

**NEGOTIATING
INDEPENDENT MOTHERHOOD**
*Working-Class African American Women
Talk about Marriage and Motherhood*

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The authors examine the experiences and ideals of African American working-class mothers through 20 intensive interviews. They focus on the women's negotiations with racialized norms of motherhood, represented in the assumptions that legal marriage and an exclusively bonded dyadic relationship with one's children are requisite to good mothering. The authors find, as did earlier phenomenological studies, that the mothers draw from distinct ideals of community-based independence to resist each of these assumptions and carve out alternative scripts based on nonmarital relationships with male partners and shared care of children.

Fully 30 years after the Moynihan (1965) report pathologized the Black mother as "matriarch," policy analysts debate the same linkages among Black masculinity, men's unemployment, women's nonmarital childbearing, and poverty. Two lines of argument continue to predominate: the cultural argument, emphasizing that welfare dependency discourages marriage and stable employment (exemplified by Murray 1984 and now sweeping across the political spectrum), and the structural argument, emphasizing that the lack of stable employment for men discourages marriage (exemplified by Wilson 1987, 1994). Although the two sides clash bitterly,

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they share a common, if unacknowledged, gendered agenda. Both assume that strengthening the Black family requires the (re)assertion of masculine family headship.

When Black mothers are referred to in the public discourse, they are portrayed stereotypically—if not as the Moynihan matriarchs, then as weak and irresponsible teen mothers (e.g., DeParle 1994; Murray 1993). Such treatments obscure the structural causes of poverty and ignore women's interests. The work of Black feminist scholars who challenge such stereotypes and articulate autonomous interests (e.g., Collins 1990; Morton 1991) has transformed academic feminist discussion, but it is ignored in the public discussion. Earlier phenomenological studies that directly confronted the pathologized portrayals are also ignored (Dill 1980; Ladner 1972; Stack 1974). In this article, we return to the phenomenological tradition and place Black mothers' voices at the center of a look at motherhood and families. This is part of a larger project comparing white and Black working-class mothers' negotiations with motherhood, but here we limit our discussion to 20 African American mothers who spoke about their family experiences and how, in particular, they "do" motherhood.¹ From their stories, we challenge both the assumption that their interests lie in "restoring" a male-headed family and the pervasive assumption shared by much feminist scholarship that they aspire to ideals of exclusive motherhood—to mother as part of an intense and exclusive dyadic relationship. We find, as did earlier phenomenological studies, that the mothers express a distinct ideal of community-based independence involving shared caregiving and nonmarital partnerships with men.

BACKGROUND

Powerful racist imagery of dependent teen mothers frames current welfare debates, reversing earlier stereotypes of "super-strong" Black matriarchs. Single parenthood, in fact, has risen among all U.S. racial-ethnic groups, yet 70 percent of nonmarital births are to women age 20 years or older and the rate of increase in teen births among African Americans has been flat since 1970.² Significant racial differences, however, do fuel stereotyped portrayals: Births to single mothers now represent 22 percent of white births yet fully 66 percent of African American births (DeParle 1994). To debunk stereotypes, some scholars show how Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) has provided diminished rather than increased incentives for nonmarital childbearing (summarized in McLanahan 1994). Wilson (1987) takes a different tack, demonstrating that it is capitalism, particularly its deindustrializing phase, that threatens Black manhood.³ Multiracial feminists go even further, challenging the preoccupation with male family headship and the model of rationality that assumes women prefer the "rewards" of marriage over social and economic independence (e.g., Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1992).

Although some 20 years ago Ladner (1972) and Stack (1974) illustrated the resourcefulness of African American mothers in supporting alternative kin networks, this work has been criticized for painting alternative families in a naively

positive light (Furstenberg 1991; Wilson 1987). Multiracial feminist scholarship, in actuality, has long recognized differences between African American and Euro-American notions of normative femininity, motherhood, and marriage and has portrayed these neither naively nor narrowly. Stack (1974) paints women's kin networks and shared child rearing as viable ongoing traditions, but she also examines sources of conflict and strain. Ladner (1972) identifies several models of Black womanhood, the predominant one being the strong and independent mother, one shared by the women with whom we spoke; however, Ladner also finds a model more reflective of white norms coexisting with or against this script, one emphasizing dependence within marriage. Similarly, Dill (1979) notes that African American women cannot live solely in their own communities and experience contradictory pressures from dominant ideals, yet their responses represent resilience and creativity in addition to simply being adaptations to racial oppression. In our study, we asked working-class African American mothers about their scripts for mothering and how these offered positive alternative identities and practices.

