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Navigating Low Wage Work and Parenting in Contexts of Poverty

Michelle Miller-Day



Contexts of poverty seem to magnify vulnerabilities in mothers, especially women who have few resources for coping and little support in parenting. Adding to the challenges of poverty are government mandates to move women off of welfare into the workforce. Focusing on the experiences of four mothers who moved from welfare into the low-wage workforce and then back to unemployment, this study offers a description of how these mothers and their adolescent children navigate and make sense of low-wage work, family life, and cumulative disadvantage.

Keywords: communication, poverty, work-family, parenting, adolescence, qualitative research

In their study of women navigating the transition from welfare into low-wage employment, Miller-Day and McManus (2009) described a mother of four, Monica, who, when asked about managing work and her family replied,

What’s important is that mothers are warm, firm, and responsive and—most of all—convey to their children that they are the mother’s

priority. No matter what the struggle, always let the kids know that they are what matter more than anything else. (p. 75)

Yet, as the mothers in this study revealed, it is difficult to convey to your children that they matter more than anything else when “there is nowhere to go. Can’t afford your rent. Gotta take care of the kids. Trying to keep this job. Don’t have no transportation....You’re back at the shelter [and] you feel stuck” (p. 70).

Some research on low-income families suggests that contexts of poverty seem to magnify vulnerabilities in parents, especially mothers, and this is exacerbated by access to few resources for coping, making it difficult for many mothers to actively parent their children (Sharlin & Shamai, 2000). Moreover, as many mothers struggle with poverty and moving into low wage employment, once they are working, their difficult work situations and job instability tend to increase stress and decrease maternal availability, reduce parental monitoring, weaken mother-youth relations, and increase the likelihood that their adolescent children will experience negative outcomes (Hsueh & Yoshikawa, 2007; Morris, Huston, Duncan, Crosby, & Bos, 2001), without much economic benefit to the household (Hildebrandt & Stevens, 2009; Ziliak, 2009). Research in social epidemiology argues that there may be cumulative disadvantage for these youth, whereby various independent risks (e.g., absent parent, poor education, risky neighborhoods) accumulate, resulting in the psycho-social and developmental disadvantages that poor children tend to experience (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Evans, 2004; Merton, 1975). Yet, little is known about how the context of cumulative disadvantage impacts women’s decisions to work outside the home and their maternal practices.

In a larger quantitative study of low-wage maternal work and mother-adolescent relations, Miller-Day and McManus (2009) found that a significant number of women moved in and out of employment during the course of their study, with many choosing to live below the poverty level with no welfare support at all, rather than stay in low-wage jobs. Yet, there was no clear reason for this pattern or any clear picture of how daily life was for these families. Therefore, I embarked on this current study to dig deeper and gain more of an in-depth and nuanced understanding of these issues. To understand something in general, we must first examine the particular. Therefore, the purpose

of the current study is to describe and understand the experiences of four pairs of mothers and adolescents from this larger study as they navigate work, family life, and cumulative disadvantage.

Background

In an effort to address poverty, the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOR) in the 1990s changed the ecology of many families by creating incentives for welfare recipients by influencing them to enter the workforce as quickly as possible (PRWOR, 1996). The impact has been marked, with welfare recipients decreasing by 51% at the end of the 20th century, but ultimately increasing the ranks of low-income and working poor families (Fremstad, 2004). As Hastings, Taylor, and Austin (2005) note, the general tendency to "constrain public welfare programs has forced poor families into a continuous survival mode involving temporary jobs and time-limited public benefits" (p. 56).

In the years following the 1996 welfare reforms, labor force participation among unmarried mothers increased by nearly 20% (Blank & Haskins, 2002; Mishel, Bernstein, & Boushey, 2003). No other group of women (single women without children, married women with or without children) or men experienced such a dramatic increase in employment (Kaushal, Gao, & Waldfogal, 2006). This dramatic change has fueled concern about the effects of poverty on children.

Fluctuating welfare and employment rates, however, do not adequately illustrate the complex lived experiences of single mothers living in poverty in the United States as they navigate parenting and employment. As Coley et al. (2007) stated, a more nuanced understanding of how these families are faring post-PRWORA is necessary, and this requires that we dig more deeply. In the wake of the 1996 welfare reform, many wondered how poor children and families would be impacted, with most of the concern directed at families with young children (Brooks, Hair, & Zaslow, 2001; Morris et al., 2001). Yet, more than a decade of research has revealed that adolescents tend to be negatively affected by their mother's transition into the low-wage workforce, citing increases in adolescent drug use, delinquent activity, and decreases in school achievement (Brooks et al., 2001; Knitzer, 2000).

Why Adolescents?

Early adolescence is a developmental period characterized by both new opportunities for growth and heightened risk. For example, delinquent behavior approximately doubles between ages 9 and 15, before beginning to decline at age 17 (Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Conners, 1991). The transition into high school is associated with a decline in grades and school engagement (Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996). Substance use increases rapidly from the sixth to the ninth grade (Oetting & Beauvais, 1990; Wills, McNamara, Vacarro, & Hinkey, 1996), and between ages 10 and 15, youth also experience a three-fold increase in depressed mood and a dramatic increase in affective disorders (Compas, Ey, & Grant, 1993; Kazdin, 1989). Approximately 13% of teens have had sexual intercourse by age 15, with sexual activity common by the late teen years and accompanied by increases in sexually transmitted disease and unintended pregnancy (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2010).

