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Reframing Marriage and Marital Delay Among Low-Income Mothers: An Interactionist Perspective

A common assertion in the family science literature is that low-income single mothers are increasingly retreating from marriage but still vaunt it as their ultimate relationship goal. To explain this paradox, scholars frequently cite inadequacies in men's marriageability, financial instability, and conflictual romantic relationships as primary forces in mothers' decisions not to marry. We propose an alternative reasoning for this paradox using symbolic interactionist theory and perspectives on poverty and uncertainty. Specifically, we highlight the contradictions between what women say about their desires to marry and what they actually do when the opportunity presents itself. We use exemplar cases from a longitudinal ethnographic study of low-income rural mothers to demonstrate our reasoning. Implications for future research and theory development are discussed.

Over the past several decades research on family structure and romantic partnering has consistently pointed to significant declines in rates of marriage among women in the United States and among low-income single mothers in particular (Bumpass, 1998; Cherlin, 2004; Lichter & Graefe, 2001). Although these trends indicate that low-income women are less likely to marry than their more affluent counterparts, countervailing data reveal that poor and economically

better off women share comparable ideals about marriage as a cherished romantic union and ultimate life course goal (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Huston & Melz, 2004; Trail & Karney, 2012). Family scholars and policy makers have emphasized a range of reasons for this disconnect between mothers' words and deeds (Deutscher, 1966), noting that hesitancy to marry among low-income women is linked to structural, economic, and relationship factors such as limited available pools of marriageable men (Edin, 2000a; Graefe & Lichter, 2007; Manning & Smock, 2002; Waller, 2001); couples' inadequate finances, as a result of lifetime poverty (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005); and serial and transient conflictual romantic relationships (Barr, Simons, & Stewart, 2013; Burton, 2014).

In citing these factors as explanations for this marital paradox, researchers have operated from the assumptions that low-income single mothers want to marry, want to marry in the immediate term, and have the wherewithal to make good decisions about their intimate unions, regardless of whether respondents provide tangible evidence to support those contentions (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor, 2009). Accordingly, researchers have argued that, when thinking of marrying, most low-income mothers have high hopes and expectations that focus largely on men as providers and fathers rather than on women's own shortcomings as relationship partners (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Manning, Trella, Lyons, & DuToit, 2010). Because of conditions, such as low-paying

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Key Words: epistemology, ethnography, interactionism, low-income women, marriage, uncertainty.

and unstable jobs and sexist gender ideologies, this “male-deficit” paradigm suggests that most low-income men cannot meet women’s expectations, and hence low-income women, regardless of whether they have children with their romantic partners, usually delay or avoid marriage altogether.

Although these viewpoints have considerable merit and are logically satisfying as interpretations of the paradox to some, they are also quite narrow and problematic. These lines of reasoning are rarely anchored in any explicit theoretical approach, and they gain their conceptual traction almost solely from empirical findings. They also portray low-income women’s decisions to marry within a particular (i.e., conventionally middle-class) normative story line, one that may not adequately reflect their daily lives in poverty. Furthermore, these explanations offer little insight into how day-to-day processes can influence (a) why low-income women with children may so readily indicate their aspirations to marry and (b) whether the structural, economic, and relationship factors we have noted are in fact the primary engines stalling the marriage train. Are low-income mothers really as interested in marriage as current research suggests? Even under the best of structural, economic, and relationship circumstances, why do some low-income mothers still choose to delay marriage?

We argue that the prevailing empirical literature on marital delay provides only a partial explanation and very little in the way of contextually relevant interpretations of the marital paradox. Informed by symbolic interactionist theory, we are *sensitized* (Blumer, 1954) to see a potential disconnect between what low-income women say and do about marriage. Hence, we assert that the reigning literature on marital delay has focused disproportionately on what low-income women *say* about their behaviors toward marriage and has failed to fully consider what women actually *do* in the course of managing intimate relationships and grappling with the vagaries of low-income life (Edin, 2000b; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004). In doing so, researchers have sometimes misconstrued the stated talk and attitudes of interview and survey respondents as proxies for their true or future behaviors (Blumer, 1955; Deutscher, 1966).

Assessing what low-income mothers do in their relationships and evaluating their actions in light of what they say, we contend, is better

achieved through a theoretical and methodological approach that integrates symbolic interactionist theory (Blumer, 1954, 1955, 1969), perspectives on the uncertainty endemic to poverty (Harvey, 1993; Silva, 2013), and emergent conceptual themes from longitudinal ethnographic study of low-income mothers and their families in context (Becker, 1996; Burton, Purvin, & Garrett-Peters, 2009). Guided by this integrated approach, in this article we present our initial steps in developing a theoretical framework that allows us to consider and interpret the potential contradictions between what low-income mothers say *and* do in the course of moving toward or away from marriage in low-income worlds rife with uncertainty (Harvey, 1993; Wood, 2001, 2003). Our ultimate goal is to develop a framework that allows us to go beyond the treatments of previous researchers to conceptualize low-income women’s approaches to marriage—and intimate relationships more generally—as ongoing, negotiated, and socially constructed interactional accomplishments (Berger & Kellner, 1994; Blumer, 1969).

In developing our conceptual approach, we use exemplar case studies from a longitudinal ethnography of low-income mothers from the Family Life Project (herein referred to as FLP) (see Vernon-Feagans, Cox, & Family Life Key Investigators, 2013) to consider what women say about their plans to marry, not as accepted truths but as situated behavior worth examining in the larger context of their everyday lives (Blumer, 1955). The FLP is an interdisciplinary program project designed to investigate the ways community and family contexts influenced child development among African American, White, and non-White Hispanic families residing in six poor rural counties in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. The FLP ethnography involved 101 families with mostly young children under age 4 and with household incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. Families were recruited into the ethnography from sites such as formal child-care settings (e.g., Head Start); the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program; neighborhood community centers; local welfare offices; churches; and other public assistance agencies between October 2001 and June 2002 and followed until the summer or 2007. Of the mothers in the sample, 54% were White, 34% African American, and 12% Latina. Four-fifths of the mothers were age 29 or younger when

they enrolled in the study; 72% had a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED); 20% were receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); and 60% were employed in low-wage jobs. Roughly half of the mothers said they were married or cohabiting at the onset of the study, with all others indicating they were single. However, longitudinal interviews with participants revealed that what respondents initially said about their marital status and living arrangements was not necessarily true, and their statuses shifted constantly during the study as many mothers serially (and on occasion, simultaneously) moved from one romantic relationship to another.

Data sources informing our theorizing on marital delay included transcribed interviews and detailed ethnographer field notes of participant observation activities with respondents. In addition, we consulted transcripts of principal investigators' group and individual discussions with ethnographers and qualitative data analysts about consistencies between mothers' words and behaviors (for a detailed description of the FLP ethnographic methods and data collection, see Burton, 2014; Garrett-Peters & Burton, in press). Because the data are longitudinal, they provide a window into low-income mothers' lives across a long span of time, for various needs, and in a variety of relationships (e.g., with romantic partners, family members, friends, neighbors), capturing both the static and changing aspects of such (e.g., chronic need, serial intimate relationships, waxing and waning support relationships). Furthermore, because they are based in both interviews and participant observation, the data captured what mothers said about their intimate relationships and what they did as they worked toward or and moved away from marriage. As Blumer (1969) and, later, Becker (1996) have noted, this is a major epistemological advantage for those particularly interested in theory development via ethnographic research. Ethnographers "can find out, not with perfect accuracy, but better than zero, what people think they are doing, and what meanings they give to the objects and events and people in their lives and experiences. . . . The nearer we get to the conditions in which they actually attribute meaning to objects and events, the more accurate our descriptions of those meanings are likely to be" (Becker, 1996, p. 58).

Our goal in developing an alternative conceptual approach is to improve scholarship on

marital delays in two important ways. First, we bring a relatively underutilized theoretical approach, symbolic interactionism, coupled with perspectives on poverty and uncertainty, to the fore, with the goal of enhancing current research that attempts to explain marital delay without questioning the consistency between what mothers say and what they do about marriage. Second, while building our theoretical case, we draw attention to a severely understudied population on this topic—low-income *rural* mothers (Burton, Lichter, Baker, & Eason, 2013; Garrett-Peters & Burton, in press). The study of marital delay has predominantly been a story of low-income *urban* mothers, and we contend that by investigating the lives of rural poor mothers, theoretical perspectives on this topic can be more inclusive and fruitful in guiding comparative research and analysis (Bauer & Dolan, 2011; Burton, 2014; Nelson, 2005).

