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Housing Dependence and Intimate Relationships in the Lives of Low-Income Puerto Rican Mothers*

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Abstract

Using longitudinal ethnographic data from the Three-City Study, we examined the relationship between sixteen low-income Puerto Rican mothers' housing dependencies and their intimate partner relations. We traced mothers' dependent housing arrangements and entrée to marital or cohabiting relationships from their teens through their procurement of independent housing while entering and maintaining intimate partner unions as adults. Findings indicated that various trigger factors led women out of their natal homes and into expedited cohabitation with romantic partners which frequently resulted in unstable unions in which mothers had little power and autonomy. As mothers became eligible for housing subsidies they obtained housing independent from their male partners, potentially increasing the propensity for greater relationship power. Housing independence, however, was not without problems. Spillover effects, such as shadowing partners, threatened housing stability and mothers' independence. The relevance of these findings for future research is discussed.

Keywords

Intimate relationships; housing; Puerto Rican mothers; gender; relationship power

Yolanda grew up in Puerto Rico and lived with her parents and 13 siblings in a home characterized by conflict. To flee from that conflict, at age 15, Yolanda moved in with her boyfriend, Adrien, at his parents' home. After two years of cooking and cleaning for Adrien, his family, and their one-year-old, a pregnant Yolanda and Adrien moved into a small house on the same lot as Adrien's parents. Yolanda's domestic duties then spanned two households, hers and Adrien's parents. Yolanda became depressed about her dual household responsibilities, depression that was exacerbated by Adrien's constant infidelity. Yolanda eventually decided to leave Adrien when he confessed to having sex with her best

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friend. Pregnant with hers and Adrien's third child, Yolanda moved to Boston to live with members of her extended family but eventually acquired her own public housing unit. Adrien subsequently followed Yolanda to Boston. The couple reunited and currently lives with their five children in the housing unit that Yolanda secured.

Yolanda's story exemplifies many of the challenges and contradictions that arise for low-income women who are seeking both stable housing arrangements and intimate partner unions such as marriage. Yolanda entered a relationship with Adrien to escape her parents' domineering home and to secure what she thought would be safe housing. Housing and cohabitating with Adrien, however, presented a different set of challenges from those she had when living with her parents. The challenges eventually hastened her to move to the United States mainland to live with relatives. After a year stateside, Yolanda successfully applied for and received her own public housing unit, but shortly thereafter allowed Adrien to move in with her. After leaving Puerto Rico and changing her living arrangements in an effort to sever her ties with Adrien, why did Yolanda allow him to move in with her? Moreover, now that the tables were turned, that is, that Yolanda controlled their housing resource which made Adrien dependent on her for a place to live, how was their relationship affected by their transposed housing dependency?

Using longitudinal ethnographic data from the *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study* (hereafter, the Three-City Study) we explored these questions assessing how low-income Puerto Rican mothers' housing choices influenced their abilities to enter, sustain, exit, and resume intimate partner relationships and how these mothers garnered power in their relationships through housing. We document the housing journeys mothers traversed from adolescence to adulthood; island to mainland; and from dependence on others for housing to housing-independence.¹ We describe how their housing trajectories were intertwined with their intimate relationships with men and we provide insights on the constraints and challenges they faced in their housing and intimate relationship experiences. We focus our attention on a small sub-sample of Puerto Rican women (N=16) from the Three-City Study ethnography because unlike Latino immigrant groups, Puerto Ricans hold United States citizenship making them eligible for subsidized housing programs. In addition, due to the high rates of non-marriage and cohabitation among low-income Puerto Rican women with children, the dynamics of housing independence and intimate relationships are more easily discernible as mothers' housing dependencies are often not bounded legally by marriage (Oropesa, Landale, and Kenkre, 2003). That is to say, Puerto Rican mothers who procure independent housing, at least theoretically speaking, have power and choice in the matter when it comes to entering and sustaining a cohabiting relationship in a house in which only the mothers' names are on the leases.

Our investigation is guided conceptually by a relative resource perspective framed within the cultural and contextual experiences of low-income Puerto Rican women. We address three research questions: (1) What role do housing dependency and intimate relationships play in late adolescent women's exit from the natal home? (2) What challenges do mothers' face in securing independent housing? (3) For those mothers who procure independent housing, how are their intimate partner relationships affected? We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research for future studies.

¹By independent, we mean housing that respondents acquired independent of other adults living in the household. By the end of the study, all respondents were holders of a housing choice voucher or lived in a public housing unit; thus, we categorize them as independently housed.

Background

Our exploration of the relationship between housing dependency and Puerto Rican mothers' intimate unions is guided by a framework that integrates perspectives on valued resource theory and the gender role expectations and economic realities of Puerto Rican women and men. Perspectives on valued resource theory are relevant because they provide the basis for understanding the processes involved in housing becoming a prized resource for mothers. According to Blood and Wolfe (1960, p. 12) a valued resource is "anything one partner may make available to the other, helping the latter satisfy his needs or attain his goals." Implicit in this definition is the variability of the value of a particular resource based upon, in part, differences in experiences and differences in investment in human capital between partners (Becker, 1991).

