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Marriageable Women: A Focus on Participants in a Community Healthy Marriage Program

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Abstract

Although disadvantaged women are the targets of marriage programs, little attention has been paid to women's marriage constraints and their views of marriage. Drawing on an exchange framework and using qualitative data collected from single women participating in a marriage initiative, we introduce the concept of marriageable women—the notion that certain limitations may make women poor marriage partners. Like their male counterparts, we find women also possess qualities that are not considered assets in the marriage market, such as economic constraints, mental and physical health issues, substance use, multiple partner fertility, and gender distrust. We also consider how women participating in a marriage program frame their marriage options, whereas a few opt out of the marriage market altogether.

Keywords

low-income families; marriage; marriage enrichment

A popular explanation for the decline in marriage is the lack of marriageable men, specifically among disadvantaged populations (Wilson, 1987). Certainly, the lack of marriageable men (defined in terms of employment) alone does not explain changes in marriage patterns (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997), although it is certainly tied to lower odds of marrying (Edin, 2000; Lichter, Anderson, & Hayward, 1995). The problems faced by young men and women in inner-city neighborhoods include a lack of employment prospects, poor education opportunities, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system. These factors are undoubtedly interrelated and cumulative in nature. For example, issues surrounding substance abuse may prevent men from engaging in more stable economic activities and potentially lead to problems with incarceration and domestic violence. Graefe and Lichter (2007) referred to women's marriageability in terms of their fertility history, human capital, and economic self-sufficiency. Waller (2002) found

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that single mothers are aware of these marriageability limitations and may avoid marriage to prevent interacting with men who may destabilize their families.

Coexisting with scholarly research is new federally and state funded healthy marriage programs established across the country. The government has attempted to buttress marriage by providing financial and political support for initiatives that reinforce stable marriages and relationships, particularly targeting poor and disadvantaged groups. In 2002 President Bush supported the Healthy Marriage Initiative (“to help couples develop the skills and knowledge to form and sustain healthy marriages”), and in 2006 over \$500 million was appropriated toward this initiative (DHHS, 2005). These programs often focus on identifying characteristics of “good” marriage partners and providing tools to obtain and sustain healthy relationships and marriages. Little work, however, has focused on the views and experiences of women who are the targets of current policy efforts, the actual participants in marriage initiatives. Further, while research and programmatic emphasis has often focused on men's characteristics, we examined the characteristics of women that make them more or less competitive in the marriage market. Specifically, we examined women's views about their own marriageability, because men's marriageability has been extensively analyzed in prior research (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Lopoo & Carlson, 2008). Accordingly, the strength of the current project is that we focused on women's marriageability from their own viewpoint.

Drawing on an exchange framework and using open-ended interviews, we examined women's perspectives of the barriers to marriage within their lives, specifically how the complexities of daily life, previous negative experiences with men, and attitudes about marriage converge to influence women's marriage-ability. Prior work has established empirical associations between women's characteristics (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Graefe and Lichter, 2007; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Lloyd & South, 1996); however, these studies have not delved into single women's own perceptions of marriage. Our work was guided by previous quantitative and qualitative studies of marriageable men and contributes to an understanding of the existing challenges faced when forming marriages and relationships, especially among disadvantaged populations. In-depth semistructured interviews allowed us to investigate the factors that put respondents at risk of not marrying and to further consider how these factors interconnect (Weiss, 1994).

Background

The majority of women marry, but differences are based on women's economic circumstances and race/ethnicity. By age 40, about one third of African American women have never married in contrast to 15% of Hispanic and 10% of White women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Further, it appears that poverty is associated with lower rates of marriage; nonetheless, half (53%) of Black women, 35 to 44 years old, and living in poverty were not married; this is in contrast to one fifth of Hispanic and White, 35- to 44-year-old poor women who remain unmarried (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009).

The literature on barriers to marriage often invokes either directly or indirectly a form of the exchange perspective (Cherlin, 2000). The general argument is that individuals enter marriage when the rewards outweigh the costs of being married, and the net gain in a particular relationship is higher than expected in other relationships (Nye, 1979). The characteristics of and interactions with partners are weighed against potential relationship alternatives (Sabatelli, 1988; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Empirical studies have suggested that low-income mothers desire to get married (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Waller, 2002), however, there are many barriers preventing them from doing so (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Lopoo & Carlson, 2008; Raley & Bratter,

2003; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Although this literature has largely focused on men's characteristics, some research has examined how women's characteristics and experiences influence marriage, including interpersonal (health, substance use, children, and gender distrust) and economic factors (Carlson et al., 2004; Graefe and Lichter, 2007; Lichter et al., 2003). These characteristics compose what makes men and women marriageable. Consistent with an exchange framework, the marriageability of a person will vary depending on the value placed on particular characteristics and interactions, competition or alternatives available, and expectations for marriage (Nye).

Of particular importance for disadvantaged populations is the substantial institutional economic constraint that prevents many individuals from developing healthy relationships. As Wilson (1987) noted, unemployment rates are high for many inner-city men, and this may dramatically hinder their marriage prospects. Being a financial provider is the traditional role for men in families (Nock, 1998; Townsend, 2002), and many women view an ideal husband from this perspective (Raley & Bratter, 2003). Providing financial security for a family can be exceptionally difficult for men in low-income communities because of poor economic structural opportunities. As Edin and Kefalas (2005) stated, "the bar for marriage is high" (p. 202). Both men and women are aware of the importance of being economically "set" (e.g., homeownership or job stability) before they get married in lieu of establishing themselves during the early years of marriage (Smock et al., 2005). At the same time, women with greater economic resources are more likely to marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Sweeney, 2002). Thus, women are valued as economic providers in their own rights. In fact, men's dwindling economic prospects, in some instances, results in greater reliance on women as economic providers. Edin and Kefalas found that economic self-sufficiency is especially important for single mothers because they may not be able to rely on their partners' financial support to provide for a family. Accordingly, women's employment and economic stability is one component related to union formation that can make women more attractive marriage partners. We, therefore, examined how women frame their economic role in marriage and their economic goals for their families.

