Where are the men?

Low-income women's experience of heterosexual relationships.

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to review the available literature concerning how low-income women experience their heterosexual relationships. Particular attention was paid to the constructs of social support and intimacy which have both been cited as important variables for coping with stress. It was found that, despite there being more stressors associated with poverty, very little research has been conducted on low-income women. However, when comparing the available literature, there seem to be important differences between low-income and middle-class women's expectations regarding heterosexual relationships. The literature suggests that for low-income women, heterosexual relationships can often be experienced as an additional source of stress, particularly as traditional gender roles play a greater role in expectations regarding the provision of social support. It therefore seems as though some low-income women, in a bid not to submit to traditional role expectations, choose to stay single and strive for financial independence in order to retain power within heterosexual relationships. The need for intimacy was not clearly articulated by low-income women but a desire for a sexually faithful partner was expressed. Although it seemed as though low-income women did not expect social support or intimacy from their male partners, they did articulate other specific expectations. The literature suggested that low-income women could reliably expect sex and the conception of children from their heterosexual relationships but that their other expectations were often disappointed. However, heterosexual relationships are considered an important means for low-income women to gain status within the community. Finally, the current review of the literature highlighted the considerable overlap between the constructs of social support and intimacy. In conclusion, further research needs to be conducted (particularly in South Africa) in order to determine how low-income women experience their heterosexual relationships.

OPSOMMING

Die doel van hierdie studie was om 'n oorsig te kry van die beskikbare literatuur oor lae-inkomstevroue se ervaring van hulle heteroseksuele verhoudings. Aandag is in die besonder gegee aan die konstrukte van sosiale ondersteuning en intimiteit, wat albei as belangrike veranderlikes tydens die hantering van stres aangedui is. Daar is bevind dat, ondanks die feit dat daar meer stressore is wat met armoede in verband gebring word, baie min navorsing nog oor lae-inkomstevroue gedoen is. Wanneer die beskikbare literatuur egter vergelyk word, lyk dit asof daar belangrike verskille is tussen die verwagtinge wat onderskeidelik lae-inkomstevroue en vroue uit die middelklas het ten opsigte van heteroseksuele verhoudinge. Die literatuur voer aan dat lae-inkomstevroue heteroseksuele verhoudings dikwels as 'n addisionele bron van stres beleef, veral aangesien tradisionele geslagsrolle 'n groter rol speel in verwagtinge rondom die verskaffing van sosiale ondersteuning. Dit lyk dus asof sommige lae-inkomstevroue in 'n poging om hulle nie aan tradisionele rolverwagtinge te onderwerp nie, verkies om nie te trou nie, maar om eerder na finansiële onafhanklikheid te streef in 'n poging om die mag in heteroseksuele verhoudings te behou. Die behoefte aan intimiteit is nie duidelik deur lae-inkomstevroue aangedui nie, maar wel 'n behoefte aan 'n enkelvoudige heteroseksuele verhouding. Alhoewel dit gelyk het asof lae-inkomstevroue nie sosiale ondersteuning of intimiteit van hulle mansvriende verwag het nie, het hulle ander spesifieke verwagtinge genoem. Uit die literatuur wil dit lyk of lae-inkomstevroue met redelike sekerheid seks en die verwekking van kinders van hulle heteroseksuele verhoudings kon verwag, maar dat hulle ander verwagtinge dikwels teleurgestel word. Nogtans word heteroseksuele verhoudings as 'n belangrike manier gesien waarop lae-inkomstevroue status in die gemeenskap kan verkry. Die huidige literatuurstudie belig ook die aansienlike oorvleueling tussen die konstrukte van sosiale ondersteuning en intimiteit. Ten slotte is dit duidelik dat verdere navorsing gedoen moet word (veral in Suid-Afrika) om te bepaal hoe lae-inkomstevroue hulle heteroseksuele verhoudings beleef.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Poverty is stressful. According to Amato and Zuo (1992) both rural and urban poverty has far-reaching negative consequences for quality of life, including exposure to stressful life events (e.g. crime, victimisation, illness and unemployment) and chronic strains such as economic hardship, frustrated aspirations and job dissatisfaction. Psychologically, these experiences are likely to lower people's self esteem and decrease their sense of control over life. Indeed, available literature has consistently shown that the poor experience a lower level of psychological well-being than the non-poor (Amato & Zuo, 1992; Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, quoted in Todd & Worell, 2000).

However, despite the many acute and chronic stressors associated with poverty, many women living in adversity do not exhibit poor mental health but continue to enjoy a positive sense of well-being (Todd & Worell, 2000). Research identifying the individual and socioenvironmental variables that mediate levels of psychological adaptation under impoverished conditions unfortunately remains scarce (Olsen, Kieschnick, Banyard & Ceballo, 1994). Little is thus known regarding the factors that enable low-income women of colour to lead positive and productive lives in the face of adversity, stress and poverty.

One potential mediator of life stress that has been proposed for impoverished women is the nature of their social network ties (Goldman & Hatch, 2000; Olsen et al., 1994). In the case of low- income women who are typically exposed to harsher life stressors and have limited access to psychological resources, it is important to explore the positive or negative impact their social support systems can have on their mental health and sense of well-being. In the literature a person's heterosexual life partner (typically referred to as husband or wife) is considered to be part of such a potentially supportive social network. While the impact of social support networks on the mental health of low-income women can be considered under-researched, even less attention has been paid to the supportive potential of poor women's heterosexual relationships. Collins and Feeney (2000), working with the intimate relationships of a different population (middle-class American women) conceptualise this problem as follows: "...researchers still know little about the specific ways in which social support processes are carried out in dyadic interactions or about the role social support plays in the development and maintenance of close relationships" (p.1053). They postulate that the gap in the literature is related to the fact that "the social support and close relationship literatures have evolved in different research traditions and have developed along largely independent lines"(p.1053). In exploring the literature it seems indeed true that there also is a growing body of literature suggesting that intimacy is an important component of stress resistance (Hobfoll, Londond & Orr, 1988), but once again it seems that the impact of intimacy on the mental health of low-income women has not been the focus of much research attention (Nyamathi,Wenzel,Keenan, Leake & Gelberg, 1999).

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In this paper the concern is with what the literature says about the impact of heterosexual relationships on the mental health of low-income women. To address this question it is necessary to consult two different bodies of literature: (1) the literature on social support, low-income women and heterosexual relationships and (2) the literature on intimacy, low-income women and heterosexual relationships. In the reviews specific attention will be paid to how low-income women have different or similar expectations and experiences of heterosexual relationships than their middle-class counterparts. The review of these literatures will be used to consider possible ways in which the study of social support can be integrated with the study of close relationships.

When reviewing studies concerned with low-income women and heterosexual relationships, one cannot help but to be struck by the paucity of literature on this topic. More generally, it has to be noted that despite so many women living below the poverty level, they have largely been ignored in psychological research (Olsen et al., 1994; Todd & Worell, 2000). Many studies have ignored the social context of poor women and erroneously assumed that their socialisation and experiences differ only quantitatively rather than qualitatively from their middle-and upper-income counterparts (Reid, quoted in Todd & Worell, 2000). In addition, the complete lack of feminist research and writings on women of colour (Landrine, quoted in Todd & Worell, 2000) have resulted in the qualitative experience of oppression (stemming from the dual stigma of being a woman and belonging to a racial minority in a society devaluing both) being left unexplored (Thomas & Miles, quoted in Todd & Worell, 2000). This is of particular relevance in the South African context where women of colour have been actively discriminated against. Research on low-income women and heterosexual relationships seems to be specifically lacking.

While it will be interesting to contemplate the possible reasons for this specific gap in the literature (for instance, due to the high prevalence of lone parenthood amongst impoverished women most studies focus on the women themselves rather than their heterosexual relationships) it is important for the purposes of the current paper to note the specific problems of this literature review. First, because the topic is seldom directly addressed, studies that were not specifically focused on the topic under discussion but included any findings about low-income women and heterosexual relationships were also reviewed. This often meant that studies could not be compared in direct ways. Furthermore, as a literature review that must serve as the basis for a study of the experience of heterosexual relationships among low-income South African women of colour, this review is problematic in that most available data, if not all, on low-income women has been collected from countries where the context of being poor differs vastly from South Africa.

Thus, in this paper, due to the paucity of local data, hypotheses will be made on the basis of existing research which may or may not be applicable to the South African context. Due to the global paucity of data on impoverished women, hypotheses will often be drawn from research on women from other socio-economic

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classes and these findings will then be compared to the available data on this specific population. In the discussion of this research the constructs of gender, class and culture will receive specific attention. Whilst not all literature can be categorised as such it is hoped that by focusing on gender issues the difference in women's specific mental health needs compared to those of men will become illuminated. Further emphasis can be placed on the differences and similarities in relationship practises (which may include marriage or non-marriage) by including the categories of class and culture.

