

Distrust of Men Doesn't Keep Low-Income Mothers from Romantic Unions

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Contrary to popular scholarship that attributes low rates of marriage among low-income mothers to their general distrust of men, a new study led by a Duke University sociologist finds that gender distrust may not be as influential in shaping these mothers' unions.

Although 96 percent of 256 low-income [mothers](#) surveyed expressed a general distrust of men, researchers found these feelings did not prevent the women from entering into a [marriage](#), live-in or romantic relationship. Instead, researchers found that mothers established forms of interpersonal trust in their partners that allowed them to enter into often unhealthy relationships that had implications for themselves and their children. The results of the study will be published in the December 2009 issue of the "Journal of Marriage and [Family](#)."

"To fully understand the intimate union behaviors of low-income mothers, researchers must move beyond primarily using general attitudes like gender distrust to explain trends in marriage and cohabitation," says lead author Linda Burton, the James B. Duke Professor of Sociology at Duke.

In order to facilitate romantic unions, mothers either suspended, compartmentalized, misplaced or integrated interpersonal trust in their partners. The mothers' individual experiences with uncertainty and poverty, and their histories as domestic violence or [sexual abuse](#) victims directly determined the type of interpersonal trust they chose to enact, the study found.

For example, 87 percent of mothers who engaged in misplaced trust had extensive, untreated histories of physical and sexual abuse. One 45-year-old white mother of four children, for instance, had a lengthy history of physical and sexual abuse and was involved in a series of abusive relationships with unrealistic expectations that put her and her children at great risk for harm and financial ruin.

However, those who enacted integrated trust in their partners had substantially lower levels of histories of abuse. For example, a 26-year-old African-American mother of one child had never experienced abuse in her life and indicated that in building a relationship with her husband she was realistic and took her time in learning to trust him. She “checked him out for a year to see how he handled his business and if he did what he said he was going to do -- and he did.” This couple trusted each other in ways that sustained a healthy and enduring marital union.

“We are making a distinction between people’s general attitudes and their interpersonal efforts in trust,” Burton says. “General attitudes don’t necessarily reflect what goes on in the interpersonal relationship itself -- there are multiple forms of trust that mothers enact in their romantic unions. (Both women in the examples above) indicated that their general belief about men was not to trust them. Yet, they each used a very different form of trust in entering their relationships.”

The study’s authors indicated these findings have implications for the romantic union-trusting behaviors of women and men regardless of race or social class. They also note the findings may have implications for marriage and family policies and programs.

“The goal of promoting marriage among the poor and near-poor may be better served by urging them to take their time forming partnerships and to carefully examine how suitable their prospective partners are for lasting, intimate relationships,” Burton says. “The issue is not just getting

women to start trusting men, rather, the issue also is getting them to stop trusting men in ways that are not conducive to stable partnerships.”

Provided by Duke University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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