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**A QUALITATIVE COMPARISON  
OF EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED  
LOW-INCOME AFRICAN-AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHERS**

**By**

**Donna Lucille McDonald**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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## ABSTRACT

### A QUALITATIVE COMPARISON OF EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED LOW-INCOME AFRICAN-AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHERS

By

Donna Lucille McDonald

The goals of this research were to qualitatively examine the lives of employed and unemployed African-American single mothers within the context of societal, community, and family variables. Specifically, I sought to 1) describe similarities and differences between the employed and unemployed women's lives along the dimensions of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model; 2) understand the effects of employment and unemployment on the women's lives; 3) use grounded theory approaches to create hypotheses concerning what factors may influence a low-income African-American single mother's abilities to gain and keep employment; and 4) make recommendations for program development based on the results of the investigation.

Forty low-income African-American single mothers were recruited from a Head Start program in Flint, Michigan and interviewed in two, two hour sessions as part of a larger research project titled the VoICES project. The women were asked questions about their family life, support systems, stresses, and personal goals. In the first analysis of this research, I compared the women based on their employment status and discovered that more similarities than differences existed among the employed and unemployed women. Two possible reasons were given for this finding. The experience of living in Flint may be similar for low-income women regardless of employment status. Secondly,

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many of the women appeared to cycle between employment and welfare. Perhaps this cyclical pattern also created more similarities.

Employment brought busy days with little respite from work and parenting responsibilities. Moreover, employment did not alleviate financial worries. However, all of the women wished to work and the employed women were able to fulfill that wish.

In a second analysis I compared the women based on their work history and found differences that formed the base of the theory I developed. Opportunity, support and the ability to plan were hypothesized to affect a low-income woman's ability to obtain and keep employment. Opportunity included access to employment, education, and child care. Access to positive supports was also important. The women who had longer work histories were also more likely to have positive relationships with supportive individuals. On the other hand, the women who had worked less than a year during their lives were more isolated or appeared to remain in negative relationships. They also often discussed trauma issues with more intensity than the other women. However, such factors as a divorce, the death of a family member, and substance use also affected employment capabilities for a few women.

The ability to plan was a third important feature. Some women had developed career plans for themselves that they were able to follow. These women appeared to be closer to moving out of poverty than the other women. My recommendations for program development also focused on the areas of opportunity, support, and career planning

This work is

**This work is dedicated to the women who were interviewed for this research  
and to my parents, Bob and Gail McDonald**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>The Purpose of this Investigation</b> .....	4
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	8
<b>Macrosystem</b> .....	12
<b>Economics</b> .....	12
<b>Ideology</b> .....	13
<b>Welfare Policy</b> .....	15
<b>Exosystem</b> .....	17
<b>Changes in Cities</b> .....	18
<b>The Economic History of Flint Michigan</b> .....	19
<b>Mesosystem</b> .....	21
<b>Informal Supports</b> .....	21
<b>Formal Supports</b> .....	22
<b>Microsystem</b> .....	24
<b>African-American Culture and Family Life</b> .....	24
<b>Changing Family Demographics</b> .....	25
<b>The Individual</b> .....	28
<b>African-American Women: Education and Work</b> .....	28
<b>Mental Health Issues</b> .....	32
<b>Summary and Conclusions</b> .....	33
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b> .....	36
<b>The Appropriateness of the Chosen Methodology</b> .....	36
<b>Participants</b> .....	38
<b>The VoICES Team</b> .....	39
<b>The Interview</b> .....	40
<b>Sources for Interview Questions</b> .....	40
<b>Review Process</b> .....	42
<b>The Interview</b> .....	43
<b>Procedures</b> .....	44
<b>Participant Recruitment</b> .....	45
<b>Analysis</b> .....	47
<b>Analysis 1</b> .....	47
<b>Analysis 2</b> .....	49
<b>The Researcher's Subjectivity</b> .....	51

<b>CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Analysis One</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Macro-system</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Discrimination</b> .....	<b>56</b>
<b>Exosystem</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Community Discrimination</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Perceptions of Flint</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>Mesosystem</b> .....	<b>66</b>
<b>Family Support</b> .....	<b>66</b>
<b>Support from Friends</b> .....	<b>74</b>
<b>Support From Romantic Partners</b> .....	<b>79</b>
<b>Support from Neighbors and Neighborhoods</b> .....	<b>82</b>
<b>Support from Community Institutions</b> .....	<b>88</b>
<b>Microsystem</b> .....	<b>92</b>
<b>Pregnancy</b> .....	<b>93</b>
<b>Parenting and Children</b> .....	<b>95</b>
<b>Single Motherhood and Stressors</b> .....	<b>100</b>
<b>Daily Family Life</b> .....	<b>104</b>
<b>Individual</b> .....	<b>107</b>
<b>Education and Work Skills</b> .....	<b>108</b>
<b>Motivation and a Sense of Control</b> .....	<b>111</b>
<b>Self-Concept</b> .....	<b>115</b>
<b>Depression</b> .....	<b>116</b>
<b>Personal Traumatic Experiences</b> .....	<b>118</b>
<b>Coping and Resiliency</b> .....	<b>120</b>
<b>Analysis Two</b> .....	<b>122</b>
<b>The Planful Women</b> .....	<b>123</b>
<b>Erica</b> .....	<b>123</b>
<b>Pam</b> .....	<b>125</b>
<b>Linda</b> .....	<b>126</b>
<b>Common Themes for the Planful Women</b> .....	<b>128</b>
<b>Low Work History Group</b> .....	<b>132</b>
<b>Edie</b> .....	<b>133</b>
<b>Jameka</b> .....	<b>133</b>
<b>Sheleatha</b> .....	<b>135</b>
<b>Exceptions in the Low Work History Group</b> .....	<b>137</b>
<b>Lois and Nikkia</b> .....	<b>137</b>
<b>Sara and Serena</b> .....	<b>139</b>
<b>Common Themes among the Low Work History Women</b> ....	<b>141</b>
<b>The Remaining Women</b> .....	<b>142</b>
<b>Tamara:</b> .....	<b>143</b>
<b>Denise</b> .....	<b>144</b>
<b>Carmella</b> .....	<b>145</b>
<b>Dhyana</b> .....	<b>147</b>
<b>Kathy</b> .....	<b>149</b>

Summary .  
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CHAPTER FIVE: I

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APPENDIX: The

LIST OF REFER

Common Themes among the Remaining Women .....	150
Summary .....	151
Analysis One .....	151
Analysis Two .....	158
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Question One: What similarities and differences exist among the employed and unemployed women? .....</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Question two: What is the effect of paid work on the women and their family life? .....</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>Question three: What effect does unemployment have on the women and their family life? .....</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>Question Four: What factors contribute to a women's ability to gain and keep employment? .....</b>	<b>167</b>
Opportunity .....	168
Support .....	170
Planfulness .....	175
<b>Question Five: What implications for policy and program development do these results have? .....</b>	<b>178</b>
Opportunity .....	179
Support .....	181
Planning .....	183
Personal Counseling .....	187
<b>The Role of Counseling Psychologists .....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Limitations .....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Future Research Directions .....</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Summary and Conclusions .....</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>APPENDIX: The Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>LIST OF REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>217</b>

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Poverty continues to have an unabated influence within African-American communities despite efforts to alleviate it (Bennett, 1987; Corcoran, Duncan, & Hill, 1984). Recent figures (1991) show that the poverty rate for African-American families is three times that of white families and female headed African-American families are the most likely to live in poverty (Bennett, 1993). Not only do whites have lower poverty rates than blacks and other minorities, poverty affects adults less than the elderly and children, men are less likely to live in poverty than women, and married couples are less likely to be affected by poverty than single mothers. Furthermore, all of these trends in the poverty demographics have persisted for the past fifty years with only one exception. For the first time the rate of poor children exceeds that of the poor elderly (Danzinger, Sandefur & Weinberg, 1994).

In addition, the poverty rate and the gap between the lower and upper classes are growing. Prior to 1973 family incomes grew rapidly, income inequality declined modestly, and poverty declined dramatically from 19% of the population in 1964 to a low of 11.1% in 1973. However, between 1973 and 1979 a stagnation in mean income and modest cyclical changes in poverty occurred, and between 1979 and 1983 poverty rates grew rapidly. Although mean income again grew after 1983 it did so unequally and resulted in a rise in poverty and a larger gap between upper and lower class incomes (Danzinger et al., 1994).

Moreover, poverty is associated with a host of negative mental health, physical health, and social outcomes that are found to affect low-income African-American women and their families disproportionately. These negative outcomes have been linked to the



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chronic stress associated with poverty as well as accompanying classism, racism and sexism (Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985; Kessler & Neighbors, 1986). In their review Kessler et al. (1985) found that people in socially disadvantaged positions were more prone to psychiatric disorders and concluded that a link between poverty and a vulnerability to stress accounted for the major portion of the relationship between depression and social class. In addition, women and African-Americans were more likely to show psychological distress.

Furthermore, poor physical health such as an increase in the incidence of cardiac disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes has been linked to low-income African-American populations. Low-income African-American women have also been found to be more prone to have complications associated with pregnancy than white women. This too has been attributed to higher stress as well as the lack of adequate health care (Paltiel, 1988).

In inner city areas where poverty is found to be concentrated, personal violence, childhood homicide, drug arrests and violent crime are higher than in other areas (Peterson & Harrell, 1992). These neighborhoods are also usually isolated from job centers within the city as well as suburban areas where job creation is most likely to occur (Peterson & Harrell, 1992). Again African-Americans and women seem to be most affected. Poor women of color have been found to be concentrated in these areas. Because of their limited financial resources they typically have no choice but to live in housing and environments that increase their vulnerability to hazards such as violence and disease. (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988).

Many argue that poverty rates and the problems associated with it have increased

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despite, or because of, governmental efforts to alleviate them. Scholars have blamed the welfare system for the worsening of poverty in the United States (Axinn & Hirsch, 1994). Mead (1988) argued that the "permissiveness" of the welfare state has led to dependency and a lack of work motivation among low-income women.

During the completion of this dissertation, changes at both the state and federal level have occurred (Engler, 1992). Changes have focused on increasing the self-sufficiency of families who receive welfare (Axinn & Hirsch, 1993). The Federal Government's Aid to Families with Dependent Children has now been retitled Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Reforms limit a family's use of welfare to two consecutive years and to five years over a lifetime. Moreover, states will have more power over their own welfare policies.

These changes are accompanied by controversy and varying opinions. Many agree with President Clinton (1993) declaration to "change welfare as we know it" and with Governor Engler's (1992) proposition that his changes will "strengthen Michigan families." Others hope for more stringent policies such as those proposed by the Republican party.

Still others have called welfare reform the "new paternalism," pointing to the lack of political power welfare recipients have and wondering why politics are focused on inner-city welfare recipients even though they receive only a small portion of funding for social programs. They argue that current policy changes ignore issues of discrimination, unemployment, and the rise in income inequality. (Axinn & Hirsch, 1993; Hecl, 1994; Shealy 1995).

Furthermore, the existing research base and many of the proposed policy reforms

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have been criticized for their focus on individual attributes without an examination of the context in which low-income African-American women live their lives. Although a contextual approach to studying African-American families has been widely advocated, it is often neglected (Benjamin & Stewart, 1991; Malson, 1987; Parnell & Vanderkloot, 1994; Wharf, 1988). Smith (1992) has concluded that because of the neglect of family life in poverty research, policy decisions have been made without the benefit of adequate informed scholarship.

Due to the disproportionate influences poverty has on African-American single mothers, the inadequacy of the research base, and the need for informed decisions regarding changes in welfare policy, an investigation that examines the lives of low-income African-American female headed families is needed. Furthermore, this information needs to be embedded in a larger family and societal context. Such research would not only be useful for programs seeking to improve the lives of low-income African-American female-headed families but also to better inform policy decisions (Jarrett, 1995).

### **The Purpose of this Investigation**

This dissertation will focus on the similarities and differences between working and non-working African-American single mothers through a qualitative analysis of interview data previously collected by the VoICES (Voices Initiating Community Empowerment) project. The VoICES project is an ethnographic investigation of low-income African-American single mothers living in Flint, Michigan.

The project began with a concern that inadequate attention was being given to the opinions and feelings of African-American single mothers living in poverty, in designing programs and intervention strategies. The project's goal was to better inform policy and

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to develop more appropriate intervention/prevention programs. The VoICES project staff wanted to assess the interactive forces at work within the lives of the women without losing the context within which these forces operated. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was chosen. This methodology allowed for an investigation of the broad spectrum of interactions between individuals and their environments.

During the first year focus groups of community members, interviews with community leaders, and an examination of the community's history and economic development ensued. From this initial work an interview schedule was written and field tested. Subsequently, forty low-income African-American women who were head of their households were interviewed in two, two-hour sessions during the summer and fall of 1994. Although some of the women were involved in a long term romantic relationship, including live-in relationships, none were currently living with a legally married spouse.

I have worked on the VoICES project since its beginning and have been involved in all aspects of the investigation. I have conducted focus groups, was the primary author of the interview, and trained interviewers. During the last year I have guided the analysis of the forty interviews.