Resource theory also addresses the division and allocation of power in interpersonal relationships. The resource theory of marital power, a variant of social exchange theory, posits that one's power in intimate relationships is influenced by the comparative "valued resources" (e.g., education, income, occupational status) held by each of the partners (Emerson, 1981). Numerous studies have shown the importance of relative resources on relationship power. For instance, the likelihood that husbands dominate decision making at home rises with the level of their resource attainment which includes education (Blumberg, 1991; Pahl, 1983; Steil and Weltman, 1991), income (Izraeli, 1994), and occupational prestige (Blumberg, 1991).

Nonetheless, an important criticism of resource theories is that they tend to overlook the symbolic and gendered meanings that couples give to their individual contributions to marriage that can influence power (Komter, 1989). In response to this critique, normative resource theory argues that the relationship between resources and marital power depends on societal norms for gender roles (Rodman, 1972). For instance, a husband's relative earnings are negatively and significantly related to the likelihood of domestic abuse (an extreme form of low relationship power among women), but this is primarily the case when men are traditional in their attitudes towards women's roles and employment. When husbands hold egalitarian gender ideologies, relative resources have little effect on abuse (Atkinson, Greenstein, and Lang, 2005).

Additionally researchers have pointed out the need to move beyond normative gender role analyses to examine how structural sources of gender inequality shape cultural norms and influence the marital dyad. Across cultures or locales, for example, women's overall position in society often predicts aspects of relationship power to a greater extent than their own individual characteristics (Mason and Smith, 2000). Consequently, within a given society, a woman's subordinate position in the paid labor force may promote patriarchal social norms that justify an inequitable distribution of household labor (Hardesty and Bokemeier, 1989).

Zuo and Bian (2005, p. 601) further assert that most studies of family decision-making power focus on male dominance and see women's contributions in the domestic sphere "as an impediment rather than a source of power, either because of women's inability to generate valued resources or due to hegemonic influence of patriarchal culture." Warner, Lee, and Lee (1986) concluded that resource theorists rely heavily upon material resources supplied by men as outlined above, without considering both the direct and indirect contributions of women. For example, they found that more complex, patrilocal family structures in which women lived among extended family members of her husband were associated with less power for women as opposed to women who lived among their own kin groups which could provide needed resources thereby decreasing a woman's dependence on

her husband. As such, they suggest a “rethinking of just what constitutes valued resources” (1986, p. 127).

We argue that with a 2004² family poverty rate of 22.2%, the second highest of any major group in the United States, and 63.1% of Puerto Ricans living in rental units, 52.5% of whom pay more than 30% of their income toward rent, independent housing constitutes a valued resource for all low-income Puerto Ricans over their life course (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). This resource is considered by couples in overall relationship power that is given to the individual in the dyad who is less dependent on the relationship, has more resources, and has perceived alternatives to the relationship (Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, and DeJong, 2000). In the context of Puerto Rican culture, there are a number of forces that facilitate housing becoming a valued resource for low-income mothers, in particular. These forces include higher rates of sexual abuse and domestic violence, economic subordination of women in the paid labor force, and non-marriage and cohabiting unions among low-income Puerto Rican mothers (Landale and Oropesa, 2007).

Contextual Influences and Housing as a Valued Resource

Independent housing becomes a valued resource for young Puerto Rican mothers in several ways. First, housing is a prized commodity for those hoping to escape violence and neglect in their childhood homes. As noted earlier, abuse is notably present in some Puerto Rican enclaves. For instance, Finlinson et al. (2003) in a study of over 1,100 adult Puerto Rican drug users, found 25% of the women experienced childhood physical abuse, 19% of which first occurred during childhood; and 37% experienced an unwanted sexual encounter, 10% of which occurred during childhood. Comparable findings are consistently reported among Puerto Rican women growing up in their natal households outside of the drug culture (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin 2004; Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Leone, Johnson, Cohan, and Lloyd, 2004; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). Given the prevalence of abuse, we argue that for young women who are living in abusive households and who have few housing alternatives, moving into the homes of their romantic partners (and the partners' families) is a viable, albeit tenuous, option.

Second, once in a cohabiting or marital union, housing becomes a particularly valuable resource for women in negotiating relationship power because women with children do not have as much access to economic independence as men. In Puerto Rico, as in much of the Spanish Caribbean, a relatively traditional gender orientation prevails. Although post-war development programs and tax incentives contributed to rapid growth in female employment in Puerto Rico over the past several decades, women remain overrepresented at the low end of wages and skills, and growing female employment has not eroded patriarchal gender orientations (Browne, 2001; Fernández-Kelly and Sassen, 1995; Whalen, 2001). Women continue to be largely responsible for housekeeping, cooking, and childrearing even when they worked full-time (Alicea, 1997; Cassey, 1996; Toro-Morn, 1995), and working women tend to associate themselves primarily with their domestic role and see their work outside the home as an extension of it (Safa, 1995). In the United States mainland, Puerto Rican women also exhibit high rates of poverty, and represent one of the most disadvantaged minority groups (Ramirez and de la Cruz, 2002). They remain concentrated in low-wage and unstable employment (Rivera-Ramos, 1992).