2. SOCIAL SUPPORT AND INTIMACY

As mentioned above, the issue of close relationships and their impact on mental health have been studied in two separate research traditions, the social support literature and the intimacy literature. In this section the focus will be on the conceptual clarification of the key concepts in these two important literatures, the concept of social support and the concept of intimacy. A review of existing definitions of the key concepts will be followed by the provision of working definitions of the concepts for the purposes of this paper.

2.1   Social support and mental health

Sarason et al. (quoted in Fundudis, 1997) define social support as the "existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value and love us". According to Magill, Rodriguez and Turner (1996) it seems as though there are different types of support and that it is important to match the type of support provided to the type of support needed. They differentiate between tangible support (the provision of material aid in the form of goods and services), informational support (provision of information regarding where help is available) and emotional support. Belsky (quoted in Fundudis, 1997) further included the concept of instrumental assistance as a form of social support and defined this as the provision of information and advice as well as help with routine tasks including childcare. Berke (quoted in Flexman, Berke & Settles, 1999) defined social support as any support included within the financial, physical, emotional, advice/guidance and socialising realm.

According to Magill et al. (1996), emotional support is more likely to come from intimate sources such as family and close friends whilst informational and tangible support are more likely to come from more impersonal sources such as formal services. Therefore, it seems that the concept of emotional support is more closely associated with close relationships and thus requires a more explicit definition. Magill et al. (1996) defined emotional support as the expression of positive feelings toward an individual, which includes acknowledging their worth and accepting their beliefs and feelings. Belsky (quoted in Fundudis, 1997) defined emotional support as interpersonal acceptance and loving care received from others via verbal expression or through considerate and caring actions.

From the above it is clear that the definitions of social support vary across the vast body of research. There does seem to be consensus amongst researchers that it is best understood as a multi-factorial construct comprised mainly of support network resources, supportive behaviour and perceived social support (Turner & Marino, 1994). Hobfall and his colleagues (quoted in Logsdon, Birkimer & Barbee, 1997) claim that individuals in a social network who can provide support (amongst other resources), greatly enhance the ability for people to cope in times of stress (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason quoted in Fundudis, 1997). However, whilst support network resources and supportive behaviour are important constructs within social support, research reveals that perceived social support is the variable most consistently and powerfully associated with psychological well-being (Olsen et al., 1994; Turner & Marino, 1994). Collins and Feeney (2000) support this notion by adding that receiving social support, or feeling confident that it will be available when needed, helps individuals cope more effectively with stressful life events and therefore appears to have long term benefits for health and psychological well-being (Cobb et al., quoted in Flexman et al.,1999). Social support can therefore be seen as the beneficial interpersonal transactions that protect people from adverse effects of stress thus benefiting health, mental health and happiness (Lu, 1997). According to Eckenrode and Gore (quoted in Fundudis, 1997), social support can either act preventatively by reducing the likelihood of negative life changes occurring (e.g. becoming depressed), or, in its buffering capacity, can control the interpretation of emotional responses following a life change.

The importance of social support in dealing with stress is illustrated by research revealing that individuals lacking social support are more vulnerable to health and psychiatric disorders and are often at a higher risk for suicide (Weiss; Williams, quoted in Flexman et al., 1999). When considering the literature regarding the elevated levels of stress amongst impoverished communities it is important to note research suggesting a link between low socioeconomic status and being unmarried with increased risk for both psychological distress and serious psychiatric disorder (Turner & Marino, 1994). Research on lone mothers living in sociodemographically deprived conditions has revealed that the absence of a meaningful supportive relationship tends to exacerbate depressive symptomatology and vulnerability to stress (Belsky, Youngblade & Pensky; Gelles; Jacobson & Frye; Popay & Jones; Zuravin quoted in Fundudis, 1997).

From the above it can be concluded that social support has significant implications for mental health and could have particular relevance for individuals living under the stressful conditions associated with poverty. However, the levels of stress and amount of social support varies according to the nature of the stress and across subgroups of the population (Turner & Marino, 1994). Therefore the mere presence of social relationships cannot be assumed to be a protective factor. As research indicates that it is the degree of satisfaction with the quality of support resources that is most consistently linked to positive mental health (Olsen et al., 1994;Turner & Marino, 1994) it is important to distinguish between the quantity of regular social contacts and their perceived quality.

In concluding this section it is necessary to provide a working definition of social support. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper social support will be defined as those interpersonal interactions which communicate caring and are perceived as caring. This caring can be financial, instrumental or emotional.

2.2   Intimacy and mental health

In the literature it has been proposed that intimacy is composed of various components such as companionship and affirmation. Words that have been associated with intimacy include "enduring relationship," or "a close, intimate and confiding relationship" (Brown & Harris, quoted in Ridley, 1993, p.244). Brown and Harris (quoted in Ridley, 1993) stated that in order for a relationship to provide intimacy, there had to be trust, effective understanding and in some cases, access to a sexual relationship. Hobfoll et al. (1988) defined intimate relationships as those "in which one feels able to disclose personal thoughts and feelings and from which one derives affection and a sense of belonging" (Hobfoll et al., 1988, p.318) whilst McAdams, Lester, Brand, McNamara & Lensky (1988) defined it as "a recurrent desire for, or preoccupation with warm, close, and reciprocal interaction"(McAdams et al.,1988, p.407). They further stated that women possess a higher intimacy motive than men. This means that women actively seek intimate relationships and they defined this "intimacy motive" as a "recurrent preference or readiness for experiences of warm, close, and communicative interaction with others". Culp and Beach (1998) added that self-disclosure was inherently part of intimacy because most definitions of intimacy that they had reviewed included this as a component.

The importance of intimacy in mental health is substantiated by research revealing that the maintenance of a stable, intimate relationship has been associated with enhanced emotional well-being and a lowered incidence of depression (Lin, Woelfel & Dumin; Lowenthal & Haven quoted in Pretorius, 1997). However, despite intimacy being implicated in mental health it is interesting to note that there is no universal agreement about the exact nature of intimacy (Culp &Beach, 1998). In her article investigating intimacy needs amongst men and women, Ridley (1993) mentioned how difficult it was to define and she reflected on how much research had been done regarding couple relationships without ever defining the concept of intimacy. The elusiveness of a definition is even more interesting when considering the fact that intimacy has been linked to the mental health of woman in particular. The literature states that women actively seek to form intimate relationships (Block, quoted in McAdams et al., 1988) and that within the context of a heterosexual relationship a lack of intimacy is associated with a higher incidence of depression (Carr, Gilroy & Sherman, 1996).

For the purposes of this paper an intimate relationship is defined as one that is subjectively experienced as being close and confiding (Brown & Harris quoted in Ridley, 1993). As such it is a relationship based on trust and effective, reciprocal understanding of each partner's emotional needs and is one in which a person not

only feels able to reveal personal thoughts and feelings but from which they obtain affection and a sense of belonging. Sex may also, but does not have to, be part of such a relationship. In this paper the focus will be on heterosexual relationships and the question of whether or not low-income women experience or expect intimacy within such a context will be explored.

3.   HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE, HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS AND LOW-INCOME WOMEN: THE PREVALENCE OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD

Before focusing on the constructs of social support and intimacy within a heterosexual relationship, it seems important to discuss some of the issues encountered within the literature reviewed, particularly with respect to low-income women and household structure. Whilst the definition of heterosexual relationships is complicated in the literature in general by the tendency for them to be defined within the context of marriage, reviewing literature regarding heterosexual relationships amongst the lower classes is even more problematic. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, as previously mentioned, few studies focus on the low-income population in general and consequently studies that explore low-income women's attitudes towards and expectations of heterosexual relationships are even scarcer. As Mclaughlin and Lichter (1997) summarised, "...marriage provides one route out of poverty and long-term reliance on welfare, yet little is known about the factors that encourage or impede marriage among poor, young women" (p.582). Secondly, most of the literature available regarding low-income women concerns single mothers. It is significant in itself that research on this population, to date, has focused mostly on single mothers rather than on heterosexual relationships. It therefore seems plausible to briefly review some of the literature regarding the prevalence of single motherhood especially since it has been associated with additional, specific stressors. For the purposes of this paper, it seems necessary to understand whether or not this holds any significance when considering low-income women's expectations of heterosexual relationships.