Indeed, the contextual and family lives of low-income urban and rural mothers have become increasingly similar in the past several decades (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Lichter & Graefe, 2011). Recent demographic and historical analyses of US rural communities indicate that the restructuring of rural economies represented by shifts away from stable, family-sustaining production jobs to low-wage service employment (Burton, Garrett-Peters, & Eason, 2011; Fitchen, 1991; Smith & Tickamyer, 2011), and dramatic shifts in the spatial concentration of rural poverty (Lichter et al., 2008) have affected labor markets and employment opportunities in ways that are redefining gender relations inside rural families in much the same ways manifested in urban settings. One of the more visible effects is how economic restructuring has produced significant declines in job opportunities for men in rural areas while women's employment has markedly increased, often in low-paying jobs. In some rural communities the majority of women with children have become primary or sole providers for their families, which adds stress to family life as women supplant men as the traditional income earners in many homes (Bauer & Dolan, 2011; Harvey 1993; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004; Tickamyer & Henderson, 2003). Other effects similar to those witnessed in low-income urban families include significant rises in single-parent households, nonmarital cohabitation, and multiple-partner fertility (Burton, 2014; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2006). Snyder, McLaughlin, and Findeis (2006) and

others have pointed to the negative impact of these circumstances on marital delays, as well as the persistence of poverty and compromised well-being of economically disadvantaged children (Lichter & Cimbalku, 2012).

BACKGROUND

Explaining Marital Delay: The Usual Suspects

Demographers have traditionally dominated the scholarly discourse on low-income women and marriage, identifying growing trends in nonmarital childbearing while also pointing to single mothers' valuing of marriage as the desired and ideal form of a committed intimate relationship (Huston & Melz, 2004; Smock & Greenland, 2010). Qualitative researchers have also contributed to this discussion (see Edin et al., 2004; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005) and have gone the farthest in underscoring such findings, concluding that low-income women valorize marriage but delay it until some future time when economic and intimate relationship conditions are ideal. Given a strong desire for children and a cultural context in which the instrumental importance of marriage has decreased (Cherlin, 2004), however, Edin and Kefalas (2005) and Gibson-Davis (2011) and others have argued that some women choose to have children in the interim and postpone marriage until a future date.

Previous research has also identified a range of constraints that impede low-income single mothers in their professed desires to marry, factors ranging from domestic violence to aversion to divorce, men's low marriageability, and women's unwillingness to relinquish household control. The most commonly cited constraint entails poor men's less than desirable marriageability traits. For example, Wilson's (1987) identification of the dearth of "marriageable" African American men in poor, inner-city neighborhoods and Edin's (2000a) "few good men" thesis emphasize the prevalence of limited pools of available marriageable men in poor communities (see also Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992). In particular, they cite poor men's low pay and poor job prospects as factors that make them undesirable marriage partners in the eyes of low-income women (Gibson-Davis, 2011; Manning & Smock, 2002).

Others have identified inadequate finances as a main reason that low-income women and men hold off on marrying (Gibson-Davis

et al., 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005; Trail & Karney, 2012), largely because of (a) low-income men's unstable employment and low earnings, which make marriage "unaffordable" in low-income women's views, or (b) the "high economic bar" that low-income women set for marriage that makes it unattainable (Edin & Reed, 2005). Graefe and Lichter (2007) have argued that unwed mothers, in particular, are unable to "marry well" (i.e., to more educated or higher-earning men), effectively shutting themselves out of the market for more desirable marriage partners (see also Manning et al., 2010). Edin and Reed (2005) and Gibson-Davis (2011) have identified the "marriage tax," which many women receiving welfare benefits fear would result from marrying a low-earning male partner and losing their preferable (i.e., more certain) welfare subsidies.

Outside of economic factors, researchers have highlighted the overall poor relationship quality that many low-income women experience in both dating and cohabiting relationships, a feature that inevitably compels them to delay marriage (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008). Herein, partners' drug and alcohol problems stand out as main contributors to relationship discord (Burton et al., 2013; Carlson et al., 2004; Trail & Karney, 2012), as do women's fears of past, current, or future domestic violence and sexual abuse (Burton et al., 2009; Cherlin et al., 2004; Macmillan, 2001). A lack of relationship trust has also been cited as one of the many reasons low-income women refrain from marrying (Burton et al., 2009; Levine, 2013), as well as the perceived difficulties involved in integrating and managing children from new partners' previous relationships (Burton, 2014; Burton & Hardaway, 2012; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006; Waller & McLanahan, 2005).

Additionally, an aversion to divorce is underscored as a reason many low-income women prefer not to marry in the immediate term, mainly given the perceived stigma they associate with failing to succeed in marriage (Gerstel, 1987; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Along these lines, Edin and Kefalas (2005) have stressed low-income mothers' concern for respectability as at the core of this constraint. They have reported that women see marriage as an act that confers social respectability and are unwilling to enter into a marriage with an underemployed partner or one with a criminal past, as such relationships are more likely to diminish, rather than

enhance, respectability in the eyes of community members. Finally, there is the sense of control that many low-income women are reluctant to give up when moving to marriage, particularly given past experiences with domineering men and women's valued feelings of autonomy and competence that come from previously managing households and children alone (Hill, 2005).

Taken as a whole, this body of empirical research provides a broad, structurally based picture of the host of problems facing low-income women who say they are intent on marrying. These factors, however, tell only a partial story, because they present a relatively static, one-dimensional, and often atheoretical perspective of low-income mothers divorced from their everyday interactions and adaptations to constraining social circumstances. In the remainder of this article we draw attention to the conceptual shortcomings of this literature as the backdrop for building an alternative and necessary theoretical approach to the study of marital delay by (a) outlining the conditions of material need and chronic social uncertainty these women face in low-income worlds and (b) demonstrating how low-income women's subscriptions to marriage can wax, wane, and waver over time, such that their stated desires to marry can differ markedly from their actions to achieve that end.

Social Worlds of Poverty and Uncertainty

Low-income life is defined not only by a lack of economic resources but moreover by chronic uncertainty (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Harvey, 1993; Wood, 2001, 2003). Daily life in such circumstances is characterized by social and economic instability, unpredictable others, and often tenuous social relationships (Levine, 2013). Realities such as low-paying and insecure jobs, erratic income flows, unpredictable daily schedules, and needy and unstable network members create conditions that inhibit long-term planning and reward short-term thinking (Alaszewski & Coxon, 2009; Hacker, 2006; Silva, 2013). These constraints are further magnified by the everyday stresses of managing households and rearing children, conditions that can test the mettle of any intimate relationship (see LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981; Wijnberg & Reding, 1999).

In social-psychological terms, *uncertainty* can be defined as a state of ambiguity, one in

which immediate and future conditions or events are unpredictable or otherwise not clearly determinable by the actors involved. In low-income environments, uncertainty can produce a narrowed range of options, a hesitancy to act, and a diminished likelihood of acting in ways more likely to create better outcomes for individuals and their families. Under such conditions poor mothers may often act with an eye toward the moment rather than the long run, as unpredictable resources and the ever-present specter of need require orientation to the here and now. This behavior emerges from a lack of control mothers may experience as they struggle to simply survive in a world of scarce resources and limited opportunities (Edin & Lein, 1997; Silva, 2013). Living in the inconstant, unsettling, and chaotic conditions that can characterize poverty means having little time, energy, or resources to prosper in the short term, much less plan reliably for the future (Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2004).

Following Harvey (1993), we argue that it is economic *and* social uncertainty that prove most incapacitating to low-income mothers, whether urban, suburban, or rural. By this we mean an inability to reliably predict the future availability and quality of material resources and social relationships, an inability brought on and sustained by the structural features of poverty—limited economic resources, a lack of formal education and marketable skills, truncated family structures, dangerous and stressful physical environments, and the like (Levine, 2013). Periodic uncertainty qualifies as a minimal condition in this regard, but it is *chronic* uncertainty that more accurately describes the lives of poor and working-poor individuals and families (Harvey, 1993; Imig, Bokemeier, Keefe, Struthers, & Imig, 1997; Sapolsky, 2005; Wood, 2001, 2003). This unremitting kind of uncertainty—an inability to predict whether money will last until the end of the month, thorny relations with recalcitrant landlords, recurring sickness or unstable jobs that can disrupt whatever household stability has been achieved—often brings with it considerable anxiety and stress, comorbid physical and mental health problems (Burton & Bromell, 2010; Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006; Sapolsky, 2005), and the attendant dysphoria that prior research has indicated is another core feature of living under conditions of uncertainty (Antonovsky, 1979; Suls & Mullen, 1981). Many poor single mothers also have extensive

life histories of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Macmillan, 2001). Such conditions constrain a whole range of actions for those living in poverty, but especially for low-income mothers, with their competing statuses and responsibilities as primary caregivers for their children and individuals trying to craft meaningful lives for themselves (Duck, 2012).