Although mental and physical health impairments may adversely affect potential romantic relationships and may make individuals less than ideal partners, recent empirical evidence has been mixed. Analyses of single mothers have indicated that self-reported health of the mother or father is not a significant predictor of marriage (Carlson et al., 2004). Good health appears to be associated with marriage among unemployed women, but the same is not true for employed women (Nock, 2005; Waldron, Hughes, & Brooks, 1996). Williams, Sassler, and Nicholson (2008) argued that marriage initiatives may fail to adequately address the special mental and physical health needs of single women and mothers. Health issues may more heavily influence poor adults than their more advantaged counterparts, as they often suffer from health problems but are limited in their ability to receive treatment. In addition, these issues affect mobility and lifestyle and may hinder employment and relationship potential. We extend these studies by examining how women's perceptions of their mental and physical health influence their perceived marriageability and marriage expectations.

Substance use, including drugs or alcohol, can have detrimental effects on relationships, and prevent union formation such that women avoid forming unions with men who abuse drugs or drink excessively. Fathers' substance use is negatively associated with cohabitation and marriage and negatively associated with the stability of cohabiting unions (Carlson et al., 2004; Waller & Swisher, 2006). This suggests that substance use and abuse negatively influences interactions with partners and family. Substance abuse may also be a more salient issue among the disadvantaged because of higher prevalence rates and limited access to treatment. Although the majority of prior work has focused on men's substance abuse, little is known about how women's abuse of drugs and alcohol negatively influences their

experience in the marriage market. Men may not want to be involved with women who have substance dependencies, and women may not consider themselves marriage material while they struggle with substance use.

An additional deterrent to marriage among both men and women is the presence of children from prior relationships (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006; Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005; Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). Even among disadvantaged subgroups of women who experience high levels of premarital childbearing, the effect of children on marriage is still negative (Lichter et al., 2003). An extension of this work focuses on multiple partner fertility, which may amplify the negative influence of having children on women's marriageability. Single mothers may face a greater struggle to encourage nonresident parent involvement and deal child support issues when there are multiple partners involved (Manning & Smock, 2000), and navigating relationships with multiple mothers or fathers may also threaten current relationships and create tension between previous and new partners (Carlson & Furstenburg, 2006). As a result, men and women may be hesitant to enter relationships that involve potentially complicated parenting demands. The empirical evidence indicates that men with multiple partner fertility have reduced odds of marriage, whereas women's multiple partner fertility does not influence their marriage prospects (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006). Disadvantaged adults are more likely to have children with multiple partners (Carlson & Furstenburg; Guzzo & Furstenburg, 2007; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe, 2008) compared to middle- and higher-income groups. We, therefore, explored women's reports of ways that children from a prior union, as well as multiple partner fertility, influence decisions about relationship timing and marriage expectations.

Gender distrust has been introduced as a possible explanation for the divergent marriage patterns of low-income families. The notion of gender distrust has been addressed in both qualitative (Coley, 2002; Waller, 2001) and quantitative (Carlson et al., 2004; Waller & McLanahan, 2005) assessments of union formation among disadvantaged populations. Focus groups with low-income mothers have indicated that there is a culture of gender distrust that has an enduring effect on women's beliefs about marriage and romantic relationships (Furstenberg, 2001). Gender distrust that is based on infidelity ("men/women cannot be trusted to be faithful" and "men/women are out to take advantage of women/men") is tied to lower expectations to marry (Waller & McLanahan) and lower odds of entering either a cohabiting or marriage union after the birth of the child (Carlson et al.). Disadvantaged women are more likely to have experienced childhood abuse (Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996) and as a result may develop greater gender distrust in adulthood. Burton, Cherlin, Winn, and Estacion, (2007) asserted that gender distrust often stems from previous experience with abuse and can have serious ramifications for healthy romantic relationships and attitudes about marriage (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, & Purvin, 2004; Larson & La Mont, 2005). Although we do not suggest that one's experience of abuse makes them inherently unmarriageable, we do consider the ways that these experiences, as well as sexual infidelity, negatively influence women's attitudes toward men and thus establish barriers to marriage.

One of the major goals of the healthy marriage initiative is to encourage healthy romantic relationships; however, not everyone is actively pursuing such relationships. According to the exchange perspective, some individuals may broadly perceive the costs of marriage in their context to outweigh the rewards and not seek out relationships. Edin and Kefalas (2005) reported in a sample of low-income single mothers that 30% did not plan to marry in their lifetime or did not have an opinion about marrying in the future. This is similar to findings by Lichter et al. (2004) who reported that 31% of single mothers in their sample did not expect to marry. A strategy employed by some single mothers is to avoid potentially

unstable relationships and marriage by focusing on their children, thus providing stable healthy family environments (Edin & Kefalas). Furthermore, Edin and Kefalas found that some women want to be financially independent before moving into a marriage in the event that their relationships end in divorce and leave them financially vulnerable. We explore how women evaluate their marriage options and focus on how women frame a permanent strategy of removing themselves from the marriage market versus a more temporary strategy (e.g., delaying marriage), which may eventuate in marriage.

Current Investigation

We employed semistructured interviews and an exchange framework to analyze the views of participants in a community-based healthy marriage program. We assessed the characteristics of women that limit their marriageability and focused specifically on how respondents' views about the marriageability of women align with current literature on factors that make men less marriageable.