Indeed, it has been found that the trend amongst impoverished women seems to be to steer away from marriage (Olsen et al., 1994) and to opt instead for being single or lone motherhood (Fundudis, 1997). McLoughlin and Lichter (1997) found that poor women, especially if they were employed, were less likely to marry than their more economically advantaged counterparts. They were also slower to enter a first marriage or to remarry following a divorce (Bumpass & Sweet, quoted in Edin, 2000). Studies on poorer women have also indicated that marriage will be less likely as the amount of public assistance increases (Mcloughlin & Lichter, 1997) Thus, the more financially independent poor women become, the less they marry. Yet many of these women are also single mothers and it is well documented that lone mothers frequently fall under the category of low-income women due to the associated financial hardships. Research conducted in the United Kingdom in the early 1990's indicated that lone mothers were amongst the most financially deprived of all the social groups (Giles et al., quoted in Hope, Power & Rodgers, 1999). The combination of single parenthood

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and poverty places women at extremely high risk for anxiety, depression, and health problems (Olsen et al., 1994). Research indicates that low-income, single mothers have the highest rate of depression amongst any demographic group (Brown, Harris & Bifuko; Gelles; Rutter & Quinton; Zuravin, quoted in Fundudis, 1997; D'Ercole, quoted in Todd & Worell, 2000). Lone parents typically have to act as both caretaker and breadwinner (Fundudis, 1997) in emotionally and economically strained conditions (Aldous, 1999). Divorced or separated mothers may also have to contend with the additional stress of custody rights and making contact arrangements for their child(ren) which could involve legal disputes and maintenance conflicts (Hetherington & Camara quoted in Fundudis, 1997). Yet, despite these known stressors the number of impoverished, single mothers continues to rise. The paucity in research unfortunately means that the reasons behind this tendency remain unexplored.

There are some studies revealing a new trend regarding single motherhood amongst women in the higher classes. Mannis (1999) conducted a qualitative, feminist study focusing on a subgroup of single, financially independent, white, middle-class women from Wisconsin, United States who actively chose single motherhood. In her study Mannis (1999) found that these mothers specified that they had deliberately chosen and planned for single motherhood and had based the decision on their own earlier life experiences. The notion that there are women who are choosing to construct their own new families in societies still upholding the notion of a traditional family with males as dominant breadwinners is indeed informative (Mannis, 1999). Although the results of Mannis' (1999) study cannot be generalised due its small and select sample, the concept of single motherhood by choice could provide an alternative interpretation of the many impoverished single mothers. However, whilst it could be that poor women, like the more privileged women in Mannis' (1999) study, are also deliberately choosing single motherhood without the expectation of having a partner, the reality is that whether they do in fact have a choice in the matter is not known. However, it cannot be helped but to wonder whether the high incidence of single motherhood amongst this population articulates something about how they experience their heterosexual relationships.

In a search of the psychological literature specifically investigating factors that influence low-income women's attitudes towards marriage, only two studies could be found. McLaughlin and Lichter (1997) conducted a quantitative study on the likelihood of marriage amongst poor women in the United States. They used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NSLY) in order to get a nationally representative sample of all poor women between the ages of 14-22yrs. Edin (2000) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 292 low-income African American and white single mothers in 3 different cities (Chicago, Charleston and Camden) in the United States in order to explore their views on marriage because of the high incidence of non-marriage and single parenthood amongst this population.

A further two studies were found that focused on the impact of heterosexual relationships on the mental health of low-income women. Sobo (1995) used both qualitative and quantitative data obtained from 30 impoverished urban women in a Midwestern city in the United States to investigate the impact their experiences and understandings of heterosexual relationships had on safe-sex practises. Nyamathi et al. (1999) conducted a quantitative study researching the impact heterosexual relationships had on 558 homeless women's health and well-being in Los Angeles, United States.

The above-mentioned studies will be reviewed in the sections that follow. Because of the high incidence of single motherhood amongst low-income women, the remaining studies that will be reviewed are those focusing on the factors enabling them to cope with the stresses of poverty (Brodsky, 1999; Olsen et al., 1994; Todd & Worell, 2000).

4. HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND LOW INCOME-WOMEN

In this section the literature concerning the role of social support in the heterosexual relationships of low-income women will be reviewed. However, due to the paucity of specific data, it will be necessary to address the topic in a circumscribed fashion. First, literature on heterosexual relationships, social support and women in general will be reviewed with the aim of eliciting their dominant expectations and experiences. This will be compared to the available data on low-income women.

4.1 Heterosexual relationships, social support and women in general

As outlined previously, perceived social support has most consistently been linked to mental health and well-being (Crouch, Milner & Caliso, 1995; Turner & Marino, 1994). In their study on support seeking and caregiving in middle-class, intimate relationships, Collins and Feeney (2000) found that perceived social support and the quality of caregiving were interdependent. In other words, the amount of social support perceived was dependent on the quality of care given and this highlights the reciprocal responsibility both partners in a relationship share in shaping the nature and quality of their interactions. However, when considering the significance of the notion of social support within the context of heterosexual relationships, the literature clearly suggests that this impact is gendered. Although theoretically social support is genderless and of a reciprocal and equal nature, research points to a vast difference in the costs and benefits of social support within a family or a relationship context when comparing men and women. This is of particular importance with respect to women in whose moral upbringing emphasis is laid on caring for others and their needs (Gilligan, quoted in Belle, 1982). Although the health benefits of receiving social support have been well documented (Belle, 1982) little attention has been given to the consequences of being the provider of social support especially when scant support is reciprocated. Being a woman seems to implicitly demand servitude yet the

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stress associated with caring remains largely unrecognised due to social expectation (Aldous, 1999; Belle, 1982; Goldman & Hatch, 2000). This "support gap" (Belle, 1982) has important implications regarding the mental health of women because, whilst many studies point to the enhanced health benefits married men experience compared to their single counterparts, there are few studies suggesting a similar protective advantage for married women (Belle, 1982). Some studies even suggest that marriage exposes women to greater risk (Bernard & Radloff, quoted in Belle, 1982). In fact, on average, women benefit less from marriage than men do in terms of both physical and mental health (Goldman & Hatch, 2000).

Numerous reasons have been proposed within the literature to explain this discrepancy. First, despite changing attitudes, the running of the household, the raising of children and caring for family and friends are still regarded as women's responsibility. Research in America has revealed a change in men's attitudes toward work and family roles between 1980 and 1990 (Taylor, Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1999). However, whilst men have become more accepting of less traditional roles for women in the workplace and they support women's participation in the workforce, they still seem reluctant to alter their image of women as the primary caretaker and men as the breadwinner (Willinger, quoted in Taylor et al, 1999). This has significant implications when considering the division of labour both physically and emotionally within the household. Mansfield, McAllister and Collard (1992) conducted a longitudinal study involving 130 middle-class couples in the United Kingdom. In this study they highlighted the discrepancy between what married couples stated as their beliefs and what they actually practised. In their research they found that most women believed couples should share domestic responsibilities yet their research, consistent with previous findings, revealed that men rarely did even though they said they believed they should (McAllister, Mansfield & Dormor, quoted in Mansfield et al., 1999). In their study they found that men and women actually had very different expectations regarding the division of labour within a marriage. For husbands, the primary focus was their job and their view of domestic life was of having a home to return to where they could expect to be well cared for (Mansfield et al., 1992). It was also found that they shied away from becoming involved in the domestic arena as they found it both uninteresting and overwhelming and therefore conveniently regarded it as "female territory" (Mansfield et al., 1992). In contrast, although most of the wives were also working, they were primarily home-centred, subordinating their jobs to their household responsibilities (Mansfield et al., 1992). Thus despite the fact that men and women state that their beliefs regarding the division of labour within heterosexual relationships are changing, in reality, women are still expected to take responsibility for homemaking and caretaking.

Furthermore, several studies support the notion that, in keeping with their gender roles, the child-raising responsibility is also assigned to women (e.g. Aldous, 1999; Goldman & Hatch, 2000; Ruback & Pandey, 1996). For instance, Rubin (quoted in Belle, 1982) found among couples that she interviewed that despite women's increasing responsibilities outside the home (i.e. being in the paid labour force), the household and caring for the children were still regarded as largely the women's domain. Ruback and Pandey (1996) also

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found that in rural India, whilst women were expected to help the men with farming and other work, they were also responsible for the cooking, housekeeping and caring for the children. Although child-rearing can be emotionally rewarding, studies focusing on women's emotional well-being over the life cycle highlight the stress of caring (Goldman & Hatch, 2000). Mothers with very young children or whose family's were expanding were found to be at a higher risk of depression and demoralization (Belle, 1982). Aside from caring for children, women are also typically the caregivers for the ill or aged family members (Belle, 1982; Goldman & Hatch, 2000) and a source of support for neighbours and friends.