White feminist scholarship also has been driven to scrutinize dominant discourses of motherhood, if for different purposes. These were, first, to counter coercive pronatalism dictating that all women must mother, but then, in a second theoretical move, to valorize women's dishonored caregiving. Unfortunately, as is now pointed out frequently, this second move tended to reessentialize dominant white norms of the exclusively bonded mother-child dyad. As Scheper-Hughes (1993) writes, such a unitary script for maternal sentiment (the "epoxy glue model") becomes a moralizing rhetoric of control, even if served up by feminists. Similarly, Glenn (1994) observes that the exclusive mother is the most naturalized aspect of current gender arrangements as she appears to be a biological inevitability. She writes, "What may be less familiar is the idea that this mothering is not just gendered but also racialized" (Glenn 1994, 7).

We organize the following discussion of African American mothers' norms of independent motherhood around two issues, starting with the attachment of normative motherhood to marriage and male family headship. We start with this because of its centrality in the public debate on the Black family and because, in our interviews, such assumptions of "marital rationality" so obscured women's experiences and understandings of their relationships with men. The second stems from the "epoxy glue" norm of exclusive motherhood; we examine the women's resistance to such norms and the alternative models drawn from shared child-rearing traditions.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

We interviewed 20 African American women living in southeast Michigan, 10 each from two different sites. The first 10 were recruited from the waiting room of an urban public family practice clinic where most patients were women and children, many of them receiving Medicaid. These women were young (average age 24 years), each with at least one child under the age of 1 year. Of the 10 women,

1 was divorced, 2 were currently cohabiting with male partners, and the other 7 were never-married noncohabitators. (No women in either group suggested that they had had same-sex partners, although we did not ask that question explicitly.) Most had completed high school and several had community college credits, but all were poor and using some form of welfare assistance. Far from the stereotype of long-term dependence, 7 of the 10 had fairly steady work histories or were in job training. They used government aid to cover what minimum-wage jobs lacked: maternity leaves, medical coverage, subsidization of transportation, and child care costs.

To locate stably employed working-class women, the second group of 10 Black women was drawn from service employees at a large hospital: nurse's aides, cleaners, and cooks. In this group, 3 women were married, 1 was widowed, and the remaining 6 had never married (2 cohabited). They were somewhat older than the first group (average age 29 years) and had somewhat older children. Their educational level was comparable to that of the first group. They averaged 35 hours per week of employment, earning an average wage of \$9 an hour. For the first group, family income was extremely low—\$9,000 to \$10,000 per year from low-wage employment and government aid. The second group earned \$15,000 to \$16,000; although substantially better off, the second group is still well below median U.S. income.⁴

We conducted these interviews acutely aware of our "otherness" as white women. Although feminist qualitative sociology has aimed to hear women with less power and resources, recent discussions call this into question; attempts at speaking for others, across differences, can be problematic because of the potential to appropriate or take over others' words (Alcoff 1991-92; DuCille 1994). We were, in fact, both similar to and different from our participants: We are mothers, but both of us are married and middle class. Age created another fine-grained sorting of differences and similarities because our participants ranged from those like us in their 30s to those much younger in their 20s. Our "speaking" thus may be problematic on several levels, and we present our interpretations of the mothers' voices as provisional. We found, as did Riessman (1987), that race/ethnic difference complicated the communication between women interviewers and participants. And, like Anderson and Jack (1991), as we carefully reread the interview transcripts, we found that at times we failed to adequately listen across differences.

TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE AND MEN

Rickie Solinger has furthered our understanding of the racialized connection of legal marriage to normative motherhood during the late 20th century. Comparing the distinct treatment of unwed mothers from 1945 through 1973, she demonstrates that legal marriage came to define motherhood for white women only: "For the first time, it took more than a baby to make a white girl or woman into a mother. Without a preceding marriage, a white female could not achieve true motherhood" (Solinger 1994, 290). Such norms promoted the separation of white unwed mothers from

their highly valued, adoptable babies, whereas Black women were expected to keep their unmarketable children. "The central question for . . . Black single mothers was how good a mother you were, *not* whether you were legally married" (Solinger 1994, 304; emphasis added). If allowed more space for maternal sentiment, single Black mothers thus were excluded from "true" motherhood (Solinger 1994).⁵

Of the 20 African American mothers we interviewed, 17 were unmarried, and their discussions evidenced the detachment of mothering from marriage so repudiated in the policy debates. Some of the mothers offered reasons for not marrying the fathers of their children, and at times such reasons did express the structural argument of Wilson. For example, Sharona had four children,⁶ and the father of the younger two wanted to marry her; she explained that it was difficult to refuse:

It's hard to bring up the subject. "Well, I don't want to marry you because you don't have a job." You know, I kind of hint around what I'm trying to say to him. It makes him feel bad. . . . He wants to get married.

