

Chapter 1

Unmarried Couples with Children: Hoping for Love and the White Picket Fence

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ONE IN three babies born in the United States today have unmarried parents (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004), up from about one in twenty (5 percent) in 1960 (Moore 1995; McLanahan 2004; Wu and Wolfe 2001). The lower couples are on most dimensions of socioeconomic advantage, the more likely they are to be unmarried when their children are born (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Moore 1995). Thus, if we are to understand today's low-income couples and families, we need to study the relationships of couples who have children outside marriage. This volume reports on such a study, devised to provide rich qualitative detail about the relationships of poor and near-poor couples who share nonmarital births, focusing on their circumstances, behavior, and beliefs. The chapters address a variety of questions. What were the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy? What are couples' relationships like in terms of affection, companionship, and conflicts before, around, and in the several years after the birth? What do the parents think about cohabitation and marriage? What breaks up their relationships? How involved are fathers with economic provision and direct care of their children while they are living with the baby's mother and, in cases of breakup, after they break up?

Few of these questions would be relevant if most unmarried fathers were long gone from the mothers' lives by the time of the birth. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. A national survey of nonmarital births in twenty large urban areas, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, found that 82 percent of unmarried parents were romantically involved with the other parent when their baby was born, 48 percent were living together at the time of the birth, and 76 percent of

fathers visited the hospital to see the baby. Of mothers romantically involved with the father at the birth, 78 percent of the cohabitators and 49 percent of those not living together said they saw at least a good or almost certain chance that the two would marry sometime in the future (all of these are mothers' reports, from Carlson and McLanahan 2002). Fathers are even more likely than mothers to predict that they will marry their partner eventually (Shafer 2006).

With the vast majority still romantically involved and about half cohabiting at their child's birth, most of these couples thus form a two-parent family of sorts despite being unmarried. Yet the precarious situation of these families, economically and relationally, led Ron Mincy (1994) to coin the term *fragile families* for what was clearly a growing population.¹ Although hopes of marrying and raising the child together are typically high at the time of birth, that is not what usually unfolds. Among the approximately half of nonmarital births in which parents are cohabiting at the birth, Fragile Families data show that 46 percent have broken up and only 27 percent are married to each other five years after the baby is born. Among the approximately 30 percent of unmarried parents who are romantically involved but not cohabiting when the baby is born, 77 percent have broken up and only 7 percent are married to each other five years later.²

Our qualitative study of 48 unmarried couples who shared a nonmarital birth in 2000 is embedded in the Fragile Families study, which sampled births in hospitals in 20 cities, interviewing both parents where possible.³ We drew the couples for our study from among the couples in the larger survey in three of the 20 cities. We conducted a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with these parents over a period of about four years after the birth. The papers in this volume reflect analysis of the rich qualitative interview data, supplemented by quantitative assessments from the Fragile Families data. In this chapter we first describe how the data were collected. We then highlight a few key findings of each chapter. Finally, we overview themes that emerge from the papers taken as a whole, noting commonalities between findings in this volume and those in earlier qualitative studies of low income families throughout the century.

The TLC3 Study

Our Time, Love, and Cash among Couples with Children project (TLC3) is a four-year, in-depth qualitative study embedded within the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Fragile Families), a nationally representative birth cohort study of approximately 3,700 unmarried couples who had a baby near the turn of the century and a comparison sample of 1,200 married couples. Births were sampled from seventy-five hospitals

in twenty large cities throughout the United States. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed shortly after the child's birth and reinterviewed when the child was one, three, and five years old. When weighted, the Fragile Families sample is representative of all births to parents in cities with populations greater than 200,000.

A group of researchers, including Kathryn Edin (as principal investigator) and Paula England, devised the TLC3 as a qualitative study embedded in the Fragile Families study.⁴ When choosing sites for its sample, we chose three of the Fragile Families cities that varied in size, economic conditions, and social policy climates. Graduate students from Northwestern and Columbia universities were dispatched to the maternity wards of one hospital in each of these cities—New York, Milwaukee, and Chicago—to await the birth of babies. In the spring and early summer of 2000, these TLC3 interviewers worked side by side with the Fragile Families researchers in these hospitals, recruiting new mothers and fathers for the Fragile Families Survey, conducting the baseline Fragile Families Survey, and offering those mothers and fathers still involved in romantic relationships the opportunity to participate in the TLC3 study as well.

For the Fragile Families survey, interviewers recruited all mothers who gave birth in sampled hospitals when participants were being recruited. In the three hospitals from which we drew the TLC3 sample, interviewers recruited a stratified random sample limited to couples romantically involved at the birth (and a few other ways that Emily Shafer describes in the final chapter of this volume). Like the survey, we oversampled unmarried births and created targets to ensure representation of whites, African Americans, and Latinos.