The literature suggests that during times of stress (e.g. providing social support to young children) many women tend to seek the help and sympathy of other adults, particularly their heterosexual partners. Research revealing that the risk of depression diminishes sharply when mothers of young children are able to confide in their husbands (Brown, Bhrolchain, & Harris, quoted in Belle, 1982) or when they are helped with child care or houskeeping tasks by their husband or other adults (Belle, 1982; Zur-Szpiro & Longfellow, quoted in Belle, 1982) emphasises the important role that supportive, heterosexual relationships can play in improving women's emotional health. However, Campbell (quoted in Belle, 1982) found that when there were young children at home, women rated their marital relationship least positively. Brown (quoted in Belle, 1982) also found that at this stage of the life cycle, women were less likely to experience their husbands as being supportive confidants. Another important variable in the perception of social support is that of the quality of the support given. This is particularly important for women within a heterosexual relationship. Research on married individuals reveals that marital quality is more important to the psychological well-being of women when compared to men and that women in poor quality marriages report higher levels of psychological distress (Goldman & Hatch, 2000).

There are also studies that show how the perception of social support within a heterosexual relationship can have a positive impact on physical health (Magill et al., 1996). Primono, Yates and Woods (quoted in Logsdon, Birkimer & Barbee, 1997) found that chronically ill women who received emotional support from their spouse and family reported greater marital quality, greater family functioning, less depression and fewer illness demands. Norbeck and Anderson (quoted in Logsdon, Birkimer & Barbee, 1997) also found that during pregnancy a woman's spouse was the most important source of support and that, if found lacking, substitute support would not be sought out from family and friends.

Research suggests then that (1) women in nuclear families want support from their partners, specifically when they are in the difficult childbearing years; and (2) when they do receive this support, it has a considerable impact on how they experience stressful times and stressful caring responsibilities. However, research also seems to suggest that by and large this need for support from heterosexual partners still remains unmet, either

because it is simply not there or because it is not perceived as such (e.g.Goldman & Hatch, 2000; Pretorius, 1997).

These findings suggest that perhaps, because women are still expected to spend more of their time caring for others, the nuclear family, which typically has been found to serve as a buffer against stress for men, is a rather stressful environment for women. Women, however, continue to consistently articulate an expectation or a desire that their male partners will provide them with social support.

4.2   Heterosexual relationships, social support and low income women

Literature suggests that the structure and processes of relationships may vary systematically across socio-economic categories (Turner & Marino, 1994). Some studies have even implied that amongst the poorer segments of society individuals tend to have relationships of a lesser quality, but the available evidence remains too inconsistent and contradictory to conclude that this is the case (Turner & Marino, 1994). However, as mentioned above, when considering the experience of social support, it is not only the availability but the quality of the support given that makes an impact on the overall experience of social support. This is certainly true amongst women in higher socio-economic classes. However, the focus of this section is to identify whether or not low-income women have social support available and how they experience it within their heterosexual relationships. Unfortunately, little is known regarding low-income women and even less is known about the role of social support in their heterosexual relationships. It makes sense therefore to firstly review the literature that focuses on these women specifically and then to review any literature that can illuminate the role their close relationships play in their experience of and expectations regarding social support.

Social support, both from within or from outside the family, has already been acknowledged as an important means of coping with stressors (Thoits, quoted in Brodsky, 1999). Llanos, Orozco & Garcia (1999) conducted a study involving two hundred low-income families in Columbia in which they aimed to identify the relationships among the social networks and the family dynamics of low-income working women. According to them, a means of survival amongst low-income groups is to obtain and give mutual support via exchanges involving money, objects and necessary emotional support. Such exchange practices form a web that is defined as a social network that responds to the individual needs of its members and is thus able to sustain them under the demanding conditions experienced in poverty (Llanos et al., 1999). The social network evolves spontaneously and compensates for the lack of social programs and general services in poverty stricken areas. Whilst these exchange practises begin to develop within the family unit as a base from which the network may expand, it is the women who continue the exchange practises that sustain the network (Llanos et al., 1999). This firstly suggests that it is the women who value and seek the support and secondly, in maintaining the network, it also

illuminates how women tend to play a key role in the social support systems of other women too (Malson; Stack, quoted in Brodsky, 1999). Llanos et al. (1999) stressed the importance of understanding the relationship between the dynamics of low-income working women and social networks as a mechanism for survival given that approximately two billion people live in poverty worldwide. Their findings revealed that family dynamics were positively influenced by the experience of socially supportive networks. Such families were able to fulfill needs for communication, child development and better internal family relationships when compared to families that did not have access to a social network (Llanos et al., 1999). Thus, their findings lend support to the hypothesis that social support networks can benefit the ability for low-income women to survive in impoverished circumstances due to the instrumental support they offer and the beneficial effect the alleviation of need has on the family's over-all functioning.

Although the above-mentioned findings suggest that social support networks play an important role in alleviating low-income women's economical and psychological distress, there is also research that indicates that having extensive social ties can result in an overload of responsibility and stress (Cohler & Lieberman, quoted in Belle, 1982). Brodsky (1999) conducted a qualitative study investigating resilience amongst urban, African-American, low-income, single mothers. She found that, contrary to prior studies, the women in her study did not view social support as an important factor for resilience. Rather, it was suggested that family contact was as likely to be a stressor as a source of support. This finding supports prior research by Belle (1982) who found that the greater involvement a low-income woman had with her relatives and close friends, the higher her level of stress was. Low-income women have reported in previous literature that non-reciprocal relationships were experienced as draining rather than supportive (Lindeblad-Goldberg & Duke, quoted in Brodsky, 1999). This finding was replicated in Brodsky's (1999) study. The mothers in this study stated that they preferred to cultivate independence and even isolation, rather than investing in extensive supportive networks. In their qualitative study examining resilience in low-income, employed African-American women, Todd and Worell (2000) interviewed 50 participants. Their respondents placed a premium on the availability of informal support when quantifying resilience factors, but they also stated that problematic social interactions had a negative impact on their resilience against stress. In other words, stressful relationships depleted their resources for coping under stressful conditions. It seems then, that whilst low-income women express a need for social support, their relationships with those in their support network can prove to be an additional source of stress. Belle (qoted in Todd & Worell, 2000) proposed that a possible reason for this is that low-income women are often bound by lack of resources and can therefore only exercise limited choice regarding with whom they can interact. In addition, those whom they interact with lead equally stressful lives and are also in need of support. This means that individuals within the support network have a limited capacity for providing support because they are also exposed to significant stressors. Thus, not only do low-income women not receive the support they need, but they also experience the stress of not being able to provide the support needed by others (Todd & Worell, 2000) in accordance with their prescribed gender roles as "caregivers".

Whilst low-income women may not be able to exercise choice regarding with whom they interact within their social support networks, it can be hypothesised that they could exercise choice regarding a heterosexual partner and it is important then to investigate whether or not they expect support within these relationships. In their study, Nyamathi, Bennett, Leake and Chen (1995) aimed to identify the types and sources of social support available to low-income women in Los Angeles, United States. They found that adult support amongst these women was almost non-existent and that the most frequently cited source of support was their children. Therefore, women without children reported diminished availability of support. Significantly, the respondents stated that their children were their most important source of support, followed by friends and neighbours and then only husbands or partners. Thus, whilst heterosexual relationships were cited as an expected source of support, they were evaluated as being less supportive than the other close relationships within the support network. Conversely, Sobo (1995) found that women who reported having small or weak support systems outside of their heterosexual relationships were more dependent on their partners to meet their emotional and social support needs. Sobo (1995) found that the less confident these women were that their family and relatives would take care of them, the more they relied on their heterosexual relationships to care for them. Unfortunately, from the findings it was unclear how these women experienced these relationships in terms of support. From the above findings it can be hypothesised that when the support network is unable to provide support, women will turn to their heterosexual relationships instead and that these relationships can therefore have a significant impact on their well-being.

One study that focused directly on the supportive capacity of low-income women's heterosexual relationships was conducted by Nymathi et al.(1999). They conducted a quantitative study investigating whether or not intimate relationships impacted on the health and well-being of a cross-cultural sample of homeless women in Los Angeles, United States. However, they defined intimate relationships as those within which conflict could be expected. This is an unusual definition of intimacy and they linked their findings to social support rather than the experience of intimacy, hence its inclusion in this section of the paper. They found that there was a high incidence of conflict in homeless (i.e. impoverished) women's heterosexual relationships. When they compared women according to their experience of their heterosexual relationships (i.e. non-conflictive or conflictive) they found that women in non-conflictive intimate relationships experienced less anxiety, depression or hostility and enjoyed a greater sense of psychological well-being, self esteem and life satisfaction than women in conflictive relationships or women without heterosexual partners. Whilst Nymathi et al. (1999) stressed the possibility that not all conflictive heterosexual relationships lack the capacity to provide support their research lent support to the hypothesis that that whilst heterosexual relationships can impact mental health positively, they can also add to stress and negatively impact on psychological well-being. Nyamathi et al. (1999) concluded that although partners could be seen to be potentially supportive, the shared poor economic circumstances and the associated stressors impaired the men's ability to provide the necessary

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social support. Thus, when comparing low-income women to their middle-class counterparts it seems that heterosexual relationships amongst the lower will be even less likely to provide sufficient social support.