Sharona was unusual in her singular emphasis on (his) economic obstacles to marriage, with only 1 other woman telling a similar story. Sharona acknowledged, however, some conflicting feelings. Considering the length of the relationship and her partner's desire to marry, she concluded, "It's like a total war in my mind." Other women we spoke with, by contrast, raised issues of independence, extended family, and public support, and they demonstrated much less interest in marriage.

In fact, in our interviews we found little direct or spontaneous interest in marriage even though only 5 of the 20 women were not involved in significant male-female relationships.⁷ The mothers, however, did emphasize the significance of fathers' continued relationships with children; only 4 of 23 living men who had fathered children with mothers in our group were truly "absent." When we asked questions about future hopes and goals, most spoke first of increased autonomy as working mothers and of wanting better jobs and public entitlements. None mentioned gaining a family wage through marriage to a "manly provider," even if (when prodded) they said they might want to get married. The African American mothers we spoke with claimed that they had been raised with expectations to achieve on their own, most repeatedly using the terms "independence" and "strength."

Jenny was 31 years old and the mother of three daughters. Although her parents had a traditional marriage, she had chosen not to marry or cohabit with the father of her children, her stable partner of 15 years. In her discussion of the future, Jenny included the upcoming completion of her associate's degree, transfer to a 4-year college, and plans for a job in the court system. She did not once mention marriage in connection with the future, although her partner was stably employed in construction. She expressed her ideal situation as follows: "I would like to be working and supporting my family and having a job that I truly loved, plus including my children in that, and they would be all happy and everything. That would be my fantasy."

Deb was similarly uninterested in legal marriage, although she and the father of her infant son had been together for six years: "Everybody keeps asking me when we're going to get married. No! . . . I'm not thinking about it, and he's not either."

Raised by a divorced working mother, Deb found in her a role model for independent motherhood: "You know, my son can have a nice life even if I'm with his father or without his father." She noted that dependence on a man was a potential liability if he were then to leave: "It's nice for him [the boy's father] to be working and helping out but . . . I grew up under my mother's standards. She never depended on nobody, so I know I don't want to!"

One working mother, Kerry, stated this as a general rule: "Every woman needs her own money so she can take care of her kids." Elise, divorced from her first son's father and involved with her second son's father, exemplifies how these mothers looked to public entitlements to protect their autonomy. After five years of stable employment in a low-paying white-collar job, Elise quit and went on AFDC for six months in lieu of paid maternity leave; at the time of our interview, she had a new job lined up. When asked what would improve her situation, she mentioned neither marriage nor improved job options for her partner: "More help with day care because it's not affordable at all. . . . The government can kind of help you with ADC [Aid to Dependent Children] . . . but if you're making six dollars, seven dollars, even eight dollars an hour, there is really no help in there!"

Nearly all the women we spoke with also emphasized desires for independence that went beyond the economic, speaking of "needing space" or even of "never letting a husband boss me around." One mother, Ramona, for example, corrected the interviewer's query about a time when she and her partner had lived together: "It was always *my* place." In our view, the women were not rejecting marriage per se. Many said that they liked the idea of getting married and finding life partners, if often placing this in the future. For example, Cynthia, a 29-year-old mother employed in food service, had stopped cohabiting with her partner after three years together. Since then, she felt that they got along better and enjoyed sharing care for their daughter. She mused that they might marry someday, with pleasurable thoughts of a church wedding.

Simply put, this group of mothers did not seem to feel an imperative to marry the men with whom they had children. The presumption that a "good mother" must be married was not evident, as Solinger might have predicted. Elise aptly expressed this, stating, "[My household] is a happy and healthy one," and Cynthia characterized herself, without contradiction, as a "homebody" who was "not ready for marriage." Kerry exemplified this positive, optional sense of marriage, after other priorities, when asked what would make her life better:

If I went back to school and got a better paying job . . . I guess if I was to get married, to fall in love and marry somebody that I know would accept my kids, even though they weren't his, but would really love them and care about them.