The most important sampling decision was that couples had to be romantically involved at the birth to be included, which, as the Fragile Families study indicates, more than 80 percent of parents sharing a non-marital birth are. Because our focus was on couple dynamics and what happened to father involvement if the couple broke up later, we wanted to start from an intact couple. Married couples were included to provide a basis for comparison, but we recruited approximately twice as many unmarried couples because they were our target of interest. We ended up with twenty-seven married and forty-eight unmarried couples in the sample. Among the unmarried couples, thirty-seven were cohabiting and eleven were romantically involved but not living together when the baby was born.

The TLC3 sample was also restricted to couples who had reported household incomes of less than \$75,000 in the previous year. However, very few came even close to the ceiling. The average household income of cohabiting couples was \$22,500. The average earnings of the unmarried cohabiting fathers in our sample in the year before the birth was \$17,500, and those of unmarried fathers who were not cohabiting even

lower, \$12,500. Twenty-nine percent of fathers and 26 percent of mothers had neither a GED nor a high school degree, and few had any college. Thus, like unmarried parents nationwide, this is a very disadvantaged group (see chapter 12 for this and other descriptive statistics on our sample, in comparison to the larger Fragile Families sample). Throughout the volume, we will refer to TLC3 couples and unmarried parents in general as typically low income. One way to see the extent of this socioeconomic disadvantage is to compare TLC3 couples to all couples, married and cohabiting, who had had a baby the year before the 2000 census, the same year our TLC3 couples had their baby. Taking all census couples with a new baby in the last year, average household income was \$51,650, more than twice that of TLC3 couples. The personal earnings of the fathers in the census households was \$32,000, much more than the \$22,500 earned by the cohabiting TLC3 fathers. Only 16 percent of mothers and 17 percent of fathers in these census households had less than a high school degree, much lower than the 26 and 29 percent of TLC3 parents.⁵

Interviews with the seventy-five couples recruited into the TLC3 sample began two to three months after the child was born, when the euphoria of birth had faded somewhat, but couples' hopes were still high. We followed the mother, father, and child through the child's fourth birthday. We engaged parents, both as a couple and individually, in a series of focused, in-depth, qualitative interviews, regardless of whether they stayed together or broke up. If couples were not willing to be interviewed together after breakup, we still interviewed each parent individually. Interviews were conducted shortly after the birth, in 2000, and when the baby was approximately one, two, and four years old. When parents took on new romantic partners, we interviewed the new couple as well, with both individual and couple interviews. In waves three and four, when the baby was two and four years old, we videotaped the entire couple interview, and ended the interview with a couple discussion, in which couples were asked to discuss two issues they disagreed on after the interviewer left the room.

In all, the study produced roughly 1,200 pages of transcript for each of the families of the seventy-five focal children, in addition to several hours of videotape. Each chapter in this volume makes use of the longitudinal nature of the rich qualitative TLC3 data; one also draws from the videotaped discussions. Several also draw from Fragile Families survey data. Although the chapters vary in terms of which subsample of TLC3 couples was appropriate to the question asked, most focus on all or a subset of the unmarried parents, though some include married parents as well.⁶ To preserve confidentiality, each respondent was given a pseudonym used across chapters so that readers can easily follow a specific respondent by name.

The Chapters

In wave four, TLC3 collected detailed fertility histories for all of the parents surveyed at baseline and any new social parents living in the household of the focal child. In chapter 2, Kathryn Edin and her colleagues analyze each nonmarital pregnancy that our original sample of unmarried parents ever had—whether it was the focal TLC3 child, a previous conception with the same or a different partner, or a conception occurring after the birth that brought them into our study. Pregnancies ending in miscarriage and abortion were included. Although a small number of the conceptions are planned (12 percent), and roughly a fifth occur due to what parents report as technical contraceptive failure, most pregnancies are in neither of these categories. Those that were planned were almost universally to couples in serious relationships. Roughly a quarter were the result of inconsistent contraception, most of these to couples in serious relationships as well. These couples often use contraception consistently when their relationship is new, but let their vigilance lapse when the relationship becomes more serious. Roughly another 18 percent are described as neither planned nor unplanned. These couples are almost always in a serious relationship and want children, or more children, together eventually. Unsure that their current circumstances are ideal, their ambivalence leads them to leave conception to chance. The remaining pregnancies, approximately a quarter, are those that were unplanned, but occurred when couples were not contracepting. Many of these are in the context of casual relationships and high-risk lifestyles. These are the couples for whom children are often genuinely unwanted both before and after the fact as well as the category for which abortion is most often considered and pursued.