This study moves beyond prior work in four key ways. First, we used a unique sample of participants in a healthy marriage program. To date, few studies have focused on the viewpoint of women enrolled in a program. Second, although most research on marriage has highlighted the inadequacies of men (employment, education, incarceration, substance use), claiming that women do not marry because they lack a pool of marriageable men, some studies have neglected the characteristics of women that may make them less suitable marriage partners (exceptions include Carlson et al., 2004; Graefe and Litcher, 2007; Lichter et al., 2003; Lloyd & South, 1996). We, therefore, examined women's views of the characteristics of women that they believe may limit their marriage prospects and indicate how these influence their relationship options. Third, we acknowledged that the concept of women's marriageability cannot be captured with one item. We therefore examined an array of factors and evaluated how a combination of an individual's characteristics and past experiences affect their perceptions of marriageability. Fourth, our work supplements current research by including respondents' own views on marriage and the marriage market, moving beyond the scope of prior work that examines actual marriage behavior. These responses provided a direct assessment of respondents' attitudes and opinions and specifically linked their experiences to marriageability. Our study highlights the impediments that women believe they face in the marriage market and emphasizes the important life circumstances and marriage beliefs of low-income women who are the target of federal marriage and relationship programs.

Data and Methods

From July through September 2006, 57 participants were interviewed shortly after completing a marriage and relationship program in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. Individuals voluntarily participated in the program after being recruited from class leaders, flyers, and word-of-mouth. Though not religiously oriented, the classes were sometimes held at places of worship and some instructors were religious clergy. Participation was voluntary and participants chose to attend classes because they were interested in learning about and improving their relationships, finding some support, and seeking an opportunity to socialize.

The current programs are part of a larger federal and state marriage initiative that has an overall purpose of providing the knowledge and skills to develop and sustain healthy marriages. We drew on two specific programs—one based broadly on the family and the other specific to finding a good marriage partner. The family curriculum emphasizes building healthy relationships with all family members, including children, grandparents, and the parents or couples themselves. Topics related to the family program include

cooperation, listening, and communication between all family members. The marriage partner program emphasizes building a strong relationship foundation on the basis of knowledge of partners, trust and reliance in partners, commitment, and delayed physical intimacy. The marriage partner curriculum includes topics related to relationship histories, open communication, and problem solving. In general, the classes provided skills to promote healthy relationships in different areas of the participants' lives. The responses of our participants did not appear to vary according to the specific program. Our sample mirrored participants in the larger marriage initiative in terms of age, presence of children, education, and marital status. A final subsample of 46 respondents was analyzed after limiting the sample to unmarried women. Of the original 46 unmarried women, 38 were reinterviewed, representing an 83% retention rate. Follow-up interviews allowed us to assess the longer-term implications of program participation.

To be included in our study, individuals must have completed four of six relationship classes offered by either one of the two primary programs. We sampled respondents from each of the ten program sites. The respondents were sent a letter about the project and were reminded about the interview opportunity by class leaders. Sample participants were selected in an attempt to closely mirror the diversity of individuals from the complete list of participants. Data from the 2006 American Community Survey was used to contrast our respondents to national estimates and to women living in the areas within which our sample reside. We found that respondents were more disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment, employment, and poverty than national estimates and closer in representation of the women who live in our sample city.

Table 1 presents the socioeconomic characteristics for our sample of 46 unmarried respondents. Half of our sample (50%; $N = 23$) were African American, 30% ($N = 14$) were White, 17% ($N = 8$) were Hispanic, and 2% ($N = 1$) were Native American. The average age of respondents was 36, while ages ranged from 18 to 68 years, indicating that program participants were not limited to young women. With respect to relationship status at wave 1, the majority were single (58%; $N = 27$), followed by dating (35%; $N = 16$), and then cohabiting (7%; $N = 3$). The majority of our sample (89%; $N = 41$) had at least one child present in their lives (e.g., partner's children from other relationships, nieces/nephews, grandchildren, or foster child). Among those with children, 43% ($N = 16$) had experienced multiple partner fertility. That is, a large portion of our sample had children with the same mother but with different fathers, thus creating many half-siblings. The majority of children in the sample were not raised by two biological parents (61%; $N = 28$).

Although most respondents were quite disadvantaged, the majority (80%; $N = 37$) had a high school degree or education beyond high school. Of our sample, 76% ($N = 35$) reported annual household earnings of \$15,000 or less. Again, participants originated from relatively disadvantaged communities, and according to 2000 U.S. Census data, 44% of our sample resided in census tracts where more than one-quarter of the population lived below the poverty line. The majority (65%; $N = 30$) of respondents were unemployed. Eighty-five percent ($N = 39$) of the sample currently receives public assistance in the form of Supplemental Security Income (SSI); Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); food stamps; cash assistance; Medicaid; and or subsidized housing.

We used a semistructured interview guide with open-ended questions which allows the interviewer to pursue varied lines of inquiry and probe for more information. In-depth interviews are an excellent method for exploring perceptions, behavior, and cognitive justifications while providing a greater level of detail than closed-ended survey questions (Weiss, 1994). To elicit information concerning barriers to marriage respondents were asked, "What would have to be in place for you to get married?" Similarly, respondents

were asked, “What is going on in your life that makes it tough to have a healthy relationship?” We also obtained information concerning the influence of children on respondents' relationship decisions by asking the following questions: “As a single mother, how do your children factor into your decisions about dating?”; “Why or why not do you think it is a good idea for single mothers to avoid relationships for the sake of children?”; and “How do you think having children helps or hinders you in finding a good partner?” The open-ended nature of these questions allowed respondents to elaborate on topics in a less-restricted manner than is often the case with traditional survey methods (Weiss).

Interviews were conducted and tape-recorded in private at the program sites. On average, the interviews were 90 minutes in length and included 42 questions. All participants were asked the same background and programmatic questions although follow-up questioning differed in some cases given a participant's initial response. Next, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, typed, and compiled into a 63-page single-spaced document. Reinterviews conducted 6 – 8 months later were shorter (24 questions), averaging 30 minutes in length, with an accompanying 14-page single-spaced document. The reinterview questionnaire was shorter because much of the biographical and background data was already established in the first wave of interviewing. Again, all reinterviewed participants were administered the same qualitative questionnaire although follow-up questioning may have differed according to initial responses. We used data from both waves to further our understanding of women's marriageability.