Although there may be cultural perceptions that during adolescence parents no longer exert any influence on their children, researchers have found that parent-adolescent relationships are highly consequential for youth. Parenting practices such as parental involvement and monitoring and relational factors such as social support and effective communication continue to influence adolescents' academic achievement, substance use, and conduct problems (Allen & Land, 1999; Jacobson & Crockett, 2000; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Ripple & Luthar, 2000). A strong commitment to education and bonding to school, along with meaningful inclusion of youth in activities outside the home, are related to later initiation and lower frequency of sexual activity (Ayers, Williams, Hawkins, Peterson, & Abbott, 1999; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). However, as recent research suggests, low-income working mothers in particular tend to have limited opportunities to monitor their adolescents' schoolwork or get them involved in activities outside the home (Lareau, 2003).

Theoretical Lens

Understanding how family relationships have an impact on adolescents' well-being is of great concern since family processes play a key role in shaping children's developmental trajectories (Repetti, Robles,

& Reynolds, 2011). Adolescents' mental and physical functioning hinge, in part, on the quality of parent-child interaction and parents' roles as socializing agents, models and managers of behavior (Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004). Across all socio-economic strata, exposure to parental processes such as parental monitoring has been found in numerous studies to promote children's well-being and lessen participation in risky problem behaviors such as substance use and delinquency (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Variable-analytic studies of these processes have led to the development of various theories such as emotional security theory (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007) and the family resilience framework (Walsh, 2002), explaining how family processes are central to predicting adolescent outcomes. Yet, much of this work has had little to say about how parents and adolescents experience the phenomenon of living and growing in a family context impacted by poverty. Therefore, we are faced with the challenge of understanding more about how family processes are enacted and experienced by parents and adolescents and how these shape family members' well being.

To address this challenge from a communication perspective, I apply the lens of social constructionism to view, describe, and organize the interpretations of those participating in this investigation. Social constructionism is a sociological theory of knowledge that argues that we create understandings of social phenomena such as "mothering" in social contexts, and that interactions with others serve to construct our notions of what is real (Hacking, 1999). By applying a constructionist theoretical lens in this study, I seek to discover how mothers assign meaning to maternal work and how both mothers and adolescents enact mother-child relations in contexts of poverty.

Methods

To describe the experiences of disadvantaged mother-adolescent dyads and provide a detailed understanding of how mothers and adolescents in these families interpret their daily lives, I conducted a qualitative study of four mother-adolescent pairs participating in a larger study of maternal low-wage work and mother-adolescent relations (Miller-Day & McManus, 2009), employing an ethnographic approach. The word ethnography literally means to write about people or cultures, from the Greek words *ethnos* (people) and *graphei* (to write), and at the

heart of this type of qualitative research are three things: involvement with the people and topic being studied, attention to the social context of data collection, and sensitivity to how the subjects are represented in the research text (Marvasti, 2004).

I asked all mothers and adolescents in the larger study (Miller-Day & Day, 2011; Miller-Day & McManus, 2009) ($N = 94$) if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up three month study. Seven dyads agreed to participate. Because one of the aims of this study was to more closely examine the experiences of women in the larger study who moved in and out of employment, I selected the four of the seven mother-adolescent pairs that met this criterion to participate in this study.

Co-Researcher Participants

All participants in this study functioned as informants and also as co-researchers, assisting with providing and interpreting information throughout the research process. All mothers in the study (a) resided in Burgville,¹ (b) had made the transition from welfare to low-wage

Family A	Family B
Mother: Kim (Female, age 40)	Mother: Angie (Female, age 35)
Adolescent: Caiden (Male, age 13)	Adolescent: Yolanda (Female, age 12)
# of children in household: 3	# of children in household: 3
Parenting partner: No	Parenting partner: No
Household annual income: \$7,000	Household income: \$4,000–\$6,000
Family C	Family D
Mother: Wanda (Female, age 33)	Mother: Lisa (Female, age 35)
Adolescent: Judah (Male, age 12)	Adolescent: Mary (Female, age 13)
# of children in household: 3	# of children in household: 3
Parenting partner: No	Parenting partner: Yes
Household income: \$2,000–\$5,000	Household income: \$12,000–\$14,000

Table 1: Participating Mothers and Adolescents

work within the past five years, but were again unemployed at the start of this study; (c) reported an annual household income that was less than the Federal Poverty Level guidelines (e.g., less than \$22,350 for a family of four). Table 1 outlines some basic information on each of the mother-adolescent pairs participating in this study, including ages, genders, number of children in the household, presence of a parenting partner, and household income.

Burgville itself is a small urban center in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. According to the Census of Population and Housing (2010), Burgville has a minority population of nearly half, and more than 60% of Burgville households are single-parent-headed households. The mean annual income for a female-headed-household with children in Burgville is less than \$12,000. A quarter of the families in Burgville live in poverty and nearly all of those include children under the age of 18. Its residents are employed mainly in labor and service industries and sales and support.