This analysis identifies two underlying dimensions affecting nonmarital fertility. First is a continuum of intentionality and highlights the reality that many couples are somewhere in between a strong positive or negative desire to have a child now. The clearest predictor of how much couples want children is the seriousness of their relationships—even within the nonmarital context. A second dimension is efficacy. About a quarter of the conceptions occur to those who really didn't want a child at the time but somehow didn't align their contraceptive behavior with their goals. A majority of these were couples with high-risk lifestyles who are in casual relationships.

In chapter 3, Paula England and Emily Shafer use data from the couple conflict discussion administered in waves three and four. Interviewers began by asking the pair to identify the two most important issues they didn't see eye to eye on and to articulate each side of the issue. After this, the interviewer asked the couple to talk about the issue and try to come to

a resolution they could each be at least somewhat happy with. The video camera continued to run when the interviewer left the room for ten minutes. Based on their analysis of the videotaped discussion, England and Shafer identified four major issues that came up most often in these intact couples—emotional attention and companionship, child discipline, housework, and money issues. The chapter focuses on the two that occur most frequently: women wanting more emotional attention and men wanting stricter child discipline. Earlier literature suggested that only in the middle class do women expect emotional intimacy and shared activities with men. This, however, has clearly changed. The women in our poor and near-poor sample complained bitterly that their partners didn't listen to them or talk to them enough, and didn't spend quality time with them. Women also complained about men spending time on the street or with male friends or kin rather than with them. Child discipline was another hot and gendered issue. Men generally wanted a stricter regime than women. Either the father wanted the mother to run a tighter ship while doing the child minding that they both agreed was her job or the father wanted to discipline children (especially sons) more harshly than the mother thought was appropriate.

Christina Gibson-Davis considers aspirations for marriage among those who have nonmarital births in chapter 4. Starting with the first wave of interviews, we asked couples, both alone and together, whether they saw themselves getting married at some point, and what it would take for them to decide to marry. To put this chapter in context, recall that more than 80 percent of couples in the Fragile Families sample who had a nonmarital birth were still romantically involved at the time of the birth. Most of these talked about aspirations to marry the partner. Although some problems with the relationship were mentioned as holding couples back, the almost universal response by men and women to our questions about what it would take for them to decide to marry was that they were waiting to meet certain economic standards. Gibson-Davis focused on the economic bar because 83 percent of couples named it in the interview slightly after the birth. The idea that couples need to be able to afford to set up a household and support a child before getting married has of course long been traditional. What is interesting about today's unmarried couples who have had a child together is that they articulate this standard, even when, like most of our TLC3 respondents, they have already started living together. Indeed, couples who had not married by four years after their baby's birth, but had not broken up either, still clung to this bar as a major reason they had not yet married. Gibson-Davis operationalizes getting above the bar as meeting the following criteria: household income increased at least 10 percent by four years after the birth, both members are working or going to school (or if one was at home, it was voluntary homemaking rather than unemployment), neither received any public

assistance, they did not need a loan from family or friends to make ends meet, they were able to pay their bills each month, and they did not describe their economic situation as unstable or shaky. Although those who married did not usually cite economics as the reason they wed, 78 percent of those who met the bar did marry and only 19 percent of those who did not meet it had married four years after the birth. The largest group neither met the bar nor married. Gibson-Davis started the project thinking that perhaps articulating the economic bar to marriage was simply a convenient excuse for those who didn't want to marry for other reasons. However, the huge differential convinced her that finances are a real constraint to marriage among low-income unmarried parents.

American couples in committed romantic relationships overwhelmingly expect sexual exclusivity regardless of their marital status, research shows, though infidelity is higher among unmarried than married couples. Studies also show that women cheat far less than men (Laumann et al. 1994). In chapter 5, Heather Hill examines the events leading up to and following each incidence of infidelity among unmarried TLC couples. More than half (58 percent) experienced at least one instance over the course of their relationship. Most of the time it was only men who cheated, but in a third of the instances in which the man did, the woman cheated as well. Only rarely was the woman the sole culprit. Incidents of infidelity often occurred around events that brought the future of the relationship into question, such as the incarceration of one partner or a major argument. Chronic infidelity often broke couples up, whereas isolated incidents did not, though relationship quality in the aftermath of the incident was sometimes low. Sexual jealousy and sexual mistrust are even more pervasive than reports of actual infidelity. Approximately 75 percent of couples reported these problems. Indeed, sexual jealousy, whether based on a real incident of infidelity or not, is sometimes a trigger for violence.

