscure the actual experiences of such parents. As an alternative, we have used a life course framework to explore different ways in which the lives of unmarried parents are linked. We articulated a pair-bonding paradigm for unresolved relationships that cannot be easily described as marriage or cohabitation. Just as Reed (2006) noted how unmarried couples drift in and out of cohabitation over time, we assessed relationship trajectories that show how unmarried parents’ relationships persist over time despite substantial barriers.

The concept of relationship suspension may provide a tool to better understand dynamics in relationships that do not fit normative definitions. For example, the period of waiting for men’s economic potential to emerge is seen as the first steps to marriage. Edin and Kefalas (2005) reported that poor women stay involved with risky male partners for up to 4 or 5 years, waiting for men’s “personal transformations.” However, timelines for relationship attrition may not be obvious. Mothers who recruit fathers for involvement with their children are often ambivalent about the consequences for intimate relationships (Roy & Burton, 2007). When low-income men are committed parents but cannot secure a good job, do mothers suspend or stall intimate relationships beyond 5 years? Are these relationships “failures” because they do not result in marriage or cohabitation?

As relationships that are “neither marriage nor cohabitation” become more common, researchers will focus less on partner choice and more on context and meanings in relationship processes. Among “purposeful delayers” in long-term relationships, partners deliberate more about specific details of relationship dynamics compared to couples who move quickly to marriage and are driven more by events such as childbirth (Sassler, 2004). As we found, relationship suspension among low-income unmarried parents may be uniquely shaped by involvement with children, women’s emotional support of men, or past histories of relationships that may stretch back into adolescence and childhood. Similarly, studies may focus less on marital aspirations and more on maintenance of close connections over many years. Suspension may capture the attempts of unmarried parents to create intimate relationships, a critical pathway for promoting hope and longevity in low-income families (Handel, 2000).

The centrality of parent-child relationships in the process of suspension offers a new model for a life-long commitment, in contrast to long-held notions of marriage as the core of family life. In many families, partnering dynamics are shaped more prominently by childbearing and childrearing and not the pursuit of marriage (Graefe & Lichter, 2002). A shift to a child-centered or pedi-focal perspective encourages researchers to consider a diverse range of relationships between genders and generations (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999; Roy & Burton, 2007). Unmarried parenting often rests on family bonds, held in place by kin keeping that is recognized by other family members. It also reflects the dynamic nature of family building, which may be more complex than currently conceptualized (Manning, 2004).

Finally, trajectories of relationship suspension differ by cultural and social contexts. Suspension was specifically relevant in the context of immigration for Latino fathers in the study. Even married parents needed to suspend relationships because of economic demands of living apart and moving across borders to search for work. The context of incarceration was also closely linked to suspension. White fathers in the study were exclusively recruited from a correctional facility and most of their long-term relationships dissolved over months of separation and anticipation of the impact of criminal records on work participation. Findings also

illustrated how systemic structural risks undermine marriage for poor African American men (Cazenave & Smith, 1988) and how their vulnerability may encourage them to remain in long-term relationships with mothers of their children (Pinderhughes, 2002).

This study was based on men’s reports and it leaves questions as to whether women also perceive relationships with the fathers of their children as suspension. Women and men may have different priorities regarding the quality of relationships (Brown, 2000). Next steps would include exploring mothers’ perspectives on relationship suspension and ideally a larger national sample, as we cannot generalize from this study of 71 fathers in the Midwest. Also, retrospective accounts may be limited, and future studies of trajectories of relationship suspension may be more effective with prospective data collection. However, both retrospective and prospective reports of relationships are biased, and we may need to consider discrepancies between both types of reports (Teitler, Reichman, & Koball, 2006). Continued study of the prevalence and consequences of high-quality, long-term relationships between unmarried parents may provide new understanding of family formation, commitment, and relationship experiences for those who “fail” to achieve marriage.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Government policymakers are heavily invested in the success of relationships between biological parents in low-income families. For almost two decades, social policy aimed at poor parents has sought to discourage nonmarital births and to encourage marriage as a path to ending poverty. However, as studies show, marriage rates among poor couples are declining, and the complex factors that drive decisions not to marry remain resistant to easy remedy. By identifying a growing group of unmarried parents who are not married and not cohabitative—yet committed to each other through their children and ongoing personal investments of support—we may rethink what a successful policy outcome should be. Marriage as a goal may be unrealistic, but promotion of stable and supportive relationships between unmarried parents may be more achievable. Positive relations between unmarried parents can be sources of strength and support for children. Short-term intimate partners of unmarried parents may be weak candidates for marriage promotion compared to

long-standing commitments among suspended partners who became frustrated or “stalled” in their efforts to formalize their relationships.

With the limited policy tools of marriage promotion, paternity establishment, and child support (Haskins, 2006), recent social policy initiatives have intervened in unmarried parents’ ambiguous commitments. However, unforeseen consequences of these programs may heighten tension between parents. The requirement that welfare recipients identify fathers of their children (or lose their benefits) has led to confusion and an atmosphere of “he said/she said” recriminations in many families (Roy, 1999). Current laws that reroute fathers’ child support payments to allow states to recoup welfare payments result in few tangible results of men’s actual contributions to their children (Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999). In addition, current social policies promote behavioral changes without addressing the environmental barriers to strong relationships. For young fathers, expanded educational and training opportunities, reentry programs for ex-offenders, and community-building efforts can provide stability (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). For other fathers, child support and marriage promotion may become more effective if they are integrated with extensive programs in job creation, training, and placement (Primus, 2006). Moreover, younger fathers in this study needed greater numbers of older men who could model committed parenting outside of marriage.

Supportive policies for fathers is only one piece of the puzzle: as men in this study argued, opportunities for employment for women also need to be strengthened, in order to “make it right” for both fathers and mothers in low-income families. Most programs for low-income unmarried parents are currently targeted at mothers or fathers but not at a family system with children’s well-being at the core. Program staff would need to integrate and coordinate employment services for both parents. To do so, social policy must recognize real-world challenges to strong relationships between unmarried parents, such as providing resources for mothers and fathers who are separated by immigration or incarceration.

The prolonged nature of these relationships presents perhaps the greatest challenge for social policy and local programming with low-income families. As the study suggests, there are few quick fixes to transform relationships between unmarried parents into stable marriages. Programs that have

offered generous resources over longer periods of time to low-income families, such as the New Hope project in Milwaukee and the Minnesota Family Investment Program, have shown only slight positive changes in stabilizing relationships between unmarried parents (Duncan, Huston, & Weisner, 2007; Gennetian, Miller, & Smith, 2005; Yoshikawa, Weisner, & Lowe, 2006). However, these relationships are not the short-term affairs presented in popular media or by policymakers. Well over half of the men were involved in relationships that lasted longer—between 6 and 16 years—and without resolution or marriage. The growth of multipartner families effectively complicates tracking and engaging with each of these parents over time. Only sustained commitments to policies and programs that stabilize relationships—and promote progress in suspended relationships—can allow parents to contribute to their children over many years, regardless of their marital status.

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