Finally, because Puerto Rican mothers are United States citizens, they are in a better position to take advantage of housing programs for low-income *single* mothers, such that low marriage rates among Puerto Rican mothers is beneficial to their housing eligibility.

²We use 2004 census data because that year constituted the end of our intensive data collection phase.

Research has shown that Puerto Rican women are more likely than Whites and African Americans to cohabit or enter consensual unions and less likely than Whites to transform informal unions into legal marriages (Landale and Forste, 1991). While not as highly stigmatized among Puerto Ricans as among other groups, consensual unions are associated with lower women's power than more formal legal unions. However, in the case of publically subsidized housing, women in consensual cohabiting unions are in a better position to negotiate with their partners. That is, housing becomes a much more valued resource for these women because they are not legally married; thus, they are able to get it. Regardless of opportunities for independent housing, however, when juxtaposed with their less formal intimate union arrangements, mothers may still opt to compromise their power in relationships. This is, in part, due to gender ideologies and economic constraints that shape relationships among Puerto Rican women and men.

To sum, many young, low-income Puerto Rican women live in generally resource poor and oppressive environments shaped by gender inequities in economic opportunities and expected social behaviors (Perez, 2004). Yet, at the same time, legal status as United States citizens offer women access to subsidy programs, like housing, in which mothers can garner power in their intimate relationships. In this article, we consider how housing alternatives impact the extent of Puerto Rican women's dependence on their partners and the relative amount of valued resources (economic and emotional) they possess. We also take into account the structural and cultural contexts, which shape how dependence and differential resources are viewed and interpreted by couples. Ethnographic data allow us to examine the nuanced processes and behaviors of how housing and intimate unions both work in support of and against the power of low-income Puerto Rican mothers.

Data and Methods

We use data from the Three-City Study to explore the relationship between housing and intimate unions among low-income Puerto Rican mothers. The Three-City Study is a longitudinal mixed-methods study of the well-being of children and their families in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio that included both a random-sample survey of 2,402 children and their caregivers and a multi-site team ethnographic study of 256 additional children and families, recruited non-randomly, who were not in the survey sample but resided in the same neighborhoods. The purpose of the ethnographic component of the study was to conduct fine-grained assessments of how, over time, welfare reform policies influence the day-to-day lives of low-income Latino, African American, and non-Hispanic white families. For this analysis we use the ethnographic data.

Families were recruited into the ethnography between June 1999 and December 2000. Recruitment sites included formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start), the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program offices, neighborhood community centers, local welfare offices, churches, and other public assistance agencies. Of the 256 families who participated in the ethnography, 212 families were selected if they included a child age 2 to 4. The other 44 were recruited specifically because they had a child aged 0 to 8 years with a moderate or severe disability. At the time of enrollment in the study, all families had household incomes at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line.

This paper draws upon a sub-sample of the Three-City Study ethnography—a group of sixteen low-income Puerto Rican mothers with young children living in high poverty Boston neighborhoods. We narrowed our focus after our preliminary analysis of the entire sample of families (N=256) revealed different patterns of union formation as well as access to and use of public housing among study participants. For example, compatible with other empirical studies, we found higher rates of cohabitation among Puerto Rican mothers as opposed to

African American and White mothers. We also found that Puerto Rican women were more likely to live in public housing units when compared with Mexican women. In order to better understand the relationships between housing dependency and intimate relationships, we focus on Puerto Rican respondents in the sample to lay the foundation for future within-group comparisons of other racial and ethnic groups in the sample.

Table 1 reports the descriptive characteristics of the sample. All respondents are women with young children living in poverty, and range in age from 17 to 40 (28 is the mean age).³ Ten of the respondents are first generation immigrants and the other six were either born in the United States to Puerto Rican born parents or were born in Puerto Rico and migrated to the United States as children. All of the respondents were living in publicly-subsidized housing in which they were listed as head of household⁴—eight received housing choice vouchers and eight lived in one of the Boston Housing Authority's public housing developments. Ten of the respondents were single, non-cohabiting; another two were divorced and non-cohabiting; two others were divorced and cohabiting; and two were single and cohabiting. None of the respondents were legally married. Respondents have between one and seven dependent children with an average of three. Although work and welfare receipt varied during the study, at time one, five respondents were working and eleven were not; twelve were receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and four were not. Five respondents had earned at least a high school diploma and nine respondents had not received a diploma or its equivalent, a GED.⁵