Procedures

Adhering to all requirements established by my university's Institutional Review Board, I tracked each family for a total of three months. During those months, I spent an average of two days per week, two to six hours per visit, in the homes of these families observing their interaction, talking with them, learning their family routines, and listening to their concerns.

To capture and document my observations, I employed three specific practices. First, when physically present in the participants' home I took extensive field notes, transcribing as much conversation verbatim as possible. When that was not possible, I would paraphrase or summarize any observed interactions. My fieldnotes included raw descriptions, conceptual memos (thoughts and interpretations about what I was observing), and researcher memos (self-reflections on my own personal reactions and interpretations). Second, whenever possible, I audio recorded exchanges with a portable digital recorder that I kept in my pocket. Participants always knew when the recorder was turned on, and they always had the option of asking me to turn it off. The audio recordings allowed me to transcribe some interactions verbatim.

Historically, there has been scholarly debate surrounding reactivity of participants when an outside observer is taking notes or recording

conversation (Davis, 1986; Johnson & Bolstad, 1975). There is ample evidence at this point suggesting that if the researcher takes steps to minimize the disruptive influence of these behaviors (e.g., introducing notetaking as a normative process in researcher-participant interaction, using jottings instead of long narrative descriptions when eye contact is important, using a small inconspicuous recording device), then reactivity can be minimal (Gittelsohn, Shankar, Ram, Gnywali, & West, 1997; Jacob, Tennenbaum, Seilhamer, Bargiel, & Sharon, 1994; Paterson, 1994).

In addition to the field notes, I conducted one or two individual unstructured, in-depth interviews with each mother and adolescent specifically focused on the parenting processes control and care. These interviews were audio recorded, ranged from 30 (an adolescent) to 120 minutes (a mother), and were always conducted in a private location away from other family members (e.g., outside on a picnic bench or in the kitchen with no one else at home). All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcriptionist, and I checked each transcript for accuracy by reading it while listening to the audiorecording, correcting any errors.

Supplementing the observations and interviews, each mother and adolescent participated in producing a daily self-report diary over a 10-day period. I would call the home at a designated time in the evening and ask a series of questions about his or her daily activities, communication partners, personal well-being, and daily struggles. These data were useful in supplementing the descriptive observational data by filling in gaps of information for times when I could not observe (e.g., early mornings, bedtime rules, and rituals).

So, what to do with all of this information? Interpreting the wealth of information (empirical materials/data) generated during this process involved making sense of the information in sensory as well as intellectual ways. Listening to both mothers and adolescents, I tried to be reflexive about my own sensory input and emotional reactions during observations, and I sought to be open to multiple voices and interpretations.

Trustworthiness

I am a working mother. I believe it is important for the reader to understand this so as to position me in this research and this research

report. As a working mother I have my own experiences, expectations, and moments of pride and guilt. I never believe I do enough for my children and sometimes fantasize about what life would be like as a stay-at-home mom. That said, as I embarked on this study, I made a concerted effort to maintain interpretive checks and balances so as not to (entirely) impose my own values onto the experiences of the mothers in this study. To enhance the trustworthiness of this research, I employed strategic sampling, triangulation of methods (observation, semi- and un-structured interviewing, and diary reports), extended engagement in the field (three months), peer debriefing with a colleague not involved with the research, member checking, and systematic management of data. So what did I learn?

“There Comes a Time [When] You Gotta Choose”: Your Kids or Your Job

The first time I walked into Feliz Manor, the 10-block-long public housing neighborhood in Burgville, I was surprised by the colors. I saw white, red, blue, and yellow sheets, shirts, and pants on clotheslines extending from one yard to the next. The array of red brick facades sported multi-color graffiti, lovely and ornate—with a mural on one wall and harsh and jagged script on another.

I saw a man using a leaf blower to blow all of the trash in the yards and sidewalks into the street, and then clean it up. I stopped to talk to him and ask if there was usually a lot of trash lying about. He said, “Yep. It’s hard to keep this neighborhood clear. Only a few residents take the time to clean up their yards. The rest is left for me. It’s sad.” But, when I reached the housing unit for Angie (Family B), I found her sweeping the concrete landing in front of her door. As I was to later learn, her apartment was almost always meticulously clean.

Angie greeted me and invited me to sit in one of two plastic chairs set out on the grass by the front of her unit. I noticed two little boys under the age of 2 playing outside in the grass. Neither child had a coat on and it was very cold outside. After about five minutes, their mother appeared from a house across the parking lot. Angie told me that the mother often left the children outside to play by themselves. Apparently several months back another person took one of the boys and hid him in her apartment “to teach [the mother] a lesson,” and when the mom came home, she panicked looking for her son. Angie

sighed, saying, “Her friend came back with the little boy, but the mom still does the same thing. I think their grandma is trying to get custody of them.”