Bernice simply laughed as she said, "I hope to be married one day, yeah, but I can't say I will be."

Robin Jarrett, in a recent focus group study of Black single mothers, came to somewhat similar conclusions. She emphasizes a stronger tie to the ideal of marriage than the one we found, but in a similar vein she contrasts this to

multilayered responses to the reality of marriage. Jarrett points out, importantly, that most scholarship on the Black family, particularly in quantitative surveys, ignores the existence of varied, extralegal male-female relationships (Jarrett 1994). Research is often conducted with a dichotomous model that recognizes only the presence or absence of marriage.⁸ Our participants recounted many stories of extralegal relationships, and at times we fell into this presence/absence model with its tacit assumption of "marital rationality." Like those who problematize feminist methodology, we had trouble hearing across differences, as the following dialogue between Kerry and the second author illustrates:

TD: Were you guys married?

Kerry: No, we weren't. We were together eight years. [This is followed by details of the premature birth of her son.]

TD: This must have been a really hard time . . . and then you have a husband that . . . he's not being supportive.

Kerry: Yeah, he's not my husband, he's . . .

TD: OK, the father, your partner for a while.

Kerry: No, I always thought that we would always be together.

TD: Right. I guess I said husband because it was this long-term relationship.

In retrospect, we can see that we were hindered by our lack of language for extralegal relationships as well as by our marriage "blindness." In one telling interview, at least eight different terms were used, creating gaps and misunderstandings between participant and interviewer. The interviewer supplied in turn "going out," "man you were sharing stuff with," "living with," and "roommate," whereas the participant, Ramona, countered with "talking with," "settle down with," "staying with," and "friend." Even the term "father" was not simple; one woman had two daughters by two men but a new "boyfriend" who cared for them, in her words, "pretending to be the father."

The few married women in the study (three and one recent widow) supported the pattern of marriage as nonimperative, noneconomic, and distinct from motherhood; all claimed to have wed because they had found true partners. For all four, marriage had followed pregnancy; for three, it had followed birth. Joy's story is indicative. The mother of two, she worked full-time in a male-dominated blue-collar job, earning more money than her husband of 12 years. Sometimes, she said, he did feel threatened, although overall he was "pretty cool." Joy and her husband did not marry until their first child was 2 years old: "I've always been independent, and I just felt like that's part of everyone, to take their own independence. . . . And I didn't think that just because we had a child that we needed to get married."

Women's autonomy has long historical roots among African Americans, in part because mothers had a common experience of combining paid work and family.⁹ In the 20th century, public assistance programs made it (marginally) possible for white working-class mothers, especially widows, to remain out of the paid labor force, but "employable mother" and "suitable home" rules denied African American mothers this option and kept them in low-wage agricultural and domestic labor

(Rose 1993). During the 1950s and 1960s, when the labor force participation of white mothers was still low, the employed mother had long been the norm for African American women. Perhaps, as Farley (1988) suggests, this legacy contributes to Black women's greater equality in marriage and reduced "need" to marry; nevertheless, much research has left an important question unasked: Do Black mothers want to be married? Listening to the women in this study suggests that the answer may often be negative and that economic considerations may not be at the heart of decisions (also see Amott 1993).

TALKING ABOUT BONDING, BABIES, AND SHARED MOTHERING

Collins (1990, 1994) and Glenn (1994), following Stack (1974), have argued that rather than "lagging behind" in the child-rearing practices prescribed by experts and favored by white middle-class mothers, racial-ethnic mothers have carved out alternative practices; these different scripts are drawn from distinct cultural resources adapted to the particular constraints created by racism. In contrast to this recognition of divergent normative constructs (including African American norms of independent mothering), experts depict "natural" maternal sentiment as a biologicistic "bonding" based on extensive, exclusive maternal care. This emphasis on exclusivity and the mother's irreplaceability stems from female domesticity and the 19th-century separate spheres ideology but was codified in 20th-century child development research, particularly in attachment theory (Riley 1983) and, more recently, in the bonding "craze" (Eyer 1992, 127).

