

Promises They Can Keep: Low-Income
Women's Attitudes toward Motherhood,
Marriage, and Divorce

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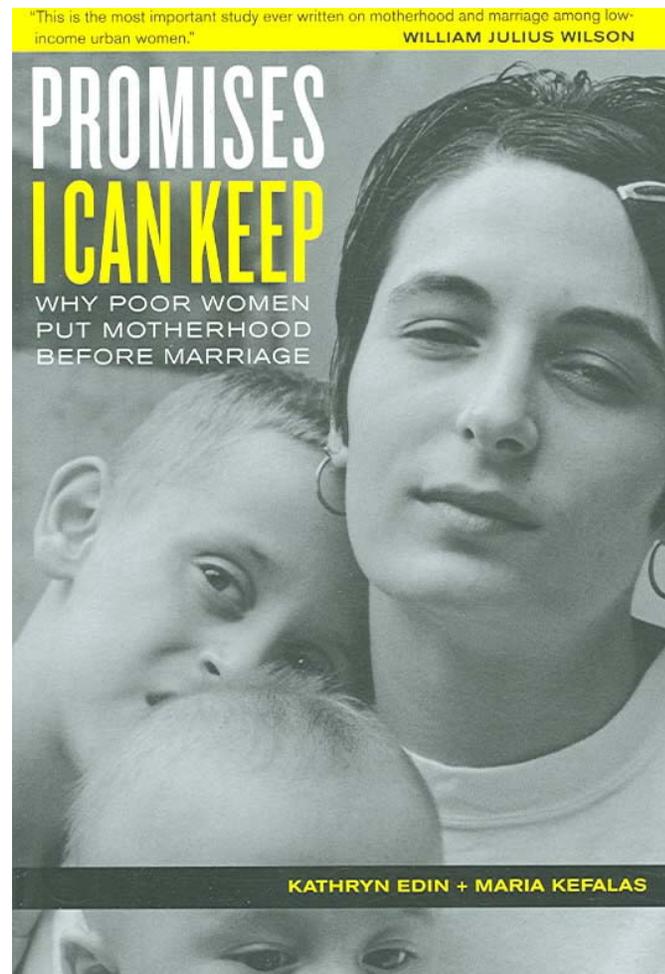
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Why do many low-income women and men have children years before they marry?

- The labor market / human capital
- Attitudes and preferences

Qualitative Literature on Attitudes and Preferences



The Three City Study: Survey Component

- Wave One 1999, Wave Two 2001, Wave Three 2005
- random-sample survey of 2,402 children and their caregivers from households
 - in low-income neighborhoods
 - with a child age zero to four or age 10 to 14,
 - with a female primary caregiver (a mother in over 90 percent of the cases).
 - with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line
- Interviewers randomly selected one child and conducted in-person interviews with that child's primary caregiver.
- 80% of original sample was reinterviewed in 2005

Proposition 1: Stigma of Single Motherhood

In low-income neighborhoods, little stigma is attached to bearing a child outside of marriage.

Proposition 2: Timing of Childbirth and Marriage

Low-income women prefer to have children at a young age and to marry at substantially older ages.

Proposition 3: Fear of Divorce

Low-income women fear divorce and this fear is an important factor in their reluctance to marry.

Testing the Propositions

- We designed a series of survey questions to test the three propositions.
- 2004: Piloted with 37 families in the Boston ethnographic sample and four families in the Chicago ethnographic sample.
- 2005: The survey wave was conducted

Demographics: Survey

- 1,722 caregivers who were the biological mothers of the target child
- White=143
- African American=710
- Hispanic=869
 - U.S. born Mexican=320
 - Mexican born =125
 - Puerto Rican=217
 - Dominican=117
 - Other=90

Demographic Comparisons

	3 City Study	Edin & Kefalas
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	41%	39%
Hispanic	51%	29%
Non-Hispanic White	8%	32%
Mean Age	36	26
Age @ First Birth	21	18
First birth as Teen	53%	73%
Mean # of Children	3.3	2.2