In chapter 6, Joanna Reed looks at how and why TLC3 couples broke up, by chronicling the process of breakups in qualitative detail and by comparing those unmarried couples who broke up to those who stayed together (whether married at the end of the study or not). Respondents report infidelity, arguing, verbal and physical abuse, lack of love and attention, and substance abuse as primary reasons for their breakups; often those who broke up had multiple problems. Relationship quality is central, and men's bad behavior is key. Indeed, it is almost always women who initiate the breakup and the men who move out. Interestingly, economic problems are never central to these stories. Economics may be a reason to hold off on marriage, but no one discussed it as a reason for breakup. The one economic factor that differentiates those who broke up is that they didn't pool their money initially, but retained some separation between his and her money. Not surprisingly, couples who broke up had

much worse relationships at the outset, when their baby was born. Indeed, it appears that the bad relationships were usually bad from the beginning. Over half the breakups that occurred within four years actually happened in the baby's first year.

We take an in-depth look at fathering in chapter 7. Limiting herself to couples who lived together (some married, the others as cohabiters), Kathryn Linnenberg examines the range of father involvement and how it varies with relationship quality. Psychologists studying married couples have proposed that the quality of parents' relationship spills over into men's parenting—that if the father's relationship with the mother is angry or distant, he often withdraws emotionally from the children. Linnenberg concludes that relationship quality affects father involvement, but not in the straightforward way suggested by spillover theory. Consistent with spillover, the worst couple relationships have least and lowest quality father involvement. However, the most involved fathers—the ones who split the care work 50–50 with their partners—are the unemployed, cohabiting fathers in the intermediate category of relationship quality, which Linnenberg dubs “happy with some problems.” The care work done by these fathers is appreciated by the mother, but the men have economic and behavioral problems that strain their relationships. Their high involvement in parenting results in large part from unemployment. The happiest and most stable relationships had some men who rivaled women in their care work (the “family-first fathers”), but the general pattern was a one in which the care work was seen as the mother's responsibility and the fathers specialized in play and helping the mother. It appears that men's unemployment coupled with women's employment is as important a determinant of father's care work as relationship quality.

Linnenberg also offers a portrait of what fathers do when they interact with their children. In most cases, the father's primary role is to serve as a playmate. When fathers do other types of care work, they often view themselves as helpers, and mothers view them this way as well. Mothers therefore often carefully scrutinize and closely supervise their work. The higher the quality of the relationship, however, the less fathers are scrutinized and supervised.

In chapter 8, Lindsay Monte looks at a special kind of parenting—nonmarital stepparenting. She profiles those unmarried cohabiting couples where at least one had a child by a previous partner, a common scenario today. Monte found that parents legitimated the stepfather role by talking about how it takes more than blood to make a father—that time, love, and money count more. This leads to the distinction between a biological father and the man who takes responsibility for the functions of being a father, an earned status. The problems that seem to emanate from the stepparent situation are largely jealous tensions. When the

father goes to see his other children, his new partner is jealous of the time away from her and her children. Both men and women are sometimes suspicious that dealing with an ex with whom one has had children will lead to romantic or sexual reengagement. Perhaps the most significant finding is which couples got married—it was those in which the woman's previous partner was no longer an active father to her children and the man was no longer involved with any of his children who lived with their mother. This poses a dilemma. It appears that a good way to encourage marriage among these couples is to encourage fathers to be deadbeat dads to their former children, hardly a compelling policy recommendation.

The Fragile Families survey shows that at the time of a child's birth, most unmarried fathers are dedicated to staying involved with their child, and most of their children's mothers are committed to that goal as well (Carlson and McLanahan 2002). Yet surveys have consistently shown that as children whose parents are separated grow older, most fathers disconnect, particularly those who were never married to the mother. In chapter 9, Amy Claessens considers two sides of the story of how fathers become uninvolved, offering a rare "he said, she said" account. Fathers blame mothers and charge them with gatekeeping, and mothers say they have good reasons to limit fathers' access to the children. Claessens investigates both claims. Among couples unmarried at the birth and separated by the time of our interview when the child was four, 72 percent report at least some gatekeeping. Gatekeeping does not always preclude father involvement, however, because nearly six in ten fathers still saw their child in the last two months. In cases where no gatekeeping is evident, mothers say they value the role the father plays in the child's life and they are more reliant on the fathers for childcare.