Ethnographic Methodology

To gather and analyze ethnographic data on the mothers and their families we devised a method of “structured discovery” to systematize and to coordinate the efforts of the *Three-City Study* ethnography team (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor, in press). [For a detailed description of the research design of the ethnography, see Winston et al. (1999) at www.threecitystudy.johnshopkins.edu]. Ethnographers conducted in-depth interviews with and observations of our respondents that were focused on specific topics but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings and relationships among variables. Topics addressed during the monthly visits included: detailed histories of residential mobility; intimate relationships; health and health access; experiences with TANF, SSI, Medicaid, WIC, and housing assistance programs; education and work experiences and future plans; family economics; child development, parenting; support networks; family routines; and home and neighborhood environments. Participant observation with the families involved accompanying the mother and her children to the welfare office, doctor, grocery store, or workplace, and taking note of the interactions and contexts of those places. In 92 percent of the cases, and for all the Latino respondents, ethnographers were racially matched with participants and remained the families' ethnographers for the duration of the study. In most cases, interviews and participant observations were conducted in English with the exception of 34 families who preferred Spanish. All Spanish interviews were translated into English. Ethnographers met with each family once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months and then every six months thereafter through 2003. However, additional yearly follow-up interviews which examined intimate relationships were conducted with all Boston respondents from 2004 to 2006. Respondents were compensated with grocery or department store vouchers for each interview or participant observation.

³Respondent demographic characteristics are from time one of recruitment into the study.

⁴17-year old Inez lived with her mother in a public housing development at the beginning of the study, but obtained her own unit in the second year of the study.

⁵Education data for two of the respondents could not be verified in the data.

The benefits of this methodological approach are two-fold. First, because data were collected as part of a longitudinal study, we view the experiences of respondents not as snapshots in time but as *processes* through which they make choices about housing themselves and their dependents that impact the types, duration, and quality of romantic partner relationships. Second, ethnographic data, collected through participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, is multi-dimensional in that it reveals behavioral patterns over time and allows us to capture not only what respondents say but also what they do.

This methodological approach does have limitations. Our analyses, in this article, are based on the experiences of sixteen women residing in one United States metropolitan area. While the women in this sample share the demographic characteristics of low-income Boston Puerto Rican communities in terms of age, education, and marital status, and thus do not represent extreme cases, our selection process was not based on random selection. Therefore, our sample is not representative of the city's overall low-income Puerto Rican population. Further, any cross-group comparisons, implicit or explicit, can only be tentative. Because the sample size is small, our goal was to develop an in-depth understanding of the intersections of housing choices and intimate relationships of respondents, and in so doing, to test the applicability of resource and social exchange theories to this specific sample and situation. This article follows the example of other influential, longitudinal ethnographic studies that rely upon a small number of respondents to draw out important process-oriented lessons in order to develop, present, and expand theoretical frameworks (Lewis, 1966; Liebow, 1967; Stack, 1974). Our long-term goal is to add to and refine existing theories surrounding migration, women's power, and social exchange by examining the ways in which low-income Puerto Rican women's housing choices and intimate relationships are interrelated.

Multiple sources of data were used for the analysis of housing and intimate relationships. Ethnographers in each city wrote detailed field notes about their interviews and participant observations with families and all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts, field notes, and other documents were coded collaboratively by ethnographers and qualitative data analysts for entry into a qualitative data management (QDM) software application and summarized into a detailed case profile for each family. The QDM program and case profiles enabled counts across the entire sample as well as detailed analysis of individual cases.

Data Analysis

We analyzed respondents' data on residential mobility over their lifetimes that included housing type and tenure, household membership, employment, quality and costs of housing, and circumstances surrounding relocation. We also explored respondents' discussions of their intimate relationships. These interviews detailed the type, quality, duration, and frequency of respondents' intimate partner relationships as well as the extent to which partners provided financial and emotional support to respondents and their dependent children. Our analysis and interpretations of the data were conducted to determine what patterns and themes emerged in response to our research questions, and are in line with procedures that have been established for qualitative and ethnographic analysis in anthropology and sociology (Agar, 1996; Bernard, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). We relied upon content analysis of field notes, transcripts, and archival data related to the study. Cross-case and within-case analysis and comparisons of respondent data proceeded along the lines established by Miles and Huberman (1994). In this design, a series of descriptive matrices, models, and networks aided researchers in comparing a variety of phenomena, meanings, relationships, and their contexts across and within respondent relationships. The purpose of employing within-case and cross-case analyses among the

sample was to thoroughly familiarize ourselves with the data and to identify patterns unique to each respondent before trying to compare patterns across the entire sample.

We analyzed the data at multiple levels in order to explore both the experiences of individuals and the similarities and differences between individuals (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2002; Miles and Huberman, 1994; La Rossa, 2005; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In these comparisons of respondents' case studies, we focused on the pathways toward stable housing as they related to the maintenance of intimate relationships among a group of low-income Puerto Rican mothers. Analysis of data at the within-case level permits a detailed understanding of the experiences and views of a particular respondent. Analysis at the cross-case level allows for the comparison of experiences across respondents. In the following section, we demonstrate overall patterns that emerged from the data using exemplars from respondents' experiences.

Findings: Housing and Relationship Journeys

Our analysis of the data documents low-income Puerto Rican mothers' journeys from dependent housing to independent housing within the contexts of intimate relationships. We organized our findings into three sections. First, we discuss the role that housing plays in respondents' decisions to leave their natal homes during late adolescence. We then follow respondents' housing and relationship journeys to independence. We end at a point on the journey where women have transposed their housing dependencies either from parents and/or from intimate partners, and are faced with the challenges of maintaining housing independence while sustaining romantic partner relationships.