Compared to the relative security of middle-class and upper-middle-class life, the chronic need and unpredictability of low-income life make it difficult to proceed toward a committed intimate relationship without consequence. Thus, low-income women may not always make well-informed decisions in their intimate relationship plans, not simply because of incompetence or moral weakness but also because of pressing economic and emotional needs and the often limited and problematic resources that are available to meet them. Some women may jump into romantic relationships with less-than-ideal partners in order to escape a bad situation in the present (e.g., living with abusive or destitute parents) (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, & Purvin, 2004). Other women may enter into cohabiting relationships to satisfy immediate needs, such as housing or money (see Desmond, 2012), a circumstance that is rarely ideal for the formation and maintenance of any successful intimate relationships (Sassler, 2004; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). In many of these cases the margin for error in partnering is slim, and women often incur additional stressors once the novelty of a new romance wears off—abusive partners, an additional child, new partners' problematic exes—problems that are likely to compound and amplify the uncertainty already present in their lives (Burton, 2014).

Cohabitation, too, can be seen as an inherently uncertain arrangement in low-income worlds (Lichter et al., 2006). Relative to marriage, in which rights and obligations of the parties involved are spelled out by custom and enforceable by law, cohabitation is a more flexible and ambiguous arrangement, one dictated by fewer clear rules and obligations (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Lindsay, 2000; Manning & Smock, 2005). Here, cohabitation can represent an attractive alternative to marriage as a way of organizing one's life and managing children and a household with a male partner. The benefits of such flexible relationships notwithstanding, cohabiting relationships are rarely straightforward or uncomplicated

arrangements, particularly in low-income environments. Their easy dissolvability, coupled with the often unplanned nature of cohabiting intimate relationships among low-income women (Manning & Smock, 2005), can add even more instability to unions that are arguably less likely to develop into committed and successful relationships, marriage or otherwise (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley et al., 2006). Similarly, within a cultural and historical context where marriage has become democratized and partners are freer to choose whether they want to marry, marriage has become more optional, as women (and men) in cohabiting relationships are compelled to weigh its costs and advantages and seriously consider whether marriage offers a better alternative in helping them raise children and organize their family lives (Coontz, 2005). And for those cohabiting women in relatively stable relationships who also want marriage, many may prefer the hard-earned and relatively certain stability of their current relationship to the unknowns of marriage (see Silva, 2013).

AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE ON MARITAL DELAY

It is against this backdrop of uncertainty and constrained action that low-income women typically plan for and enter into intimate relationships. Their subscriptions to marriage or avowals to marry, though, do not always lead to marriage or necessarily indicate a genuine or immediate willingness to marry. Humans are, by nature, contradictory beings. We can hold beliefs and make pronouncements that are at odds with our behaviors (Deutscher, 1966; LaPiere, 1934), whether because of obfuscation, strategic impression management, or the simple misfortune of having our plans go awry. Part of this contradiction, as cognitive and social psychologists have argued, stems from the reality that we are less-than-perfect predictors or articulators of our behaviors (McClure, 1983; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Schwalbe, 1987). Another reason, according to symbolic interactionists, is that we are situated (i.e., constrained) actors engaged in a more or less open-ended, reflexive process of behavior and interpretation in our everyday attempts to coordinate our actions and plans with those of others in social life (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Interactionally speaking, the achievement of some desired act or goal, such as marriage, is not simply

the expression of individuals' social values or attitudinal positions but a continually developing and collaboratively constructed *social act* (Blumer, 1955). At certain times and under some conditions, we may exert considerable control over the outcomes of these plans (e.g., successfully starting and managing a marriage); under others, such as the vagaries of low-income life, predictability and control may be elusive, and our aims can be thwarted by intermittent resources, uncooperative partners, family strife, or a general absence of social stability.

As seen from a dramaturgical interactionist perspective, *talk* is a special kind of data that is both part of, and distinct from, overt behavior (see Mills, 1940). Talk is thus a resource that actors use, variously, to communicate with others, coordinate social action, "do" self-presentation and impression management, repair social situations, manage emotions, and the like. For example, individuals often offer up *disclaimers* to deny personal responsibility for actions (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975), or they engage in various forms of *motive talk* (Mills, 1940; Scully & Marolla, 1984) to explain their actions to important audiences. Actors sometimes verbally engage in a range of *aligning actions* (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976) to repair damaged interactions or explain untoward behavior by providing *accounts* (Scott & Lyman, 1968) in the form of *excuses* or *justifications* (see also Scully & Marolla, 1984). And at other times individuals use talk to either avoid devalued identities, through *role distancing* and *alter-casting* (Goffman, 1959; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sykes & Matza, 1957), or subscribe to cherished ones through *role embracement* (Goffman, 1961; Snow & Anderson, 1987).

In this processual view we are describing, human beings are not so much rational or fully planning actors, but *rationalizing* actors (Brissett & Edgley, 1990), necessarily responding to situations and events after the fact (Mead, 1929, 1932) and making sense of their actions and those of others in the form of the attributions provided to explain behaviors (Crittenden, 1983; Heider, 1958). Likewise, the accounts (Maines, 1993; Scott & Lyman, 1968) we give to predict or otherwise explain our behaviors are not so much accurate descriptions of behavior but discursive acts themselves, behavioral attempts to render situations sensible and explain intentions or courses of actions in culturally acceptable ways. Such may be the case with low-income

mothers who are interested in marriage as an immediate or long-term goal. In these instances, marriage plans can be specific or vague, goals can be stymied, or individuals can change direction in midcourse, perhaps to return to the task somewhere down the line or give up on the idea entirely.

Symbolic interactionist theory also holds that individuals, such as unmarried low-income mothers, are social actors who act toward objects—including conceptual "objects" such as cohabitation and marriage—on the basis of the meanings that those things have for them (Blumer, 1969). Such meanings are necessarily worked out in the course of social interaction and accumulated social experience (Blumer, 1969). In the case of low-income mothers desiring marriage, this particularly entails interactions involving intimate relationship partners (see McCall & Simmons, 1978). Interactionists similarly stress the *self-conceptions* and *identities* that intimate relationship partners bring to and develop in the context of those relationships, and moral and role identities, such as "mother," "wife," and "partner." Such identities are to some degree ascribed, informed by the constellation of socially learned roles and expectations operating in the social lives of low-income women. Importantly, these identities are negotiated, worked out in an ongoing process of social interaction (Maines, 1979, 1982) with intimate partners who furthermore serve as important interactional role "supports" in the contexts of close interpersonal relationships (McCall & Simmons, 1978). In this sense, intimate relationships are largely driven by the self and identity needs of participants. Thus, intimate relationships, as well as participants' ideal conceptions of those relationships and goal states (e.g., "marriage"), are inherently open-ended and contingent accomplishments, liable to change as partners' needs and commitments change in the course of relationship careers.

The potential contradictions between what low-income women say and do with regard to marriage become even clearer if we look closer at the researcher-participant relationship. There, questions of marriage expectations and plans to marry can elicit a range of responses from the women being questioned. Barring obvious reasons for participants to engage in outright deceit, researchers assume that the former are offering truthful accounts when they report a willingness to marry. But the data that researchers

collect do not amount to “the truth,” per se, wholly accurate indications of future behaviors or relationship states. Interactionally speaking, these data represent actors’ situated indications of future behavior, predictions that can be shaped by their degrees of prior planning, recollections of past motivations, desires to manage impressions in the immediate moment, and the like. Thus, some women may respond to researchers’ queries in good faith but simply not have a fully formed sense of their views on marriage or their immediate or long-term marriage plans (see also Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Some may voice a strong preference for marriage but secretly believe that the likelihood of marriage—either with a current or a potential future partner—is low. And others may similarly engage in wishful thinking, predicting impending marriage to a partner when all signs realistically signal otherwise (e.g., in hopes of making the possibility more real by stating it publicly). In each of these instances what the actors provide are varieties of *talk*—efforts to explain their desires, intentions, and motivations for immediate or future goals—that may not always match up to any efforts to bring those goals to fruition.