Living situations were very similar for all families in this study. All lived in Feliz Manor, but each person’s outlook on his or her life in the projects was unique. In Family B, Angie home schooled her three children and was not employed outside the home. She had no current relational or parenting partner. She no longer received welfare payments and lived with minimal income. When discussing her brief transition into low-wage employment several years earlier, she explained,

As I became permanent in my job, it seemed like the problems that my children were having in school intensified. They got greater. The babysitter had to keep calling me for my son, who was born with asthma, and he was on a machine, and she could not control his asthma anymore by putting him on the machine.... She would have to call me, so it was like every day. If not every day, then every other day, either the babysitter was calling, or my children’s school was calling, and I had to keep leaving work. It seemed like there was no other answer but to leave my job. My kids needed me. My son especially, I was the only thing that could calm him down in order for the treatment to take effect.

When discussing the public assistance she received several years ago, she shared,

Welfare reform is good, but, not practical. Every case is individual, but how do you do it? Moving from welfare to work is more than just trading in a welfare check for a pay check. It’s about keepin’ things. Keeping your family together, keepin’ everyone safe, and, um, keepin’ your sanity. It’s about doing the most important work—“HOMEwork”...the work of parenting. For me, I just couldn’t do both.

Angie did not work outside the home and did not receive welfare payments. She lived on whatever money her daughter’s father sent her and her self-reported income of between \$4,000 and \$6,000 per year. This income was substantially below the federal poverty line for a family of four. She lived very modestly, yet shared what little she had with

neighbor children. Because of past experiences with the Department of Public Welfare, she would not apply for any kind of assistance or food stamps. She truly lived with the bare minimum. Angie was committed to staying home with her children and home schooling all three; however, she was concerned about her chronic inability to pay bills. She disclosed the following:

If I am at a job, I worry that he'll have an asthma attack. He uses this machine to breath. Not an inhaler, but an oxygen machine. Last year when they shut off my electricity, I was scared to death. I asked the electric company, "What do I do if he has an attack?" They said, "That's your problem."

Mothers, like Angie, learn to "work the system" in order to get basic needs met. For example, Angie went to a variety of food banks and had a favorite she liked more than others because "they give you more meats and meals." Many of these families found several obstacles to getting food at food banks. The problem was that in order to go to the food bank, you had to get a voucher from another social service organization. Also, these families tended to not have transportation to pick up the vouchers, let alone pick up the food. There were services offered, but a majority of families had no transportation and no money to use for public transportation. It was difficult. One day, when I gave Angie a ride to the food bank, they gave her two large boxes, a bag, and some baked goods. When I took her home, the kids came out and helped carry everything inside. They were very excited about helping unpack the food. Based on my observation, they did receive a lot more items that day than they had previously from other food banks. There were quite a few things she could make meals with, including fresh fruits and vegetables. When I helped Angie unpack the food, they had given her a small package of hamburger, and when she opened her freezer, it was completely empty. In fact, as I watched her put the food away, I saw that her cupboards were almost devoid of food. The only items I noticed were a box of baking soda and a tin of rat poison.

Angie believed that not working outside the home was "worth it" so that she could be present for her children and educate them at home. To me, I wondered if she held tightly to her children so as to work out some of her own personal issues. She said that she

always wanted to be there for [my daughter]. I wanted our relationship to be different from the relationship that I had, or non-relationship that I had with my mother. My mom was a single mother raising nine children, me being the baby of the nine.

Having very little in the way of material possessions, her children were just that—*hers*. Hers to care for, protect, and manage. For Angie, mandates to leave welfare and enter the workforce did not work. She left the welfare rolls, yes, but drifted deeper into poverty.

Four buildings away lived Wanda and Judah (Family C). They had lived in their current neighborhood for a little over one year. Wanda felt safe and did not believe there were any problems in her neighborhood. She also had no parenting partner and was not employed outside the home. Wanda was on welfare for one and a half years and currently received only a medical assistance benefit. She believed that food stamps did help with food, but Wanda said the bad part was that the “caseworker acted like she was giving the money out of her own pocket.” Wanda argued that “I pay taxes and have been working since I was 15. So, I shouldn’t be treated that way.” At one point, Wanda recounted that the state cut off her medical assistance, and she was not able to get her son’s medication for his attention deficit disorder. He was hospitalized as a result.

Wanda worked for a while in the fast food industry, but when she was laid off, she moved to the projects. She made a point of reminding me that:

We’re all just a step away from being there. You never know what life’s going to throw at you; what situation you’re going to put yourself in or that you’ll be put into. You just never know. You lose your job, you know, you just never know. Nothing’s stable anymore. No job is stable anymore.

She actively sought job opportunities, completing job applications whenever she could. She believed, though, that her employment efforts had been thwarted. She shared the following experience with me one day over lunch.

About six months ago I was so happy that I got a job and they wanted me to start workin’ ASAP. But, with the three kids I gotta find a day-care, get my paperwork done with welfare, then waitin’ for welfare to

get me a transportation allowance so I can get to my job. I got the job, and, um, I called, I said, please ... I need transportation now, so I can get my kids back and forth and get back and forth to work. I waited two weeks, two weeks, before I got that transportation allowance. By then, I already lost my job because I couldn't get there. Right now, me and my three kids, we live on about \$170 a month.