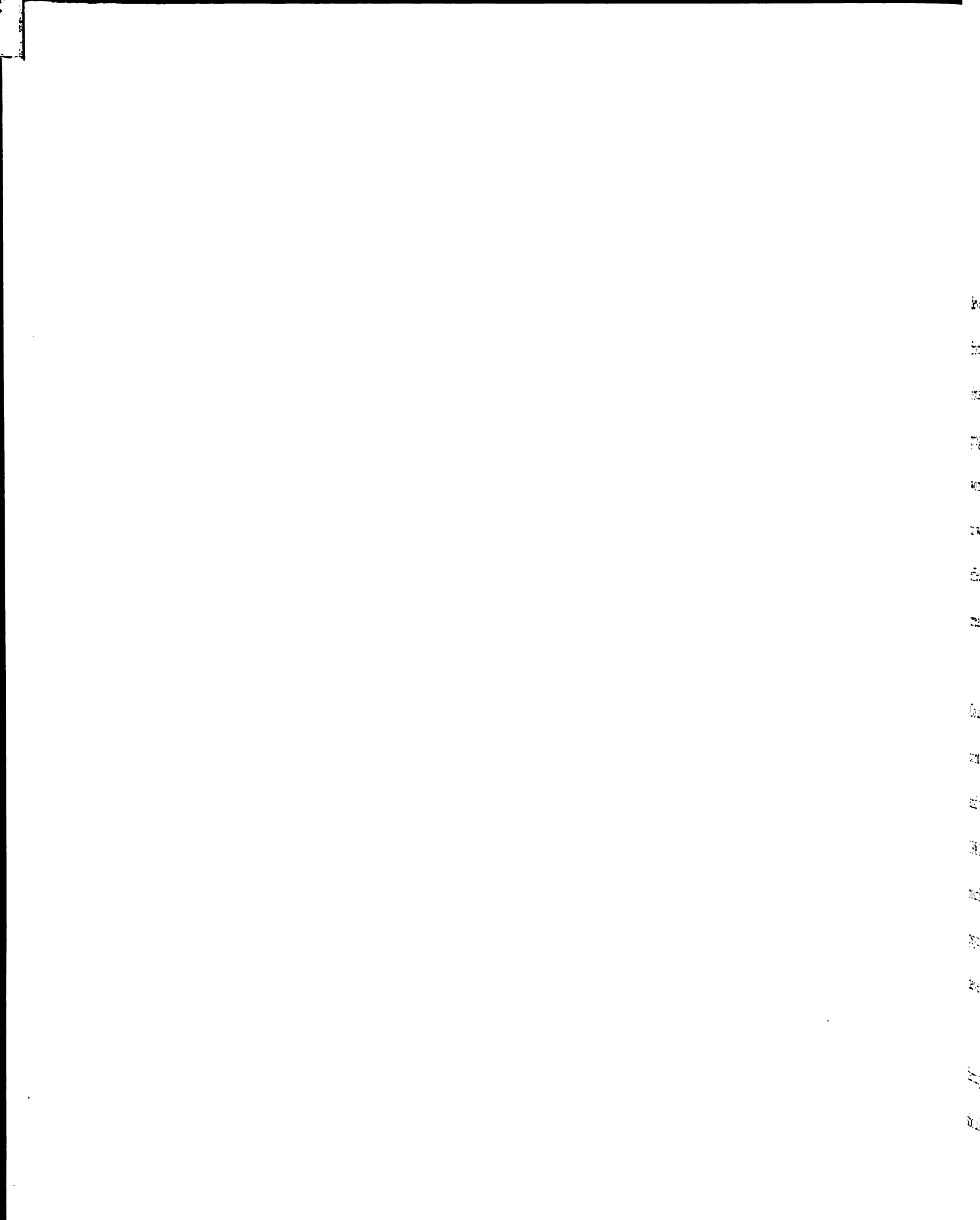
The VoICES Project has focused on examining the interviews as a whole. This study will be focused on the influence of work and unemployment on the women and their children through an examination of the following questions:

What are the similarities and differences between the employed and unemployed women?

What is the effect of paid work for the women and their family life?

What effect does unemployment have on the women and their family life?





**What factors contribute to a women's ability to gain and keep employment?**

**What implications for policy and program development do these results have?**

The answers to these questions can be used to guide both policy and program development. Because welfare policy is currently concerned with transitioning women from welfare to work, an examination of the factors that enhance the women's ability to obtain and keep employment is needed. Furthermore, the results of this study will inform program development as human service workers examine methods to help low-income women cope with the current policy changes and make effective transitions from welfare to work. Moreover, this study will also fill a void in the current research by looking at the effects of employment and unemployment from a family-focused perspective as well as creating a context from which family and individual variables can be better understood.

Counseling psychologists should be interested in the results of this investigation. Counseling psychology has focused on the working and developing human beings in the contexts of school, family and work place. They have a specific interest in career issues and the fit between the work environment and the personality of the individual (Blocher, 1981). However, the issues of low-income individuals' career development have been routinely ignored. Therefore, the results of this investigation should inform counseling psychologists as they examine the issues of career for low-income women and the developmental issue of moving from welfare to work.

Furthermore, counseling psychologists also have an interest in how work and family life are combined in an individual's life (Richardson, 1993). This investigation should provide such information. Specifically it focuses on how low-income African-

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**American** single mothers combine the raising of their children with employment outside  
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## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research has examined low-income African-American families from three **different** frameworks: a deficit model; a model based on family strengths; and a structural **framework** (Barbarin, 1983; Benjamin & Stewart, 1991; Malson, 1987). Traditionally, **deficit** models emphasize the deviance and weaknesses of the black family that have **emanated** from slavery and culminated in the “single parent, matriarchal and disorganized **black family** of today” (Barbarin, 1983). Researchers who use this framework often **compare** African-American families to white families and attribute differences to “**dysfunctional**” aspects of black families. The idea that poverty is a result of the “**pathological**” features of the black family exemplifies the themes inherent in a deficit **framework** (McLanahan, 1985).

In a response to this negative view of black families, a second framework **developed**. This strength framework emphasized the capacity of black families to survive **oppression**, racial discrimination and economic hardships (e.g., Stack 1974). Authors **who** use this framework focus on how an African heritage combined with the historical **experience** of slavery formed a unique social identity, viable family structures, and an **adaptive** pattern of family functioning (Barbarin, 1983).

Both of these frameworks, however, have received criticism from policy-makers and program developers. The deficit framework does a disservice to low-income African-American families by ignoring the functional aspects of diverse family patterns. Furthermore, deficit models ignore the context in which African-American families live their lives (Malson, 1987).

Although the strength framework is an improvement because it recognizes the

**assets** of low-income African-American families, it doesn't provide a framework for **improving** life circumstances. This tradition has failed to discuss the ramifications and **antecedents** of such issues as drug abuse and increased violence in many inner city low-**income** neighborhoods. Ignoring these factors has left a gap in our understanding and **ability** to create effective programs (Wilson, 1987).

A structural framework examines the adaptation of African-American families to **the unique** social and economic pressures they face (Malson, 1987). It de-emphasizes **personal** criteria and instead examines the individual and the family within the context of **their** specific environments. Structural frameworks focus on the functional aspects of **African-American** families as mitigating against poverty and oppressive structures (Benjamin & Stewart, 1991).

The use of this type of contextual approach has been advocated as a superior **approach** to studying low-income African-American female headed households (Brewer, 1995; Hemmons, 1995; Randolph, 1995). Burgess (1995) stated a need for a multi-**disciplinary** approach that examines the psychological, sociological, historical and **economic** forces affecting the lives of low-income families. Without this type of approach, **she** feels that any report on the problems facing African-American single mothers will add **very** little to our current understanding. Moreover, a contextual approach has been advocated for the development of mental health and social programs for low-income families and for the career development of women. (Brooks & Forrest, 1994; Haveman, 1994; Parnell & Vanderkloot, 1994; Wharf, 1988).

One popular structural framework is the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The ecological model can be used to examine behavior of an

**individual** within the context of the settings in which she lives as well as examining the **interactions** among those settings. Thus, an ecological framework allows a holistic **understanding** of individual development (Wharf, 1988).

Furthermore, the ecological model has also been recommended as a framework to **study** African-American families. It allows practitioners and researchers an opportunity to **explore** the interactions between the historical, political, and social influences on African-American families, as well as serving as a guide to human service workers to help black families cope with occupational, educational and governmental institutions that create **stress** (McAdoo, 1993).

Blocher (1981) has advocated its use for counseling psychology. He states that **individual** approaches tend to foster individual blame for social problems and that barriers **to healthy** development are best understood within the context of the environments in **which** they occur. The origins of counseling psychology are rooted in understanding **healthy** development. Thus, an ecological model matches well with the philosophy of **counseling** psychology.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) felt that human development occurs within an ecological **environment**. He conceived this environment as a set of nested structures. At the inner **most** level was the immediate setting containing a developing individual. However, development was also influenced by the interconnections between the settings in which an individual was involved. For example, how the family interacted with the school would influence the academic development of a child. In addition, community and cultural influences also influence an individual's development. All of these nested structures or levels were perceived by Bronfenbrenner to be interconnected and affect developmental



processes in complex ways.

He offered the following definitions of the components of an Ecological Model:

**Macro-system:** consistencies that exist at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies (p. 26).

**Exosystem:** one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person (p. 25).

**Mesosystem:** Comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as for an adult, among family, work and social life) (p. 25).

**Microsystem:** Pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics (p. 22).

This investigation will also use these definitions. Specifically, however, this study

examines the following domains either in the literature review or in the analysis of the

**VoICES** interviews.

**Macro-system:** Economics, ideology, and welfare policy issues.

**Exosystem:** Demographic changes in the inner city, urban isolation, and the historical and economic context of Flint, Michigan.

**Mesosystem:** Informal support networks: supports supplied by family, friends, romantic partners, and neighbors; and formal support networks: support supplied by churches, human service agencies, schools and other community organizations.

**Microsystem:** Family mechanisms: culture, children and parenting, daily family life, family stress.

**Individual:** Education, work skills, work motivation, sense of control over daily and future events, and mental health issues: depression and self-concept

### Macro system

The macrosystem includes economics, ideological issues, and policy concerns (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These same macro systemic issues have been found to operate simultaneously and interactively in low-income Africa-American family formation and functioning (Brewer, 1995)

### Economics

Women and children have a much lower and more unstable family income than men (Corcoran et al., 1984). Furthermore, African-American children are most at risk for being poor due to their higher probability of living in female-headed households (Corcoran et al., 1984). Although, women are often the sole providers for their families, they still earn less than men in every occupational category and African-American women continue to make less than white women (Hesse-Biber, 1985). In addition, since the mid 1970's the income impoverished women received from welfare benefits have also declined (McLanahan, Sorenson, & Watson, 1989).

Corcoran, et al. (1984) examined questions from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) that asked men and women questions about their work history, interruptions in work, absenteeism, and self-imposed restrictions on work hours and job location to test the hypothesis that these factors contributed to income disparities between men and women. They discovered that these variables only accounted for one-third of the difference in wage gaps between white men and white women, and only one-quarter the differences between white men and black women. They concluded that income differences were based more on gender and racial discrimination than actual differences in work skills and experience.

In addition, the changing economic base of the United States has created an **income** inequality between the upper and lower classes. Higher paying industrial jobs are **now** being replaced by low paying service work in such areas as food service and retail. **Unfortunately**, minorities and those living in the inner city have been the most affected by **this** change (Danzinger et al., 1994). Although, the black unemployment rate was twice **the** white rate through the middle 1970's, it rose to 2.5 to one during the 1980's when **many** factories closed or laid off workers (Hirschman, 1988). This situation is **compounded** by the fact that most of the new service jobs are located in suburban areas **not** easily accessible to inner city workers (Peterson & Harrell, 1992).

### Ideology

Low-income African-American women also must battle misconceived images **based** on their race, gender, and social class. These issues are thought to be the most **oppressive** sources of stress for black women (McAdoo, 1982). Currently the ideas of **rugged** individualism and the image of the welfare queen affect the popular views of low-**income** African-American women.

Those who believe in rugged individualism feel that poor individuals should be able **to** find mechanisms to escape their economic conditions without the help of others. When **this** doesn't occur, they blame the individual instead of the conditions in which the individual lives (Hemmons, 1995; Wharf, 1988). In addition, the image of the welfare queen has created a picture of impoverished African-American women as individuals who won't work but instead collect welfare benefits while having more children (Brewer, 1995). This image has served to link race with welfare reciprocity in the minds of many citizens of the United States (Bobo & Smith, 1994; Hecllo, 1994).

Stereotypically, welfare mothers are thought to be young women with a large number of illegitimate children who stay on welfare indefinitely and are not educated or motivated to seek further education or work. However, a 1993 census report found that the average age of welfare recipients is 30 and only about 8% of welfare recipients were under age 18. Although higher illegitimacy rates are associated with AFDC reciprocity, the amount of money received from AFDC is not related to birth rates. For example, some states with the highest benefits have the lowest illegitimacy rates. Furthermore, the birth rates of both welfare and non welfare mothers are remarkably similar (Shealy, 1995).