In the following section we turn to a discussion of exemplar case studies from the FLP ethnography to illustrate our points made earlier. In the course of presenting our alternative perspective, we identify some contradictions between talk and action revealed as rural low-income mothers articulate their various reasons for wanting to marry and for abstaining from marriage in the present. We describe four exemplar cases to suggest that it is not simply a lack of money, unemployed and problematic partners, or minimal relationship trust that keeps these women from reaching their supposedly steadfast marriage goals. These cases are employed, not strictly as data to be analyzed, but as compelling examples designed to illustrate the utility of integrating symbolic interactionist theory, longitudinal ethnographic study, and a perspective on the constraining conditions of poverty and uncertainty. By shifting the traditional analytic focus to critically assess what low-income mothers say about marriage in light of their often unstable living conditions, we demonstrate that their perspectives on marriage are malleable and sometimes less than certain. As our discussion shows, these women are far from uniform in their subscriptions to marriage, moving back and forth as they

alternate between approaching and avoiding marriage, constrained by the daily uncertainties and stresses of low-income life.

EXEMPLARS AND DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL APPROACH: BETWEEN TALK AND ACTION

As noted already, our primary goal in this article is to discuss our initial efforts in developing an alternative conceptual approach for interpreting and understanding low-income women’s marital delay in the context of poverty and uncertainty, in this case in rural families. We approached our discussion of the ethnographic data sensitized (Blumer, 1954) by concepts from symbolic interaction theory and conceptual discussions of poverty and uncertainty. We explored the data using an exemplar case study approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An exemplar case (Abbott, 1992) is a particular instance of a conceptual class of phenomena or social actors that exemplifies some property or feature of that conceptual class (e.g., different types and situations of low-income mothers who delay or reject marriage). Here, the individual-as-case is a detailed examination of an individual actor who exhibits the “operation of some identified theoretical principle” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 192), such as contradictory talk and action regarding marriage under conditions of social uncertainty. Although these cases share many similarities with other low-income mothers, they are neither selected nor described initially on the basis of their typicality but instead on their explanatory power (Mitchell, 1983), that is, their ability to demonstrate the operation of general principles found in the theory. Hence, these cases are valuable precisely because they make salient those principles of symbolic interactionism and perspectives on poverty and uncertainty we identify (e.g., discrepancies between saying and doing, uncertainties that impinge on actions) (see also Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In describing the exemplar cases, we have treated the idea of *talk* as a “sensitizing” concept (Blumer, 1954), as opposed to a formal, definitive one, an approach that “gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances” (p. 7). In contrast to formal concepts that are used to build predictive theory, sensitizing concepts are employed as interpretive devices and

starting points in ethnographic analysis that draw attention to important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for theory development in the context of specific settings and behaviors (Bowen, 2006; see also Glaser, 1978; Padgett, 2004; Patton, 2002). In this way, we were sensitized to think of talk as a concept that represents both behavioral reports and conduct independent of the actual behavior it is purported to predict as mothers describe their movement toward or away from marriage. Thus, in drawing on symbolic interaction theory, we treat mothers' pronouncements of their plans for marriage, which are sometimes heartfelt and carefully considered and other times vague and largely wishful thinking, as *talk*, a multifaceted kind of (discursive) behavior (McClure, 1983).

The four exemplar cases we present here were selected on the basis of their efficacy in demonstrating a range of conditions under which low-income mothers say they want to marry but delay it in the interim. In each case, participants have been assigned pseudonyms so as not to render them identifiable to others. It is likewise important to note that although specific features and circumstances of the four cases might seem extreme or atypical to readers, they are actually relatively common for the low-income women we studied (and have studied in previous research). Hence, while ethnographic research can rarely offer sample representativeness or the ability to generalize behaviors to entire populations, the four cases we selected are in fact characteristic of mothers in groupings of respondents that we identified in these early stages of theory building. In short, the four cases share so many similarities with those in their particular groups, it would be difficult for readers to identify them as distinctive individuals. We see this as a strength in our progression toward theory building, and one that also allows us to protect the identities of the exemplar cases.

Our approach to theory development is to consider, as a first step, the range of forms of talk and action in which mothers engage, rather than to search for patterns of central tendency that would preclude our identification of subtler processes that define what mothers say and do in leading to marital delay. For example, all four mothers in the cases we selected from the general groupings endorse marriage, albeit to four varying degrees: One is serious about marriage and actively taking steps toward it; one values marriage but sees it as a capstone

that should happen only after a long period of testing out a partner; one attaches importance to marriage but sees no need to hurry toward it; and one appears eager to marry, moving in and out of multiple "engagements," though never actually getting any closer to marriage. Exploring this variability as a starting point allowed us to closely interrogate the different ways in which mothers use *talk*.

Moreover, all four cases share the common circumstances of economic and social uncertainty but present unique situations that exemplify the difficulties of moving toward marriage in low-income worlds. In developing our theory, these sources of variability allowed us to unpack the attributes of economic instability in ways that we hoped would prevent us from erroneously limiting mothers' marital delay behaviors to structural issues like unemployment. Exploring these women's lives using this point of view opened up the possibilities for us to interpret a range of perspectives mothers shared with ethnographers about marriage and how consistent those perspectives were with mothers' actual marriage-seeking behaviors. More important, it kept us from being locked into considering their movement toward or away from marriage according to the usual structural, economic, and relationship factors discussed in the extant literature.

Kim: Intent on Marrying (but Tripping Over Circumstances)

Kim is a cohabiting, 20-year-old White mother of two young boys living with her partner, Linus, in an old trailer home on his family's property, which is located down an isolated rural road in Pennsylvania. Her oldest son, age 3, is from a previous cohabiting relationship, but her infant son's father is Linus. She and Linus have been cohabiting for 10 months, having moved in together after just a few days of first meeting at a music concert. Kim worked as a waitress in the past, but since her last pregnancy she has stayed home while her partner works a steady but low-paying job at a nearby industrial plant.

Kim is a petite and almost childlike young woman, short in stature, yet defiant in her attitude and quick to anger. In some ways she appears innocent and naive, such as the recent family incident when she tried to protect her young sons by throwing a blanket over them during gunfire between Linus and his brother. She

has a history of abusive intimate relationships, including the current one, which is characterized by jealousy, arguments, and occasional violence, some of which she admitted to instigating, and some of which she attributed to her partner's drunken behavior. Her parents had a violent marriage and married and divorced multiple times. She is estranged from her abusive father but has stayed in close contact with her mother, who lived a few counties away. Linus's family is even more violent and unsettled than hers. His divorced parents have a history of hostility and abuse: His father once chained his mother to concrete blocks and threatened to throw her in a nearby river, and his mother stabbed her new boyfriend during an argument. Linus also has a violent younger brother who had been in and out of jail on various gun and alcohol-related charges, sometimes dragging Linus into his troubles. Kim lives a physically isolated life, in part because their sole car is not working and her partner is hesitant to repair it (in her view, because he is worried that she will leave him or use it to meet other men). She is also socially isolated, having chosen to withdraw from their former circle of friends, purportedly because of the latter's drunkenness and their habits of infidelity.

Kim was intent on marrying Linus, although their plans for marriage were stymied over the course of her 15 months in the study (the principal investigator of the FLP ethnography had to discontinue Kim's involvement in the study because her living circumstances became too dangerous for the ethnographer). Ostensibly, this was due to the ups and downs of Kim's and Linus's financial situation but more likely because of their chaotic household circumstances and uncertainty in their relationship. Relative to the other cases we discuss in this section, Kim appeared the most determined to marry, regularly telling the ethnographer of her desire to marry her partner, developing concrete wedding plans, and even going as far as sending out invitations late in the study, only to have the wedding canceled.

Kim's "serious" commitment to marriage, however, was not as straightforward as her words or talk implied. She occasionally vacillated in her stance on marriage throughout the study, questioning her reasons for getting married. Midway through the study, for instance, she cited leverage as a main motivation for marrying, telling the ethnographer, "If he screws me over, I could screw him over twenty times more.

Because I have two kids—one belongs to him, and the other one is like his son. And if we get married, I could take him for, like, half." After some consideration, though, she qualified her statement and revealed the competing impulses at play, adding, "But that's not why we're getting married. We're getting married because we love each other, and it's the right thing to do. . . . At least when we're married, I have more power over him."