Large-scale surveys indicate that allegiance to norms of exclusive motherhood may be racialized; white mothers have a much stronger preference for maternal care, particularly during the early childhood years, than do Black mothers (Mason and Kulthau 1989). Eyer (1992, 14), a psychologist, contends that because full-time motherhood is increasingly unattainable, the notion of early bonding is seized on as a kind of "inoculation" against the damage that substitute care is believed to cause. In-depth studies of white working mothers do find common themes of guilt and ambivalence toward care providers viewed as "replacing" the mother (Hertz and Ferguson, in press; Newman 1993).

Black feminist scholars have demonstrated that in female-centered networks of the Black community, although motherhood is honored, the honor and responsibility for children are shared among sisters, grandmothers, and "other-mothers" of the biological mother. Collins (1990, 119) thus writes,

In African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. . . . Vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible.¹⁰

For most, and possibly all, of the African American women we interviewed, raising children was not an individual undertaking. They counted on extensive

support from grandmothers, aunts, friends, and fathers and their kin. Good mothering was not defined by the mother's singular, irreplaceable presence; even mothers of infants clearly said *no* when we asked whether they might prefer to be at home full-time. Jenny, for example, had found the care of two babies born just a year apart exhausting: "Oh my God, it was hell, let me tell you. Two children in diapers!" Her parents, however, were able to care for the babies so that she could return to school: "Their grandfather, he was crazy about them. They were a handful, but it was really fine." Charonda had lived with her mother during her baby's first year; Charonda's mother worked nights but, like Jenny's parents, cared for the child while Charonda attended school. Although Charonda later decided to get a separate apartment, her kin remained close; the baby spent many weekends at her grandmother's and was cared for by Charonda's sister during the week: "Me and my sister's babies are a month apart."

Shared care arrangements most often were made to accommodate mothers' job or school schedules (although some spoke of the need "to get a break"). Beyond the accommodations necessary for economic survival, however, mothers emphasized the noneconomic value of shared child rearing and the benefit to children of close kin relationships. From such a perspective, exclusive motherhood is neither practical nor desirable. Ramona, for example, wanted her two children to be mothered by her sister and aunts so that they would grow up as she had, surrounded by kin: "My whole family is from here, so we're extremely close. I went to school with at least five cousins at all times."

The African American mothers we interviewed praised the other-mothers with whom they shared child rearing. Janet emphasized,

My sister watches my son now, and if it wasn't for her, I don't know what I would do, honestly. . . . She's the kind of person, she gets along with young kids, she thrives on it. My patience is not as good as hers.

Often the shared child-rearing arrangements these mothers described were regularized, long term (several years), and extensive (two to four days a week). Janet's six-year-old son had been spending three nights and four days per week with her sister during the school year while she worked second shift at a hospital cleaning job:

My supervisor says he [is] going to do me a favor, and he lets me come in Thursday from 12 to 8 [o'clock]. So I get off of work Thursday night at 8, and I go pick my son up. I take him to school Friday, I pick him up Friday night from my sister, [and] he be at home Saturday, Sunday. Monday I take him back to school, and she picks him up Monday after school, and he's back over there. . . . So if it weren't for my sister, now I do often thank her, I would be in trouble, really.

Bernice, with two young children, had a similar arrangement, although she worked the first shift. To get up at 5:30 a.m. and catch a ride to her hospital custodian job, she arranged for her preschool-aged son to sleep at his babysitter's (a friend in their apartment building) or at his father's. Bernice was, however, one of the few who had had a bad experience with shared caregiving; an other-mother's physical

beating of her son Vonnie continued to trouble the family. The incident shocked Bernice; the other-mother, a grandmother who had cared for Vonnie with her own grandchildren "from when he was two months until he was two years" (before the incident), had been "a big help, she was really good." Bernice had looked to state-funded programs (specifically Head Start), as well as to assistance from kin in another state, to resolve this crisis. Following independent mothering norms, she did not quit her job yet cast herself as a good mother. As Bernice recounted,

My brother was up here at the time, so he and his girlfriend kept him [Vonnice] for like a month . . . so I didn't have to quit my job. . . . They kept him until my daughter got out of school, and they went to Chicago for that summer. So over the summer I was able to continue working. [She recounted juggling her work hours for the children's fall return.] . . . He went to Head Start this past year, so that was kind of good for him. . . . [The Head Start teachers] have a way with kids. . . . I learned that I have to be strong. . . . I always said, "Well, thank the Lord they have got a good mama!"