In addition, most welfare recipients have a basic education and do not remain dependent on welfare. Thirty-eight percent have finished high school, another 19% have at least one year of college and 15% continue to pursue their education. Furthermore, more than 70% of welfare recipients leave the welfare system within two years (Shealy, 1995).

Corcoran et al. (1984) examined welfare dependency. They defined dependency as a reliance on welfare income for more than half of the total family income in any one year and found that only one-third of those receiving welfare in their sample were actually dependent on it. Furthermore, only 2% were dependent on welfare for eight or more years during a period of ten years. They concluded that welfare reaches a large number of the poor without promoting dependency. Although a small group did depend on welfare, this dependency appeared to be a result of barriers such as a lack of child care and unemployment rates, not a lack of work motivation. Unfortunately, this dependent group was disproportionately African-American single mothers.



### Welfare Policy

Although welfare reform is a current controversy, it is not a new concept. Aid to **Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)** (originally ADC - Aid to Dependent Children) **was** incorporated into the social security act of 1935 without much debate. The program **provided** federal support to financially strapped states trying to maintain a system of **mothers' pensions** during the Depression. It was expected to become extinct as more **widows** came under the protection of Social Security and was designed to keep widows **out of** the labor force so that they could fully attend to their children. Although every **president** since Truman has tried to change welfare, AFDC has remained basically the **same**. It is still categorized as a program where benefits are tied to having responsibility **for a** dependent child and benefits still decline as a family's economic position improves **(Corbett, 1993)**.

During the 1960's the "War on Poverty" was initiated as a response to the fact that **neither** poverty nor AFDC had disappeared despite economic growth. This movement **was** marked by an increase in social program spending for such activities as job training **and** Head Start (a program designed to help children from "disadvantaged" families **receive** a head start in education before entering kindergarten). Despite these efforts **poverty** again did not disappear (Corbett, 1993).

Recent policy debates have focused on the idea that current welfare policy is responsible for welfare dependency based on the following ideas: AFDC policies have made recipients choose between public assistance and marriage, they discourage the reporting of outside work because policy benefits decline disproportionately, and they create a lowered self-image due to the public ideology connected with welfare reciprocity

**and unemployment** (Corcoran, et al, 1984; Garcia, 1989; Wilson, 1987). Although **welfare** debates have traditionally been associated with differences in political affiliations, **currently** this argument is being made by both Democrats and Republicans.

During the time of the VoICES interviews, the State of Michigan began **implementing** changes in welfare policy. Welfare recipients were being asked to sign a **social** contract outlining how they would spend 20 hours a week in productive activities **such** as work, school, or volunteer work. Policy changes also expanded job skill, **entrepreneurial** training, child support initiatives, and child care. Changes in AFDC policy **itself** were also made so that paid employment would be less likely to reduce welfare **benefits** disproportionately to the added work income (Engler, 1992).

Although some praise the State policy initiatives and feel that workfare will **strengthen** families by providing needed resources and positive role models, many are **critical** (Garcia, 1989). Wilson (1988) argues that these ideas fail to look at economic **realities** and instead emphasize the personal characteristics of the poor. Jobs are not **readily** available to all segments of the population and even if many AFDC recipients obtained jobs they would still be living in poverty. Furthermore, some speculate that families may actually be harmed by workfare policies because they will have less time for parenting and other home-based activities with little or no increased income (Garcia, 1989).

Others are concerned by the racist and sexist undertones. They point out that the poor have very little power and that poverty and race have become ideologically **inseparable**. Therefore, the current policy changes only legitimize the prejudices characteristic of the larger society and create a pool of exploitable female workers (Hecllo,

1 994; Hemmons, 1995).

Among all this controversy, some preliminary investigations are questioning whether Michigan's social contract actually works. Both changes in Michigan's policies and those that have occurred in Wisconsin are touted as models for the country. However, Whitman (1995) discovered that only one in four AFDC recipients actually participates in Governor Engler's workfare plan in a given month and by September, 1994 less than 1% were actually working in workfare jobs. He concluded that Engler's reforms have had a modest success but have yet to show that welfare rolls can be slashed by putting women to work.

Furthermore, both Michigan and Wisconsin have adopted policies more typical of liberal politics. They have increased job skill training and initiatives for better child or health care. Although Wisconsin now claims to save \$2 for every \$1, they have spent an additional \$1400 per family per year to help parents prepare for work (McCormick, 1995).

During the course of this dissertation, the Federal government passed legislation changing welfare policy. More power was given to the States to set welfare guidelines. However, at the same time freezes in spending for social programs are also being proposed. Thus, it appears that funding may be insufficient to actually help women leave the welfare rolls (McCormick, 1995).

### Exosystem

The exosystem consists of the communities in which the women live their lives. Changes in the Midwestern cities and inner city neighborhoods have affected the job opportunities and the degree of isolation felt by inner city inhabitants. Furthermore, these changes are reflected in the city (Flint, Michigan) where the respondents live.



### Changes in Cities

The de-industrialization and the servicing of the economy have largely affected **Midwestern** cities that have historically relied on factory work to create a stable economic **base**. Currently, 40% of the poor live in the Midwest (Brewer, 1995). With the transfer **of capital** to suburban centers there has been a massive marginalization of African-**American** workers. Furthermore, corporate decision makers have moved out of urban **African-American** communities on racial and economic grounds. This migration has **created neighborhoods** that are segregated both by race and class (Brewer, 1995)

Moreover, inner city urban areas are associated with higher rates of crime and **violence** than other neighborhoods. In two qualitative studies, the added stresses caused **by drugs and violence** created fear and safety issues for inner city African-American **families** (Dunlap, 1992 & Burton, 1992) .

Wilson (1987) originated the term social isolation which he defined as "a lack of **contact** or of sustained interaction with the individuals and institutions that represent **mainstream society**." (p. 60) He felt that the shifts in industrial economy, the suburbanization of jobs and the exodus of the black middle class have left inner-city black communities in crisis with their residents in serious danger of forming a permanent **underclass**.

This concept is just beginning to receive empirical support and has been found to have multiple dimensions (Fernandez & Harris, 1992; Peterson & Harrell, 1992). The poor have been found to be physically isolated due to racial and class segregation. This segregation has isolated inner city residents in areas apart from urban and suburban job centers. Segregation has also created residentially segregated schooling which often

translates into ineffective teaching and learning (Peterson & Harrell, 1992). Furthermore, unemployed poor African-Americans have been found to participate less in community organizations and to have social networks consisting of other non-working poor individuals. Some have been found to have few or no social contacts outside their families (Fernandez & Harris, 1992).

### The Economic History of Flint Michigan

Flint, Michigan, the city where the respondents live, became one of the largest industrial centers in the Midwest during the mid twentieth century (Edsforth, 1987). The culture of the community was created out of the economic cycles of its largest employer, General Motors (GM) and currently its economic condition exemplifies the decay of Midwestern urban areas.

Two waves of migration to Flint occurred during periods of economic prosperity in the auto industry. From 1900 to 1950 the population of Flint increased 600% due to an influx of European-American workers and a small number of African-American laborers who emigrated to obtain employment in the auto industry. Production rates during World War II and the postwar economy created a second economic boom. Flint's population again increased and included, for the first time, a large number of African-Americans. Furthermore, the civil rights movement of the 1960's and 70's allowed African-Americans to secure the higher paying factory jobs once exclusively given to whites.

GM not only provided superior wages but also instituted policies to meet workers' personal and familial needs for insurance, financial aid, education and recreation. These programs, know as "welfare capitalism," created a "paternalistic" environment for Flint's families. During periods of economic prosperity members of the Flint community

**begin** to rely on the affluence of GM to meet community and personal needs.

**Furthermore**, a mass consumer culture was created where individuals were judged more **on** what they owned than who they were (Edsforth, 1987).

Economic downturns have historically created a community consciousness in Flint.

**During** the Great Depression hundreds of workers lost their jobs as entire plants in Flint **were** closed. Out of this grew the beginnings of a labor movement, the Great Sit Down **Strike** of 1936, and the birth of the United Auto Workers' union (UAW) in 1937 **(Edsforth, 1987)**.

The current economic conditions began with the OPEC oil crises and inflation of **the** 1970's, and the economic recession of the early 1980's. A trend toward compact, fuel **efficient** imports hurt American automakers, instigating layoffs and plant closings. By **1987**, 30,000 jobs were eliminated in Flint. This created high unemployment, especially **among** the African-American population. Many left Flint permanently (Edsforth, 1987).

The results of the decline in the auto industry can be seen in the income statistics **for** Flint and Genesee County. In 1980, the percentage of Genesee County families living **below** the poverty level (7.1%) was half the rate of the state (14.7%) and below the **national** rate (9.6%). However, by 1990, the percentage of families who were living **below** the poverty level nearly doubled (14%) and both exceeded the national (10%) and **state** (10.2%) rates. In 1990, the poverty level for individuals living in the city of Flint **(27.6%)** was nearly triple the national and state rates. Furthermore, the percentage of **female** headed families living in poverty in Flint increased dramatically from 55% to 76% **between** 1980-1990. The state rates only increased 5% (from 62% to 67%) during the **same** time period. According to the 1990 census, 40% of the population of Genesee

**C**ounty was receiving some type of public assistance income (The Community Foundation of Greater Flint, 1994).

Recently, General Motors ended their hiring freeze. However, at the time of the **i**nterviews, Genesee County had the highest unemployment rate for Michigan's 12 major **l**abor markets (The Community Foundation of Greater Flint, 1994).

### Mesosystem

The mesosystem includes the environments, people, and organizations a woman **i**nteracts with outside her immediate family. For the purposes of this study, the **m**esosystem consists of both informal (friends, extended family, romantic partners, **n**eighbors) and formal (agencies, churches, schools) support mechanisms.

### Informal Supports

In their review of the literature, Taylor and Chatters (1988) note that African-**A**mericans were more comfortable asking family for help than either friends or neighbors **a**nd were least likely to turn to agencies or other formal organizations for support. **E**mpirical studies have found that African-American women are more likely to interact **w**ith extended kin, to live in extended households, and to see these relationships as more **s**ignificant than whites (Hays & Mindel, 1973; Multran, 1985; Wasserman, Rauh, Brunelli, **G**arcia-Castro & Necos, 1990). Furthermore, black women receive more help with child **c**are from their families than white women (Hays & Mindel, 1973; Parish, Hao, & Hogan, 1991). However, neither the presence nor the degree of support provided from kin **n**etworks is found to have a significant effect on the probability of receiving welfare **a**ssistance (Benjamin & Stewart, 1991; Parish et al., 1991). Moreover, higher levels of **s**ocial support are linked to depression for low-income African-American women

suggesting that social support has a psychological cost for this group (Dressler, 1985; Taylor, Henderson & Jackson, 1991).

Fewer studies have examined the supportive role of neighbors, friends, and romantic partners in the lives of poor African-American women. Taylor and Chesler (1993) found those single African-American mothers who had support from either a male intimate or a female confidant also reported more affiliative relations with their children than mothers with low support.

Oliver (1988) discovered that African-American communities, regardless of income, had abundant social networks. In a low-income community, however, the networks were dense and tied to local contacts. Two ethnographies of low-income black women also portrayed a rich variety of reciprocal support networks based on friendship and neighborhood ties (Jeffries, 1967; Stack, 1974). Jeffries, however, noticed that some women chose to remain isolated. She observed that supportive relationships with neighbors were of relatively short duration and that those who were the neediest were the most likely to participate in neighborhood networks. Belle (1983) proposed that isolated women may have chosen to "therapeutically withdraw" from a demanding and stressful network and those who utilize an extensive network to meet their needs may have no other choice due to economic necessity.

#### Formal Supports

Historically, the church has been the major institution around which African-American families organize their lives (Barbarin, 1983). It has served as a central source of material aid and emotional support. Furthermore, the church has been a mechanism of political and social activism. Psychological benefits have also been noted. For example, a

religious orientation may reduce the perceived threat of a stressor by providing an interpretation of a negative event as a part of God's grand scheme (Barbarin, 1983; Taylor & Chatters, 1988).

However, an empirical examination of the issue found that religious orientation was linked to depression for African-American women. Women who reported higher levels of religious orientation also tended to identify with white racist stereotypes about blacks. Therefore, the church became a mechanism of cultural oppression (Taylor et al., 1991).

Research on the effects of human service agencies have largely consisted of individual program evaluations. Overall, most programs have been found to be successful in meeting their objectives (Burtless, 1994). Job training programs have been linked to modest employment and income gains among women receiving AFDC payments. However, there has been no evidence that these programs actually move families out of poverty (Blank, 1994).