Out of the Natal Home...

Our data analysis revealed that many of the challenges respondents faced in stabilizing their housing began early in their lives. Throughout their childhood and adolescent years, 56% (n=9) of the respondents experienced and witnessed physical and sexual abuse and/or neglect imposed by caregivers or other members in the household. Housing became a compromised resource which led respondents to search for alternative housing arrangements by late adolescence. Let us consider, for instance, the situation of Evelyn. Evelyn, a 38-year-old mother of seven children, spent her childhood living in split family arrangements with various family members who physically and sexually abused her. During her early to late adolescent years, Evelyn moved with her mother, her five siblings, and an aunt into one of Puerto Rico's public housing developments. While the family's housing became more stable by moving into publicly-subsidized housing, Evelyn's mother's inability to provide her with the necessary emotional, financial, and social support forced Evelyn and her newborn son to leave home at the age of 17. She describes the circumstances under her mother's roof as,

... very unhappy. My mother had a lot of problems and used to fight with me all the time. Sometimes my mother didn't buy anything to eat. I went through a lot with her. I wanted to move away because I felt bad. I even got some nervous attacks due to all the problems.

Because she already had a child while living with her mother, Evelyn was eligible for her own public housing unit in Puerto Rico in which she lived intermittently over a seven-year period. During this time, she had another child, moved to the Bronx, got pregnant, moved back to Puerto Rico, had three more children, cohabited, moved to a public housing development in Boston, then into a Section 8 apartment in Boston, had her seventh child, began cohabiting, and eventually married. In all, between the ages of 17 and 36, Evelyn gave birth to 7 children fathered by 5 different men and moved 8 times. Four of her moves coincided with the termination of an intimate partner relationship.

We purposively recount Evelyn's residential mobility and relationship histories for four reasons. First, it illuminates the intersections of housing choices and intimate relationships. Second, it outlines the cycle of serial relationships, childbearing, and residential mobility that often result from domestic violence situations. Third, it demonstrates the rapid pace at which relationships are initiated, terminated, and in many cases, result in pregnancies. Finally, it shows that housing acquisition has not been as much of a stable barrier for Evelyn as her abilities to stabilize a romantic partner relationship.

While physical and sexual abuse were factors triggering adolescent respondents like Evelyn out of the natal home, others left home due to oppressive home environments, including too much conflict in the home and authoritarian parenting. Twenty-five year old Yolanda, who was introduced in the opening of this article, describes her move from her parents' home:

Listen I left my home when I was 15-years old, okay. When I run away with him (Adrien) it wasn't because of *this* (pointing at her heart) because if I didn't have problems at home I still would have been home with my mother. I would have completed my education. What made me run away with my husband was my father. We couldn't have any friends. We couldn't bring any friends over. So when my other sisters didn't want to do their chores I became the slave of my house. I got a lot spankings on behalf of my sisters...they would get dressed and I couldn't even go out because I had to stay home and clean, cook, and [do] dishes while the other ones were sitting down doing nothing. So I was like the housekeeper of my home. So this made me feel like if I was drowning. I met [Adrien] when were going to school, and what was happening at home pushed me to run away with him. And I run away with him and since his family...well the first days it was fine, but later they started talking about me, that I was lazy. And his mother used to work selling hot dogs and everybody would leave the house and I will be the one cleaning after them.

Yolanda's case represents a pattern of cohabitation and childbearing among teen mothers that was found among six other respondents. This pattern began when respondents left their natal homes with no place to live and little to no assets to secure independent housing. Unlike Evelyn who secured a public housing unit, others, like Yolanda, had to resort to other housing strategies such as entering a relationship with a romantic partner who could provide immediate access to housing. Partner-dependent housing, thus, became an exit strategy these respondents used to leave the natal home.

Yolanda's experiences of cohabitation with Adrien and their five biological children have lasted well over a decade. Nonetheless, in assessing their housing stability and relationship quality, one must consider the couple's relationship vulnerability over time including how the relationship began, the continuous infidelity and abuse imparted by both partners, and the opportunities and constraints resulting from the transposed housing independence for Yolanda. Next, we examine more closely the pathways low-income mothers like Yolanda take to acquire independent housing and how these trajectories relate to establishing and/or maintaining intimate relationships once women leave their natal homes.

...And Into Independent Living

Housing, again, became a valued resource and source of power when respondents wanted out of abusive relationships and into housing they controlled. Seven respondents experienced physically- and emotionally-abusive intimate partners. Others highlighted the persistent infidelity of romantic partners as a source of relationship fragility. Several moved as a means to escape abusive and unstable relationships. Sometimes leaving Puerto Rico and migrating to the United States was the best solution.

Consider Melanie, a 24-year old mother of one child who spent most of her life in a small Puerto Rican village where many of her extended family lived. She described her family as one where “all the women in those ten houses in (town) were battered, including my mother.” At age 18, Melanie moved to Boston where she lived with her extended kin in order to attend a community college. She met her partner, David, at school and they moved back to Puerto Rico the next year. David lived with his family and Melanie moved back in with her family.