Linus had a long history of trouble with the police and courts. He was a heroin user when they first met, but he immediately quit to be with Kim. He lost his driver's license for a 10-year period, and given his drinking habits and entanglements with his problematic brother, he had been arrested on more than one occasion during the time he and Kim lived together. During the study Kim complained to the ethnographer about Linus's lack of help to her and his failure to relieve her of any child-care and housework duties when he was at home. Not surprisingly, these tendencies generated ample uncertainty for Kim as she considered marriage.

Late in the study Kim and Linus had a wedding date picked out and invitations sent, but he was arrested after a drunken episode in which he fired a gun at his intoxicated brother, who was causing trouble at their trailer. The wedding was postponed while Linus was in jail and their meager savings were spent to bail him out. At that point Kim bemoaned his lack of forethought and apparent concern over their family's future, arguing that, unlike him, she could not afford to go out and get drunk regularly, get thrown in jail, and fail to consider the consequences. The experience left her feeling more indecisive: "I don't even know what I want to do anymore. Like, I want to get married, but if I get married to Linus—like we're already married now, basically; it's just not written on a piece of paper. But then it's like, 'Oh, my God, I don't know what to do,' 'cause I wonder if he'll get even worse." As her involvement in the study ended, Kim still had loose plans to marry Linus.

In considering Kim's situation and her experiences with poverty and uncertainty from a symbolic interactionist perspective, we see, despite her voiced intent on marrying Linus, how she employed different forms of *talk* about the matter depending on the level of uncertainty about her life situation she was experiencing at any given point in time. Even in the context of those uncertainties and her occasional subtle

questioning about proceeding with the marriage, she moved forward, taking concrete steps to make it happen. Thus, her dominant mode of talk about marriage was indeed in line with her actions. What is theoretically noteworthy in this case is that the source of financial instability that derailed her wedding plans was not one that a more traditional explanation, such as lacking necessary financial resources for the wedding, might have captured. Rather, this financial instability was a result of using their meager financial resources to get her partner out of jail because of circumstances related to an entire family network of chaos.

Because of our theoretical and methodological starting points, we interpret Kim's desire to marry and the circumstances that led to marital delay in a considerably less positive way than a proponent of marriage among the poor might, based on her responses to closed-ended yes-or-no questions about her desire for marriage and whether she had taken steps toward having a wedding. Analysts focused solely on Kim's voiced intent to marry and her movement toward marriage would likely interpret this situation as one with a promising outcome, as her responses to both questions would unilaterally have been yes. Hence, without considering the backdrop of Kim's life in poverty and uncertainty with Linus, it might be tempting to view Kim's relatively consistent talk or response about her intentions to marry and her movement in that direction as laudable and deserving of some financial assistance in ways that would lead to marriage. With emphasis on the context of her daily life, however, our interpretation of Kim's talk and actions toward marriage leads us in a very different analytic direction. Given the contexts of poverty, uncertainty, chaos, and identifiable dangers in which she was embedded, her desire for marriage and movement toward it raised serious concerns about her current and future mental health, her wherewithal for decision making about marriage, and more important, the implications of marriage for her own and her children's safety.

Rhonda: Wanting to Marry (Eventually)

Thirty-year-old Rhonda is a resourceful and resilient White mother of four who grew up in a world of family violence and instability in rural North Carolina. Her parents separated when she was young as a result of their constant fighting,

and she grew up with her hard-drinking mother in deep poverty, surrounded by equally poor and hard-living kin. Rhonda had four children by the study's end to four different men over a 13-year period. Her first child, a 13-year-old son, was the result of date rape from an older man when she was a teen, and this child lives mostly with Rhonda's mother and stepfather. Her second child, a daughter, age 4, was from her relationship with a highly abusive former partner who was in prison throughout her time in the study; the third, a son, born at the start of the study, was from her first partner during the study; and the last child, a son, was born to her most current partner, her stepbrother, at the end of her involvement in the study.

By her own admission, none of Rhonda's cohabiting relationships was planned. Rather, as she tells it, they just "happened." Describing the father of her third child—in a typical example of her tendency toward "accelerated cohabitation"—she admitted, "We didn't really go on no dates. He'd come to my house, hang out with me, and go home. And before I know it, he's living with me, and I really didn't have no say-so. He just moved all his stuff in, and I'm like, 'Well, I reckon you're living here, too, now.'" This pattern of minimal communication was also evident in the relationship she had with her daughter's father, and even her recent cohabitation with her stepbrother was moved along by their parents, who forced the issue by moving all of his belongings over to her trailer within a few weeks of him sleeping over there. Similar to the situation of other low-income women, this quick movement into a cohabiting relationship created a situation in which her relationship status was not clearly defined from the start and, hence, its future trajectory was unsure.

Rhonda nearly married her first partner, going as far as getting a marriage license but then letting it expire. She said that she considered marriage only because he was on probation and thought that marrying would have kept him out of jail. Luckily, she developed doubts because of his increased drinking, violence, and erratic behavior over the course of their 5-year relationship (which included a series of stabbings, shootings, death threats, car chases, and arrests), and their relationship ended when he was sent to prison. Her relationship with the father of her third child at the beginning of the study started promising enough but soon devolved into a contentious relationship as he became

controlling and abusive (and didn't appear interested, according to Rhonda, in finding a job). She kicked him out of her home permanently after a year together, following one final episode of abuse. Her most recent cohabiting relationship with her stepbrother, Philip, began midway through her involvement in the study and was arguably her most stable of all. Both partners had known each other since high school, when they first introduced their respective parents, and they have had a long and amicable relationship as friends and stepsiblings ever since.

Against this backdrop, Rhonda described marriage as an ultimate goal, but not one that had ever been pressing—up until her most recent union with her stepbrother. As her experiences show, merely professing a desire to marry—ultimately, in her case—does not indicate a willingness to do so immediately (although her near miss with marriage to her prison-bound first partner shows one way the circumstances of low-income life can bring marriage about). She cited a not-uncommon normative expectation when voicing her opinion on marriage, saying that couples should ultimately marry, “because that’s what you’re supposed to do.” Still, she felt that a couple should be in a stable, committed relationship before deciding to marry, claiming, “I’ve always been, like, if I’m gonna get married, I want to be married to somebody that I think I’m gonna be able to stay with for the rest of my life.” Late in the study she advised taking a slow, deliberate course of testing out a partner, declaring, “It’s stupid to get married if you know that you’re not gonna be able to deal with somebody. I think that’s crazy. I don’t want to marry somebody just to have the marriage and the big wedding and all that crazy mess.”

Her quick entry into those earlier accelerated cohabitations precluded her from knowing much about those men and their habits beforehand. It also made developing a stable, committed relationship—especially marriage—difficult, given their personal shortcomings and the financial pressures of low-income life. Even her strategy of checking the background of a new romantic partner failed, as Rhonda noted in describing how she looked to the parents of her second partner, whom she met in a bar, for signs of stability and good character: “Then I met Lee, and he was like Mr. Nice Guy, all nice. And I met his mama and daddy, and I was like, ‘Well, they’re really good people, so maybe

he’s a good guy.’” Time and experience told her otherwise as he proved violent, controlling, and unreliable.

Relative to her former partners and the fathers of her older children, Rhonda had the benefit of testing out her newest mate for years in his many statuses as school friend, stepbrother, and romantic partner. She credited his positive performances in previous romantic partnerships, which she had observed over time, as a primary reason she would like to marry him: “Philip is not one of those guys, thank God! I can tell that, because I’ve known him through all his women, and I know what he’ll he put up with and why his relationships didn’t work. I know why. It weren’t nothing to do with him; it was the crazy women he was with. He didn’t beat on ’em, he never hit ’em.” As her nearly 3 years in the study ended, Rhonda and Philip had tentative plans to marry, and the only stumbling block, according to her, was waiting on his divorce from a previous marriage to be finalized. This hurdle may have been the most proximate hindrance to an impending marriage for them, but doubts still remained for Rhonda, as did a diminished sense of urgency to marry. Given her past record of failed intimate relationships and the instability introduced by an unplanned entry into those relationships, both past and present, such hesitancy is understandable.