In general, agency programs seem to be receiving more criticism than accolades. Wharf (1988) states that agencies are so controlled by government and consumed by crises that they are unable to track the impact of economic and social policies on the communities they serve as well as on their own practices. Often successful programs are not brought to the attention of policy makers nor replicated on a larger scale. Although most writers advocate an empowerment perspective based on the economic and social conditions in which low-income families live, most also criticize human service programs for ignoring these same factors (Guittierrez, 1990; Parnell & Vanderkloot, 1994; Walters, 1994). As a result many services are inappropriate and do not meet the needs of low-

**income** clients. In turn, the low-income client's resistance to such services is viewed by **some** human service professionals as lack of motivation to improve life circumstances. **Furthermore**, the problems of low-income clients are most likely to be attributed to **psychological** deficits without consideration of their environments (Parnell & Vanderkloot, 1994).

The impact of schools and other community organizations on low-income family life has received little attention. The use of schools as an important component of service delivery and youth programs has been advocated (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988; Jarrett, 1995). Moreover, lower levels of family stress have been associated with involvement in community organizations that enforce an African-American ethnicity for middle income Black families (McAdoo, 1982). Both these areas deserve further attention and hold some promise as effective support for low-income African-American families.

### Microsystem

The microsystem focuses on the family variables of culture, parenting and stress. **Although**, the African-American family has historically been described as deviant and **pathological**, recent research and discussion have focused on family strengths.

### African-American Culture and Family Life

The strengths of African-American families are attributed to their strong reliance **on** the family, their sense of religiosity, the involvement of both parents in decision **making**, and their ability to protect themselves from discrimination. **Although**, some **believe** that African culture was lost to black Americans during slavery, many argue that **family** strengths are a result of a solid cultural base (Burgess, 1995; Leslie, 1995; **McAdoo**, 1982).

African-American families have adapted to life in racist America. During slavery, African-American fathers lived on other plantations and family members were sold. Due to discriminatory practices after Emancipation, African-American women often had an easier chance of employment. In addition, welfare policy forced women to live with males who often had difficulties finding employment due to structural barriers, or to accept contributions provided by the government (Burgess, 1995).

Diverse family forms are hypothesized to have formed as a solution to these problems (Dickerson, 1995). Although the nuclear family is considered the norm in the dominant culture, extended family forms are often a part of the African-American family structure. The flexible roles found in African-American families and the power African-American women have in family decision-making are also described as strengths derived from this adaptation (Barbarin, 1983; Randolph, 1995).

Furthermore, African-American mothers often make sacrifices for their children so they can have a better life. Researchers have noted that mothers may buy their children expensive clothing or send them to private schools to maintain the advantages of a middle-class image. Often their disciplinary practices are strict and designed to protect their children from violence and racist practices (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan & Buriel, 1990; Randolph 1995). An ethnography of African-American Head Start families found that mothers stressed education, and emphasized self-reliance and autonomy for their children (Rosier & Corsaro, 1993).

#### Changing Family Demographics

Three demographic trends have created changes within the American family.

These trends include an increase in female headed families, poverty, and maternal



**employment.** In 1990 more than half of all African-American children under the age 18 **lived** with one parent, usually their mothers (Randolph, 1995). In quantitative studies, **single** motherhood has been associated with a number of deleterious effects on children **such** as poor academic achievement, higher high school drop out rates, higher rates of **delinquency**, drug and alcohol use, lower earnings in adulthood, premarital pregnancy and **higher** rates of poverty. Moreover, these variables are mediated by both maternal **employment** and poverty. Children living in low-income single female headed families are **found** to be most at risk due to the stress associated with their impoverished status (McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

Qualitative studies have noted the resiliency in African-American female headed **families** and their participation in an extended family support network (Burton & Dillworth-Anderson, 1991; Malson, 1987; Stack, 1974). Malson (1987) noted family **diversity** in terms of socio-demographics, life situations and employment status. She **found** that although the women were struggling they were not dependent and they were **more** proactive than reactive. The women worked actively to manage and cope with the **dual** responsibilities of bread winner and parent. Although single-parenthood was often **disruptive**, it also served as a motivator to make life changes. Furthermore, the women **thought** that a full-time job with adequate child care would be a mechanism to make their **life** better and more financially secure.

Poverty is associated with female-headed families. Furthermore, research suggests **that** individuals who grow up in poor families are more likely to experience poverty as adults. Corcoran et al (1984) investigated whether poverty and welfare reciprocity were passed from one generation to the next. Four-fifths of the children in their sample who

had lived in poverty moved out of poverty after forming their own households. Although, in this study, a parent's overall economic condition was a determinant of a child's welfare use, women who left homes of welfare dependent families were not any more likely to receive public aid than otherwise similar women whose parents didn't receive welfare.

Maternal employment has also been found to affect family life. In a qualitative study, both single and married employed African-American women were found to do more work than the unemployed due to the added household and mothering responsibilities. Although friends and family provided support, all of the respondents had the primary responsibility for child care and household chores (Malson, 1983).

However, between low-income and middle class women, between white and African-American women, and between married women and single mothers, women who could work or stay at home based on their own preferences were found to experience the least stress (Lerner & Abrams, 1994). Furthermore, their children did not experience any negative developmental outcomes (McAdoo, 1982; Jackson, 1992; Lerner & Abrams, 1994). In fact, children with the poorest socio-emotional adjustment had mothers who wanted to work but were unemployed (Lerner & Abrams, 1994).

Some differences between single and married mothers have been noted, however. Single mothers need more support than other groups in terms of child care and economic security. Furthermore, in a study completed by Jackson (1992), black single low-income working mothers were at a high risk for depression. There was also some evidence that raising boys may be more difficult than raising girls for this group. Having a high school education or less and parenting young sons were associated with higher role strain, greater depression, the least favorable perceptions of children, and lower ratings of overall life

satisfaction.

Maternal employment patterns have also been found to impact children. School achievement is improved when mothers work part-time on a stable basis rather than working fluctuating or decreasing hours. Furthermore, maternal employment affects older children less. Mothers of new born infants need time away from work to establish adequate child care and organize their households (Lerner & Abrams, 1994).

All these demographic changes (poverty, single motherhood and maternal employment) are stressful for low-income African-American female headed families. The experience of living in poverty requires that energy be devoted to worrying and scheming about how to make ends meet. Furthermore, coping with being single creates stress. Single mothers must balance their parenting, household and work responsibilities with a need for love, companionship, and support from a romantic partner (Bennett, 1987).

### The Individual

#### African-American Women: Education and Work

African-American women have historically attended racially segregated schools. Even today, poor women of color often attend inferior schools in inner city neighborhoods (Peterson & Harrell, 1992). Furthermore, students who lack basic skills or are behind in grade level are more likely to drop out or become teen parents. If a poor female student of color remains in school, she is typically tracked into vocational, general, or special education programs without consideration of her ability. Moreover, college enrollment is declining for African-Americans despite gains in the high school completion rates. In addition, those who do attend college are most often enrolled in the lower-cost two-year junior or community colleges (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988).

Little has been written concerning the career development of low-income African-American women. However, recent interest has been directed toward the career development of women. Farmer (1976), Astin (1984) and Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) have all proposed popular theories of women's career development. Hackett and Lent (1992) have noted that these conceptual models of women's career development converged in some important ways. These models all included background factors such as gender, ethnicity, parents' educational and occupational level, and socioeconomic status. Secondly, they incorporated the influence of personality or internal traits and attitudes. These traits included cognitive appraisals and expectations, self-concept, and achievement motivation. Socialization factors such as gender-role attitudes were also important factors. Finally, the theorists of all three models agreed that women's career development is grounded in a social context. Betz (1994) proposed a similar framework in a review of the literature. She felt that both environmental variables (discrimination, educational barriers and family background) and individual factors (family issues, self-esteem, work expectations, and profeminist attitudes) could act as either barriers or facilitators to women's career choices and development.

An examination of the social context for African-American women found that inequalities for African-American women exist in the job market. Women of color receive the lowest wages, hold the worst jobs and are more likely to be unemployed than white women (Zinn & Dill, 1994). Historically, sexist and racist attitudes have kept African-American women tied to domestic and agricultural labor, the two jobs held by female slaves. Until the 1970's, the majority of African-American women were employed in service or private household domestic work (Newman, 1986).

Initially, policy initiatives ignored both agricultural and domestic workers. New Deal legislation provided old age insurance, survivors' benefits, and unemployment compensation to all occupational groups except domestic and agricultural workers (Newman, 1986). Therefore, historically, when domestic or agricultural laborers lost their jobs their only option was to join the welfare rolls.

Today African-American women often find themselves isolated in their work roles. Furthermore, they often work in uncertain, unpredictable jobs where they have little control over their work schedules or job duties. Low-income women are more likely to find jobs in professions where work schedules vary from week to week and work time occurs outside of traditional nine to five hours (Paltiel, 1988). Not only are these conditions linked to stress, they often make child care arrangements difficult (Paltiel, 1988).

However, African-American women have always had higher participation rates in the labor market and had fewer interruptions to their employment than white women (Belgrave, 1988). They are committed to work (Belgrave, 1988; Benjamin & Stewart, 1989). Malson (1983) interviewed fifty-four African-American women. The vast majority had always planned on combining motherhood and work and 80% reported that they preferred working to being at home due their need for independence and financial advantages for their families.

Benjamin and Stewart (1989, 1991) completed a series of studies examining the role of self-efficacy and work orientation in the work status of a group of women living in a housing project. Indicators of self-efficacy included measures of self-worth and work orientation which examined the extent the women perceived they had the ability to change

their present circumstances.

No racial differences were found in either self-efficacy indicator or in beliefs about the importance of work. Furthermore, neither type of self-efficacy indicator was a consistent predictor of welfare reciprocity status, current employment status, work history, nor current employment status (Benjamin & Stewart, 1989).

Although, the longer an individual received public assistance the lower her perceived efficacy and work orientation, this factor did not translate into differences in work history or work status. Overall, there was a substantial consensus among African-American and white employed and unemployed low-income women that opportunities are stratified in society and that most people "make it" by working hard and beating the system (Benjamin & Stewart, 1989).

Education was the only consistent predictor of a work history of full-time employment and being currently employed. Overall, age (younger women) and the presence of children under age six was the most consistent predictors of welfare reciprocity and length of the receipt of aid (Benjamin & Stewart, 1991). Benjamin and Stewart concluded that there was an absence of a measurable influence of values and beliefs on labor market behavior for their sample. They suggested that researchers focus on identifying structural barriers to employment for low-income women.

However, low-income adults do need more information about jobs and career options. Miller (1982) found that low-income individuals lacked basic information about careers. Furthermore, levels of career maturity and knowledge about career development tasks have been found to be low for this population (Healy, Mourton, Anderson & Robinson, 1984; Manuele, 1984; Miller, 1982).

### Mental Health Issues

Low-income African-American women are found to have high rates of depression and psychological problems due to stress (Bennett, 1987; Dressler, 1985; Jackson, 1992; Kessler et al, 1985). The chronic stress related to poverty is thought to create the greatest risk for depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem for low-income women (Paltiel, 1988). Taylor et al. (1991) found that social economic status, negative life events, physical health problems and internalized racism were significant predictors of depression for African-American women.

Locus of control, and self-concept are thought to be internal mechanisms that mediate the effects of stress (Smith, 1985). Although, an internal locus of control (expectations that one has a high degree of control over life events) is associated with lower stress for majority Americans, researchers question the notion that an internal locus of control is beneficial for racial minorities. Researchers hypothesize that a minority individual's ability to recognize discrimination can prevent the internalization of racism. Therefore, the context of an individual's situation should be evaluated before making decision on the value of an internal locus of control (Smith, 1985).

In general, African-Americans are thought to have a low self-concept due the internalization of racism (Smith, 1985). In addition, welfare reciprocity is also thought to create a negative self-concept due to the popular views associated with public assistance (Garcia, 1989). Although, internalized racism is associated with higher rates of depression (Taylor et al., 1991) and long-term welfare reciprocity has been linked to a decrease in self-concept (Benjamin & Stewart, 1989), a low-income or minority status doesn't necessarily translate into a negative self-concept. Self-worth was not linked to work

history for low-income women (Benjamin & Stewart, 1989). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that many African-Americans compare themselves to other individuals like themselves. Thus, they do not perceive themselves as lacking or deficient (Smith, 1985).

Interestingly, denial, in the form of selective inattention or escapism, is found to be a healthy coping mechanism for uncontrollable situations associated with poverty (Kessler et al, 1985; Paltiel, 1988). However, ignoring a situation is a poor coping mechanism when events can be controlled and a problem focused coping strategy is thought to be most effective (Kessler et al., 1985).

### Summary and Conclusions

Low-income African-American women must battle the economics and ideological factors of the macrosystem. Their higher poverty rates appear to be a result of gender and racial discrimination (Corcoran et al., 1984). Furthermore, the popular image of the welfare queen is a stereotype not supported in census data or research (Corcoran et al., Gotschalk, et al., 1991; Shealy, 1995). Although, it is unclear at this time how policy changes will impact AFDC families, Whitman (1995) discovered that only a few AFDC recipients were being effected by Michigan's policy changes during the time of the VOICES interviews.