Mothers offer three main justifications for their gatekeeping: previous inconsistency in visitation, safety concerns about the dangers associated with the father's lifestyle (usually his drug or alcohol use), and the inability of the parents to get along after the breakup. Although one might assume that safety concerns would prompt mothers to completely shut fathers out, this was not so. In fact, fathers whose contact was limited for these reasons alone often had some degree of contact, though mothers controlled when the contact occurred. These mothers usually arranged for the fathers to visit in the mother's home. Fathers on house arrest, however, could entertain the children in their own homes because the mother felt confident that the father couldn't get into trouble. It was when the two parents just couldn't get along that fathers were most likely to be shut out completely, sometimes by a restraining order. Some fathers claimed that these had been obtained fraudulently. Most interesting, however, is that most mothers who gatekeep their children's fathers out have repartnered, which strains an already tenuous co-parenting relationship. This suggests that maternal repartnering, as well as poor couple dynamics and paternal

behavior, may well play a significant role in declining father involvement over time.

In chapter 10, Katherine Magnuson and Christina Gibson-Davis examine whether fathers support children from previous relationships, and if so, how. They consider formal and informal child support arrangements and compare the life circumstances of fathers who are contributing to fathers who are not. They find little evidence of deadbeat dads—fathers who could support their children but choose to not do so. However, this is partly because child support systems are now stringent enough that those who are employed have support automatically garnished from their wages; we don't know how many of these fathers would have paid in a less stringent regime. For those not paying, mothers and fathers point to incarceration, unemployment, and a lack of resources as reasons for the low levels of support. However, fathers often portray their contributions in a much more positive light than their female ex-partners do. Although the causal order is unclear, most mothers without support from fathers are relying on a new partner to help provide for their families by the study's end.

One of the unique aspects of TLC3 is that it is embedded in a larger survey. Because the qualitative interviews address many of the same topics the Fragile Families survey does, but more in depth, the two sources of data can be used to assess the consistency of information gathered two ways. In chapter 11, Mimi Engel compares responses in six areas of overlap, including the degree to which respondents believe their partners express affection or love, the level of understanding and encouragement between partners, conflict over finances, physical conflicts, conflicts relating to drinking and drug use, and an overall assessment of relationship quality. Obviously, all of these items are somewhat sensitive, so one might expect inconsistent reporting. Some are arguably more sensitive than others. In general, Engel found a relatively high level of consistency regardless of topic. Bivariate analyses show that women and those with more education are more consistent in their reports across the two studies, though these differences often escape statistical significance.

Today's Fragile Families and Yesterday's Low-Income Families

How do the findings of this volume compare with qualitative research on low-income families from past decades? Take first the nonmarital pregnancies that Edin and her colleagues examine. In earlier decades, it was common for unmarried low-income couples to find the woman pregnant out of wedlock, just as our unmarried sample members did, though rates have probably gone up. Intercourse, however, typically would not have started until relationships were more serious (Hollingshead 1949), and on

discovering a pregnancy, white couples at least were far more likely to have a shotgun marriage (Rubin 1976). Among blacks in some parts of the old South, it might have occasioned a common-law marriage, because few black communities upheld the idea of forced legal marriage (Powdermaker 1939/1969). Within or outside of marriage, though, having children only when planned has long been more frequent in the middle class than in the working and lower classes (Rainwater 1960, 1965). As it was decades ago, it is common today for low-income couples to get pregnant without explicitly planning for it, and for pregnancy to escalate the seriousness of their relationship. Premarital sex undoubtedly increased with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but so did the use of contraception. One thing contributing to the increase in nonmarital births is the reduction in how often pregnancies prompt couples to move to marriage or to stable common-law arrangements (Moore 1995; Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz 1996). The extent to which the sexual revolution reduced shotgun marriages underscores the degree to which these marriages in earlier eras reflected the shame entailed in the revelation of premarital sex, a shame that was heaped particularly on the women.

Several papers in the volume point to change in the meaning of marriage over time (Cherlin 2004, Edin and Kefalas 2005). Gibson-Davis shows that, as long as they are still romantically involved, unmarried parents almost always see marriage to the coparent as something to aspire to, but they don't want to marry until a certain economic bar is met, even when they are already living together and have a child together. By contrast, in the older ethnographic studies it is clear that, among whites, one almost had to be married and have children to "count" as a social adult (Morland 1958). Today, marriage is seen as more optional, but its symbolic value has increased (Cherlin 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005). People feel that marriage is not culturally appropriate unless the couple's relational and economic status are above a certain threshold (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2006). Rising emotional standards for marriage are a continuation of a long-term trend; Stephanie Coontz (2005) argues that the trend dates all the way back to the love revolution of the eighteenth century. In the early twentieth century, Robert and Helen Lynd (1929) saw the idea that marriage should be based only on romantic love to be "new." Although this may have been the ideal, ethnographies of the 1950s and 1960s pointed out how little companionship and shared leisure there was between spouses (Bott 1957; Gans 1962), and how, after early marriages (that couples were often catapulted into by pregnancy), women often resigned themselves to little mutuality and considered themselves lucky if their men brought home most of their paycheck and didn't beat them (Komarovskiy and Phillips 1962; Rubin 1976). Today's low-income women, black, white, and Hispanic, clearly have much higher relationship standards. In analyzing

reported couple conflicts in this volume, England and Shafer found that women's top complaint was that men didn't talk to them enough, show enough affection, and spend enough quality time with them.