To analyze the qualitative data, an inductive approach was utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The research team (comprised of the four authors with the later help of another graduate student Angelika Gulbis) worked to compile data from the interviews and quantitative questionnaires. Additional research staff, including one interviewer and two transcriptionists supported the initial phase of the project. First, at each wave the research team read two transcribed interviews and then, as a group, compiled a comprehensive code list that rose out of the reading of the interviews. Once the code list was constructed, we entered all of the interviews into ATLAS.ti, which is a qualitative database used for coding and organizing qualitative data. All members of the research team coded two interviews at each wave to check for reliability in the code list and coding process. We then examined *intercoder reliability* by discussing and comparing the individually coded interviews. Although there were few interpretive disagreements, we explored and discussed the meaning of even minor discrepancies in our interpretations, eventually generating a coding scheme capturing our consensus on the issues. We further refined the code list to avoid duplication and to ensure all themes were incorporated. Once all the interviews were entered into ATLAS.ti and the text coded by a member of the research team, similar codes were sorted and analyzed together (e.g., “children interfere with relationship” and “multiple partner fertility”) to determine common themes that emerge from the data. This process involved repeated readings of interviews and moving back and forth from codes to the original text. Finally, the process involved considering how multiple themes intersect in an effort to adequately portray the complicated nature of respondents' lives and romantic relationships. All names that appear in this study are pseudonyms assigned to protect participants' privacy.

To supplement data garnered from interviews, we also included results from a ten item Marriage Attitudes Survey developed by program staff and completed before starting the class. This questionnaire complements the more in-depth interviews completed subsequent to the classes. These are, however, only single-item indicators, and attempts to create subscales resulted in low α s. One item taps a general attitude toward marriage (e.g., “People should marry”) and two items address respondents' own marriage views (e.g., “I expect to get married one day” and “I am scared to get married”). Gender distrust was measured by two items, “Men cannot be trusted to be faithful” and “Women cannot be trusted to be faithful.”

Participants were offered the following response: (a) Strongly Agree, (b) Agree, (c) Disagree, and (d) Strongly Disagree. Responses from the survey were used to supplement the qualitative findings.

Results

Respondents' overall attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and childbearing were examined first. Although this was a disadvantaged population, overall, respondents reported that marriage is the ideal relationship status. Prior to participating in the program, the majority of respondents (85%; $N = 39$) thought that people should marry, and the majority (87%; $N = 40$) expected to get married. Tanisha, a 37-year-old single mother of four, rationalized that "it's good to be married ... I guess that's just a dream everybody wants ... to be married and have a happy little family." At the same time, 48% ($N = 22$) of respondents claimed that they were scared to get married. This response demonstrates the complexity in attitudes about marriage. Tania, a 24-year-old cohabiting mother of three, expects to marry one day and explained, "I'm scared to get married ... and being committed to somebody for so long." Tania elaborated, "'cause I know some people do get married and there's a lot of arguments in the house. It really depends on the relationship and on the person. And I know there can be a lot of arguing ... And I think that's what scares me." Some respondents did not want to get married because they were concerned about divorce. Helen, a 36-year-old single mother of one explained, "... it's like, I mean I do [want to get married] and then I don't ... Because ... here every time I turn around somebody's marriage is ending, and people are getting divorced. And that just bothers me." Importantly, when respondents discussed their reluctance to marry due to divorce, it did not appear that they were afraid of divorce due to the stigma of divorce. Rather, they were often afraid of the *process* of divorce. Catie, a 38-year-old cohabiting mother of three, mentioned that she had witnessed the divorces of friends and family, and her fear of the process of divorce is a barrier to marriage: "Oh, yeah. I don't want, like I said before, if I get married I don't, I don't want to have to go through all that stuff. That's why it's like I put the walls up." Although there was a positive view of marriage among respondents, many still had reservations and were realistic about the nature and stability of marriage.

When studying factors associated with marriageability, it is important to recognize that not all women may be actively seeking a romantic partner at the time of the interview. The majority (8 of 11) reported just temporarily opting out of the marriage market. For instance, Marie, a 39-year-old single mother of five, acknowledged that she did not want a relationship at the time of the interview but possibly would be open to one in the future. When asked if she saw herself getting married, she stated, "I want to. But I'm saying now my most important thing to me with the way the world is going that I really need to take my kids—my youngest two kids—into adulthood."

A major theme that emerged in this data about why women are not interested in marriage was the influence of children. Introducing new men into the home and exposing children to men so that they may become attached were concerns that forestalled mothers from dating—regardless of the age of their children. Some women expressed concerns about abuse (see below). Other women wanted to wait until their children were older: "until my daughter gets where she's more independent and on her own and not dependent on me as much ... then it will be better for me [to be in a relationship] ... Right now it's not that important to me." Other women believed the demands of a romantic relationship would distract them from their life goals of furthering education or gaining stable employment. Ramona, a 25-year-old single mother of one, stated:

I think it's just that I'm not out there really looking for anybody right now. I'm more self-centered on myself right now. I want to get through school, and I want to get

into employment ... And I want to get things going for myself before I do anything ... It's just for me and my son. I got a son to raise. I think that's why I haven't looked into, you know, having a relationship.

Regardless of her hesitance to date, Ramona, like the majority of our sample, agreed that she expects to marry in the future. In the marriage survey, both Holly and Ramona agreed with the statement "I expect to get married to someone during my lifetime," suggesting that they were not fully rejecting marriage just temporarily opting out.