Exosystemic influences are also impairing low-income women's ability to obtain good paying employment. The servicing of the economy and job layoffs in the auto industry are creating a void in employment opportunities in Midwest urban areas (Brewer, 1995; Edsforth, 1987). Furthermore, the ensuing increase in inner-city violence and urban isolation are compounding the women's ability to create safe, supportive environments for their families (Peterson & Harrell, 1991; Wilson, 1988).



It is difficult to create a clear picture of mesosystemic support systems for low-income African-American women. Black women have been found to rely more on extended kin networks than white women and individuals living in urban areas appear to have large supportive networks. However, support is thought to have a cost for some low-income black women and has been linked to higher rates of depression (Dressler, 1985; Henderson & Jackson, 1991). Furthermore, social programs designed to help low-income individuals are criticized for lacking an empowerment and contextual perspective (Blank, 1994; Wharf, 1988). In addition, the church, historically a support system for African-Americans, has also been linked to higher rates of internalized racism in an empirical study (Taylor et al., 1991).

Both stresses and strengths are found in the micro-system. Low-income African-American female headed families are resilient and have developed diverse kin networks as positive adaptations to racist life in America (Burgess, 1995; Dickenson, 1995; McAdoo, 1982). However, raising children alone brings added stressors. Single mothers need more support in terms of child care and economic security.

Poverty and work add additional burdens. Although, most African-American women have been found to prefer combining the roles of mother and employee, work inside the home and outside employment combine to create a busy day for single mothers (Malson, 1983). In addition, African-American female headed families are the most likely to live in poverty. Poverty acts as a chronic stressor as women struggle to meet ends meet (Bennett, 1987).

At the individual level, the inequalities of education and in the job market could translate into fewer job skills for low-income African-American women (Gordon-

Bradshaw, 1988; Peterson & Harrell, 1992). However, it appears that their work motivation and perceived efficacy are supports when looking for employment. Although, long-term enrollment in public assistance lowers perceived efficacy, this factor does not translate into differences in work history or work status (Benjamin & Stewart, 1989).

Low-income African-American women do have more mental health problems and are more likely to be depressed than middle class women (Bennett, 1987; Dressler, 1985; Jackson, 1992; Kessler et al., 1985). This distress is linked to the chronic stress of poverty (Kessler et al., 1985).

Typically, an internal locus of control and a positive self-concept are thought to mediate stress for majority Americans (Smith, 1985). Although, low income minority women are expected to have neither a good self-concept nor an internal locus of control, these traits are hypothesized to operate differently for low-income minority individuals. Researchers advocate taking a contextual approach before evaluating both locus of control and self-concept for low-income minority individuals (Smith, 1985).

This review has uncovered more barriers to employment for low-income African-Americans single mothers than supports. However, many low-income African-American single mothers do work. The results of the investigation will provide an explanation for how these employed women overcome the barriers they encounter. Also, it will provide information as to the effects of work or unemployment on their family life.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I will employ a qualitative analysis of the forty interviews to answer the research questions.

What are the similarities and differences between the employed and unemployed women?

What is the effect of paid work on the women and their family life?

What effect does unemployment have on the women and their family life?

What factors contribute to a women's ability to gain and keep employment.?

What implications for policy and program development do these results have?

These questions will be answered along all the dimensions (macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem, and individual) described in the literature review (see appendix A for the interview questions).

### The Appropriateness of the Chosen Methodology

The goal of this dissertation is to investigate the lives of low-income African-American women within the context of societal, community, and family variables. Qualitative research directly addresses an emic, or insider's, perspective by allowing the researcher to collect data from within the research participant's environment. Furthermore, qualitative research examines the interactions and dynamic contexts, rather than variables that isolate particular fragments of a person's experience such as an attitude or particular behavior (Daly, 1992).

Furthermore, qualitative methods are advocated for the investigation of families, especially the female headed African-American family, for ecological frameworks, and for informing practice and policy (Daly, 1992; Randolph, 1995). Historically

anthropological studies have used qualitative methods to understand the meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences of families as well as to understand the functional attributes of diverse family forms. More recently psychologists have begun to use this methodology to look at the dynamic contexts of families and the interactions and ongoing negotiations of family roles and relationships (Daly, 1992). Randolph (1995) stated that a qualitative examination of the female headed African-American families' daily living and the adjustments to the single mother family structure was needed. The need to go straight to the source to understand the stresses associated with racism and sexism and ensuing coping strategies is also met through a qualitative methodology.

Although, Bronfenbrenner (1979) doesn't advocate one form of methodology over another, he does state that the methodology chosen should reflect the purpose of the study and the research questions. Qualitative methods have been found especially helpful in investigations employing an ecological model (Anglin, 1988; Glossop, 1988). Essential to an ecological perspective is its focus on context. Instead of being governed by generalized principles, an ecological model holds that a person's life and developmental capacities can only be understood within her environment. Furthermore, the perception of the individual is thought to be an essential component (Glossop, 1988).

Qualitative studies are thought to be especially helpful in informing efforts to create effective human service programs that are based on the first-hand knowledge of the targeted group. Both the goals and the solutions of a particular program are more applicable and helpful when they are created out of the client populations own descriptions and interpretations of their issues and problems (Jarrett, 1995). Furthermore, the adaptive strengths of African-American families and their communities should be articulated to

program planners, service providers, and policy makers to help in the development of strategies that respect the cultural integrity of the African-American family (Randolph, 1995).

### Participants

Forty African-American women were selected from the Flint Head Start program. They ranged in age from 17 years to 56 years with a mean of 29.6 years. Fifty percent were under the age of 29 and 75% under age 33. The majority of the women (63.4%) were born in Michigan and 19.5% were born in southern states. Furthermore, 48.8% were born in Flint and the majority have lived there all their lives.

The number of children per respondent ranged from one to seven. The mode number of children is 2 and 80.5% have 1-3 children. Their children range in age from less than a year to 34 years. The women's ages at the birth of their first child ranged from 13 years to 32 years. Fifty percent of the women had a child before age 19. Five of the women (12.2%) were pregnant at the time of the interview.

Twenty-nine of the women have never been married. Of the 11 who were, 6 reported being separated, 3 were divorced, and 2 were widowed. At the time of the interview half of the women were also currently involved in a relationship with a partner and 8 of these women reported living with a romantic partner.

Twenty-eight women (68.3%) graduated from high school and 2 others obtained GED's (general equivalency degrees). Reasons for not completing high school included: pregnancy, no day care, family problems, marriage, and attitude problems. Most of the women (75.6%) have received job training beyond high school.

Ninety-five percent (38) of the women have, at some time, worked for pay outside

their homes. Fifteen were currently working for pay and of these 14 worked between 20 and 42 hours a week. Most of these women (8) worked a full forty hours a week. Sixty-five percent of the employed women had been at their current jobs for less than a year. However, the length of time they had held the job ranged up to 10 years. When asked to describe their current or latest job, most women (8) were employed in food service jobs. Six women reported employment in the following categories: youth/child work, medical (primarily nursing assistants) and retail work. Most often the women were employed as assistants.

Current household monthly income ranged from \$344 to \$1707. Fifty percent of the women make less than \$593 a month and 75% make less than \$920. The majority of the women (70.7%) receive medical assistance and 82.9% receive food stamps.

### The VoICES Team

Originally, a team of five graduate assistants (Kathy Gainor, Nancy Hill, Linda Juang, Norman Peart, and myself) was recruited by the principal investigator, Dr. Marvin McKinney, to work on the VoICES project. This original team completed an initial literature review as well as conducting focus groups and key informant interviews. Each researcher brought a varied approach and background to the project. The fields of psychology, sociology, and education were represented. Furthermore, the team was ethnically mixed and included four African-Americans (including the principal investigator), one Asian-American, and one European-American (myself).

At this time the other four graduate students have left the project due to graduation or to pursue other interest. A sixth graduate student has joined the VoICES project. Mickey Melendez is Puerto-Rican and is pursuing a degree in counseling

psychology. Mickey and I have completed the initial analysis of the VoICES data.

### The Interview

The questions used in the interview instrument originated from four sources: questions derived from the content analysis of earlier focus groups and key informant interviews, measures used in prior research, issues that emerged through discussion during team meetings, and issues supported in the current literature on African-American families and poverty. Most often questions gained support for their inclusion from more than one source. The instrument also went through a number of revisions based on the review of other researchers and a field test. The following examines more closely the sources for the interview questions, the review process, and the field test.

#### Sources for Interview Questions

During the first year of the study, the VoICES team conducted focus groups and key informant interviews. A focus group consisted of eight to twelve participants and a leader from the VoICES project. The leader's job was to facilitate discussion concerning the problems of poor African-American single mothers in Flint. Although questions were written and used to begin each focus group, discussion preceded informally. A total of eight focus groups was conducted with the following groups:

- Family TIES Advocates: para-professionals working with low-income teen mothers
- Beecher Head Start Teacher Aides
- Beecher Head Start Lead Teachers
- Beecher Head Start Paraprofessionals
- Daly Elementary School Mothers (four meetings occurred)

Interviews were also conducted with key informants in the Flint community.

Those interviewed were selected based on their knowledge and involvement in poverty

issues in Flint. A total of twelve interviews was completed with individuals working in such diverse organizations as the school board, local schools, a local health clinic, a major business employer, several community empowerment groups, a funding agency, the Department of Social Services, and the community Head Start Program.

All groups and interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Field notes were also written by the VoICES team member who led the group or conducted the interview. Later discussion of the groups and interviews occurred during team meetings. Based on this discussion, our review of the literature, and our conceptualizing framework, specific categories for focus were chosen by the VoICES team during a team meeting. The categories received approval from all team members. The categories included: supports, stresses, neighborhood life, daily activities, family life, parenting, and romantic relationships. These categories became the main sections of the interview.

A content analysis was completed for all transcribed interviews and focus groups using the chosen categories. The refinement of these categories lead to the development of many interview questions.

Other interview questions were adapted, or simply taken from measures written by others. Dr. Linda Burton, our consultant for the project, allowed us to adopt much of an interview she used for her research. Dr. Burton has been working on a qualitative investigation of the intergenerational process involved in teen pregnancy and motherhood. Many of her questions were directly applicable. The demographic section of the VoICES interview was almost entirely taken from her study. Other questions were reworded and adapted to more directly fit the format of the VoICES project.

The instrument used to evaluate the Family TIES program in Flint was also



examined. Although many of their questions were originally included in the first drafts of the interview, most of these items were edited out in later revisions. Thus, in the current interview very few questions were drawn from this instrument.

Although discussion during the VoICES team meetings involved all areas included in the present interview, certain areas evolved out of these discussions. Specifically these areas included: the importance of men in the participant's lives, the interplay of racism, sexism and classism, the hopes or fears participants have about their future and the future of their children, the differences in how boys and girls are raised, and the issue of fun and recreation in the participant's lives. These areas were incorporated by adding a question or two to the main sections of the interview schedule.

Support for questions was also found in a review of the literature completed during the project's conceptualization. Questions came from the following general research areas pertaining to low income African-American women: parenting, support mechanisms, and family relationships.

### Review Process

Early drafts of the measure were reviewed by the principal investigator, Dr. Marvin McKinney, and other members of the VoICES team. Other project advisors, Dr. Richard Lerner, Dr. Francisco Villarruel, and Dr. Linda Nelson of the Human Ecology Department and the Institute for Children, Youth, and Families at Michigan State University also commented on the interview and its format. Concerns often related to the wording of the questions and changes were made to clarify their meanings. Additions and subtractions were completed to keep the focus on the outlined goals of the VoICES project.

After addressing these concerns a series of trial runs were completed. Members of the VoICES team practiced interviewing each other to check the appropriateness of the questions and the flow of the interview format. Again changes were made. Most of the changes again involved the rewording of questions.

Finally, Dr. Burton reviewed the finalized draft. A few revisions were made as a result of this last review. Dr. Burton's suggestions involved creating a consistent format for the informal and formal support sections in the measure.

Dr. McKinney and I field tested the interview with three participants randomly chosen from a list of Beecher Head Start mothers. Each interview was conducted in the manner planned by the VoICES team and participants were paid \$20 for their participation. No major difficulties were discovered. Participants appeared relaxed and comfortable with the interview process. A couple questions were found to be confusing to the participants and were changed.

### The Interview

The interview was administered in two, two-hour sessions with each session occurring within a week of each other. An introduction was included and contained instructions for the interviewers, a consent form, and a face sheet which asked for the participants name, address, phone number and the name, address, and phone number of a person who knew how to reach the participant. Both the participant and the interviewer also completed evaluation forms at the conclusion of the interview. The participant was asked to rate their honesty and comfort level with the interview. The interviewer was asked to report observations of the home and also to evaluate the interview in terms of participant honesty and comfort level.

The interview asked questions concerning the following topics:

**Demographics:** living arrangements, marital status, marital history, education, training and employment, McKnight's Capacity Inventory, and income.