The above-mentioned findings illuminate two themes. First, that low-income women express a need for social support (Llanos et al., 1999) which they obtain from a) individuals within their support network or b) when their support network is unable to provide the necessary support, from their heterosexual relationships. Second, however, the relationships with these individuals can either be experienced as so stressful that the supposed buffering effect social support should have under stressful circumstances is often depleted. A common hypothesis is that the capacity for individuals amongst the lower classes to provide social support is limited because they share the same stressful circumstances and therefore are also in need of social support

When examining heterosexual relationships and the provision of social support, the impact of traditional role expectations is of particular significance. As mentioned in the literature regarding women from higher socio-economic categories, traditional role expectations still impact on the actual division of household labour. Interestingly enough, one hypothesis that has been offered to explain the decline in marriage rates in America amongst the lower classes has been the impact of traditional sex role expectations on women. In her study on low-income women, Edin (2000) stressed that the gap between men and women's expectations regarding the division of household labour is widest amongst the lower classes and therefore it seems important to investigate how this is impacting on the structure of heterosexual relationships. Unfortunately few studies have investigated this. However, it has been found, like amongst their middle-class counterparts, that whilst more wives are likely to work now than before and many men are earning less than previously, few men truly share the household labour and childcare tasks (Hochschild, quoted in Edin, 2000).

The women in Edin's (2000) study voiced their concerns in this regard. They reported that their children's fathers had very traditional notions of sex roles and would expect them to do all the household chores as well as to take care of them in the same way as they took care of their children. They also feared that prospective husbands would expect to be "head of the house" and to make "final" decisions regarding child rearing, finances and other matters. Research involving South African farm labourers also revealed that traditional sex roles were supported by both males and females and that conflict in these relationships and households was often about the management of finances (Kritzinger & Vorster, 1995). The implication of traditional role expectations is that women are not only expected to work outside the home, but to do all the work within the home too. When these traditional roles are upheld, women are stripped of their power to expect or negotiate anything to the contrary and are expected to work, raise the children, care for their men and family and friends as well as run the household. While the same expectation seems to exist amongst their middle-class counterparts, there are even more stressors for impoverished women to contend with. Thus, it seems that concerns about power might explain why child-rearing and marriage have become separated from one

another, particularly amongst low-income women with practical matters (such as finances) playing a more central role than in higher income brackets (Edin, 2000). Traditional provider role attitudes essentially minimize the significance of women's contributions both within and outside of the home (Belle, 1982; Goldman & Hatch, 2000; Taylor et al., 1999). In support of this notion, Cotrane and Valdez (quoted in Taylor et al., 1999) found that amongst low-class, Mexican American men, those who were reluctant to accept their wives as co-providers performed fewer household duties than those who did. Thus, obtaining recognition as co-providers afforded these women the agency to shift traditional gender roles to the extent that men could also be expected to perform household duties. Therefore, one way women can gain control and not feel bound by traditional role expectations is to choose non-marriage and to become financially independent (Edin, 2000).

Due to the distinct paucity in data regarding social support, heterosexual relationships and low-income women, extreme caution must be exercised when interpreting the above-mentioned findings. Based on the literature reviewed it seems clear that low-income women do have a need for social support and that they value and actively seek it within their social support networks. However, the stress of poverty seems to impact more heavily on the quality of supportive exchanges than in the higher classes. Due to the fact that most of the individuals within a supportive network share the same circumstances, their capacity for providing support is limited by their own need for support. Furthermore, the literature suggests that conflictive and problematic relationships undermines resilience in the face of adversity and therefore impacts on overall mental health. Hence, it seems that close relationships are often experienced as an additional source of stress rather than as supportive and as a buffer against stress.

Specific findings regarding the role of social support in heterosexual relationships are scarce but the literature makes some interesting suggestions. Firstly it is clear, like amongst the higher classes, that traditional role expectations predominate. However, under the already trying conditions associated with poverty, traditional role expectations place even further stress on women. The literature suggests that one way low-income women short-circuit these expectations is by steering away from tradition and opting instead to remain single mothers. In other words they may continue to live with their partner but choose not to be formally married or they may not live with him at all.   Of importance here, is the assumption that these women exercise choice regarding their formal commitment within a heterosexual relationship but as stressed previously, this may not be the case. Secondly, based on the literature reviewed it could be hypothesised that low-income women in fact do not expect their heterosexual relationships to be supportive. This could be because traditional role expectations are more deeply entrenched at the lower-class level and therefore carry the assumption that it is not a man's duty or role to provide anything other than financial support. It could also be because the stress of poverty effects men's ability to provide social support. Of significance, however, is that low-income women rely mostly on other women (family or friends) or their children rather than their heterosexual partner for support. These are only tentative suggestions based on the few available studies. It seems that there is a

need for literature specifically focusing on what these women expect and experience regarding social support within a heterosexual relationship.

5.   INTIMACY, HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS AND LOW-INCOME WOMEN

In this section, the focus will be on the role of intimacy in low-income women's heterosexual relationships and specific attention will be paid to their expectations for and their experience of intimacy within this context. Once again, due to the paucity of data on this particular population, expectations for and experiences of intimacy within heterosexual relationships in the middle-and upper-classes will first be reviewed and then compared to the available literature concerning low-income women.

5.1   *Intimacy, heterosexual relationships and women in general: expectations and experiences*

Although there is no universal definition of intimacy, the working definition provided for the purposes of this paper, implies that intimacy can only occur within the context of a close and confiding relationship. When intimacy is discussed within the context of a heterosexual relationship, it implies an **expectation** that partners will able to confide in one another and that their needs will be understood. Thus it is one variable that can impact on how individuals **experience** their relationships. Thus the focus of this section will be to explore the role of intimacy for women in heterosexual relationships and whether or not intimacy impacts on their mental health.

In order to explore the construct of intimacy within a heterosexual relationship, it is useful to look at the conceptualisation of marriage amongst the middle classes. Although it is only one example of a heterosexual relationship, the way marriage is constructed provides a useful departure point from which insights regarding the dominant cultural expectations concerning heterosexual relationships can be explored. The literature suggests that there have been significant changes in attitudes towards marriage in the past century. In her studies on divorce amongst white, middle-class men and women in the United States, Reissman (1990) found that the ideology or romantic ideal of the "companionate marriage" (Reissman, 1990, p.24) was upheld. Both men and women spoke about an ideal marriage based on a friendship that took priority above all other relationships (primacy), offered emotional intimacy, sexual fulfillment and companionship. In their study, Mansfield et al. (1992) investigated these changing ideas and expectations regarding marriage. According to their findings the most significant change has been the shift away from the institution of marriage to the relationship of the couple (who may or may not be legally married). Giddens (quoted in Mansfield et al., 1992) states that whilst marriage in the past was anchored in the division of labour, its current anchor is the emotional satisfaction derived from close personal contact with another. Their findings provide further support for the hypothesis that the modern marriage is a partnership of equals and a relationship based on qualities

like intimacy, companionship, sharing, communication and equality (Mansfield et al., 1992) rather than on the traditional division of labour.

It therefore seems as though the modern model of middle-class marriage is one of a caring, sharing and intimate relationship. This rejecting of the traditional model of marriage (i.e. a legal bonding based on social and economic considerations) highlights the move towards a relationship based on emotional considerations (i.e. love) and personal satisfaction (Mansfield et al., 1992). This implies that both middle-class men and women share the notion of a relationship where their needs for closeness and understanding will be met.

Intimacy within a heterosexual relationship has been linked to positive mental health. Vanfossen (quoted in Culp & Beach, 1998) found that intimate exchanges with a spouse or partner lead to improved emotional well-being, mental health and enhanced mood. Conversely, Brown and Harris (quoted in Culp & Beach, 1998) found that the absence of a confiding relationship played an important role in the prediction of vulnerability to depression. Certainly, Culp and Beach (1998) found, in support of other studies, that marital discord (implying a lack of understanding of one another's needs) often precedes and plays a causal role in the development of depressive symptoms. These findings suggest that there is an expectation for intimacy within a heterosexual relationship and that the experience of these relationships can have a profound impact on psychological well-being. However, caution needs to be exercised not to assume that because men and women articulate similar needs regarding their heterosexual relationships that their expectations are in fact the same.

In her study on divorce in the white, middle-class of the United States, Reissman (1990) investigated the factors that men and women considered necessary for a relationship to be deemed fulfilling. She found that whilst both men and women subscribed to an "ideal" marriage or partnership that fulfilled the needs of companionship, primacy, emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction, they had very different perspectives on how each of these components ought to be realised. She found that women placed a premium on emotional intimacy and stated that their partners' inability to provide the type of intimacy that they expected was sufficient reason for them to rate their relationship as unfulfilling. Men, however, held an expectation that the marital relationship would be kept exclusive and treated as a priority by their wives and that emotional closeness would be achieved via sex and certain types of companionship activities. Finding that their wives had investments in diverse relationships due in part to their many other socially assigned roles (e.g. caretaker, mother, friend) was a source of considerable dissatisfaction.