The rising emotional and economic standards for marriage have left many low-income couples in the situation where neither their relationships nor their budgets meet their own standards for marriage. It is probably not that today's relationships among low-income couples are worse than those of earlier decades, though the advent of mass incarceration and crack cocaine may be taking more of a toll. Part of the problem is that the earnings of men in the bottom half of the class hierarchy have fallen in relative and absolute terms since the 1970s (Bernhardt et al. 2001). But this explains only a small fraction of the retreat from or delay of marriage (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). Poor men, particularly poor black men, have always been unable to support a family in the normatively approved style. As modest as the standards of the couples we study here seem, they are undoubtedly much higher than those held by their counterparts decades back (Edin and Kefalas 2005). In the past, at least among whites, it was other strong forces that pulled couples into and kept them in marriages even when relationships were awful and conditions poor—the need to be married to be a “regular” adult, the moral crisis of reputation that nonmarital pregnancies caused for women, and women's economic dependence on men. These patterns were less true for blacks; there was a tradition of durable common-law marriages in some areas (Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Du Bois 1967; Powdermaker 1939/1969), and the extreme precariousness of black men's earning power made black women less economically dependent on their men than white women were (Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Powdermaker 1939/1969).

Older qualitative portraits of low-income families, black and white, paint relationships as riddled with conflict, often violent, and prone to breakup (Du Bois 1899/1967; Frazier 1939/1966; Howell 1973). There have long been class and race differences in divorce rates and in rates of less formal consensual unions over marriage, and these differences clearly remain and have even increased (Raley and Bumpass 2003; McLanahan 2004). In the older literature, several explanations are offered, somewhat speculatively, for why relationships among the lower classes seemed less happy and more prone to break up. One thesis, implicit in many studies, is simply that economic deprivation puts strain on marriages and the individuals in them. Housing is crowded, dreams are unfulfilled, debates over how to spend money are more difficult when there isn't enough, and women may feel that men have failed in their role as provider (Frazier 1939/1966; Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Leibow 1967).

Other authors focus less on the level of family income and more on the lack of men's economic dominance over women as a problem for relationship stability, especially among blacks (among whites, men's incomes are

often enough to keep women at home). One version of this argument is Gary Becker's (1991) view that specialization is what makes marriage rational. Some of the older qualitative studies seem to take this view. They also take the view that it violates strongly held norms for men not to be the economic heads of the family, and this is somehow bad for marriages (Lewis 1965; Hannerz 1969; Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Powdermaker 1939/1969). Indeed, reading these old pre-feminist studies, it is striking that the notion that egalitarian marriages might be more satisfying for women, and that lack of mutuality might be the problem, seems not to have occurred to the authors.

Another possible explanation for lower quality and less stable relationships among low-income individuals posits that, compared to growing up middle class, growing up disadvantaged is less conducive to developing efficacy. Efficacy, as Edin and her colleagues use the term in chapter 2, refers to the ability to organize one's behavior into sequences of action that further one's goal, even when this requires doing things that are onerous in the short term. Growing up in chaotic or dangerous conditions may make it hard to believe that future-oriented behaviors will succeed, and hard or even futile to engage in long-term planning. Edin et al. argue that about a quarter of the unplanned pregnancies they observed might reflect a lack of efficacy—there was no clear intention to conceive, even ambivalently, yet no contraception was used. Efficacy probably affects earnings and relationship stability as well.

Another view of why informal unions, breakups, and divorces are more common among the disadvantaged involves men—both black and white—“doing gender” in compensation for their low earning power, either relative to their wives or to other men. In this view, when men can't provide much money, they feel a heightened need to display some socially defined marker of masculinity. They then enact masculinity through violence (sometimes toward women), through sexual conquest (which involves infidelity to partners), or by hanging out and posturing with the guys (Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Leibow 1967; Anderson 1989, 1990; Edin and Kefalas 2005). It is as if there are two ways to “be a man,” being the legitimated economic provider and being the less legitimated tough guy nonetheless culturally coded as masculine. Being seen as masculine trumps legitimacy when the two can't be combined, a situation faced by poor but not by middle-class men. These arguments anticipate the later intersectionality perspective on race, class, and gender (Collins 1990), which sees gender enacted differently in social locations that differ because of race and class. The papers in this volume support this view in some ways, and not in others. Infidelity by married and cohabiting men is discussed in many of the older studies of low-income families (Powdermaker 1939/1969; Lewis 1965; Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Morland 1958; Hannerz 1969; Rainwater 1970; Howell 1973; Kurz 1995),