**Daily Life:** daily activities, neighborhood and community, stress and personal strengths, racism/discrimination, the future

**Family Life:** family of origin, parenting, friendships, romantic relationships, kin networks

**Support Networks:** Informal support systems, Formal support systems

### **Procedures**

Dr. McKinney decided that indigenous interviewers would be used. Therefore, a contractual arrangement was formed with SmartWORKS. SmartWORKS is a minority women owned consulting firm in Flint that specialized in management, planning, and resource development primarily for school services. Specifically, SmartWORKS was contracted to complete the following tasks: hiring the interviewers, help in training of interviewers, arranging interview appointments, supervising the completion of the interviews, and transcription of the interviews. Weekly written contact between SmartWORKS and VoICES was arranged. Informal telephone contacts or face to face contact occurred approximately twice a week.

All interviewers were hired by SmartWORKS based on the following criteria:

- 1) African-American women
- 2) culturally and socially sensitive to the target population
- 3) indigenous to the community under study
- 4) people with similar life experiences as the target population
- 5) ability to quickly and easily establish interpersonal rapport
- 6) articulate
- 7) well-modulated voices
- 8) demonstrated listening skills
- 9) personal knowledge of prior job performance
- 10) prior experience working with people

Interviewer training consisted of four hours of instruction plus additional practice administering the interview. During the instructional periods interviewers were oriented to the purpose of the study and trained in confidentiality and contact procedures. Furthermore, all the interview questions were read by the interviewers and gone over a second time during the training. All concerns or misunderstandings were addressed at this time. After completion of each interviewer's first interview, all tapes were listened to and feedback was given. No difficulties were reported with these first interviews.

### Participant Recruitment

The VoICES team explored several sources for selecting the participant sample. Because some of the initial focus groups had been conducted using parents of the Head Start program in the Beecher School District, they were considered as a possible source for participant recruitment. However, due to changes in the Head Start's administration this became more difficult than originally anticipated. Secondly, a list of mothers of kindergartners was obtained from the school system. However, this list proved to be a year old. Thus, the chances were high that many of these women might have moved or would no longer be low-income.

Due to this difficulty, the VoICES project sought the assistance of the Head Start program in the Flint Community School District. They were willing to provide us with a list of 287 current Head Start parents who were low-income African-American female head of households. Initially, a letter was sent explaining the study and informing the parents that they might be contacted to determine their interest in participating in the VoICES study. The parents were notified in the letter that if they did not want to be contacted, they could call the Head Start office and have their names removed from the

list before sample selection. No calls were received.

From the listing, every third name (a total of 80 names) was selected to be contacted to participate in the study. This selection took place in the Head Start Office. Although, the VoICES project continued to have access to that listing, the list was never in their possession. This procedure was followed to insure the privacy of the Head Start parents. Once the list of the 80 selected names and their phone numbers were printed out, the sample recruitment process began. Six individuals without a phone were dropped from recruitment eligibility. The Head Start program did not wish to release addresses due to privacy issues, therefore, these individuals could not be reached.

Some difficulties were found in this list of names. During initial contact SmartWORKS discovered that many of these women either had moved or had disconnected phones. Therefore, more names were needed. An additional 80 women were selected by again choosing every third name from the master list.

The participants remaining in the Head Start parent sub-sample were contacted by phone by SmartWORKS. If the individual was found to be at the same phone number and made an initial agreement to be interviewed, they were contacted by a trained interviewer to arrange an appointment time. The phone contact involved a description of the study, including a detailed description of the two required interview session and a commitment to pay \$20 at the successful end of the second session. Once the time, place, and date of the first appointment was set, a letter was sent to the woman for confirmation, and one follow-up phone call was made.

All the interviews were conducted in the women's homes. All interviews were taped. Written notes were also taken by the interviewer. After completion of the

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interviews, each was transcribed by SmartWORKS. To ensure the quality of the transcription, members of the VoICES team listened to every fifth audiotape, randomly choosing approximately 1 to 2 hours of the interview and checked it against the transcription.

### Analysis

The questions in this dissertation are of two types. Some required a descriptive analysis and others needed a grounded theory approach. For example, the questions: What are the effects of work for the women and their family life?; What effect does unemployment have on the women and their family life?; and What are the similarities and differences between these two groups?, required descriptions of the lives of the women who are employed and those who are unemployed along the dimensions described in the ecological model.

However, the questions: What factors contribute to a women's ability to gain and keep employment?; and What implications for policy and program development do these results have?, were best answered through grounded theory. Mere description did not suffice, instead new ideas needed to be discovered. While grounded theory is based on description it goes beyond and is used to develop or generate social theory and concepts directly from data, rather than from previous assumptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This type of analysis is discussed in detail later, first the procedures for the descriptive analysis are outlined.

#### Analysis 1

During the discovery phase the data were read and reread, themes and ideas were noted, and typologies were constructed (Taylor & Bogden, 1984). This method was used

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during the initial analysis of the VoICES data and for the descriptive analysis for this dissertation. First the interview was divided into sections based on similarity of content. The participant's individual responses were used to create a data set. Using the copy and paste computer functions, answers to specific questions (including participant identification numbers) were copied from each interview and pasted into one data set encompassing a specific subject. Because these data sets had already been created for the VoICES project I did not need to recreate them. However, I did divide each data set into two categories based on the woman's current employment.

Next I read each data set to discover commonalities and possible patterns. This was completed separately for the employed and unemployed women. Often a few readings were needed to create a clear sense of common patterns. I developed coding systems using methods outlined by Miles & Huberman (1994) for a cross-case display using a variable-oriented strategy. The responses to a particular question were listed and then grouped according to common categories. Next, these coding categories were entered into a matrix or grid. The matrix was set up as a series of boxes with the respondent number listed along the left side of the page and the coding categories across the top. For example, responses to the question: "What do you like about your neighborhood?", fell into the same following four coding categories for both employed and unemployed women: safety; neighbors; close to shopping; school or the bus line; clean. These results were then documented and written into a matrix of the women's perceptions of their neighborhoods.

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## Analysis 2

The last two research questions: How do these similarities and differences play a role in the women's ability to work? What implications for policy and program development do these results have?, need more than descriptive data to answer. Thus, grounded theory approaches were used.

Grounded theory involves not only collecting and ordering data but also organizing ideas that have emerged from the analysis. Hypotheses are not tested through this method but discovered. Researchers using this technique do not try to prove their theories but to demonstrate support for them. The key criteria in evaluating the validity of these grounded theories are whether they "fit" and "work." "Fitting" the theory to the data means that the categories discovered must be applicable to and indicated by the data and not forced upon them. The theory "works" when it is relevant to and able to explain the behavior under study (Taylor & Bogden, 1984).

For this second part of the analysis, I chose to reread the transcripts and the comments made by the interviewers after each interview. The interviewers were asked to specifically comment on strengths and stresses in the women's lives. I also reread the notes I had made during my earlier readings of each transcript. As I had read through each interview during the initial VoICES analyses and later during the first analysis for this research, I had kept notes of significant events in each women's lives as well as emerging themes and patterns.

Furthermore, I categorized the women differently. In my proposal, I proposed to create predictor and outcome variables out of the first analysis. The predictor variables were to have emerged out of the descriptive information and the constant comparisons of

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data between and among the various ecological systems. The outcome variables were to consist of certain measures of employment. During my first analysis I found that social support and individual factors such as control, hope for a better future and the ability to plan a career were important variables. I also discovered that the women's work histories were better outcome variables than current employment status.

Specifically, I found that eleven women had work histories consisted of less than a year total employment. I examined these women as a group and called them, the low work history group.

I also discovered that seven women had a career plan they were following. I decided to examine these women as a second group and I called these women the planful group. The patterns in the planful women's lives appeared to be significantly different than any of the other women. Not only could they articulate a career plan, but their work histories showed that they were actively pursuing the goals they'd outlined for themselves.

For the remaining women (those not in the low work history group nor in the planful group) I read the transcripts in descending order of total years of employment as reflected in their work history. The interview of the woman who had the longest work history was read first and the women with slightly more than a year of employment were read last. Initially I'd tried to divide these women into categories based on the length of time they'd been employed. However, no clear categories were apparent. In other words, having a total work history of six years did not seem to be clearly different than a total work history of four years. Therefore, I decided to examine these remaining women in this more continuous fashion.

The key method of my grounded theory approach was "constant comparison." I

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compared information within each work history category and also between categories to discover patterns and connections between those patterns. These patterns were then refined into theoretical ideas and hypotheses were generated (Tesch, 1990). "Memoing" was also an essential part of this process. Emerging themes and concepts were written down during all stages of the analysis. This process allowed me to tie together different pieces of data into a recognizable cluster and to keep track of my emerging hypotheses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The information discovered through this grounded analysis not only helped me generate hypotheses about what variables were most likely to contribute to employment, but also helped me make recommendations for program and policy interventions.

#### The Researcher's Subjectivity

Another important area of the research process was the record keeping of my subjectivity and reactions to the interviews. I kept notes of emerging thoughts and feelings about the data as I read the interviews and completed the analysis. Peshkin (1988) wrote that all researchers have a responsibility to identify their subjectivity or discover their "subjective I's" (p. 18). Miles and Huberman (1994) note that most researchers rely on preexisting beliefs and experiences in interpreting data.

I noticed one of my subjective reactions as I began to discuss the research with others. As I began to explain the VoICES project and my dissertation to colleagues, friends, family, and acquaintances, I heard stories and information these individuals had gathered about women on welfare. I spoke with teachers who blamed their students poor academic performances on the negative values their parents who were on welfare had passed on to them. I heard stories about how the welfare mothers did not want to work

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and wouldn't accept jobs that had been offered to them. Some of those I spoke with felt that individuals on welfare had large families in order to increase their welfare payments. Others asked questions and wanted to know how things could be changed or how we could encourage employment. Everyone I spoke with felt that something was wrong with the welfare system and many felt that something was wrong with people on welfare.

I listened to these discussions and thought of them within the context of what I was learning from the interviews, what I had learned through past experiences, and my own beliefs. I had previously worked in a family service agency providing therapy to low-income urban African-American and white women. In fact, I had sought opportunities to continue working with this population throughout graduate school. I also had led many of the early focus groups conducted by the VoICES project. I liked the women I'd met. Furthermore, I believe in the underlying principles of the ecological model. I believe that individuals develop within the system of their environments and that a person's community, family, schools, and even macro-systemic influences affect that development. However, I also believed that the welfare system was not helping individuals reach their goals and made leaving welfare difficult.

At first, I felt angry at those who were perpetuating what I labeled stereotypes and I was protective of the women involved in the project. As I began my analysis, I wanted to ignore the women who discussed substance use or had many children because I did not want my research and writing to perpetuate negative stereotypes. I wanted to be fair and I wanted justice for these women. However, by ignoring some women I was also ignoring difficulties in their lives and problems that efforts at welfare reform had to address. I eventually found myself willing to listen to those I was discussing my research with and to

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listen to all of the women interviewed by the VoICES project. I also found myself using the ecological model more fully and explaining the women more completely within the context of their lives.

During the analysis, especially during analysis two, I was aware of how my experiences as a therapist were influencing my interpretations. Most of the low-income clients I had worked with previously were involved in violent relationships or were adult survivors of childhood abuse. I had learned from this experience how important positive support mechanisms were and how abuse could impact an individual's life. At one point during my analysis, I caught myself trying to push the data into the emerging themes of the importance of social support and the problematic effects of trauma on the ability of the women to remain employed. I realized that I was again ignoring some of the women who were exceptions to that theme. At that time, I carefully reread and paid special attention to the women who appeared to be exceptions.

I'd also learned other things from my low-income clients. I often was required to do home visits and I gained an understanding of safety issues. I quickly learned to make my home appointments in the morning before neighbors involved in the drug trade awoke and safety declined. I listened to stories about difficulties of raising a family on the income supplied by welfare, in finding employment, transportation, and child care. I heard of how some of my clients were treated rudely by welfare workers. I also discovered a mistrust of human service workers and developed methods of gaining the trust of my clients.

During my analysis of this data I tried to use these previous experiences as a strength and foundation of knowledge. At the same time, I was aware that this knowledge may also led to false conclusions or interpretations. I continued to explore my own

reactions and to discuss my emerging ideas with others. I also kept returning to the interviews themselves and to reread entire transcripts or various passages. I carefully examined the interviews of the women who did not fit the themes I was discovering. At times, I tried to ignore any previous subjectivity I might have in order to examine this data with a fresh perspective. Overall, I feel that I was fairly successful with this balance between my own subjectivity and the objectivity needed to create plausible hypotheses.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Chapter four contains the results of the two analyses. Analysis one includes the information gathered from the initial coding and comparison of the data. It is organized into the ecological model. Analysis two is a comparison of the women based on their work histories and abilities to create a career plan.

### Analysis One

Overall, very few differences were found among the employed and unemployed women in analysis one. Occasionally, a different pattern of answers was found in a small group of the employed or unemployed. However, rarely were distinguishing patterns found between the two groups. In this section, I've included both general descriptions of the women as a whole and also examined the patterns that were different in the two groups of women.