Women also claimed to opt out of the marriage market on a more permanent basis if they surmised that their potential as and for a romantic partner had diminished. Of the 11 respondents that reported opting out of the marriage market, 3 stated that they were not planning on looking for a romantic relationship any time in the future and in the survey they reported they were not expecting to marry. These women often suggested that chronic health problems, older age, or desire for independence were reasons to avoid romantic relationships permanently. Madeline, a 59-year-old single mother of one explained, "boyfriends, I could [sic] care less anymore ... I'm getting up there in age." Others like Pam, 45-year-old with no children, cherished a sense of personal independence, "I plan on pretty much just being by myself ... that works for me ... you don't have to argue with anybody, clean up after anybody. You can do what you want, when you want." The reason they participated in relationship education classes was for socializing and interacting with similar others, and they utilized the lessons to aid in other facets of their life—such as relationships with family, friends, and coworkers.

Marriageability

Economic Factors and the Marriage Ideal

Two fifths of the sample discussed their economic potential, which influenced their marriage prospects. Many women in our sample found it difficult to establish stable employment because of factors such as low education, poor job opportunities, or lack of skills. Lack of employment was directly related to stress in current relationships and negatively influenced the possibility of future relationships. Krystal, a 29-year-old single mother of three, elaborated on the difficulties of establishing a healthy relationship when finances are a concern:

But right now, it's [money] getting pretty low ... I'm looking ahead to other things that I want in my life. And I need more money. So I'm trying to focus on getting ahead. I'm not really looking at anybody right now.

Krystal recognized that having a partner may be financially beneficial and has benefited in her past; however, she also stated her desire to be self-sufficient and not have to worry about losing her financial stability if her relationships end. Sabine, a 57-year-old single woman explained, "I wish I had a job. I would feel much better about myself if I had a job ... I'm the kind of person that, that works ... I'm the person that will work and not just sit around the house and do nothing ... That's important to me, and I think that's important probably to a man." Sabine recognized the importance of having a job and contributing financially in a relationship. Existing literature suggests that being employed and providing income are top priorities for men; similarly, we found that it is an equally important consideration for women. Many women recognized the need for dual-income households, and much as they are unwilling to accept lack of employment in a partner, they accept that their own employment problems may hinder relationship potential.

Several respondents expressed concerns about relying on public assistance and felt that they should not marry while receiving aid. Tori, a 34-year-old single mother of six, suggested,

“... a man, a woman shouldn't be on welfare and married.” Respondents viewed financial stability not only as a prerequisite for marriage but also as a way to maintain a stable marriage.

Establishing personal independence prior to marriage was important for some respondents. Even though marriage is desirable, some women delay marriage until their lives are in order. Jill, a 21-year-old dating mother of two explained:

I'm just not ready to get married. I want my career ... I want my house. I want my children to be stable. And from there, I can think about me. But right now, I'm on the grind and I'm trying to get myself together. I just honestly, I just really want to get what I need to get out of the way before I look at the whole thing of marriage.

Thus, although marriage is on the horizon for Jill, a great deal has to fall into place before she is ready to move toward marriage.

Mental and Physical Health Issues

Eight women, 18% of the sample, reported that health concerns affect their dating and marriage potential because they believe themselves to be less than ideal partners. For example, 31-year-old Mary, single mother of two, said that being depressed makes it difficult to start a relationship because she has to take care of herself first: “it makes it hard to sustain a relationship, I believe. Because I'm moody. My mood swings ... I feel like if I'm gonna' be in a relationship ... I should be able to be in that relationship and be focused on what I need to do, what's going on in our lives.” Mary recognized that she is not currently ready to be in a relationship but strongly agreed that she expects to marry.

Physical impairments were also a concern for many respondents in our sample. Some respondents, like Tania, a 24-year-old cohabiting mother of three, have preexisting conditions that negatively influence fertility and may make them unsuitable partners for someone who would like to have additional children. She explained how abusing diet pills when younger made it difficult to conceive children, “‘cause when I was young, I ended up taking diet pills from my grandma ... so through all three pregnancies I was constantly going to the hospital ... It messed up my uterus ... So, ever since I had my daughter she messed me up even more. So now, it's really hard for me. If I wanted to have [a child] right now it would be hard for me to have one.” Respondents with physical disabilities often felt isolated and guilty because of their condition, and they did not want to be a burden for potential partners.

Substance Use

Respondents cited their partners' drug and alcohol use as a key factor that created instability and stress in their relationships. Only 7%, or three women, acknowledged that their own struggle with substance use limited their potential as marriage partners. Mary, the 31-year-old single mother of two who has depression issues, noted, “I'm slowly trying to change ... I have to abandon smoking cigarettes ... and drinking ... I mean, you can drink. But, just drink social. Not drink as in every day ... Cigarettes and drinking are bad for you.” Mary recognized that smoking and drinking are not necessarily desirable qualities in a potential marriage partner. Similarly, Holly, a 53-year-old single mother of one, acknowledged that although sobriety provides an opportunity to better herself, it is difficult to resist temptations: “I've been clean for, umm, since '96... that's a blessing ... You feel guilty too when you ... fall back ... I had made a promise to God that ... I would never get high again ... But, you know, the devil's always busy too.” Regardless of Mary's reservations about her own marriageability, her survey results indicated that she expects to marry.

Some of the issues surrounding drugs and alcohol were tied to money and employment. For many, addressing these problems is a step toward marriage. Melinda, a 51-year-old mother of three who is currently incarcerated, noted how her excessive drinking has disrupted her economic potential and her relationships:

[My dating partner and I] drink too much ... I'm dried out already ... I'm not gonna' be a drunk when I get out [of jail] ... I like the way I feel these days ... I want a life. I don't want to live paycheck to paycheck ... I'm too old to keep coming to jail. And when you keep getting so drunk, you're bound to go to jail sooner or later ... it made me think I want a more serious person in my life, because I'm sick of partying everyday ... I think I'll have to ... find somebody I'm better suited to ... it's like everybody expects you, you know, to act a certain way. But, I'm not drunk anymore. So, nobody really knows who the real [Melinda] is.

Melinda acknowledged that her substance use is taking a financial toll on her economic stability and noted her desire to change for the sake of her relationship, or to potentially find a partner for whom she is better suited now that she is sober.