Similarly, in their study, Mansfield et al. (1992) took pains to understand the meaning of "togetherness" in intimate relationships. In studying the interviews, they found that men and women interpret togetherness very differently. Men it seemed, sought a "life in common" (Mansfield et al., 1992, p. 216) with their wives i.e. a home or a physical and psychological base from which to operate their lives. Women however desired a

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"common life" (Mansfield et al., 1992,p.216) with an empathetic partner who would provide material and emotional security. The women highlighted a need for an intimate relationship that would make them feel valued as an individual and not merely as the traditional wife. However, Mansfield et al. (1992) found that despite the promise of emotional satisfaction made by modern marriage, the gender gap of expectation in many of the newly-wed marriages was wide. Men seemed unaware of the gap or unable to accept it whilst women acknowledged the gap and outlined hopes of bridging it (Mansfield et al., 1992). Due to the longitudinal design of the study, Mansfield et al. (1992) conducted a follow-up study in order to investigate whether or not expectations had changed. When they compared the findings they found little change in women's expectations for intimacy. In the initial stages of marriage they found that women placed great emphasis on the expression of warmth and sharing and establishing closeness (that often involved talking) as a prelude for sex whilst men described a feeling of closeness following the sexual act. However, at a six-year follow-up findings remained relatively consistent: sex for women was only one way in which they experienced intimacy with their partner but for men it was the medium through which they "discovered" marital intimacy (Mansfield et al., 1992). This concept was further supported by Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, and Wexler (quoted in Culp & Beach, 1998) who found that women emphasised verbal intimacy whilst men stressed sexual intimacy. Both findings lend support to Reissman's (1990) findings that women express a specific need for emotional intimacy whilst men stress an exclusive relationship that can provide companionship and emotional closeness via sex. Thus it seems that there are important gender differences in the expectations that men and women have regarding their heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, even though both men and women cite intimacy as an important component of a heterosexual relationship the findings emphasise that it is significantly more important to women. It makes sense then to explore the literature focusing on the possible reasons underlying these differences as research argues that these very different expectations often lead to strain within a heterosexual relationship (Reissman, 1990).

Research suggests that the reason women stress emotional intimacy more than men is because men and women are socialised differently regarding the expression of intimacy (Reissman, 1990). Gender socialisation and cultural norms impact on and shape the way individuals create and sustain interpersonal relationships (Woods, 1999) and prescribe how individuals ought to behave, think, feel or act should they desire love and approval within relationships (Jack, quoted in Woods, 1999).

Maccoby (quoted in Woods, 1999) compared the differing sets of gender "shoulds" that exist for children as they enter adolescence. Whilst boys are encouraged to develop independence, competitiveness, self-sufficiency and resistance to the influence of others, girls are expected to become nice, non-competitive, unselfish, to be attractive in a stereotypically feminine way, to be competent without complaint, to make others feel comfortable and above all, to make relationships work. In other words, women are raised to define themselves according to the "success" of their relationships with others (Belle, 1982; Reissman, 1990). How

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women "succeed" in this regard therefore forms the basis of how a woman may estimate her value in society i.e. either as a "good" or a "bad" woman. Therefore, it follows that for women, their ability to feel positive about themselves may be impacted on by their ability to feel sensitive to and connected with others whilst for men being independent, separate and better than others may be more important. Thus, it seems that having close relationships is an integral part of the societal definition of "being a woman" whereas it appears to be less important for men. As previously mentioned, intimacy is per definition experienced when a relationship is experienced as being close and confiding. This may explain why women place more emphasis on intimacy in their heterosexual relationships. Of significance is that the literature suggests that women seem to evaluate both themselves and the quality of their relationships according to the degree of intimacy experienced.

Indeed, research has indicated that a woman's sense of self-esteem and well-being are directly linked to the quality of their human attachments and their inner sense of connection with others (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, quoted in Culp & Beach, 1998; Woods, 1999). In their study, on middle-class marriages in Georgia, United States, Culp and Beach (1998) found a correlation between poor marital quality and depression for women. They suggested that it is women's subjective evaluation of their marital relationships that is associated with depressive symptoms. This may be because women, in keeping with gender roles, take more responsibility for their relationships and thus experience a sense of "failure" when their relationships "fail". A sense of failure is inherent in the development of depressive features. Indeed, research suggests that women in poor quality relationships or marriages are more vulnerable to developing depressive symptoms (Culp & Beach, 1998). A further finding in Culp and Beach's study (1998) was that self-disclosure and depressive symptoms directly effected one another. In other words, women in relationships that lacked an intimate, self-disclosing relationship with a spouse were more vulnerable to depression. Thus, intimacy was an important factor in predicting depression (Culp & Beach, 1998). These findings support the hypothesis that women rate the quality of their heterosexual relationships according to whether or not they experience intimacy.

Culp and Beach (1998) suggested that self-esteem was also an important variable when predicting depression amongst women in heterosexual relationships. They found that self-esteem could play a mediating role between marital quality and depression. According to them an individual's self-esteem is linked to their self-definitions which is largely shaped by societal expectations. Thus, for women, the extent to which they internalise their prescribed gender roles will have an impact on their sense of self-esteem. Essentially, this means that if women rate their self worth according to their relationships with others, the quality of their relationships will have an impact on their self-esteem. The connection of women's self-esteem to the quality of their relationships is further substantiated by studies on battered women. Ferraro and Johnson as well as Mitchell and Hodson (quoted in Woods, 1999) found that physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse in an intimate relationship frequently created devastating feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. The degree to which this impacted on the women's self-esteem was directly correlated with the extent they had internalised

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gender-specific norms regarding how women should maintain interpersonal relationships. Woods (1999) found in a comparative study of abused and non-abused middle-class women in a city in the United States, that women with lower self-esteem had higher levels of belief in these gendered societal norms. In the same vein, low self-esteem was also linked to higher levels of self-sacrificial caring (Woods, 1999) thus supporting the notion that women are expected to devote themselves to the care and protection of others (Belle 1982; Gilligan quoted in Woods, 1999). What is significant, however, is that even within the traditional paradigm of heterosexual relationships, women seek intimacy.

In her study investigating the relationship between silencing the self and depression, Jack (quoted in Carr et al., 1996) found that women ascribed their depression to relationships that did not meet their needs and desires for intimacy. Consequently they rated these relationships as unsatisfactory and were disillusioned because they felt they had performed the behaviours that they believed and society had told them would lead to intimacy. In the process they not only did not achieve intimacy with their partners but also lost their sense of self or their own needs in their drive to fulfill the roles of the "good wife" and "good mother" as dictated by society. In exhibiting society-valued attributes of women i.e. self-denial and self-sacrifice, women were forced to deny or "silence" any contradictory feelings. In addition, when their needs were not met, the women regarded it as a failure on their part (Jack, quoted in Carr et al., 1996). Thus these women blamed themselves for the fact that they could not achieve intimacy in their relationships. These findings support the hypothesis that many women rate themselves according to the quality of their relationships and that the tendency to do this is often directly related to traditional societal expectations regarding women's roles. However, irrespective of the extent to which women internalise gender norms regarding the maintenance of heterosexual relationships, the literature suggests that the central issue for women is the quality of their heterosexual relationships which are directly linked to their subjective experience of intimacy.

Thus, in combining Culp and Beach's (1998) and Carr et al.'s (1996) findings it seems as though women in heterosexual relationships lacking intimacy are more vulnerable to depression. Not being able to achieve intimacy is linked with the silencing of those needs in order to maintain a relationship. Because women tend to take more responsibility for their relationships, a woman may regard it as her "fault" and blame herself inwardly if she is in a relationship that does not provide intimacy. Such self-blame may eventually lead to a lowered self-esteem which may be expressed as depression. Furthermore, in order to maintain a heterosexual relationship, women often have to silence certain thoughts, feelings or behaviours that oppose gender expectations. Thus, although the literature states that women have an internal drive towards intimacy, negotiating for it seems a complex process that requires the challenging of ingrained societal beliefs regarding their roles in heterosexual relationships. The cost, however may be that their partners may not accept their views, and that the women will have to bear their abandonment (i.e.. emotional or physical isolation) or again silence their needs in order to maintain the perceived intimacy of their current relationship.