Like many other unmarried low-income mothers, Rhonda talked about and valued marriage as some ultimate, usually far-off romantic relationship goal. She indicated an apparently sincere desire to marry, but only under specific conditions, such as using marriage to keep a partner out of jail or considering marriage once a cohabiting relationship had progressed to some acceptable level of success. Hence, Rhonda said she would like to marry a committed partner under the right circumstances—that is, only after she was relatively *certain* that they would be someone she could live with happily in the long term. The conditions of low-income life, however, make such relative certainty a difficult goal to achieve. To this end, she recommended a common strategy among low-income women, one of “testing out” a new mate to verify his potential as a long-term marriage partner. Such a tactic of assessing a future spouse’s potential, though, is not without problems, as her more recent testing of the father of her third child showed. Looking to his parents for additional evidence of his moral character and potential

as a mate proved an insufficient strategy, as did their time spent living together. He failed the test, and she was compelled to end yet another relationship, once again with a new baby as a result.

In light of a limited pool of reliable or good-quality male partners that Rhonda's narrative seems to indicate, it would be tempting to cite a "few good men" hypothesis as explanation for her marital delay. Simply taking Rhonda's declared intentions to marry and her problematic former partners at face value, however, is problematic and ignores the inherently uncertain conditions of "sliding" cohabitation (Stanley et al., 2006) into which she entered as a route toward possible later marriage. Even in the absence of abusive or unemployed partners, other stressors of low-income life can impede the progress of a cohabiting relationship toward marriage, particularly in situations where the relationship is unplanned from the start. Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective on intimate relationships as negotiated interactional accomplishments, we looked at this mother's history of romantic relationships over time and considered the conditions of instability common to poverty and low-income cohabiting relationships to recognize that marriage, while an outcome that could eventually be achieved, was an inherently unstable undertaking, perpetually "in the future" for Rhonda and other mothers in the study.

Elaine: Wanting to Marry (Ostensibly)

Elaine, age 23 when she joined the study, is an unemployed, single, African American mother residing in North Carolina with her four children, who are all younger than 8 years of age. She left her mother's home at age 16 and had since moved between various public housing developments, usually because of her inability to pay the rent. Her eldest child was from an unnamed father and lived outside the home with a family member. The youngest three children were from the same father, her off-and-on partner for 8 years, who left the home at the beginning of the study. Both she and her ex-partner had limited work histories. He rarely provided financially but helped out periodically in the home with child care and cooking during their periods together. Elaine's father had been in prison for most of her life, but he stayed in contact by sending letters and cards for her children, whom he has never met. Over the years Elaine

and her nearby mother and sisters provided emotional and material support to one another, when available, sometimes living together, but the help was typically sporadic and limited.

Elaine's parents never married, and her mother did not marry either of the fathers of her two sisters. During her 2 years in the study, Elaine proclaimed a desire to marry and jumped hastily into marriage commitments with different men. By all accounts she glamorized marriage, quickly entering into engagements and making accelerated marriage plans, at times without having ever met the prospective husband face-to-face. This tendency to jump into rapidly escalating intimate relationships was evident in the many simultaneous online relationships she had with various men she was "talking to." After splitting with her ex-partner early in the study, she met a 19-year-old man online and started making marriage plans with him, just as he was about to go to court on an armed robbery charge. As that relationship fell by the wayside, she reported that she was in love with and engaged to marry a (blind) man she had been chatting with in an online forum for a year, a relationship that soon faded. During this time, she also developed a relationship over the phone with an agent for her long-distance phone company. After swapping photos, this new potential boyfriend arranged to visit from his home in Texas, and they had loose plans to marry on her birthday in a year's time; like her other budding relationships, this one failed to progress much further.

Not surprisingly, given the degree of poverty she and her children were experiencing, Elaine's accelerated relationships appeared to be motivated by material and emotional needs. Immediately following the relationship just described, Elaine began an online and phone relationship with another man in a neighboring state, who occasionally sent money to help her and her children. She explained the situation, saying, "He asked me to marry him, but I said no, 'cause I'm already engaged to be married. And he respect that, you know what I'm saying? But he was like, he ain't going to stop doing for me and my kids 'cause I got a fiancé." Although she recognized that she was engaged to marry another man, she told this man she loved him, though secretly revealing otherwise to the fieldworker. And when he sent her \$60 to help pay her recent probation charge, she noted, pragmatically, "I'm not going to turn him away," echoing a common

sentiment among some single mothers in our study who were in similar dire economic straits (see also Nelson, 2005).

All this relationship instability was compounded by her growing entanglement with a possessive, self-professed “gang banger,” who began staying over at her house on occasion during this period and competing for her affections. She attributed her attraction to him—and men in general—to his style, attitude, and dress. Although this man may have added some excitement to her life and provided her with affection, his growing possessiveness and violence added even more uncertainty. Responding to the ethnographer’s question of whether she felt safe with him, she admitted, “No, ’cause one time he jumped at me. ’Cause I said, ‘Look, my husband—my fiancé—is about to come home, and I’m about to get married.’ He said, ‘What!?’ and he jumped up off the chair, and he was fixing to punch me, and he said something, like, ‘If I can’t have you, then can’t nobody have you.’ So I’m stuck in here, you know? He’s serious about that.”

While immediate need can be a powerful motivator for some low-income mothers to enter quickly into romantic relationships with men they barely know, there are costs to such relationships. Although some benefits (e.g., companionship, sex, money for the household) might be immediate, the longer-term costs, such as a violent partner or a difficult situation that becomes trickier to extract one’s self from, can be harder to recognize up front. Marrying such men, rather than testing them out through cohabitation, can make things even more difficult.

While these various relationships were ongoing, Elaine was jailed for 6 months on a shoplifting charge late in the study, and then she became engaged to another prisoner after they developed a relationship by chatting through their cell walls and the jail’s plumbing lines. This romantic relationship escalated as they exchanged photos and letters, and later he proposed to her over the phone from another prison. She was flattered by his attention, and after her release, she and her kids visited his mother and siblings. His mother even took Elaine to look for wedding rings, demonstrating the potential seriousness of this relationship that they planned to culminate in marriage once he got out of prison. She described these developments to the ethnographer in the following excerpt from field notes, which reveals the emotional allure of comparing

him to the other men whom she was “talking to” simultaneously:

They (the other men) all right. It’s just, like, Darius, every time he write me, “How my kids doing? How *his* kids doing,” you know what I’m saying? He be like “How my kids doing? What they doing? How they doing in school?” Every time he write me he asks how the kids doing. So that takes my heart, too, you know what I’m saying? He the only person who always asks how my kids doing.

Whether Darius’s words were sincere, cheap talk, or somewhere in between, they can represent, for hard-pressed mothers like Elaine, some indication of a committed partner and hope for a better life. And simply having the prospect of a new mate who shows an interest in one’s children can be enough to win affection, something that allows one to overlook many negatives in a partner’s current circumstances. Much like her other budding intimate relationships, though, this one failed to progress any further.

As Elaine’s actions show, marriage can be a highly idealized relationship status for some unmarried low-income mothers. In theory, there are few concrete barriers to getting engaged or married quickly, as Elaine’s experience shows, given the frequency with which she was purportedly engaged to new men and planned to marry them. Other researchers might read this situation optimistically, as evidence of hope for the likelihood of marriage among unmarried low-income women. Our longitudinal ethnographic data, however, reveal a different story. Rather than simply accept her verbal avowals and immediate actions (e.g., engagements, proclaimed marriage plans) as proof that she would marry, a symbolic interactionist perspective sensitizes us to the various ways unmarried low-income mothers can define marriage and act—often contradictorily—toward it as a penultimate type of committed relationship. Thus, by being there, listening to what Elaine had to say about marriage, and witnessing her actions toward that goal, we are privy (via ethnographic study) to the truncated nature of her intimate relationship and marriage trajectories and better able to scrutinize her accelerated plans to marry. In practice, then, culminating a marriage can be a tricky undertaking in low-income worlds, and romanticized notions of marriage might belie more wishful thinking than actual intent. Beyond the actual uncertainties brought on by low-income life and in the absence of family

members or organizational structures (e.g., the church, the state) applying sufficient pressure to marry, women such as Elaine are free to profess a desire to marry without having to actually do anything about it.

Lisa: Wanting to Marry (but Paralyzed by Uncertainty)

Lisa is a 20-year-old, cohabiting White mother of two young daughters, both under age 2, from her 5-year relationship with Greg, her boyfriend since high school. Lisa and her family reside in rural Pennsylvania. She and Greg began dating when she was 15, and they had been cohabiting and "engaged" for 2 years, living in a cramped, dimly lit apartment along with Lisa's mother and her teenaged half sister at the start of the study. Lisa's mother did not work because of a host of medical problems, and she had long depended on Lisa for shelter, food, transportation, and the like. Barring a short time during high school when she worked in a day-care center, Lisa had never worked outside the home. Greg worked in various construction jobs throughout the study, and other than Lisa's sister's supplemental security income (SSI) payments, he was the only earner in the home.