Children and Multiple Partner Fertility

Among unmarried mothers in our sample, 58% ($N = 27$) were single, 35% ($N = 16$) were dating, and 7% ($N = 3$) were in cohabiting relationships with two fifths (40%; $N = 18$) of these mothers reporting that their children hinder their marriage prospects. Many studies have indeed found that children deter marriage prospects; thus we examined some of the ways children can hinder the development of new relationships. Previous relationships that bear children often continue to influence new relationships because children forever tie a couple together—for better or for worse.

In addition to children from previous relationships, ex-partners are also a reminder of previous romantic relationships that may illicit feelings of jealousy and insecurity, especially when these ex-partners are also coparents. Tori, a 34-year-old single mother of six, explained the difficulty of managing ex-partners while forging new relationships: “We decide to move on, ‘cause his baby mama jealous of him trying to talk to somebody else and my baby daddy is, don't want nobody else to have me ...” Tori ended her relationship because of the jealousy of not only her “baby daddy” but also her boyfriend's “baby mama drama.” When women bring children from a previous relationship, there is sometimes a problem with what respondents refer to as “baby daddy drama”—the involvement of a male former partner in a current relationship. For example, Jackie, a 30-year-old single mother of three, explained how her ex-partner intervenes in her new relationships: “[one of my children's fathers] was always trying to intervene between me and [my new partner] ... still trying to come back and be with me ... Yes, it gets complicated. Because they always try to come over and make it look like there's something going on between me and them ... and it makes my partner start wondering, are you cheating on me?” Clearly, children not only serve as a constraint to dating and forging new romantic relationships but they also represent a connection to relationships that have since ended.

Some men are not interested in assuming parental responsibility for others' children. Marie, a 39-year-old single mother of five, explained her experiences with prior dating partners: “Because a lot of times, like me, I get into a relationship and come to find out that the kids weren't a part of his agenda.” Mothers in our samples were aware that men may not be interested in dating women who have children by another man, especially if there is the potential that they would have to financially support these children in the absence of the biological father.

Forty-three percent ($N = 16$) of parents had children with multiple (at least two) partners. Multiple partner fertility often means there can be maintenance of ties to more than one former romantic partner and other parents. A 33-year-old single mother of six, Ida, is well-versed in managing multiple relationships among her three ex-partners and their children together:

[One father] he didn't want to be the daddy. He would spend time with them. Go to parks, walks. But he wasn't trying to be the dad ... [Another father] was trying to be the dad; he was trying to prove something ... I think he was trying to prove he could be a good dad. [The third father], he did a good job with the boys. He always spent time with them; he spent more time with them than me ... but see, he would, like, drill my kids when he get 'em. "What you all doing?" "Ahh, what is she doing?" And, he, he would threaten me ... Just say, well I'm gonna have them look up [the other fathers'] records ... I just tell him ... I don't want no daddy drama.

Although Ida displayed appreciation that one of the fathers is involved in his children's lives, she showed resentment that he monitors their access to her other ex-partners, and she was offended that he thinks her previous partners may be bad influences on the children. As is evidenced by Ida's situation, some men have a difficult time reconciling the presence of other men in their children's lives, even when these men are the fathers of their own children's half-siblings.

Gender Distrust

Two fifths, or 19, of the participants, reported gender distrust influences their marriage prospects. Often, complexities in these respondents' lives lead to a general distrust of others. Marie, a 39-year-old single mother of five, explained how negative life experiences have led her to distrust others and be leery of new romantic partners: "I'm gonna' have to at least date a person six months before I really can say, well okay, I can go to your house and sit and watch TV ... Because ... I don't trust anyone ... and that comes from when I was robbed in the supermarket; I was robbed on the city bus." For Marie, her global distrust of others was a barrier to all types of relationships, particularly romantic. Lydia, a 22-year-old dating mother of four, explained that distrust of others is the rule rather than the exception for her:

Interviewer: Does he trust you?

Respondent: To a certain extent.

Interviewer: Why do you think he doesn't trust you fully?

Respondent: Just in life in general, who do you trust to the fullest?

Lydia recognized that others too have global distrust, which can influence her own marriageability.

The marriage survey results indicated that 38% ($N = 17$) of the respondents agreed with the statement "Men cannot be trusted to be faithful," and 20% ($N = 9$) believed "Women cannot be faithful." We found being faithful represents just one facet of gender distrust. Gail, a 24-year-old divorced mother of one, explained how a history of infidelity influences her lack of trust: "I was with someone and he cheated on me ... there's no trust anymore." On the marriage survey, Gail indicated that she agrees with the statement "men are not to be trusted to be faithful." Women, too, can be unfaithful. Candice, a 20-year-old dating mother of three, explained her experience: "...when he was supposed to come and get me he didn't end up coming. So I just went out with my friends, and I just thought, in my head, I thought he was cheating on me. 'Cause that's why he didn't come get me. So I just got stupid and drunk and ... [ended up cheating on him]." Candice became pregnant after cheating on her boyfriend with whom she was still in a romantic relationship at the time of this study. In the

marriage survey, Candice stated that she disagrees with the statement “women cannot be trusted to be faithful.” When speaking about her relationships during the interview, however, she stated, “It’s our past that brings us to not trust each other,” suggesting that trust in the relationship is a deterrent in moving the relationship toward marriage. A few women in our sample stated that infidelity is at the root of gender distrust for both women and men and directly influences attitudes toward potential or current romantic partners.