Even if one gets a job, mothers like Kim (Family A) argue that the wages paid in those positions may not make moving off welfare “worth it.” When living in public housing, rent is based on income. According to Kim,

[public housing] helps you get back on your feet. Then you get a good job.... Then once you have work, your rent goes sky-high in a few months. They even want to know what gifts you get at Christmas time from who, and they use that as income. This leaves you back where you left off at. Nowhere.

Living in similar circumstances and not far from Wanda lived Kim and her son Caiden. Kim worked at Verizon for several years and enjoyed her work. She also has no parenting partner. When she first started working at Verizon, she had morning hours from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. She would be home a half hour after the older kids got home from school. She helped them with their homework. Everything was fine until Verizon switched her hours. She was working from 9:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.—10-hour days. The kids were getting ready for bed when she came home. She felt she had no time to spend with them, and Caiden was responsible for caring for the younger children while she was at work. She learned that they were acting up in school. She had to make a decision—her kids or her job. So she decided to resign. She explained her reasoning by saying,

I wasn't there with the kids. You can always find someone to watch them, but they tend to do things they aren't supposed to when Mom is not around. They started thinking I cared more about my job than them, and they started acting out.

She said that her employer understood that she had to leave. Now that she's been home, she reported that Caiden is doing much better in school and “my being home has made a big difference.”

Lisa and her daughter Mary (Family D) lived seven buildings away from Kim, and their experience was a bit different. Lisa was not married but had a relational partner, Maurice, who could ostensibly assist with parenting. Yet during my time with this family I witnessed very little male parenting. He is the biological parent of the newborn child in the family, but not of the other two children. They have lived in their current neighborhood for almost a year. Lisa reported that their previous neighborhood had been nice years ago, but it was now run down and drug infested. She felt hopeful about her current neighborhood. She said, "It used to be bad, but they are rehabbing it. Here we have a neighborhood watch, and the kids feel safer." Mary shared with me that she felt safe sometimes, but she liked to stay close to the house. She had seen people using and selling drugs, and she characterized her living space as having a lot of broken bottles and trash lying around, with abandoned or boarded up buildings. During my first month with this family, Lisa was trying to acquire a kitten to help with the problem they had with mice. She eventually found a small tabby kitten, and she also bought rat poison and blocked the holes in her basement.

Before the new baby was born, Lisa had been working 20 to 30 hours on the weekends. Her partner worked Mondays through Fridays. She talked about how it was difficult to not have weekends with her children. She would sometimes keep them home from school on a Tuesday or a Wednesday just to spend a day with them. But after the baby was born, Lisa and Maurice decided as a couple that Lisa would stay home with the children because "it would cost more for daycare for the baby than what I would make." They also decided that he would take a second job as a night janitor. Consequently, his work schedule required him to work 14 to 18 hours per day and one weekend day. He was rarely at home.

I learned from these mothers that the types of low paying jobs available to them were somewhat insecure, with unpredictable or inconvenient hours. Child care presented a problem because of younger children or the need to supervise the adolescent. As found in other studies, although mothers may find employment, their wage rates and total earnings remain fairly low (Hildebrand & Stevens, 2009). Some scholars refer to this process as moving from economic dependence on state and federal programs to working poverty (O'Connor, 2001). Any economic gain from low wage employment tended to be offset by

increased rent in public housing and lower overall monthly income, as is often the case for low-income families (Hastings, Taylor, & Austin, 2005). The mothers in this study constructed the transition into low-wage work as not worth the losses incurred: loss of income overall, loss of flexibility, and loss in parenting oversight. These women seemed to be placed in the position of deciding to juggle the challenges of maintaining low-wage work and parenting (almost exclusively alone) or electing to move out of the workforce, be a more active parent, but shift back into poverty. In these families, as shown in other studies of the working poor, those living just above or below the poverty line are usually families headed by women who work in low-paying service-sector jobs, are less educated, and have personal health constraints or problems with their children's health (O'Neil & Hill, 2003).

Parenting in Contexts of Poverty

At the time of this study, most of the mothers studied made a conscious choice not to seek employment outside the home and all endeavored to be good mothers. But parenting adolescents in contexts of poverty may be unlike parenting adolescents in other contexts (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

From my vantage point, at first glance the adolescents in this study seemed no different from youth in other contexts. They attended school (mostly), they were not drug dealers (but they sometimes used), and they watched a *lot* of television (or what I classified as a lot)—averaging four hours of television on a school day and seven hours of viewing on a weekend day. But, as Angie (Family B) stated, "the children living here must navigate more dangerous waters than other kids." As illustration I offer one of my observations. One day, I had the opportunity to be sitting with Lisa (Family D) and Kim (Family A) on chairs in front of Kim's housing unit when we saw a neighbor sitting on his porch and rolling what looked like a joint (marijuana). The following is a recorded dialogue from this visit:

Lisa: I see transact, drug transactions takin' place just outside my door.

Kim: And there ain't nothin' you can do about it.