From the above, it can be concluded that women expect their need for intimacy to be fulfilled within their heterosexual relationships and that they rate the quality of their relationship according to the degree this need is met or not (Reissman, 1995). Whilst the modern definition of a fulfilling heterosexual relationship includes intimacy (Mansfield et al., 1992; Reissman, 1990) for both men and women, it is clear that there are important gender differences in the expression of intimacy. Women tend to emphasise talking in being able to achieve a sense of closeness whilst men emphasise sex (Mansfield et al., 1992; Reissman, 1990) which is only one way that women experience intimacy. Reissman (1990) suggests that the differing ways men and women define intimacy is linked to the way they are socialised. Men are taught to define themselves as individuals whilst women are expected to become invested in relationships and to define themselves within these interpersonal contexts. Men stress their need to have their relationship acknowledged as a priority in their partners' lives yet women are socialised to be in a series of interpersonal relationships. It is clear how these gaps in expectations could become opposed in a heterosexual relationship and become a source of stress (Reissman, 1990). The findings suggest that due to these differing expectations, men are largely unable to meet women's needs for emotional intimacy within the context of a heterosexual relationship (Culp & Beach, 1998; Mansfield et al., 1992; Reissman, 1990). This is significant when considering the literature revealing the impact that relationships lacking intimacy can have on women's mental health (Culp & Beach, 1998).

5.2 Intimacy, heterosexual relationships and low- income women

Of specific interest in this paper is whether or not low-income women share the same needs and expectations for intimacy within heterosexual relationships as their middle-class counterparts. Whilst socialisation and cultural norms have been identified as an important variable in the way women create and sustain interpersonal relationships, knowledge of the specific ways women think, feel, and act in maintaining intimate relationships remains scarce (Woods, 1999). Even less about these processes is known amongst impoverished women. As highlighted above, having differing expectations within a heterosexual relationship can frequently become an additional source of stress (Reissman, 1990). Intimacy is no exception in this regard. It seems important then to investigate whether or not low-income women also expect emotional intimacy within their heterosexual relationships and whether they rate the quality of their partnerships accordingly. Due to the already stressful nature of the circumstances impoverished women are exposed to it also seems necessary to explore whether the quality of their heterosexual relationships (if defined by intimacy) also impacts on their mental health. Thus, in this section, literature illuminating low-income women's expectations of intimacy within heterosexual relationships will be reviewed. However, this is problematic because no articles directly addressing this topic could be found. Therefore, the literature reviewed in this section serves only to highlight any expectations low-income women have regarding heterosexual relationships and the degree to which these expectations are met.

In order to gain insight into low-income women's expectations regarding heterosexual relationships it is important to understand how they make sense of their relationships. In a study concerned with the way women viewed condom use (i.e. safe sex) Sobo (1995) found that these attitudes were directly impacted on by low-income women's understanding of heterosexual relationships. Whilst previous literature on HIV/AIDS alleged that impoverished women were more likely to engage in unsafe sex for material and financial gain from their partners, Sobo (1995) found that the reasons for engaging in unsafe sex were more closely linked with cultural ideals and gender roles regarding heterosexual relationships than with the need for money. Sobo (1995) found that her respondents valued their heterosexual relationships for very specific reasons. To them, men represented increased access to emotional and social resources i.e. being in a monogamous relationship with a man was linked to women's status and self-esteem. By presenting themselves to others as having successfully attracted a loyal and upstanding partner and in so doing achieving the "conjugal ideal" (Sobo, 1995, p.117), respondents felt that they had gained status which made them feel good and in turn enhanced their self-esteem. Conversely, being without a partner meant that access to the sense of status and self-esteem that being in a relationship afforded them was denied. This often resulted in feelings of being unloved and lonely. Sobo (1995) found that because of the social value attached to their heterosexual relationships, women often preferred to overlook their partners' shortcomings. Similarly, Edin (2000) found that her respondents linked their relationship to personal status and that gaining respectability in the community was an important criterion when considering marriage.

In both Sobo's (1995) and Edin's (2000) studies, the respondents linked the men's employment (or lack thereof) to his respectability. Many of the women in Edin's (2000) study felt that they lost respect for an unemployed partner. A man who had a regular income was perceived more positively. In Edin's (2000) study, the stability of men's incomes were specifically stressed when it came to considering marriage. The women stated that if they remained unmarried to their partner, they had more flexibility in terms of leaving the relationship if the man proved a financial burden. Choosing to stay unmarried meant that the women did not tie themselves permanently to their partner's class-position. Thus, whilst money was deemed a necessity in terms of relieving financial pressures and preventing the resultant strains on the relationship, it was also linked to self-respect and respect of one's partner. The implication of these findings is that inherent in low-income women's expectations regarding heterosexual relationships, is the need to respect themselves and their partner and that this is linked to their partner's class and employment status. When their partner does not meet their expectations in this regard, these women will be more reluctant to commit to them formally through marriage.

In the exploration of the meaning of condom use for low-income women, Sobo (1995) found that within the context of a monogamous relationship, condoms implied distrust, disrespect and disease. Therefore, because

of these connotations and their desire to preserve their image of themselves as having attained the ideal of a monogamous partner these women were more prepared to engage in unsafe sex. Having sex without a condom was also linked to their desire for a sense of physical "closeness" with their partner. Whilst these women discussed their relationship in terms of emotional ties and expressed their relationship in terms of love and their partner's character, it was not clear from the findings whether these women in fact expected emotional intimacy from their men. Rather, they described sex as a means of obtaining affirmation that their partners needed and cared for them. Having sex thus made them feel good and it meant that they had fulfilled cultural expectations i.e. to be cared for by a monogamous man. Thus, these findings suggest that also inherent in low-income women's expectations regarding heterosexual relationships is the need for a trustworthy, sexual partner. Furthermore, it seems as though these women expect sex within their heterosexual relationships and it is via sex that they experience physical closeness and the sense that their partners need and care for them.

However, despite emphasising a hope or an expectation for loyal, trustworthy partners, the women in both studies alluded to their uncertainty regarding this being possible within their heterosexual relationships (Edin, 2000; Sobo, 1995). In Edin's study (2000) many of the women, drawing on their or others' experience, said that they did not believe that men could be faithful within a heterosexual relationship. They cited this as one of the reasons why they chose to remain single. In addition they voiced the expectation that violence and abandonment following pregnancy could more commonly be expected in their heterosexual relationships than sexual fidelity (Edin, 2000). Although the women expressed mostly negative views regarding relationships they all hoped that they would find someone that could be trusted and who would not disappoint their expectations. In this regard, it was interesting that the women from both studies emphasised the importance of being able to provide financially for themselves and their households. Many of the women stated that this afforded them a sense of achievement which made them feel good and afforded them an alternative source of self-worth separate from their heterosexual relationships. Besides increasing their sense of control within a relationship (Edin, 2000), being financially independent also meant that they felt more protected against the emotional and financial risks associated with a heterosexual relationship.

From the two studies reviewed, it can be suggested that impoverished women also subscribe to a relationship ideal, but that their expectations are very different from those of their middle-class counterparts. Whereas middle-class women emphasise the importance of emotional intimacy and companionship, low-income women idealise monogamy. Therefore, middle-class women rate the quality of their heterosexual relationship according to the degree of intimacy they experience with their partner, whilst low-income women rate the quality of their relationship according to the sexual fidelity of their partner. Although there is too little data to conclude that low-income women do not desire emotional intimacy in their heterosexual relationships, the

desire for or expectation of intimacy was not mentioned in the cited studies. When intimacy was mentioned it seemed to be associated with physical intimacy rather than emotional intimacy.

The studies reviewed also suggest that low-income women's expectations of heterosexual relationships are commonly disappointed. Whilst the women in Edin's (2000) study stipulated that they expected their partners to have a stable income, to be trustworthy, to remain sexually faithful and to refrain from domestic violence order for them to consider a formal commitment such as marriage, the findings suggest that they experience the opposite. The fact that so many impoverished women are single can perhaps therefore be interpreted as signalling something about how they experience their intimate, heterosexual relationships. However, until this is asked specifically in a study, it will be impossible to draw any conclusions regarding low-income women's expectations for and experience of intimacy within this type of context.

6.   CONCLUSION

Both social support and intimacy have been cited as important variables for coping with stress, particularly in the case of middle-class women. Low-income women are exposed to even more stress than their middle-class counterparts, yet less is known about how social support and intimacy impact on their mental health.   The purpose of this paper was therefore to explore low-income women's expectations and experiences of social support and intimacy within their heterosexual relationships.

When comparing middle-class and low-income women's expectation for social support within heterosexual relationships, the available literature suggests there are certain differences. Firstly, whilst middle-class women seem to expect social support from their heterosexual partners, it seems as though low-income women do not. Even though the literature suggests that male partners are thought to be a potential source of support, the fact that they are not consistently mentioned as providers of social support is significant.   Instead, it seems as though low-income women look to other women, their children and in some cases, their faith (Brodsky, 1999) to have their needs for social support met.   The literature suggests that relationships amongst the lower classes can often be experienced as an additional source of stress rather than as being supportive. This also applies to heterosexual relationships. It is suggested that their relationships are experienced as stressful because all individuals within a potentially supportive network are exposed to the same stressors associated with poverty. Therefore their need for social support is also great and thus their capacity to provide social support is limited.