### Macro-system

The literature review presented a picture of low-income African-American women struggling to combat the influences of discrimination, changing economic conditions, and policy changes that encompass the macrosystem. Although much of what we know about the macrosystem comes from writings concerning the American culture, Bronfenbrenner (1979) wrote "what matters for behavior and development is the environment as it is perceived rather than as it may exist in objective reality" (p. 40). Therefore, the women's perceptions of the macrosystem are most important. Specifically, the women were asked to make general comments on the societal influences of racism, sexism, and classism on their future opportunities and job possibilities. These aspects were addressed through general questions concerning these types of discrimination.

### Discrimination

Both the employed and unemployed women knew that discrimination did exist. However, the women rarely felt that it affected their future job opportunities. Instead, discrimination was a problem that lurked outside of their day-to-day lives. For example, all but four women stated that racism existed. However, only a few felt that it might impair their abilities to gain employment. Carmella, a 35-year-old mother of two sons, doesn't blame her lack of employment on racism. When asked if she felt racism affected her chances of finding a job, she replied:

I know that there's a problem, [with racism] but I haven't personally encountered one.

On the other hand, Janeice, a 28-year-old waitress and mother of two daughters, did think that racism affected her future chances of success and of finding employment. She felt that the best way to handle this situation was simply to be polite. She stated:

Sometimes, like I have to go on different interviews and stuff like that and if they prefer you to be white they just really be snotty to you and try to give you a bad day. And in that situation you just be polite to them anyway.

Janeice was also one of the few women who noted that racial problems had existed in her high school. Janeice attended a predominately African-American high school and felt that the African-American students sometimes treated the white students differently. Her attempts to understand and confront racial conflicts early in life appeared to help her to understand them more fully as an adult. This pattern was found in other women's discussions. The women who felt that racism was a problem for them as children were also more likely to recognize it as adults. Janeice discussed this problem in the following manner:

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. . . I don't like to seeing nobody get hurt whatsoever because I remember when I used to go to school and the black kids used to mess with the white kids and I always get beat up because I was always helping the white kids because I just didn't like that. Oh, I just couldn't stand that. And now I see it and I still don't like that and I still say something because it is ignorant. You and that person are still that same thing, but just color on top. Your bones and stuff is still the same. Just ignorant.

The women also knew that sexism existed. Sometimes an employer might have a negative perception about a woman's ability or intelligence, and occasionally a man might be hired over a woman for a manual labor job. However, again this type of discrimination had not happened to any of them and they all recognized that women were as capable as men. For example, although Phyllis, a 36-year-old unemployed mother of two, felt that she hadn't encountered discriminatory treatment because of her sex, she knew that this might be a problem. She discussed this societal issue in the following manner:

Yes, they have a line, an invisible line where men can achieve at a job, a higher paying job. And they don't think a woman can because she's supposed to raise the family, stay at home, cook the meals. . . . seeing if she's making much more than a man, they say it can't be done. But it can be done.

In addition, Tamika, a 25-year-old college student and mother of one, felt that her chances for employment were better than a man's because African-American men faced even more negative stereotypes than she did. She stated:

If we (women) were to go out in the neighborhood and seek employment or something, I believe that we get hired quicker than a black male would. . . . I don't think people feel so much intimidated by a black woman as they do a black man.

Although the effects of classism were also rarely personalized on a societal level, it was the most salient form of discrimination. Most often classism was found in the way others in the community treated them (this will be discussed in the next section).

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However, a few women noted that opportunities were different for the poor. They couldn't always afford to go out to restaurants or clubs. Moreover, a few women noted that a bank wouldn't give them a loan or a credit card. Therefore, they couldn't buy a car, a home, or other needed items. Although, many women had thought of starting a business such as a home child care center, or a beauty salon, these opportunities were closed to them because they couldn't obtain a business loan. Marissa, who was 26 and employed, wanted to open a hair salon. She dropped her plans after not being able to find financing. She discussed the different opportunities she had in the following manner:

[those with less money] are not as easily accepted at financial institutions as far as applying for loans and things. They're looked at as those who probably won't be able to make a payment, so they're not given the same opportunities at loans.

Furthermore, even though she was able to support her family of three solely through the salary she earns working for an optometrist, Marissa noted that women on welfare have to battle stereotypes and classism:

. . . the women that are on the ADC system. Those women are treated differently. I think they're looked at as slothful and lazy and wanting -- not wanting to make their lives better, which is usually not true.

The women's ability to recognize that discrimination existed and refusal to personalize its influence is somewhat confusing. Although the data can not explain this pattern completely, several guesses can be made. The women could be simply ignoring discrimination when it occurs to them or they might not have developed ways to recognize it when it was personal. Perhaps, sorting out the effects of societal discrimination is an undaunting task, one that adds too much stress or takes too much energy. Moreover, if women were to recognize discrimination, they might feel so discouraged that looking for

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employment would be even more difficult.

On the other hand, the women may have developed ways to address discriminatory practices. Therefore, they didn't think of it as a problem. Janeice appeared to have developed effective methods of recognizing and confronting discrimination. However, she was also one of the few women who felt that discrimination was a problem. Therefore, this idea seems less likely. This theme is described and refined further in the next section.

### Exosystem

The women spoke, often vehemently, about the changes in Flint after the General Motors (GM) lay-offs. They noted that employment opportunities were less and that crime and violence had risen. Although I reviewed these economic changes from a historical perspective in Chapter 2, the women's perceptions of how these exosystemic influences have affected them are needed for a complete understanding (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The women also discussed how their neighbors and other community members treated them based on their race, gender, and economic status.

### Community Discrimination

Although the women rarely personalized societal discrimination, they could state how racism, sexism and classism might affect someone in Flint, as they shopped, looked for housing or employment, and socialized. Moreover, they were more likely to tell personal stories of being treated negatively by other community members based on their race, sex, and class, than they were when discussing how these factors affected their future opportunities. However, many were still reluctant to call discrimination a personal problem. Sheleatha, who was 21, unemployed and had four children still had problems understanding the personal influence of racism.

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I am sure there is [racism in Flint], I mean prejudiced, some people are still prejudiced.

She thought:

It sucks, cause I don't understand why we have this problem between blacks and whites and any other kind of race.

However, she hadn't encountered a problem and she didn't see that discrimination affected her personally. Sheila, a 30-year-old with three kids, worked twelve hours a week as a lunch room aid at her children's school. She echoed Sheleatha's thoughts.

Yeah, I've heard of them (racial problems in Flint). I don't know what they are, but I know they are there -- for jobs and stuff like that. They're there. I never experienced with them, but they're there.

Others, however, had a less difficult time identifying discrimination within their community. Racist practices in Flint were identified to be disapproval of interracial relationships or landlords who wouldn't rent to African-Americans. Others wished that more African-American would be hired as teachers in their schools or as clerks in their neighborhood stores. Erica, a 20-year-old, unemployed, biracial, mother of two saw that others sometimes treated her differently because of her mixed ethnicity.

You know, like "zebras" . . . with my mother being white and my father being black, you know, they say "Go back to your own races" and things like that.

Marissa discussed how discrimination affected her opportunities to find housing.

Racism isn't a problem when I look for work. But going to buy a house, I've encountered it several times, in different forms.

Although, there were not any differences between the employed and unemployed women, during the few occasions that stories of personal experiences with racism were told, it was often in the context of work. Many women who had, or were, working as

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waitresses noticed that they were treated differently. Janeice, who was quoted discussing racism earlier, worked as a waitress. Although she stated that racism did not affect her as she completed her daily errands, it did exist. She knows this because she saw it at work.

I work at a restaurant and I deal with people to where, some customers, they . . . don't even like you to touch them. They just slam the money on the counter or just drop it in your hand. And I cannot stand that, oh I just cannot stand that. And then some of them are real snotty and nasty to you to where they feel like you just have to bow down to them. And even my supervisor, my supervisor is white, and he feels like he can just tell everybody what he wants to do and stuff like that. True enough he has that title but . . . because you have that title doesn't mean that you have to dog everybody. That is not the way you want to be treated so why should you dog everybody else out. . . .

The women noted that sexism might occur when fixing or buying a car. Mechanics and car salesman tried to cheat women and assumed they were less knowledgeable. Moreover, because they were women, men tried to flirt with them to initiate sexual encounters. Tamika who felt that she had better job opportunities than African-American men, also noted that she was treated differently because of her sex and race.

Sometimes they don't take you seriously. Sometimes they just assume you don't know anything. . . . It's really bad. A lot of men think they're superior over women anyway. And then a lot of people of different races think they're superior over black people.

Although racism and sexism did exist, most often the women attributed negative interactions with others to classism. The women knew that status in Flint was based on income and possessions and the unemployed women recognized this problem most often. They described being treated rudely by store clerks or those they'd meet for the first time. Lois, who was 40, unemployed and the mother of three children, told the following story of meeting a man who wouldn't socialize with her after he found out she was on welfare and unemployed.

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. . . this one guy I was talking to, and he said to me, "You need to get a job, maybe you could talk to me." I laughed, you know, I had to laugh. Then I thought about it and I got upset. What happened to people just being people? You know, its, like, all about what you got and I don't think, you know, I don't think that's right.

Even employed women noted the effects of classism, however. Carla was 37, had four children and she was raising a niece because of her sister's drug problems. At the time of the interview, she was on maternity leave from a nurse's aide job. Carla felt that Flint offered equal opportunity for African-Americans and women. However, she noted that others sometimes treated her differently because she has less money. She said:

A lot of them might think they're better than us. . . . Yeah, they say if you got money, they talk to you like somebody. They talk to you out of respect. But otherwise they think they can just say anything to you.

However, the women knew that if they dressed well or spoke well, they might be able to pass for someone with more money. Consequently, they would be treated with respect. The following is a typical description of a woman's experiences with classism. Janeice, who experienced racism while working also encountered rude clerks when shopping.

. . . They feel like -- for instance take me for an example. I would go into a store, Kessels or something like that, dressed like this, and they feel like I can't afford nothing in there. Now if you [the interviewer] go in there they will help you more than they would help me and I might buy something and you know, that's how it be. My mother and me went out to the mall many a days, you know, and dressed like this and we come out and they feel like, they feel real stupid when we go to the counter and purchase something.

Based on these discussions of community prejudice, a clearer picture of the women's understanding of discrimination can be drawn. In the preceding section, I suggested that the women's reluctance to call racism a personal problem may be due to a

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their successes at handling prejudice. I also noted that they may be ignoring discriminatory practices because they were so overwhelming. However, a clearer picture of community issues suggest another reason.

Some women noted that Flint was segregated by race. Therefore, women who lived and spent most of their time in segregated neighborhoods probably didn't encounter racism as frequently. Although they'd heard of the problem, they hadn't had a problem with it. This supposition is supported by the fact that when racism was personalized, it was often done so in the context of work situations that would occur in less segregated environments. Moreover, those women who found racism problematic as children were also more likely to discuss it personally. Thus, a previous experience with prejudice also contributed to a different understanding of its effects. However, it is also interesting that no differences existed among the employed and unemployed women in their discussions of racism. Perhaps because most of the women did have some work experiences, they also had similar experiences and ideas about racism.

Classism was the most salient form of discrimination experienced by the women. Edsforth (1987) discussed how Flint had become a consumer society and stated that status was based on wealth and possessions. This factor was understood by the women. In fact, those who were unemployed were even more likely to be aware of classism. Having a job or a higher income changed how the women were treated in their own community.

### Perceptions of Flint

All of the women, regardless of employment status, agreed that Flint was ridden with violence and it lacked job opportunities. Their feelings about their community were so negative that only a few could answer the question: "What do you like about Flint."

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Most often the women focused on the lack of job opportunities and crime. For example, Carmella who didn't attribute her lack of employment to racism, did find a link between unemployment and GM's plant closings.

Interviewer: What do you like about living in Flint?

Carmella: I really don't know. I'm here. I really don't have an answer to that question. If I had the money or means to go elsewhere, I probably would.

Interviewer: What do you dislike about living in Flint?

Carmella: The crime, the drugs, the violence. Before all this started happening I think Flint was pretty good to me. When I first came here I loved it. But you know it's having to go down with all the guns and violence and murders and stuff like that, I kinda dislike that. I hate the fact that opportunities for jobs in the General Motors went down like they did. I think it kind of gave the Flint area a downfall when the plants started laying off people. When I came here it was a great place to live.

However, Flint was home and their families lived there. The closeness to family was the only positive feature anyone mentioned about living in Flint. Most of the women would leave Flint given the opportunity. They would leave for a better job, for better opportunities, and for a better education. Those that would choose to stay, would do so because of family connections. When asked, "Would you move out of Flint or your neighborhood if you had the chance?" most answers contained references to Flint's economic condition. Janeice stated:

Yes, because I believe it would be a better environment for the girls and it would be -- I would move out of state period to try to find a different environment and so they could learn different cultures, and job-wise.

Flint's future, as described by the women, was bleak. The women couldn't figure out how they were going to get ahead with so few decent paying jobs available and there was little hope that community conditions would improve. Lois, who was quoted earlier

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discussing classism, had recently been divorced after a twenty-year marriage. She worried about the lack of job opportunities and felt that unemployment was her greatest stress.