- Lisa: I'm tired of that. And, it's, like, I can't just up and leave. I, 'cause I don't have...that choice right now. But why do I have to live like that?
- Kim: You can smell it all; you smell it all through your house all night.
- Lisa: My daughter rips up, uh, sugar paper, any kind of paper. She'll rip it up; she'll go like this, and she'll go [mimes rolling a joint].
- Me and Kim: Mmmm.
- Lisa: "I warned you." I say to her, but she pretends to be smoking.
- Kim: See!
- Lisa: Like she knows...When they play together in the house, her and her friend, this is what they do. "You want some of this weed? Is that beer you're drinkin'? You're drinkin' beer." That's how they play together. When they're outside, they, they'll, they'll pick up sticks and they'll walk around like this. [Pretending to smoke] "We got some weed."
- Kim: Because they see everybody doin' it.
- Lisa: ...she takes the paper...then takes grass and goes like this, rolls it up and then, w, w, what cracks me up is she licks it. She licks it and then goes like this. [Pretending that she's smoking] "I will hurt you," I say [pretending to smoke]. What is, what is she doin'? [Chuckles]
- Kim: That's funny. [Laughs]
- Lisa: It's, it's not funny. It's really not.
- Kim: It's, it's a shame.
- Lisa: And she's four. And she's just four years old.

Indeed, the adolescents in this study navigated waters that differed from what my own children have faced. As Angie articulated, for these youth "their fears are very different than many children." Her daughter provided further insight saying, "I worry about somebody just walking up to me and shooting me. My neighborhood is bad." This is similar to what Judah shared, "I worry about getting shot. My mom. I worry about her, too. I just stay in the house 'cause

its safer." All of these adolescents spent much of their times indoors watching television.

Wanda (Family C) consistently urged her children to play outside or go to the Boys and Girls Club. But, she did admit that the Boys and Girls Clubs did not provide enough supervision, "so the kids end up leaving and getting into trouble." She explained,

My [seven year old] daughter was outside in the playground and, um, she came home screamin', hollerin', and cryin'. Some boy just walked up to her—had to be about an eight-year-old boy—came up to her and punched her in her face. Her, her face was just black for a couple of days. He just punched her, just dead in her face for no reason. Dead in her face.

One day, while walking past a nearby playground, Caiden (Family A) reported that on another day he had been "playin' when some boy came up and just whipped me in the back with a belt. I had a long welt across my back. For no reason!" These apparent random acts of neighborhood violence seemed to propel family members into the safety of their homes and increase parental uncertainty about how to keep their children safe.

Angie, specifically, expressed ongoing concern about not only keeping her children safe, but also about how to communicate messages of security and safety to her children. One week in late spring, the neighborhoods were abuzz with news of a recent shooting. It turned out that the shooting victim was Angie's nephew. She explained,

The kids are comin' home from school, people are running their errands and then...he gets shot. Yesterday. My nephew. My nephew got shot. He and his cousin were sitting in their car and this *thug*, this gangster whipped out a gun and shot them in their car. My nephew was killed. They were behind a school bus filled with kindergarteners, and when he was shot the car hit the bus with these babies. The shooter got away. This boy, my sister's boy, was killed on the same day that his grandfather died some 20 years ago. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This was a difficult time for many of the families participating in the study. The shooters were caught by the police, but not until nearly

two weeks had passed. Everyone seemed to be staying indoors. Angie shared her sense of helplessness with me. She said,

My baby asked me, “Mom, I dreamt last night of being shot in my stomach. Are they gonna shoot tonight? Mom, are they coming around here?” And the only thing I could tell him is, “Honey, I can’t promise you anything, but whatever goes down, Mommy’s going to be here and make sure you’re protected.” I wanted to pull him back into me; to be one with him again. You know, I cannot tell him, “No, they’re not going to shoot tonight. Go to sleep.” When we hear shooting out here every three days. I can’t say that...no.

The challenges of parenting in the context of poverty were many, but as Kim stated, “it makes us a stronger, closer family.” These family members have each other and, for most of these mothers, they embrace a pattern of mothering that Arditti, Burton, and Neeves-Botelho (2010) refer to as *survivalist mothering*.

Survivalist Mothering

First identified in disadvantaged families (Arditti et al., 2010), survivalist mothers embody a parenting style that encompasses firm control, care, and advocacy behaviors. Firmness and high levels of control were evident in two of the households in this study. These mothers tended to regulate and monitor their children’s chores, responsibilities, and leisure time very closely.

There is a wealth of evidence that young adolescents who spend unsupervised time affiliating with deviant peers are at increased risk for school dropout, problem behaviors, early substance use, and criminal activity (Ary, Duncan, Duncan, & Hops, 1999; Griffin, 2000). Parents who monitor their adolescents’ activities—knowing who they are with, where they are, and what they are doing—are more likely to implement rules and curfews and notice whether their adolescents are getting into trouble. All of the adolescents in this investigation had curfews and rules about homework and other chores. Yet, the boys’ mothers were not as vigilant in their monitoring as the girls’ mothers. Kim, who had four older children not living at home, stated her opinion was that her son “is old enough to take care of himself” and “I don’t ask him to do too much around the house. It’s too exhausting to try and get him to do it.” It was my opinion that Kim was not

apathetic about monitoring Caiden, but was not very nervous about the trouble Caiden might get into on his own. She was more relaxed in her parenting than some of the other mothers.