After four years of sporadic dating, the couple had their first child which led to cohabitation. Unfortunately, David’s physical abuse intensified, so Melanie left Puerto Rico and moved back to Boston soon after giving birth. Finding permanent quality housing was a major challenge for Melanie. At one point, she and her daughter were living in a building that had no heat, and her daughter contracted pneumonia. They lived in nine different places over a year and a half with friends, co-workers, and family before Melanie acquired a public housing unit that she described as “the first home” she had ever had.

After settling into her place, David returned to Boston and wanted to reconcile the relationship. Melanie allowed him to move in but she was soon relieved when he went to prison for selling drugs. Nonetheless, from the confines of his cell, David was able to control Melanie’s actions by threats of abuse upon his release and verbal assaults during his collect telephone calls. Her ambivalent feelings toward David surfaced in her proclamations that while she was no longer in love with him, she wanted to believe in and support him because he is the father of her child. By the end of the study, David had been released from prison, was living in Melanie’s publicly-subsidized housing unit with Melanie who was pregnant with their second child. Other respondents who were searching for independent housing encountered similar challenges as Melanie in securing a place to live.

Two related pathways toward independent living surfaced in the data, sheltering and social networking. Sheltering represents the process that mothers with dependent children went through to obtain independent housing by moving into a homeless shelter temporarily in order to be placed higher on the waiting lists for subsidized housing. These families had to demonstrate to the housing authority an emergency housing need; e.g., they were homeless, lived in crowded or unsafe conditions, or were victims of domestic violence. We see the dynamics of sheltering in the case of Lena.

Lena, similar to many of the respondents in the study, had a tumultuous childhood. At age 11, she became homeless when her father’s physical abuse forced her to leave the house. Over the next four years, Lena bounced from foster care to her mother’s house until she met and immediately moved in with the father of her first child at age 15. This relationship lasted on and off for two years at which time Lena entered a period of cycling in and out of relationships over the next 15 years for a total of 7 children fathered by 6 men.

Lena eventually left Puerto Rico, a decision sparked by her desire to leave Juan, the father of her two youngest children. In 1997, Lena and her seven children moved to another neighborhood in Boston to live with a woman she had been introduced to by one of her relatives. After seven months, Lena’s relationship with her friend became strained; so the friend suggested that Lena and her children move into a shelter in order to acquire priority housing from the housing authority. Lena praised the assistance she received by the housing coordinators at the shelter who were very instrumental in helping her get a subsidized unit —“I had to really thank God. It was really sent from God because the mothers of the houses were really, for me, better than my own mother. I knew a black lady who was the mother of the house, and she loved me.” Lena and her children lived at the shelter for 10 months until

Lena received a 5-bedroom public housing unit. Shortly thereafter, Juan divorced his wife in Puerto Rico, professed his love for Lena, and joined her and the children in Boston.

Social networking involved respondents' abilities to build upon established relationships in order to secure housing. For example, Christina, age 20, was born and raised in a Boston enclave housed mostly by Puerto Ricans. Unlike most of the other respondents, Christina described her childhood home as more nurturing; thus, she did not experience the urgency to leave the natal home as described by other respondents. Her closeness to her mother was also reflected in her perceptions of her neighborhood where, as she described, "the culture is strong and, you know the Latino people. It's real...we're like a whole big family type of thing. Everybody knows each other; people try to help one another." When she and Paul, the 21-year old father of their two children, were looking for a place of their own to live, they first rented out the first floor of a house owned by Paul's uncle. They did not live there long because Christina felt lonely and isolated from her mother and extended social network back in her old neighborhood. Christina moved back in with her mother and Paul moved back with his mother who lived in another housing project two miles from Christina's mother's apartment. When the couple decided to try again to get their own apartment, Christina applied for housing assistance. She received a unit in the same development in which her mother lived. Only Christina and the children are on the lease—the woman in charge of determining rents for the development who has known Christina and her family since she was a child overlooks Paul's presence in the home.

The 'Best of Both Worlds'

Our findings show that respondents, like most in society, are seeking the best of both worlds, housing and intimate relationship stability. In each of the previous examples, respondents have transposed their housing dependencies from intimate partners to housing they control. They also have resumed or sustained their intimate partner relationships. From a valued resource perspective having control over housing should provide women with more negotiating power in romantic partner relationships. Mothers, however, interpreted housing as a valued resource in intimate partner relationships in divergent ways with independent housing being seen as a bargaining tool to maintain or initiate relationships as well as a refuge for terminating relationships that experienced conflict.

While only four of the respondents were cohabiting at the beginning of the study, all except one, had cohabited in the past and/or by the end of the study. All four of the cohabiting respondents shadowed their partners. Shadowing is a residential pattern where partners are not listed on the apartment lease but live in the unit. Mothers who shadowed partners recognized that their housing subsidy was a commodity that could be used as leverage in negotiating their intimate partner relationships; that is, housing was interpreted as a valued resource. While Christina professed her love for Paul, for example, stating that "he has done a lot for me and I love him," she also underscored the fragility of the relationship in the same sentence, "but just as much as he did good to me, he did bad" referring to his infidelity. Later in the study, although she was not certain of Paul's continued unfaithfulness, she had resigned herself: "He can get lost. I am the one with the apartment. I don't really need him so it doesn't matter."