RECOGNIZING ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF MOTHERHOOD

We began this article by noting that the current policy debate in its very framing excludes Black women's voices, even as it rests on limited, naturalized constructions of motherhood and the deserving mother. By contrast, "giving voice" to excluded groups has been an important, if sometimes romanticized, goal of feminist qualitative research. Listening to African American women's negotiations with racialized norms of motherhood reveals both the particularity and "unnaturalness" of dominant norms and the ongoing presence of alternative scripts.

In contrast to the public emphasis on men, manhood, and female dependency, these Black working-class mothers expressed ideals centered on autonomy and independence. This was not an isolated independence like the middle-class family and exclusively bonded mother-child dyad; rather, it was based on the kin networks and shared responsibility for children that earlier phenomenological research had emphasized. For these women, more isolated mothering would have been impractical, but it was also an undesirable ideal; they resisted assumptions that the deserving mother must be singularly and exclusively present. Their community-based independence, therefore, provides a better basis for policy design.

The women also resisted the assumption that legal marriage is required for good mothering, and they did not express strong desires to marry or rely on male breadwinners; yet, mothers valued long-term partnerships and the presence of fathers in their children's lives, and they framed marriage in pleasurable, if nonimperative, terms. Our trouble hearing such alternatives, based on economic and noneconomic independence from male family headship but no rejection of men, was very instructive. It reminded us that feminist qualitative methods are valuable for having subjects speak and for allowing participants to talk back to us, the researchers who frame and represent. This talking and talking back (and then trying

again and correcting again) suggest a helpful model for speaking across differences among women in that it also evokes the great persistence required to challenge the current public debate about the deserving mother.

NOTES

1. We use the term “negotiate” coined by feminist anthropologists; compatible with the “doing gender” interactionist perspective in sociology, the term also emphasizes women’s agency but within power-laden social and institutional contexts (Ginsburg and Tsing 1990).

2. The age of single mothers is a 1991 figure from the National Center for Health Statistics (cited in Rook 1993). The teen pregnancy rates are from Census Bureau reports (cited in Holmes 1995).

3. Wilson’s (1987, 63-92) position falls within a depathologizing tradition of research that emphasizes the conventional but thwarted family aspirations of poor Black men. This is a powerful line of argument, with many studies documenting how economic pressures inhibit marriage (e.g., Horton and Burgess 1992; Testa, Astin, Krogh, and Neckerman 1989). Our point is different—simply, that it is about men and manhood.

4. Median incomes for 1993, according to Census Bureau reports, were as follows: white men, \$31,100; Black men, \$23,000; white women, \$22,000; Black women, \$19,800 (cited in Holmes 1995). The two groups might be seen as distinct: “underclass” versus working class, or poor versus near-poor. However, because the poverty line is drawn too low and many stably employed single mothers struggle to find adequate housing, transportation, and the like, there is considerable overlap. This overlap also increases over time as some poor women increase earnings after job training or AFDC-subsidized maternity leaves, and some stably employed mothers use forms of state aid during times of stress. We found that 6 of the 10 stably employed mothers either had used AFDC to pay for maternity leave or had at times drawn on subsidies (e.g., food stamps, Medicaid) to supplement earnings.

5. African American mothers, however, were denied “maternalist” welfare benefits both in the pre- and post-World War II years. The Aid to Dependent Children caseload increased greatly during the postwar years, but most Black single mothers received no assistance until the late 1960s when organized groups brought legal challenges (Piven and Cloward 1971).

6. We have changed the names of all participants to ensure confidentiality.

7. Of the 17 single mothers, 1 was a recent widow, 7 (including one divorced mother) were in stable long-term relationships, 2 had male partners in prison, and 2 were involved with former partners in ambiguous or tumultuous ways. By our reading, only 5 women were uninformed at the time of the interviews. Interestingly, white working-class mothers we interviewed greatly emphasized the need to be married even though a majority were not. They tied future goals to gaining manly providers, yet, like the Black mothers, they found that access to men with such jobs in a deindustrializing region has dwindled.

8. This was suggested to us by Andrea Hunter.

9. For aspects of this legacy of women’s autonomy prior to the 20th century, see Burgess (1994).

10. We do not suggest this model as the “essential” Black mother; no doubt norms and practices of middle-class African American mothers would differ, as might those of working-class mothers of other regions or backgrounds.

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