Interestingly, both of the boys—Caiden and Judah—indicated that their mothers did not *really* know as much about their activities as their mothers thought they did. Both of these adolescents perceived that their mothers did not monitor their lives as much as the girls' mothers did, and the boys also reported that their mothers used much more aggressive communication strategies with them when they had conflict with their mothers than the other mothers did with the girls in the study. Pretty consistently, the arguments in all families surrounded these rules or chores, but the arguments in families A and C were certainly louder and more frequent. According to Caiden and Judah, their mothers would hit, slap, kick, swear, and throw things during conflicts and arguments. Wanda and Lisa were generally very vocal women, and I did hear Lisa scream on numerous occasions, but in my notes I wrote "what parent doesn't?" Caiden and Judah reported lower levels of perceived maternal monitoring and actual maternal knowledge of their activities and higher levels of aggression during conflict with their mothers than did the girls in this study. Almost every time I visited Wanda and Judah, Wanda was issuing directives in a stern fashion and one or both of them would argue about something, such as chores or sibling relationships. There was no physical violence during my observations, but Judah discussed with me how he "hates when his mom thinks she is always right. She will yell, swear, and throw stuff just to get her way."

Both boys in this investigation also had much higher incidents of problem behaviors than did the girls. When asked to fill out an inventory of behaviors, Caiden reported that he was already sexually active at the age of 13, was having academic difficulties, had been suspended from school, had been caught stealing more than \$50, and had been on probation for criminal trespass, but he reported no alcohol or other drug use. Judah, at the age of 12, reported that he was not sexually active, but was having academic difficulties, had been suspended from school, self-reported theft of over \$500, violent crimes, and alcohol use. In contrast, the girls did not report these kinds of aggressive behavior during conflicts with their mothers, reported higher levels of maternal monitoring, and fewer problem behaviors.

Yolanda, for example, had high levels of academic achievement, was not sexually active, and had not tried alcohol or any other drug. She did, however, self-report theft of less than \$50. Similarly, Mary had high levels of academic achievement and was not sexually active. She had, though, experimented with alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana, and she self-reported theft of less than \$50. From what I observed, the association between maternal aggressive conflict communication and maternal monitoring reminds me of the marital research by Gottman (1994) that revealed conflict in a relationship—per se—is not indicative of marital difficulty and does not predict divorce. His findings suggested that it is the manner in which arguments are conducted that is most predictive of marital difficulty. I postulate that a similar phenomenon may be occurring in parent-child relationships. Conflict alone may not negatively affect the parent-child relationship; indeed, there was plenty of conflict around chores and sibling relationships in all of these households. But, the aggressive conflict strategies employed by the boys' mothers such as kicking, swearing, and throwing things seemed to have a negative effect on adolescent satisfaction with the mother-adolescent relationship. It is not clear whether mothers are more aggressive because their child is perceived as more "difficult" or whether the child is more "difficult" because of aggressive ways of interacting with Mom. Yet, quantitative data from the larger study and these qualitative data suggest that it is not just maternal monitoring that seems to contribute to negative outcomes for adolescents, regardless of maternal employment status. These data suggest that the ways in which adolescents interact with mothers during conflict situations may be consequential.

The moms in this study didn't just fight *with* their children, they fought *for* them. Wanda explained, "My kids are all I got and I am all they got. Why wouldn't I fight for them?" I was having hot chocolate one morning with Angie when she told me the following story of advocating for her daughter:

My daughter has never spoken Spanish. But they put her in the ESL class. Now, here my daughter's like terrified. She's like, "They're teaching, speaking to me in Spanish. I have no idea what they're saying". She's like, "I don't speak Spanish. Why are they making me take that class?" They didn't listen to her. I even talked to the principal, but they assume since she has a Spanish last name that she

speaks it. My daughter's crying everyday. She's like, "Well, they took me to a lower English class and I don't understand why." I see her bringing in her homework, and I see her, you know, I help her out, and she knows maybe like two words in Spanish.

I was told that there's funding available for these English as a Second Language classes and if they can demonstrate a percentile of the school is of Latino descent then they can apply for those special funds, see, to hire another person. That's fine, that's their prerogative. But why should they bring my daughter's grades down to get more money. [She pauses in contemplation.] Make her feel bad to get more money? I tried to help her out, but she's still in that class. Do you know anyone who can help?

Schools were often constructed as adversarial rather than supportive. Even when enlisting the assistance of her school when trying to advocate for her son, Kim discovered that there may be "a fine line between helping and hurting" your child. After several months of visits with Kim and Caiden, I noticed that Caiden would sleep the day away, refuse to go to school, and that he barely ate. When Kim would travel on the bus to her church in an informal (under the table) job, Caiden would not attend school at all. He appeared to me to be depressed. One day I got a call from Kim who was crying. I drove over to her home as quickly as I could, and in a quivering voice she explained,

I took today off from the church and took the bus to his school. I told the principal that Caiden refused to come to school, but it was 'cause he's depressed. He said he would have to go to my house and physically pick my baby up and bring him to school. He called for three security officers to meet him at my house. The one officer had told me that if he gives them a hard time, he would have to handcuff him to bring him in.

They all went to his bedroom and told him to get up. They told him he had four minutes to get ready, and however he looked in those four minutes, that's how he was going to school.