Testing Stigma

- Having a child without being married is embarrassing for a woman.
- Having a child when a woman is single hurts her chances of later getting married.
- A woman should have children if she wants to, even if she is not married.
- A woman does not need to be married before having a child.
- Scale: alpha reliability of .68, with higher scores indicating greater stigma

Example: **Having a child without being married is embarrassing for a woman.**

Strongly agree	6
Agree	13
Disagree	58
Strongly disagree	24
(n = 1,683)	100%

Testing Stigma

- Age
- High school diploma
- Race/ethnicity:
 - Native-born Mexican
 - Foreign-born Mexican
 - Puerto Rican
 - Dominican
 - Other Hispanic
 - Non-Hispanic white

» (reference category: African-American)
- Catholic
- English proficiency (scale of 1-4)
- Boston
- San Antonio

Stigma: Few significant coefficients

	coefficient
Age	.0033**
Native Born Mexican	.12***
Boston	-.082***
Constant	.572
R ² =.049	

- Note: Dependent variable is the natural logarithm of the score on the stigma scale (mean = 0.65; s.d. = 0.30)
- * = $p < .10$
- ** = $p < .05$
- *** = $p < .01$

Having a child without being married is embarrassing for a woman.

“This ain’t 1920, where they put you in a home because they’re, you’re a young girl and you got pregnant. Or you’re 20 years old and you got pregnant and you’re not with the father or whatever. No, I disagree with that.”

--White Woman, Chicago

Testing the Preferred Order of Marriage and Childbearing

- What do you think is the best age to start having children?
- What do you think is the best age to get married for the first time?
- Age Categories:
 - under 20
 - 20-24
 - 25-29
 - 30-34
 - 35 or older

Timing of Marriage and Childbearing (cell percentages)

<i>Best age to marry</i>	<i>Best age to start having children</i>					Total
	Under 20	20-24	25-29	30-34	35 or older	
Under 20	1	1	0	0	0	3
20-24	1	21	6	0	0	27
25-29	1	10	30	4	0	45
30-34	0	3	8	6	0	17
35 or older	0	2	4	1	1	7
Total	4	37	48	11	1	100%

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Timing: Significant Variables

* = $p < .10$ ** = $p < .05$ *** = $p < .01$	<i>Marriage before childbearing</i>	<i>Childbearing before marriage</i>
	odds	odds
Native Born Mexican	2.6*	0.4***
Foreign Born Mexican	1.8	0.4*
Dominican	1.6	0.4**
Non-Hispanic White	0.4*	0.6
African-American (reference category)	--	--
English Proficiency	1.6***	1.2
San Antonio	0.4**	0.7

Testing Fear of Divorce

<i>Most people do not care if a woman gets a divorce.</i>	
Strongly Agree	15
Agree	50
Disagree	29
Strongly Disagree	6
n=1,652	100%

<i>Getting a divorce is embarrassing for a woman.</i>	
Strongly Agree	8
Agree	16
Disagree	57
Strongly Disagree	19
n=1651	100%

Getting a divorce is embarrassing for a woman.

“For me, I strongly disagree. I can see somebody maybe who has some certain high place in society, and the whole world is watching and waiting and – but not, not for regular people.”

--White Woman, Boston

<i>Marriage usually changes a relationship for the worse.</i>	
Strongly Agree	6
Agree	18
Disagree	59
Strongly Disagree	16
n=1,652	100%

<i>It's best to avoid marriage because it usually doesn't work out.</i>	
Strongly Agree	7
Agree	16
Disagree	58
Strongly Disagree	19
n=1,652	100%

Ethnographic field notes for all 256
families:

Fear of divorce is not an emergent
theme.

Conclusions

In low-income neighborhoods, little stigma is attached to bearing a child outside of marriage.

YES: Strong evidence.

Low-income women prefer to have children at a young age and to marry at substantially older ages.

OVERSTATED: Limited, qualified evidence.

Low-income women fear divorce and this fear is an important factor in their reluctance to marry.

NO: Almost no evidence.

Implications for marriage formation:

- Large gaps between first birth and marriage may represent constraints more than preferences.
- Fear of divorce not a barrier to marriage formation?

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