Seventeen-year old Inez lived in a three-bedroom apartment with her two children and boyfriend, Luis, whom she shadowed. The couple began dating when they were 13-years-old. They had their first child at age 16. Luis was not happy with fatherhood and wanted out of the relationship with Inez. Inez was convinced that she wanted Luis in her life so she cajoled him back into the relationship with the promise of getting an apartment. Thus, she went through several months of sheltering herself and her two children until she received a housing choice voucher. Not only did Inez acquire housing for her, Luis, and their children,

she also had Luis's child support payments stopped once he moved in with her. She asserts, however, that Luis could only remain in the apartment if he contributed to the finances and helped with the children. When asked if she thought about marrying Luis, Inez responded ambiguously, "yes and no, but more no because if we get married I'll have to put him on the lease for the apartment and I don't want to take any risks. His income would have to be included and I'm afraid of losing the apartment."

Having control over housing made it easier for respondents to endure tenuous relationships; albeit at a higher cost for some than others. These costs were reflected in respondents' various stages of relationships with men. At one end of the relationship continuum, respondents referred to their partners as "husbands" although they were not legally married. Take, Juanita, who was a housing choice voucher holder. She had been cohabiting with and shadowing Miguel for 14 years. He is the father of their three children. Over the years, Juanita withstood Miguel's infidelity and fathering a child outside their relationship, which caused her to decline his marriage proposal in 2000. However, two years later, her distrust lessened and they were planning to marry early in 2004. Juanita stated that "marriage is sharing, understanding and under the same roof with the same man" and she hoped to live the dream of a nuclear family with Miguel as head of their household. She was careful, however, in gauging the amount of resources she supplies to their relationship. For example, during one period of the relationship when she was receiving cash benefits from the state, Miguel expected Juanita to pay all of the bills with her check even though he had previously paid the bills with his salary. In response, Juanita discontinued her welfare subsidy, but continued to provide financially toward the household with her housing voucher which decreased their monthly rent to \$263/month which Miguel paid.

At the other end of the relationship continuum was Maria, a divorced mother of six children. Maria waited three years for her housing subsidy. She received the housing application from the father of her youngest two children, Carlos, whom Maria knew was married when she met him and admitted that she "fell in love with my eyes closed." Carlos vowed to Maria that he would never leave his wife. Still, his relationship with Maria has lasted almost a decade and consisted of Carlos spending weekdays with Maria and the children and purchasing gifts on special holidays and occasions. When Carlos was in the home, however, Maria was clear about their roles, "I tell him, I am the boss here, and this is my house, and I am the one who pays the rent." When asked who makes the last decision, she responded, "I do. I do everything. No matter what, I am the boss." Although Maria staked her claim as head of household, she lamented that she was tired of being the other woman and wanted to be with a "man for me only; that spends time with only me".

Discussion and Conclusion

We began this discussion with the story of Yolanda's and Adrien's relationship journeys through housing which highlighted the constraints and challenges that respondents confronted when trying to achieve both stable housing and intimate partner relationships. Guided by a conceptual framework that integrates perspectives on valued resources, gender, and power, we addressed three research objectives. Our first two objectives involved describing the role that housing as a valued resource and a source of power played first, in late adolescent women's decisions to leave their natal homes and second, in women's pathways to independence. Our findings showed that many respondents left home as teens in response to harsh conditions in the natal home. These circumstances included childhood physical and sexual abuse and neglect as well as oppressive relationships between respondents and other household members. Respondents were faced with limited opportunities for employment and were not eligible for public housing because they did not have dependent children or were not old enough to apply for public assistance.

Consequently, a strategy used by respondents to acquire housing was to enter a consensual union which led to childbearing and dependence upon their male partners for housing. These findings are important because they mark a pattern of early union formation behavior among low-income Puerto Rican women that is associated less with love and more with acquiring a basic human necessity, housing. Thus, trigger factors inside the natal home as well as gender inequalities relative to employment laid the foundation for women's future instability both in housing and intimate partner relationships.

Once respondents moved out of their natal homes, most endured similar abusive situations in the homes of their partners' extended family. Our findings along these lines are consistent with the work of Warner, Lee, and Lee (1986) that suggest that when wives (or, in our case, cohabiting partners) move in with the family of the husband, wives' power is lower than when the couple moves to a new residence or lives with or near the wives' extended networks.

Eventually, mothers in the study secured their own housing. Through their own social networks, some mothers migrated to the mainland United States to escape gender oppression and abusive relationships. Alicea's (1997) study of Puerto Rican women documents, as we also discovered about mothers in our study, that "migration can be a form of resistance to gender oppression ... however, there is a tension, ambiguity, and ambivalence between the desire for the security of home and the awareness of the oppression of home" (pp. 609–610). We argue that it is in this ambiguity and ambivalence that our respondents made decisions around intimate relationships and housing that appear contradictory. In their quest for creating stable home environments, respondents' choices were shaped by a transnational gender ideology that upholds distinct family roles for women and men. Thus, while Yolanda understands that Adrien's actions are harmful to her and their relationship, she remains hopeful that their children will grow up in the same home with their father as head of household.