[Caiden] said "I can't go, I still need a haircut. I didn't get my haircut." I said, "gel it down, baby. Go with them."

He didn't argue. He just went with them.

I just wanted to do the right thing. Wouldn't you?

All the mothers in this study invested considerable energy in their children. On average, when not employed, these mothers spent five to seven hours per day with their children, and even when doing volunteer or other work, would spend as much time as possible with them, often just watching television together or doing chores. Kim (Family A) monitored her child's activities less often than the other mothers, but she advocated for him as well as she could. In following up with Caiden after the security guard escort incident, he started attending school again, worked with a tutor, and slowly gained back some energy and interest for school. The school counselor worked together with Kim to get Caiden some mental health counseling. My understanding is that this counseling is ongoing.

Summary and Conclusions

Informed by research on family process and social constructionism, this study described and examined how four mothers living in the context of poverty navigated low wage employment outside the home and parenting in the face of poverty and cumulative disadvantage. Echoing previous research, this study finds that contexts of poverty may magnify vulnerabilities in mothers and impact their ability to parent effectively (Sharlin & Shamai, 2000). As this study found, environmental risks and a lack of resources may also serve to propel mothers into survivalist mothering, providing care and advocacy, but with firm control.

For most of the mothers in this study, the financial and relational costs of employment outside the home were constructed as “not worth” the income. Because of a lack of transportation, unstable employment opportunities, and unpredictable hours, employment was constructed by most of these women as taking them away from the work that was most important in their world—HOMEwork²—the work of parenting. All mothers constructed their maternal role as the sole supporter of their children, and other challenges distracted from that role. One of the mothers, Lisa, made what I believe is an excellent point when she said,

Do you know what the difference is though between most parents and [working] poor parents? Most parents work one job with steady hours and can plan their lives. It's not uncertain every day; every darn

month. If their child gets sidetracked while finding his way, there are usually others around to catch him. For us, we work two to three jobs just to put food on the table and our children...well, if *our* children lose their way they fall. They just fall.

For most of these mothers, they made a conscious choice to work in the home providing support for their children, instead of working outside the home in low wage positions. The consequences of that choice were that these mothers learned to work the system and rely on the kindness of strangers and social services. Public housing was the only thing that kept all these families off the streets, but rent was income-based and so any extra jobs or even gifts threatened low rents, dissuading mothers from reporting any extra income.

HOMEwork, the work of parenting, was substantially influenced by living in environments of poverty. Maternal constructions of neighborhood safety and danger shaped the messages they shared with their children, often casting themselves in the role of the protector and monitor, keeping the family safe in the enclave of the household. A child being told not to answer doors because "someone might want to rape you" may serve a powerful function in co-constructing the household as a sanctuary protecting its members from a dangerous external environment. This is not to say that these constructions were not warranted. These neighborhoods did have dangerous elements. The stories told to children and the rules regulating time outside the home served to construct the world outside the household as threatening and the world inside as a haven. Most of these mothers made a significant effort to control and manage a secure household and protect their adolescent from the risks of the neighborhood.

Those women who were survivalist mothers exerted firm control over their adolescents, along with caring and advocacy. Maternal control served to protect the youth from environmental risks, such as violence and drugs, by managing and monitoring what, when, where, and to whom the youth were exposed in this outside world. In these relationships, the "we" of the family was perceived as distinct and separate from the "them" who existed outside the walls of the home. Yet, in those times when harsh realities reached into the home, maternal advocacy attempted to buffer the child from these realities.

Finally, it seems that mother-adolescent conflict communication may be very consequential for understanding how family interaction

influences youth outcomes. In this research, the quantitative analysis from the larger study (Miller-Day & Day, 2010) and this qualitative study reveal that aggression during conflict (e.g., hitting, slapping, swearing) along with low levels of maternal monitoring were linked to problem behaviors such as delinquency for male adolescents as young as 12 years old. Because this is a descriptive study, I cannot be certain that maternal aggression and low levels of maternal monitoring are statistically correlated with problem behaviors for boys; but, this finding is suggestive of a pattern. Perhaps, assertive (rather than aggressive) and vigilant parenting may respect the developmental and emotional needs of the child while protecting him or her from the risks of poverty.

There are no easy answers. For the women and children who participated in this study and helped me see the world from their perspective, home is a powerful place. As a working parent I want to stay home with my children on many days, and on others I need to go to work to get away from the craziness of children, dogs, husband, and the chores that beckon. But I believe that I have choices and that, most of the time, my family benefits from my work outside the home. For mothers such as Kim, Wanda, Lisa, and Yolanda, however, navigating work and parenting in contexts of poverty is much, much more complicated than for those of us living with adequate means. In the end, this study adds to the rich work-life literature in our field (e.g., Buzzanell, 2005; Medved, 2007; Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Although much of the work-life literature illustrates the complexities of work-life issues for middle-class Caucasian women, this study extends the conversation to reflect the experiences of working class, minority women and their adolescent children.

Notes

- 1 Burgville is a fictional name used to protect the privacy of the participants.
- 2 "HOMEwork" was the title of the ethnodrama that came out of this research. To the participants (and me) this phrase emphasizes that work occurs at home and not just in other workplaces.

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