Experience of abuse is another facet of gender distrust that affects the relationship quality and expectations of this sample. One third of our sample (37%; $N = 17$) had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and 7% ($N = 3$) had witnessed abuse between family members. Many respondents experienced childhood abuse at the hands of parents or witnessed violence between their parents, thus inciting an abiding distrust of men. Mary, a 31-year-old single mother of two, explained how experiencing childhood abuse influences her current relationships: “The reason why I think I probably acted like that towards ... I guess I was molested when I was younger. But I don’t really know. Physically, I don’t want a man touching me. It is just weird sometimes.” Often, gender distrust stems from childhood experiences witnessing mothers and fathers cope with infidelity and lack of commitment. Vicky, a single 20-year-old woman with no children, explained how childhood abuse at the hands of her stepfather, and abandonment by her biological father, makes her distrustful of men in her own romantic relationships; “[My mother] got married ... he started beating her or whatever, and he started beating us ... after that she started dating this other guy. And she’s still with him today ... He used to beat me. And my dad has never laid a hand on me, but he has totally not been there for me my whole life. And I just don’t trust men.” Abuse or even potential abuse affected more than the immediate romantic dyad. Women in our study were reluctant to bring men into their lives if they had young children (especially daughters) living in the house because they fear sexual abuse. For some mothers, parenting and dating cannot coincide. A majority of mothers, especially those with daughters, are cautious about bringing men into their families. Holly, a 53-year-old single mother of one daughter, explained that “by having a teenager I got to be able to trust the guy that he’s ... not gonna touch my child in an inappropriate manner ... like, putting his hand on her where he’s not supposed to ... It’s hard to trust a man ... And you hear so many times that a child is being molested by the stepfather, and I don’t want that.” For Holly, the presence of children, especially a daughter, and underlying issues with gender distrust made her leery about pursuing romantic relationships.

Some respondents leave at the first signs of abuse; others retaliate after being victims for too long. Jill, a 20-year-old dating mother of two, explained that she “quit because I got tired of him being abusive towards me. And I quit. And I threw the first lick and I threw a lot of things and I messed him up real bad.” This quote illustrates that, while Jill was provoked, women are also capable of enacting violence and are not always innocent victims in domestic strife. At the time of this study, Jill was in a romantic relationship and used violence when she argued with her boyfriend, which complicated their relationship. She stated, “If I get to the point where I’m so upset and I just hit him, like I’ve done before, he just walks away.” For a small number of women, perpetrating abuse upon their partners indicated that women are not only capable of abuse but also that these behaviors may make them less than suitable marriage partners. Although serious injuries are more prevalent when violence occurs, male-to-female national estimates (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000) show that women report intimate partner violence at a higher rate (22.1%) than men (7.4%) (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Consequently, being both a victim of abuse and perpetrating intimate violence can have an influence on marriageability for women.

Discussion

We used semistructured interview data collected from women in a marriage program to examine their marriageability (e.g., economic factors, mental and physical health issues, substance use, multiple partner fertility, and gender distrust). We suggest that, similar to their male counterparts, some women possess characteristics that make them less than ideal marriage partners. Although many women may express a desire to marry, they may lack the most competitive set of economic, social, or personal characteristics. We confirmed that a few women are voluntarily opting out of the marriage market temporarily to raise children, pursue education, or find employment. From their perspective, the costs of marriage, in their context, outweigh the benefits. Even though program participants have marital aspirations, they are aware their own characteristics and circumstances pose constraints to marriage. Thus, as suggested by Edin and Reed (2005), women may modify their expectations to marry because they cannot achieve the standard prerequisites for marriage.

Similar to men, women are aware of how their economic potential influences their options on the marriage market. It is well known that economic factors are an important consideration in marriage decisions (e.g., Gibson et al., 2005; Smock et al., 2005; Sweeney, 2002). Respondents recognized that maintaining stable employment, reducing reliance on public assistance, and providing for their families improves their marriage potential. Financial stability and independence enhances women's market value and allows them to be more selective.

Although many studies have documented that children limit their mothers' marriage potential (e.g., Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006; Stewart et al., 2003; Waller, 2002), we expand upon these studies by showcasing that multiple partner fertility compounds the potential negative effects of children. Women report that men are sometimes reluctant to partner with women who have children from previous relationships because of issues related to responsibility, economic support, and ex-partners who remain present in their lives. The presence of ex-partners raises concerns about fidelity and trust. Mothers' accounts show that multiple partners can create additional stress on relationships, as mothers must negotiate personal relationships and their children's relationships with more than one ex-partner. Multiple partner fertility is especially important in this context because it is a family composition complication more commonly found among disadvantaged populations (Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007; Manlove et al., 2008).

The influence of mental and physical health issues and marriage has received limited empirical attention (Carlson et al., 2004; Nock, 2005; Waite, 1995; Waldron et al., 1996; Williams et al., 2008) and does not consider how health impairments influence women's marriageability. Women in our sample cited poor mental and physical health issues as obstacles to success in the marriage market and challenges to the stability of existing relationships. Health concerns not only limit women's marriage potential, but they are also detrimental to other aspects of their lives, such as employment, which then further confines their marriage options. Disadvantaged women facing mental and physical health issues may often go untreated or inadequately treated. Some women, however, may have access to additional sources of support through social or community based networks, such as faith-based services among African Americans.

Empirical work on gender distrust relies on indicators of infidelity as markers of gender distrust (e.g., Burton et al., 2007; Carlson et al., 2004; Waller, 2001). Our findings support these studies and showcase that women's distrust of men is often framed around fidelity but that women also merit some gender distrust due to their own infidelity. There are multiple dimensions of distrust extending to a more global distrust of everyone to concerns about

commitment and reliability. This general level of distrust may be a coping strategy found more often in disadvantaged communities. Our findings also showcase that abuse is an underlying element of distrust (Burton et al.). Although abuse does not make a woman unmarriageable, these women may possess attitudes or dispositions that make them less trusting of men, which may also deter their efforts to marry.

Our findings indicate that marriageability is based on a combination of interrelated characteristics and should be examined simultaneously. Traditionally, multivariate analyses of the barriers to marriage include these factors as separate items in models. Researchers could learn from relationship education programs, which acknowledge there are constellations of factors that influence the marriageability of individuals. Analytically, future research should adopt a more person-centered approach rather than the traditional variable-centered approach (e.g., Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Singer, Ryff, Carr, & Magee, 1998).