Having acquired independent housing, our third objective was to determine in what ways respondents used housing as a valued resource in negotiating intimate relationships. One approach taken by cohabiting respondents was shadowing, allowing partners to live in the home without putting their names, and by extension, their financial resources, on the lease. By shadowing a partner in the household, a respondent was able to maintain her housing subsidy while sustaining the relationship with her partner. There were risks, however, with shadowing men that included losing one's housing subsidy, and/or losing one's partner. Respondents risked being sanctioned by the housing authority if landlords or neighbors reported shadowing partners. For individuals like Inez who understood the value that a housing subsidy played in her relationship, losing housing also meant losing her partner, Luis.

Men who were shadowed contributed sporadically to the household economy. Because they were not legally on the lease, they had some control over how much, if any, they would contribute to the household. Nevertheless, for those men who had few alternatives for shelter (e.g., no other family or partners to live with, or not in the country legally), more support (i.e., increased relationship power for respondent), either financial or domestic was offered to the mothers in the study. Oropesa, Landale, and Kenkre (2003) examined the pooling of financial resources among Puerto-Rico cohabiting couples and found that cohabitation is attractive because of its flexibility and can be bent to accommodate the interests of each partner and the meaning each partner attaches to the union (p. 923). We argue that housing is a fundamental interest for both partners. Due to men's low labor force participation and/or low wages, women take on a larger role in family subsistence, a large portion of which is housing costs. That the state is able to provide women (and not men) with housing subsidies

increases men's economic marginality in the household, yet, offers women a valuable resource.

Respondents' negotiation of housing resources was made in the context of the Boston housing market. In contrast to other major metropolitan areas, Boston has a greater availability of low-income housing, which is further augmented by state- and city-supported housing for low-income families (Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, 2004; Vale, 2000). The primary recipients of housing subsidies are women with dependent children, the elderly, and the disabled. Consequently, the United States public housing system can be seen as a paradoxical gendered institution that supplies women with family' shelter while providing disincentives for women who want to raise their children under the same roof with both parents.

Ethnography allowed us to observe the degrees of variability that women place on housing as a valued resource that is associated with the temperaments of their romantic partner relationships. It is not a direct relationship but one where the value of housing is sometimes heightened in the relationship and at other times diminished, depending on a variety of inside and outside influences in women's lives. We hope this study opens the door for future research examining the ways in which valued resources such as control over housing shape low-income women's relationship power. We also expect future studies to evaluate women's contributions to romantic partner relationships across diverse contexts paying close attention to the economic realities and cultural norms embedded within resources.

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TABLE 1

Boston Puerto Rican Sample Characteristics (N=16)

ID	BIRTH PLACE	MARITAL STATUS	AGE	DEPENDENT CHILDREN (age at first birth)	HOUSING	EDUCATION	WORK	TANF
Evelyn	Puerto Rico	Single	38	6 (17)	S8	<12	Y	Y
Juanita	Puerto Rico	Divorced/coh.	25	3 (16)	S8	DIPLOMA	N	N
Inez	Puerto Rico*	Single	17	1 (16)	S8	<12	N	Y
Rosana	Puerto Rico*	Divorced	28	3 (19)	S8	<12	Y	N
Yolanda	Puerto Rico	Single/coh.	24	5 (16)	PH	<12	N	Y
Christina	Boston	Single/coh.	20	1 (15)	PH	DIPLOMA	N	N
Natalia	Boston	Single	28	3 (21)	S8	>12	N	Y
Anna	Puerto Rico	Single	32	2 (26)	PH	<12	N	Y
Carmen	Puerto Rico*	Single	20	2 (13)	PH	DIPLOMA	Y	Y
Lola	Puerto Rico	Single	24	1 (22)	PH	>12	Y	N
Lena	Puerto Rico	Single	33	7 (17)	PH	<12	N	Y
Victoria	Puerto Rico	Divorced/coh.	37	2 (26)	PH	<12	Y	Y
Marisol	Puerto Rico	Single	35	2 (25)	S8	?	N	Y
Nina	Puerto Rico	Single	23	3 (18)	PH	?	N	Y
Isabel	Puerto Rico	Single	19	1 (18)	S8	<12	N	Y
Maria	Puerto Rico*	Divorced	40	6 (23)	S8	<12	N	Y
<hr/>								
N = 16		10 Single/non-cohab	$\mu = 28$	$\mu = 3 (19)$	8 Section 8	9 < 12	5 Work	12 TANF
10 → 1 st generation		2 Divorced/non-cohab			8 Public Housing	3 DIPLOMA2 > 12	11 non-work	4 non-TANF
*born in		2 Divorced/cohab				2 unknown		
Puerto Rico but migrated to the U.S. as a child		2 Single/cohab 0 Married						