Lisa led a traumatic life growing up; her mother left her father when Lisa was still a child because of his physical abuse. She and her mother, Tammy, were soon back in an equally abusive situation when her mother married a violent alcoholic partner, moving with him to live in a tiny, three-room trailer wedged beside an interstate underpass in a nearby remote county. Lisa's half sister, Tina, was a product of this marriage, and in the following years both she and Lisa were molested by her stepfather's teenage son. When this abuse finally came to light, Tammy issued an ultimatum to her husband, and events came to a head when he shot the family cat in anger and threatened Tammy and her family with the gun. Tammy soon escaped the situation, gathering the girls and their possessions when he was away at work, enlisting her own sisters to slip in and take them all away.

Given Tammy's dependence on Lisa, their roles seemed reversed, and it is apparent that Lisa identified herself as a caretaker for her mother, not the other way around. On top of her years of physical abuse at the hands of former partners, Tammy had a long list of health problems, and with her missing teeth and

frazzled looks, she appeared decades older than the 40-year-old she was. Added to this mix was Lisa's half sister, Tina, a provocatively dressed 18-year-old with a diagnosed developmental delay. She did not work but received monthly SSI payments, and she dropped out of high school because of her learning difficulties. Given Lisa's concern for her mother and her mother's and sister's reliance on her, these three women, along with the children, existed at the center of a somber household, with Lisa's partner, Greg, operating on the periphery.

Lisa and Greg's 5-year relationship was relatively stable in terms of their consecutive years spent together but still marked by problems. Greg had a troubled upbringing and lived with Lisa, her mother, and her sister off and on during high school, sleeping on their couch periodically, before moving in permanently when Lisa finished high school. Besides his heroin habit, which he gave up soon after they started dating, Greg came from a family of wild, troublemaking brothers well known to the local police and community. Immediately after the birth of their first daughter, he spent 6 months in the local jail for a burglary charge, leaving Lisa to raise their daughter alone (with the help of her mother).

Typical for many intimate unions in worlds of poverty, Lisa and Greg's was marked by verbal and emotional abuse, if not outright physical violence. This antagonism even extended to the relationship between Greg and Lisa's mother, who did not typically see eye-to-eye. Tammy did not hide her disdain for Greg, and she once confided to the ethnographer, when Lisa was not around, that Greg had even hit her (Tammy) in the past. Lisa described a traditionally masculine, working-class partner who had punched car windows during arguments with her and vowed, "If you ever leave me and take my kids, I will kill ya." Speaking of their past arguments and her willingness to speak her mind to him, she declared that he could just leave if he wanted. This tough talk reveals some conflicted feelings on her part, as she added, "I know he ain't going nowhere, though. . . . That's the bad part. Sometimes I wish he would just go."

Over the course of the study Lisa swayed back and forth between an interest in marrying Greg and coolness to the idea. Early on, Lisa told the ethnographer that they had talked about marriage and would like to get married when they had their finances in order (citing the costs of weddings and a divorce as reasons for delaying

marriage). Later her stance on marriage shifted, and she indicated, albeit lukewarmly, that she would not mind marrying Greg, because he had become less controlling and she felt that she could trust him. She finally admitted that Greg, rather than she, was the one pushing for marriage. Her ambivalence about marriage—and Greg as a legal partner—was evident when she declared, “I mean, I love him to death, but marriage is a bigger step. Being together eight years, we might as well be married. . . . I wouldn’t trade him for anything, but I don’t think I’m ready for marriage yet.”

Months later, as her participation in the study ended, Lisa, Greg, the girls, and their new baby moved to a run-down apartment of their own, following a car accident in which Greg sustained a severe head injury and was out of work while Lisa tended to him. Alone for the first time in a household of their own, tensions heightened and Lisa’s uncertainty grew. As they adjusted to a new situation in which Greg was stuck at home and reliant on her, she complained, “It’s just me and him. Now I’m constantly trapped here.” Given this change in their relationship, she was less keen on marrying, describing Greg as a controlling and jealous partner who did not want her to work or go out with girlfriends (for fear of the lecherous males who were out there to tempt her into infidelity). Pressed for other reasons she hesitated to marry, Lisa identified his problematic family name: “I don’t want to be a Thompson. . . . I’m stayin’ a Greene. . . . You go out here and you ask a cop, say your last name’s Thompson, he’s already writing you out a ticket for somethin’.”

The end of the study found Lisa tentative in her relationship with Greg, heartened by some signs that he had changed for the better, yet unsure if he would return to his old, problematic ways. Like other low-income partners in intimate relationships, Lisa and Greg were not finished products, *per se*, but individuals still in the process of learning and developing as adults, romantic partners, and parents (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Rubin, 1983). Unfortunately, the instabilities of low-income life can make managing this process even more difficult than usual. And so this mother seemed stuck, unsure of how to proceed other than maintaining their relationship as it was, unwilling to make what she implied was a risky leap into marriage.

Reading this evidence from Lisa’s relationship with Greg, it might be tempting to

attribute her hesitance to marry to her partner’s problematic and controlling behaviors. Such an explanation, though intellectually satisfying at first glance, is ultimately limited. It does not adequately account for the complexity and history of their relationship and the instability and competing demands in Lisa’s life as a partner, mother, and caretaker for her mother and sister, all under conditions of low-income life. Relative to the other cases covered in this section, Lisa presents a different sort of unmarried low-income mother who claims interest in marriage but delays it. Although she championed marriage at times and proclaimed her love for her partner, Lisa vacillated in her desire to marry over the course of the study, moving back and forth as she questioned the quality of their relationship and offered reasons for delaying a move into marriage. The accounts she provided, from a lack of money to her partner’s controlling nature and problematic family name, to his—rather than her—insistence on marrying, conceal what our symbolic interactionist approach indicates is a nagging uncertainty around marriage, something likely common to many low-income mothers’ lives. Hence, Lisa’s words and her conflicting actions reveal a woman stuck, caught in unfortunate circumstances and uncertain how to proceed in a troubled relationship in which she has been long invested but is questioning for multiple reasons.

CONCLUSION

In this article our primary goal has been to craft an alternative conceptual approach for studying marital delay among poor women. Our thinking and efforts in developing this initial frame integrate a symbolic interactionist approach with perspectives on poverty and uncertainty informed by longitudinal ethnographic data on the romantic unions of low-income rural mothers. In doing so, we have also intended to prod family scientists to move beyond the typical attributions offered by contemporary researchers as empirical explanations of the marital paradox—that is, the contradiction between low-income women’s espoused desires to marry in the context of an increasing prevalence of marital delay and, in the case of some single mothers, to retreat from marriage altogether. Our fundamental rationale in pursuing this theoretical approach was prompted by the extant literature on this topic, literature often framed outside of theory and disproportionately

focused on what low-income women *say* about their behaviors toward marriage while failing to fully consider what women actually *do* in the course of managing intimate relationships. We echo Blumer's (1955) critique of the epistemological weaknesses of "attitudinal" research to argue against the field's contemporary reliance on family research (see, e.g., Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) that takes individuals' attitudes and values on marriage as reliable predictors of behavior (see Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008). Much of this existing empirical work, moreover, fails to adequately contextualize mothers' words and deeds about marriage as they are grappling with the difficulties of low-income life.

We have used exemplar ethnographic case studies of low-income rural families to show the range of low income mothers' words and deeds with respect to marriage. As part of our initial attempt to develop a new conceptual model, the selected cases do not reflect a strict typology or progression of types of what unmarried low-income mothers say and do about marriage. Rather, they are intended to be illustrative, highlighting varying degrees of personal commitment and a range of conditions of economic and social uncertainty under which unmarried low-income mothers stating a desire for marriage may find themselves or move toward as they adapt to intimate relationship situations (e.g., immediate, muted, or abated desire for marriage; clear vs. vague definitions of marriage; relationship uncertainty vs. social uncertainty). Moreover, these cases are not particularly unique or extreme in terms of the overall experiences of rural low-income mothers in the study, for that matter, relative to those of other poor women in longitudinal urban ethnographic studies we have completed on comparable topics (see Burton, 2014; Burton et al., 2009). Duck's (2012) recent ethnographic work on the precarious lives of low-income mothers, as well as the work of others, validates our logic and the all-too-common extreme circumstances that characterize life in poverty (Davidson, 1990; Harvey, 1993; Raffaelli, Tran, Wiley, Garlarza-Heras, & Lazarevic, 2012; Wood, 2001, 2003). In short, we did not cherry-pick cases when it came to choosing the magnitude of life challenges that mothers in the exemplar cases studies faced. Life was comparably hard for all the mothers who participated in the FLP ethnography and painful

for our ethnographic team to experience in the course of participant observation, interviewing, and chronicling mothers' voices and actions in their field notes (Burton et al., 2009). Pursuing this line of theoretical work has been both scientifically and emotionally hard work.