Finally, some women are opting out of the marriage market to focus on parenting or to pursue education and employment opportunities. Many women do not disregard the ideal of marriage, but are actively seeking to better themselves, in some cases in an effort to attract a better man. Consistent with Edin and Reed (2005), although low-income women may be aware of the benefits of marriage, they cannot always get married owing to economic and social constraints. Opting out to improve their economic situation or waiting until children are older may temporarily limit their marriage odds. Recently, the median age at first marriage is 30 for African American women, 26 for White women, and 25 for Hispanic women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Yet women returning to the market when they are older, more educated, and more independent may have fewer marriage options. Unmarried mothers' marriage odds decline with age (Qian et al. 2005), and expectations to marry diminish with age. Specifically, 78% of young (age 25 or younger) single mothers, but only 50% of older (age 35 or older) single mothers, expect to marry (Lichter et al., 2004).

Our study is limited in a few ways. First, we are not able to determine statistically the extent to which these factors limit the marriageability of women. Additional studies are warranted to determine whether these factors affect the marriageability of women as they do for men. Second, the study is limited in that it only includes the female perspective. Women are significantly more likely to be in a marriage education class. Thus, our sample has a very small number of men, which results in questioning the reliability of any gender differences that may arise in the coding. Future research could focus on how men view the marriageability of women. Third, our sample is located in one U.S. city and may not represent the experiences of all women across the country, especially those in rural areas and locations with more prosperous economic climates. Fourth, we have a limited number of respondents in our sample and the small number of cases may limit generalizability. Finally, the group is somewhat select—women from a disadvantaged population participating in a healthy marriage program. Future research should examine the marriageability of various groups of women, even women who are better educated and have greater access to resources to improve their marriage potential.

Our results indicate some ways in which women's views of marriage and their marriageability may influence the design, implementation, and evaluation of relationship education programs. First, most participants wanted to get married and expected to get married. A subset, however, were wary about forming a relationship soon and perhaps any relationship. These women may need further tools to seek out partners who will support their goals and may require alternative messages to address their concerns, which are often based on their own negative prior relationship experiences. Thus, there needs to be attention to the relationship goals and expectations of participants to develop the most effective programs

(Sabatelli, 1988). This calls into question the definition of a successful outcome for marriage education programs and points to challenges in measuring program effectiveness. Second, these findings point to ways in which women need to improve themselves to be more effective at finding and attracting quality partners. Although this may be part of ongoing relationship programs, relationship education classes in disadvantaged settings may require specialized relationship skills given their unique circumstances (e.g., multiple partner fertility, gender distrust). Women appear to be aware of their limited marriageability, so the content should focus on ways to develop solutions rather than just listing barriers. Along a similar vein, programs offered via larger community organizations may be especially effective when they are able to encourage participants to receive additional services related to their marriageability, such as mental health services, financial management, and job training. Third, a “positive” program outcome may be to avoid or end a relationship. Accordingly, program effectiveness should be measured on shifts in knowledge of skills as well as attitudes and beliefs. Finally, programs that start at earlier ages (in early adolescence) may be especially effective at promoting marriageability by preventing some of the early relationship experiences that shape negative future relationship trajectories. Thus, programs targeted at youth or mother and child pairs may help future generations form healthier and more stable relationships.

Taken together, these findings also help to inform program staff. We find participants are responsive to the class message, and months after completion of the class recall the key lessons (Manning, Trella, Lyons, Gulbis, & du Toit, 2008). A major factor in a successful marriage initiative class, however, is respectful instructors who are able to adjust language and establish one-on-one relationships that build trust among disadvantaged participants. Our findings contribute to this end by suggesting some potential new areas to emphasize in class. Specifically, multiple partner fertility is experienced by a significant proportion of the individuals who participate in marriage initiative programs. A portion of the lesson plan should focus on this target group by providing communication tools respondents can use to handle relationships with ex-partners with whom they have children. Another important factor to incorporate in classes is recognition of the wide array of prior relationship experiences (e.g., violence or substance abuse) that women have that shape their views and chances of achieving successful relationships. Some women may be opting out of marriage because of these past experiences, and instructors need to ensure these women assess their personal stumbling blocks to achieving healthy relationships. In addition, without blaming women, classes may need to focus more in-depth on how women themselves may prevent the formation and stability of relationship. Finally, one way to extend the reach of the class may be to offer it in tandem with other services, such as job training. This approach may lead to more effective courses that focus on themes (e.g., building human capital resources) that apply to a wide-range of relationships. The lives of marriage education program participants are complex, and it is challenging to offer classes that appeal to broad audiences and speak to individual concerns.

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Table 1
Socioeconomic Characteristics of Nonmarried Women at Wave 1 (N = 46)

Age		Employment	
Mean Age	36	Unemployed	65%
		Employed (full- and part-time)	35%
Race/ethnicity		Household income	
Black	50%	Zero dollars	15%
White	30%	\$1,000 and \$5,000	30%
Hispanic	17%	\$5,001 and \$10,000	22%
Native American	2%	\$10,001 and \$15,000	9%
		\$15,001 and \$20,000	9%
Relationship status		\$20,001 and \$30,000	4%
Single	58%	No information provided	11%
Dating	35%		
Cohabiting	7%		
		Public assistance ^a	
Childhood household structure		Receives public assistance	85%
Lived with Both biological parents	39%	No assistance	7%
Single parent family	28%		
Step-family	11%	Presence of children	
Other	22%	Presence of at least one child	89%
		Biological children	81%
Educational attainment		One biological child	24%
Less than or some High school	20%	Two biological child	11%
High school graduate	43%	Three biological children or more	46%
Some college/trade school	24%	No biological children	20%
College graduate	13%		
		Multiple partner fertility ^b	
		Multiple partner fertility	43%

Note: N = 46.

^aDoes not add up to 100% because of missing information.

^bAmong those who have own biological children (N = 37).