The fact that middle-class women do report experiencing social support from their male partners is a second important difference when comparing middle-and low-class women.   Whilst, middle-class women may complain that the support given is insufficient, lower-class women seldom report even receiving social support from their male partners. Third, there is evidence to suggest that traditional role expectations have a greater impact on expectations regarding the provision of social support within low-income women's heterosexual relationships when compared with middle-class women. Whereas traditional gender roles still largely dictate men and women's expectations regarding the provision of social support amongst the more affluent economic groups, there is evidence to suggest that men's attitudes towards these roles are changing and they are becoming more supportive, albeit slowly.   However, there is no evidence to suggest that the same is happening amongst the lower-income groups.   Rather, the literature suggests that traditional gender role expectations are more firmly entrenched and that this is a cause for concern for low-income women due to the additional strain it places on them in already stressful conditions.   As a result of these traditional role expectations, there is some evidence to suggest that in order to have some control within heterosexual relationships, many of these women prefer to stay single. Although they still have children with their male

partners, it seems as though by not committing formally to them via marriage and therefore remaining single and financially independent, that they have more power within the relationship and therefore do not have to submit to the traditional gender role expectations. This may be one way in which low-income women protect their mental health in already stressful environments. By not subordinating themselves to male dominance they are able to influence household decisions (e.g. finances or the raising of children) which they would previously not have been entitled to and which may have been an additional source of stress. However, this is only a tentative hypothesis and more research will be need to be conducted before such a conclusion can be made.

With respect to the expectation for intimacy within a heterosexual relationship it also seems as though there are important differences when comparing low-income women to their middle-class counterparts. The significant difference seems to rest in general expectations regarding heterosexual relationships. Whilst the expectation for emotional intimacy is inherent in both middle-class men and women's understanding of a heterosexual relationship, this does not seem to be the case for low-income women. Middle-class women emphasise the importance of emotional intimacy in their relationship ideals. Whilst the literature suggests that their male partners are often unable to meet their needs for emotional intimacy sufficiently, there is evidence to suggest that they are able to have this need met in relationships with other women (Culp & Beach, 1998). Low-income women, however, seem to subscribe to a different relationship ideal. The need for intimacy was not clearly articulated by impoverished women, yet the hope for a faithful sexual partner was stressed as desirable and formed part of their "conjugal ideal" (Sobo, 1995). Their expectation seems to rest on the hope that their partners will be sexually faithful to them. This may be linked to a need for exclusive physical intimacy but again, there is not enough data to make this conclusion. The meaning of sexual fidelity for these women will need to be further explored in order to determine whether it is linked to a desire for intimacy.

Even though low-income women do not seem to expect social support or intimacy within the context of a heterosexual relationship, they do seem to have other specific expectations. These include the need for their partner to be sexually faithful, to be economically stable, to refrain from domestic violence and to be trustworthy (Edin, 2000). However, the literature suggests that they more often than not experience disappointment within heterosexual relationships in this regard. Their experiences were more often negative and included unfaithful sexual partners, men that became a financial burden or who beat them or abandoned them in times of need, especially during pregnancy (Edin, 2000).

Having a relationship with a man and having children also seems to be important to low-income women for other more indirect reasons. Having responsibilities to a child is often a prerequisite for membership in female support networks and is also a way of establishing themselves more permanently with a man (Ward, quoted in Sobo, 1995). Being associated with a faithful and respectable partner (especially via children) means that a

woman has a lot to gain in terms of her status within the community. Having achieved the "conjugal ideal" also seems to be a reflection of a woman's sense of worth (Sobo, 1995) and thus strengthens her sense of self-esteem. However, because low-income women seem to expect to be disappointed by their partners, they have also learnt the importance of not pinning their sense of worth entirely on their heterosexual relationships. These women clearly state that they feel proud of being financially independent and being able to care for their children without the help of a partner (Edin, 2000).

In conclusion, the literature suggests that whilst low-income women cannot rely on their partners for social support or intimacy, they can have expectations regarding sex and the conception of children. To have other needs met, they will look to themselves, their children, their support network or their faith. The fact that many of these women voice concerns about committing to a man formally (such as in marriage) is significant. It is possible that these women are suggesting that committing to a heterosexual relationship will entail more stress. By remaining single and financially independent they do not have to submit to traditional gender roles or tolerate a partner's sexual infidelity or economic instability. This gives them a greater sense of being in control. However, more research exploring the experience of social support and intimacy in relationships amongst the lower classes is needed before it's impact on women can be properly assessed.

Based on existing (or almost non-existing) literature, there is considerable reason to continue research on the impact of heterosexual relationships and the role of intimacy in women's mental health. In their conclusion, Nymathi et al. (1999) stressed the lack of qualitative research investigating intimacy among homeless, impoverished women. They specifically highlighted the value of research aimed at understanding how homeless women view their partners, how they choose partners and how such relationships impact on their lives. According to them longitudinal research that can address the specific linkages between partnership status and health and well-being is necessary.

Very little is known about the experiences of low-income women and their expectations regarding heterosexual relationships within the South African context, yet when the risks for impaired psychological well-being associated with poverty and single motherhood are considered, psychologists can hardly afford to ignore this population (Foster, Jones & Hoffman; Garfinkel & McLanahan; McLanahan & Booth; McLanahan & Sandefur; Polokow, quoted in Mannis, 1999). Clinicians still need to investigate how low-income women in South Africa make sense of their relationships and how these relationships impact their mental health in order to gain a more informed and valuable understanding of their psychosocial environment. Such information is vital if clinicians hope to shape more effective formal support structures that can address the needs of this population that has very limited access to psychological resources. There does not appear to be a study similar to Edin's (2000) that explores low-income single mothers' perceptions regarding their experience of heterosexual relationships in South Africa. Whether or not they choose to remain single mothers to avoid being subjected to

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the implications of traditional sex-roles and thereby maintain a sense of control (in the same way their African American counterparts do) or whether other factors dictate their circumstances still needs to be explored. The paucity of data on this South African population speaks for itself and can only be addressed by future research including studies aimed at specifically understanding how low-income woman of colour experience their heterosexual relationships.

Finally, the current review of the literature highlights an important theoretical issue. There seemed to be considerable overlap between the constructs of social support and intimacy within the context of heterosexual relationships. According to Reissman (1990), relationships are important because they offer a focal point around which people can construct and organise the meaning they give to their lives. Thus it follows that what happens within these relationships has the potential to alter the way individuals make sense of their world. However, most research on heterosexual relationships does not consider the meaning making functions these relationships serve. Part of the reason for this is that the bodies of research on close relationships have developed independently of one another (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Therefore, although social support and intimacy are both considered important constructs within close relationships, they have been studied separately. Yet from the literature it is clear that there is often an overlap between social support and intimacy.

Perceived social support is most persistently and powerfully associated with various outcomes (Turner & Marino, 1994) and appears to be the most important criterion when assessing health and well-being (Cohen & Wills, quoted in Todd & Worell, 2000). However, Collins & Feeney (2000) add that most empirical work on social support has focused on individuals rather than the dyadic relationships that essentially shape people's subjective experience of social support. Such an omission denies the fact that human beings live in relationship with others and that the way in which people interact with one another has a direct impact on their experience of social support. From the literature reviewed, it is clear that women place more emphasis on the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, they assess the quality of their interpersonal relationships according to the degree of intimacy they experience. Therefore one factor that could influence the perception of social support, particularly for women, in heterosexual relationships is that of intimacy. Pretorius (1997) postulated that the experience of intimacy plays a vital role in determining whether a social encounter is experienced as being effectively supportive (Brown, Bhrolchain, & Harris; Hobfoll & Leiberman; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, quoted in Hobfoll et al., 1988) and thus effects how the quality of the support is perceived. There is evidence to suggest that the confiding nature of intimate relationships represents one of the most important sources of social support (Pretorius, 1997) which in turn impacts on how individuals experience stress. In their study on Israeli combat soldiers, Hobfoll et al. (1988) found that those who were in intimate relationships were significantly less affected by the stress of war than those who were not. Therefore, as an additional conclusion to this paper, the author wants to argue for more research combining the constructs of intimacy and social support. Due to the fact that they have developed independently of one

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another, available research tends rather to be quantitative, typically only stating whether a relationship is experienced in terms of a certain variable (e.g. social support or intimacy) or not (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Pretorius, 1997). However, this type of data does not allow for insight regarding how a relationship is experienced. It is clear that how social support and intimacy are actually experienced within the context of a heterosexual relationship is not well understood within the psychological literature. This gap can only be addressed if future research focuses on how they impact on one another within such a context.

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