We likewise developed the beginnings of our conceptual approach informed by symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theory, sensitized (Blumer, 1954) to consider the potential disconnect between what unmarried low-income mothers say about marriage and what they actually do in working toward that relationship status. Thus, we considered how mothers conceptualized their pronouncements of their plans for marriage—sometimes heartfelt and carefully considered and other times vague and largely wishful thinking—as *talk*, independent of the actual behavior they were purported to predict. Through our in-depth examination of mothers' everyday lives, we identified how mothers engaged in various forms of talk (Mills, 1940; Scully & Marolla, 1984) to explain their actions to ethnographers or provide accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968) in the form of either excuses or justifications (see also Scully & Marolla, 1984) for their behaviors around marital delay. Hence, our approach illustrates the need to consider mothers' *consistency* in how they use talk to present their intentions about marriage and whether their forms of talk are self-reflective in their attempts to move toward or away from marriage.

Furthermore, we considered how mothers' talk and behavior were linked to correlates of poverty and uncertainty beyond the usual factors discussed in the literature. In taking this perspective, we determined, at least in these first stages of our theory development, that marriage is far from certain as an objective for low-income women despite that they sometimes vaunt it as a desired goal. Likewise, this perspective revealed that there is rarely anything straightforward about the pathways into marriage for low-income mothers. Hence, the problem of whether a low-income mother will marry involves more than just deciding whether a prospective mate will act as a good father, determining whether a partner can provide economically, or orchestrating a long-desired wedding. These considerations matter, but the situation is typically more convoluted than explanations, such as the "limited pool of marriageable men" argument (Wilson, 1987), Edin's

(2000a) “few good men” thesis, or Gibson-Davis et al.’s (2005) view on “low-income women’s high hopes and high expectations,” for marriage would lead us to believe.

By considering the words, practices, and larger lives of women in the exemplar cases we have described, we were able to demonstrate, as a first step, how low-income mothers can hold competing and often contradictory views on marriage, thus adopting shifting perspectives on marriage as they adapt to the unsettling fluctuations of low-income life. Most of these women desired committed intimate relationships as ways to organize their adult lives with a male partner to share the load, with many of those desiring marriage in particular. However, the ever-present uncertainties of low-income life made moving toward marriage or attaining a lasting marriage a difficult and far-from-certain task (see Trail & Karney, 2012). Hence, those women desiring marriage defined and acted toward it, not in some linear, culturally scripted fashion, but in ways that often found them wavering between hopefulness and avoidance in their immediate intimate relationships and their long-term marriage plans. In this way our perspective breaks from that of previous researchers by recognizing the multiple statuses that low-income women manage and the attendant pressures they face as socially situated actors, rather than treating them as a one-dimensional set of mothers set on expected (i.e., normative) pathways toward marriage. The result, we argue, is a clearer and more realistic picture of how women in low-income worlds think, feel, and talk about their romantic relationships as they work toward—and sometimes back away or run from—marriage.

Although our focus on talk and behavior has been the principal driver of our work to this point, emergent patterns in the exemplar cases also drew attention to women’s mental health (e.g., living with chronic stress and depression from domestic violence, dealing with problematic network members, managing households on limited finances) and the role it can play in shaping their decisions and actions toward marriage. Under such conditions, low-income women do not always make the best-informed decisions as they move toward committed intimate relationships, nor do they clearly foresee the consequences of their actions. And when they do make the best possible decisions in bad situations—such as Rhonda’s

testing out a new partner or Kim’s setting aside money for a wedding—they can still end up “tripping” over unfortunate circumstances common to low-income life and getting nowhere nearer to marriage (or a successful, long-term partnership).

On the basis of our efforts to reframe the contemporary perspective on low-income women’s intimate unions, we also draw attention—albeit serendipitously—to the value of ethnographic work in theory development. We agree with LaRossa’s (2012) recent commentary on ethnographic and qualitative data being an undervalued yet important source for discerning contextual and behavioral patterns in the pursuit of theory development, particularly in family science. In his discussion of the difficulties facing qualitative researchers publishing in the field of family studies, LaRossa (2012) issued a deserved call for greater theoretical development and explicitness in qualitative manuscripts submitted for journal publication. The present article addresses this call by explicitly integrating a symbolic interactionist approach with perspectives on poverty and uncertainty. We do so by using ethnographic exemplar cases to stress the potential disconnect between low-income women’s words and actions and to reconceptualize their movement toward marriage as inherently unstable interactional accomplishments, particularly in the conditions of uncertainty that are endemic to low-income life. In doing so, we hope that we are moving toward improving the paradigm for research on intimate relationships in low-income populations, one that avoids the theoretical shortcomings of reigning approaches in the field as a whole. Similarly, we hope that this work is encouraging to other scientists who seek to build theory from ethnographic and qualitative work.

We also have developed the beginnings of our theoretical approach while simultaneously drawing attention to a severely understudied population on this topic—low-income rural mothers. The conversation on low-income women and marriage has typically been limited to what urban (and occasionally suburban) low-income women have to say about marriage. In this way, most contemporary research either has glossed over the perspectives of low-income rural women, treating them as stereotypes, or has ignored them entirely. Given the changing nature of rural environments in recent decades—the disappearing agrarian ideal of

family farms, increased rates of poverty, shifts away from manufacturing to low-wage service jobs, increased participation by women in the workforce, changing gender dynamics at home (Bauer & Dolan, 2011; Lichter & Brown, 2011; Lichter & McLaughlin, 1995)—it is important to examine low-income rural women's perspectives and behaviors toward marriage. We shed light on this group, both to include them in the larger discussion on marriage and to generate better theory that accounts for a largely overlooked segment of low-income women whose lives are shaped by the constraints and opportunities of fast-changing social environments.

Our ultimate goal in pursuing this line of theoretical development is to construct a conceptual model that allows family researchers to consider and interpret the potential contradictions between what low-income mothers say *and* do in the course of moving toward or away from marriage in uncertain, low-income circumstances. In developing our approach we hope to offer a social-psychological perspective on low-income women as thinking and feeling actors who are continually adapting to changing life circumstances and to conceptualize women's movements toward marriage as ongoing and negotiated interactional accomplishments (Berger & Kellner, 1964/1994; Blumer, 1969), rather than relying solely on the conceptual (i.e., attitude-based) framing of most empirical work on this topic for guidance. Indeed, we are not entirely sure where our initial efforts to build theory and develop deeper, alternative interpretations of the marital paradox will take us. One potential direction is a deeper analysis of the forms of talk that the FLP mothers used to explain their intimate relationships and relationship plans, a fuller analysis of their talk as *accounts* (e.g., as justifications, excuses). Another possibility is an in-depth comparison of the talk and action among urban and rural low-income mothers using a comparable urban longitudinal data set—the Three-City Study (Winston et al., 1999). What we do know, though, is that a fair amount of the existing research on this topic is not sufficient enough, theoretically speaking, to guide us in interpreting contradictions between the words and deeds that occur as low-income mothers delay marriage. In our minds, the narratives of Kim, Rhonda, Elaine, and Lisa beckon us as family scientists to think more deeply about

the complexity of their lives and to develop a conceptual model that embraces the conceptual and methodological strengths of symbolic interactionism, perspectives on poverty and uncertainty, and ethnographic research as tools to guide us in being more precise in interpreting their words and deeds in the context of their everyday lives.

AUTHORS' NOTE

We gratefully acknowledge the National Science Foundation (Grants No. SES-1061591 and SES-0703968) for its support of this research. We also thank the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Grant No. PO1-HD-39667) and the Administration on Children and Families (Grant No. 900J20201) for core support of the Family Life Project ethnography. We extend special thanks to all the families who graciously participated in the study reported here.

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