and Hill's analysis in chapter 5 finds men's cheating and women's and men's jealousy a big issue in low-income couples. Whereas some of the old studies suggest that infidelity by men was accepted if it remained discreet (Powdermaker 1939/1969; Hannerz 1969; Rainwater 1970), in our study, women were not found to be willing to stay with men who were chronically unfaithful, even outside of marriage. This is an example of the rising expectations for relationships. Stories of the breakups that Joanna Reed analyzes in chapter 6 are full of reports of men's violence and infidelity, with women eventually putting the men out. Amy Claessens's account in chapter 9 of mothers who are gatekeeping men out of seeing their children depicts many of them as claiming to do so because of the men's involvement in crime, drugs, or the street. Several chapters in this volume find that women resent men spending time on the street with their buddies rather than at home with them, a theme in earlier ethnographies (Gans 1962; Hannerz 1969; LeMasters 1975; Halle 1984). All this seems consistent with the compensatory gender display argument.

However, some of our findings are not consistent with this compensatory gender display perspective. Applying the argument to housework, Julie Brines (1994) offered survey evidence that men whose earnings are much lower than those of their wives do less housework than those who earn about the same as their wives.⁷ Rather than thinking they need to do more housework if they aren't contributing money, as some other theories would predict, men whose masculinity is threatened on one front shore it up on another by eschewing housework (Brines 1994). This is not, however, what Linnenberg finds in her analysis of father involvement in the intact relationships (chapter 7, this volume). The highest involvement in child care was among fathers who were unemployed, because they had the time available to provide it.

Parallel to increasing expectations for relationships and marriage are increasing notions of appropriate father involvement. Married fathers in all social classes spend more time with their children than previously (McLanahan 2004). This new norm is in a tension with the increase in nonmarital childbearing and the high rate of breakup of unmarried couples who have a child together. As mentioned, in the Fragile Families study, among unmarried parents cohabiting at the birth, 46 percent have broken up five years later, and 77 percent of those romantically involved but not living together when their baby was born have done so. Given the prevalence of nonmarital births among the poor and the high rate of breakup among unmarried parents, as well as the high divorce rate among low-income couples, an important determinant of low-income children's connection to their fathers is how much fathers stay involved after parents break up.

Although father involvement and child support payment after a breakup were not prominent themes in qualitative studies reporting on

periods before the 1970s, Leibow's (1967) black male informants observed that the new man often pushes the "old daddy" out, and LeMasters (1975) similarly found that divorced working-class white men felt pushed out when their wives repartnered. Claessens's analysis (chapter 9, this volume) shows mothers gatekeeping men out either because the father's involvement causes jealousy or other problems with their new partners, or because of the fathers' high-risk lifestyles. Older studies allude to the role of the new boyfriend in helping provide for women's children from past partnerships (Rainwater 1970; Drake and Cayton 1945/1962; Lewis 1965); consistent with this, many unmarried fathers in our study are living with and contributing money to their female partners' children from prior relationships. But Monte (chapter 8, this volume) finds that the blended family couples who married were those where the "outside" father of the woman's children was not visiting, and the man was not visiting his children from former partners. Clearly, there are tensions inherent in maintaining biological father involvement simultaneous with cohesive blended families in new partnerships. What has changed is that we are now at much higher levels of multiple-partner fertility because of the increased instability of unions, both marital and nonmarital (Raley and Bumpass 2003). Thus, many more families are experiencing these dynamics.

Overall, our study is consistent with the older literature on low-income couples in finding many troubled relationships and much behavior by men that women find unacceptable. How much such behavior is simply a response to economic strain, a lack of efficacy, or is motivated by a need for a compensatory enactment of gender, is an important question for future research. Low-income families have long had higher breakup rates than the middle class, but huge increases occurred in the 1960s and 1970s in all classes, and class differences have intensified (Raley and Bumpass 2003). Authors of older studies expressed horror at levels of nonmarital births, breakups, and single motherhood in the poor and minority population that were often no higher than what now prevails in the white middle class, and were certainly much lower than what prevails in low-income communities today. To contribute to our understanding of these couple relationships in an era of persistent inequality coupled with higher standards for relationships, we turn now to the individual papers.

Notes

1. Ron Mincy was the program officer at the Ford Foundation responsible for the initial funding of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the larger survey in which TLC3 is embedded. Later, the Fragile Families study also received substantial funding from National Institute for Child Health and Development at NIH.

2. We thank Jean Knab for these calculations from the Fragile Families survey. They use weights to make the estimates representative of births in U.S. cities with populations of over 200,000.
3. Ours is one of two qualitative studies embedded in Fragile Families. The other was a qualitative interview study of a different subset of Fragile Family respondents by Maureen Waller (1999; 2002).
4. Two of the principal investigators of the Fragile Families Study, Sara McLanahan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, were members of the MacArthur Network on the Family and the Economy, a research group funded by the MacArthur Foundation. In 1999, with data in from the first seven of the Fragile Families Survey cities, this network decided to launch a qualitative addition to the Fragile Families study, the TLC3 study. The network members who originated ideas for the TLC3 study included McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn, along with Nancy Folbre, Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Greg Duncan, Paula England, Shelley Lundberg, and Robert Pollak. They then recruited Kathryn Edin to join the network and serve as principal investigator of the qualitative TLC3 study. Later, Cecilia Conrad, Irwin Garfinkel, Ronald Mincy, and Robert Willis also joined the network and helped lend guidance to TLC3. The MacArthur Foundation provided the major funding for the TLC3 study. Additional funding was provided by the National Science Foundation (in a grant from the sociology program to Edin and England) and the William T. Grant Foundation (in a grant to Edin).
5. Mean household income for black census (cohabiting and married) couple households who had had a baby in the last year was \$44,000, with fathers' earnings averaging \$24,300, and 16 percent of both mothers and fathers without a high school degree. For Hispanics of any race, the comparable figures are household income of \$36,500, with fathers earning \$20,000 last year and 46 percent of women and 49 percent of men without a high school degree.
6. Three couples participated sporadically or not at all after the first wave, so, as all our papers are longitudinal, they were never included. Other than this, subsamples were chosen by topic. Six papers restrict their focus to couples who were unmarried at the time of the birth of the focal child. Gibson-Davis, who looked at the economic bar for marriage in chapter 4, includes all unmarried couples who participated in two or more waves of the study (forty-six couples). Edin and her colleagues, who look at pregnancy intentions in chapter 2, and Hill, who analyzes infidelity in chapter 5, use all unmarried parents who participated in an individual interview at wave four (forty couples). Magnuson and Gibson-Davis's chapter 10, on child support, includes all unmarried couples in which at least one partner also had children by other partners, thus rendering them subject to either payment or receipt of child support. In addition, they include those who broke up during the course of the study, thus making the focal child potentially eligible for support, whether they married someone else or not, and whether or not they had children by other partners. These two groups add to thirty-two couples. Monte's paper on twenty-seven unmarried blended families, chapter 8, is limited to couples who entered the TLC3 study unmarried with at least one child from another

partnership, and who participated in at least two waves of interviews. Reed's chapter 6, on breakups, uses only unmarried couples who broke up at least once over the course of the study (twenty-two), though a few subsequently reunited. Four of the papers are not restricted to unmarried couples. England and Shafer rely in chapter 3 on data from a videotaped couple discussion that was only collected in the third and fourth waves. All sixty-one couples who were still intact and participated in this task in either wave are included, because preliminary analysis did not find different types of conflicts for the unmarried and married. Linnenberg's paper on father involvement in intact couples (chapter 7) includes all couples, married or not, who were cohabiting at both the wave one interview and the wave two interview for whom there was enough information on father involvement and relationship quality (fifty-seven couples out of the sixty cohabiting at both waves). Claessens's paper (chapter 9) on whether fathers who had broken up with the mother continued to see their children includes the eighteen couples who had broken up during the study and had at least one parent interviewed by wave four. Engel's paper, chapter 11, which matches survey questions on sensitive issues to comparable TLC3 data on the same topics, uses a unique sample for each question considered, including all respondents for whom there were data. Five of the chapters (England and Shafer, Linnenberg, Gibson-Davis, Edin et al., and Hill) include a core sample of twenty-two couples. These couples were all unmarried at the birth, still in the study by the fourth wave, and still in a romantic relationship. Seven of the chapters (those just mentioned plus Magnuson and Gibson-Davis and Monte) include a subset of this core, fourteen couples, who also included at least one parent with a child by another partner.

7. The relationship was curvilinear, with men earning much more or much less than their wives doing the least housework and those with equal earnings doing the most (Brines 1994; see also Bittman et al. 2003, Gupta 2007 on this theme).

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20 Unmarried Couples with Children

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