She stated:

I see Flint going down. In a way I see it as jobs, lack of jobs. Not enough jobs and you have a lot of kids coming out of school, no jobs. I went to a graduation . . . and I was looking at the program at the amount of people planning to go away to college and I'm like, 'Well God, I wonder what all these other kids is gonna do? There's no jobs here and if they're not planning to go to school, what are they gonna do?' . . . it's not like when I came out, the jobs were plentiful, even the shop. Because I know, I just put in an application . . . and they called me.

Cheryl, a 26-year-old, unemployed mother of six also was discouraged. She felt that even additional training might not be enough to get a good job in Flint.

. . . seem like I can't find too much of a good paying job here in Flint. If I was qualified it seems like it would be hard to find jobs in that particular position. You have to find something a little less and work your way up to that job, but you may not like it while you doing it.

Some women also felt Flint was boring and they yearned for more excitement.

Many felt that it was difficult for adults to find affordable places to have fun without the threat of violence. In addition, children also needed safe activities. Often older teens hung out at the playgrounds and parks creating fear. Trash, broken glass, and broken playground equipment were also seen as a problem. Few women felt comfortable allowing their children to go to public play areas without them. Danger was the norm in Flint and the women were constantly evaluating their safety. Angela, who was 31, unemployed, and had two children, discussed how she was afraid to let her children play outside.

. . . My son was outside one day and they was out there gambling. They start arguing and fighting and stuff. So, you know, he had to come in . . . So, when its a nice day outside, because they get kinda crazy, I have to end

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up making them come in -- on a nice day where they should be playing outside. . . . [In Flint] there's a drug house probably on every street, every

corner . . . can't walk up to a store -- somebody begging for a quarter. Its really all over Flint, really.

These descriptions of Flint echoed the descriptions of inner cities noted in the literature review. Flint's job market had moved from the good paying factory jobs open to those of an older generation, to the low paying service jobs where the women found employment (Edsforth, 1987). Moreover, the women found themselves living in areas where they felt unsafe. Crime, violence and drugs had become daily problems in many of Flint's neighborhoods.

### Mesosystem

The mesosystem contains those aspects of the community the individual and family interact with on a regular basis. In this section I focused on possible support systems for the women and their children. Specifically, I examined family support, friendships, romantic relationships, neighborhoods, and community agencies including churches.

#### Family Support

Childhood caretakers were discussed with love and respect. Biological parents, mothers alone, mothers and stepfathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and even brothers served as primary caretakers. For most women, regardless of employment status, family relationships were full of joy, pleasure, and support. However, a few women spoke of abuse or abandonment. The differences in these relationships were striking and when abuse or neglect was present it affected the women's adult relationships with family and sometimes friends and partners. In the following sections I discuss the patterns found in these early relationships and how they affected adult relationships.

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Close relationships and fond memories were found in the descriptions of mothers. Mothers worked, taught their daughters to cook, and played with them. Carmella, who was quoted discussing racism and unemployment, grew up in Arkansas and lived with her grandparents who were better able to take care of her. However, she had frequent contact with her mother. She said:

My mom, she would take us out riding. . . . She would take us downtown and we'd park and sit and look. We'd go to dinner. . . . It was this favorite place that she like to eat, we would go there and have lunch and things like that. We would go to church together sometime. There was things happening at school, neighborhood things. I was always with her when she wasn't working. . . . I loved her dearly.

Other mothers, like Pam's, stayed at home. Pam, who was 32, had two children and worked full-time as a nursing assistant, discussed her mom in this manner:

My mother is 67 years old. She is real nice to her grandkids. She's a home lady. We use to go shoppin', taught me how to cook and sew a little. We went out to eat and played games with us. I love her.

A few women, however, had different relationships with their mothers.

Sometimes, moms weren't emotionally ready to be moms and sometimes they had difficulties in life as they struggled as single parents. The women understood these problems, however, and along with adulthood came forgiveness and new understanding. However when a mother was abusive or overly neglectful, it was harder for the women to forgive. Edie was 27 years old, the mother of seven children and she worked as dishwasher. Edie had a different perception of her mother than either Pam or Carmella.

(My mother) took me through hell. I thought she wasn't the mama she should have been cause it's like her kids were last. . . . I talk to her when I can, but sometimes I just don't like talking to her at all.

Edie found it difficult to discuss her relationship with her mother. She was often vague

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and at times refused to answer questions about her childhood. However, Edie's interview contained many references to childhood abuse and difficulties in maintaining current relationships. Examples from Edie's life are used throughout this section to illustrate the effects of an abusive childhood. Carmella's experiences are used to better understand the life of a woman who had a happier childhood.

Although relationships with biological fathers took different forms, many lacked a close relationship with their biological fathers. Some fathers were not available, others were abusive, and some preferred to spend time with their sons. However, some fathers went to work and then came home to play with their daughters. Carmella was also close to her father.

My father was terrific. He once told us he could speak a foreign language, but he really couldn't, so he would speak this stuff, and for a long time, until we got older, we thought he could. He worked very hard. He worked in a mill for a while. He got asthma and emphysema, so he had to retire from that, but he still did carpentry. . . . He would go out, just walking and stuff, and see small trees. We'd get them and bring them home and plant them. . . . Father was kinda great at showing us the outdoor type things -- gardening and so forth. I loved my dad.

Absent fathers were discussed with longing and a wish to know them better.

However, even if a woman didn't see her father very often, she almost always described love for him. Edie didn't know where her biological father was and she longed for contact with him.

The last time I seen my father. I believe I was 12 or 13. Me and my sister and my brother was shopping and I know he was standing out to the side. . . . When I watch shows about how people had problems when they were coming up, I cry sometimes. I be wanting to know what kinds of things I could do to try to find my daddy. I'd like to see how he's doing or where is he at.

Other fathers, however, were abusive to the women or to their mothers. They

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gambled or used drugs or alcohol. When a father lived at home and a negative relationship existed, the women were angry. They didn't long for contact but resented their fathers. However, they often also expressed love. After all, these men were a part of them. Bernetta, a 32-year-old, unemployed mother of two, didn't have positive things to say about her father.

My father was an engineer and my mother worked at AC. He's just an alcoholic. It was him, drinking. I mean, we had everything, we went to piano lessons every Saturday, went to movies. . . . [My father was a] drunk, sorry alcoholic. . . . He was smart. He just was just a drunk -- every day, all day, drank Old Granddaddy. He'd make my mama give him money then beat her up after she give it to him.

Although many women had difficult relationships with their biological fathers, they had positive childhood relationships with other men. Brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and stepfathers, provided a stable male relationship for the women. Stepfathers were especially important. A few women felt that their stepfathers were intruders, however, most were discussed affectionately. Although Edie didn't know her biological father and wasn't close to her mother, she had a stepfather who provided love and support. Her stepfather comforted and supported her as a child and continued to do so into adulthood.

My baby sister's father probably is the one that raised me, took care of me. I love him. I call him sometimes. . . . I talks to him. When he talks to me, he talks with truth. He tell me that I'm doing the right thing. I'm going on the right track. . . . I love him.

Overall, most women had a community of adults that loved them and helped to raise them as children. Again many of these childhood relationships continued into adulthood and provided support and emotional connection. Most often these adults were extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. Relationships with extended family were prevalent and nurturing. Jackie was 35-years-old, employed as a

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housekeeper for the last six years, and the mother of two children. Her mother died when she was 7 and her father abandoned the family when she was even younger. Jackie was raised by her aunt.

She was a nice person. She accepted five kids besides her six she already had. So, I think she did a good job. I love her a lot. . . . She praised us when we did things and she disciplined when we didn't do right. So, she loved us and she showed it.

Carmella had the following to say about her grandparents.

My grandparents, I loved them. I think that most everything I know came from my grandparents. . . .

However, non-related adults also influenced the women's lives. Their mother's friends, their friend's mothers, neighbors, teachers and god-parents provided support. Many women had an older woman, in addition to their mothers, that answered parenting questions. Many of these relationships began in childhood. These "fictive" kin members were important. The majority of both employed and unemployed women stated that they had people in their lives who were not biologically related to them, but whom they regarded as family members. Carmella was one of the women who had another adult in her life to supply love and support.

My mom had a best friend. . . . She's really sweet and she's very close. After my mom passed away, she took over being our mom for us. She is very sweet.

Family relationships were most often the foundation of the women's adult support networks. Based on the information gathered through the Kin Network Inventory (this inventory asked the women to list their relatives, where they lived, and how much contact they had with them) all the women visited with family frequently. As mentioned previously, Flint was home. Most of the women's family lived in the Flint area and thirty

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of the women had daily contact with at least one family member. Siblings and mothers were visited the most. Weekly contact existed for all of the women and many had daily visits with mothers or siblings.

However, one difference in current family contacts existed between the employed and unemployed women. Unemployed women were more likely to live with or near their mothers and they saw them more frequently. Nine unemployed women visited with moms on a daily basis and three lived with them. On the other hand, only two employed women saw their mothers that frequently and only one of these women lived with her mother. Moreover, a difference sometimes existed in these relationships. Serena, a 33 year-old who was raising two children and working as a waitress, was the one employed women who lived with her mother. However, she was the caretaker. Her mother was 70 years old and was ill. Serena stated:

As far as my mother, I was glad that she was here but sometimes I cry about it because its a lot when you got other kids . . . the way she is now she probably be in a home somewhere. Sometimes I feel like I can't do it and sometimes I feel, you know, I gotta do it because if I don't do it won't nobody else do it. . . .

However, Keisha, who was 19 and unemployed, and Latrice who was 18 and unemployed, had never left their childhood homes after the birth of their children. They relied more on their mothers for support than their mothers relied on them.

Therefore, unemployed women appeared to need the support of their mothers more. This explanation fits for the women who lived with their mothers. These women were younger and just beginning to establish their own families. They had few resources and needed to live with their mothers until they could afford a place of their own. On the other hand, the unemployed women also had more time to visit with family. Because they

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weren't working, their daily schedules were less structured. Perhaps employed women would see their mothers more often, if they had the opportunity.

Family gatherings such as reunions, or holiday celebrations were also frequent occurrences for both employed and unemployed women. Many women met with family members more than once a year for celebrations such as holidays, birthdays, and graduations. Family get-togethers were a time to reconnect, let loose, and forget other worries. Chagrin, who was 23, unemployed, and was raising 3 children, loved her family gatherings.

They be fun and exciting. There always be some relative in the family. . . and they come and bring their friends. And we have fun and enjoy ourself and eat, dance or whatever.

Carmella had the same opinion about her family get-togethers.

We're usually together every Christmas . . . for special occasions, graduation, Christmas, Mother's Day, things like that. We get together at least twice. We always are together twice a year. It's wonderful to have all these folks in the house at the same time, plus the grandkids.

The women often spoke of their family's closeness. They appreciated their families willingness to help each other and stick together. Struggles against crime, discrimination, and unemployment were eased by a family's love and support. Even though many of Carmella's family members still lived in Arkansas, they found ways to remain close.

We all look out for one another, regardless of how far away. A lot of us are in different states, some are even in different countries, but we keep in contact. We never go a month without somebody callin' the other one . . .

Moreover, family support took many shapes. Often it came in the form of a listening ear. Sometimes, it included driving a woman to the grocery store or watching

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the kids when a woman worked or needed a break. Other times, it was help in paying a utility or grocery bill. The women also provided support to their families. They were just as likely to watch their sister's children, as a sister was to watch theirs.

However, many wished for even closer family relationships. Jackie, who was quoted discussing the aunt who raised her, enjoyed her family celebrations. However, she wished for the following:

Well, my sisters and brothers, the ones that was already grown. . . . I would want them to change they relationship. I would want to make it better so it wouldn't be so much arguing and stuff like that.

Others worried about addicted or troubled family members. Many women had at least one family member that had been lured by drugs or crime, or seemed to be simply drifting and looking for direction. Latrice worried about her uncle.

I could change my own uncle. He just seem like -- just everything going wrong for him. And I, you know, feel bad for him cause he just don't -- he just feel like everything going bad for me.

In addition, some women were reluctant to meet with family. At times, family problems were so extensive that a woman had cut off family relationships. For example, Serena only met with her family when there was a funeral. Serena was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. She chose not to spend time with her family because of the following:

. . . everybody drinks in my family. Everybody get high. But for me its a real, real sense of relief that I don't have to be like that no more. . . . They're all still crazy and sick.

Eddie also didn't see her family.

I never see my grandmother. I never see my grandfather. I never see my mama's sister. . . . We never had no family reunion. We never got together. If we did it was always argue . . . and I don't want my kids

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Although most of the women trusted their relatives, ten women mistrusted certain family members and five others, such as Serena and Edie, trusted no one in their family.

Jackie also wasn't sure if she could trust all her family members.

. . . That's they way it is. I can't say I can trust them all, cause I can't. But I know I can trust my sister and my brother that I was raised up with -- I can trust those.

These estranged family patterns occurred most often in families where past physical, sexual or emotional abuse existed, or when family members were addicts.

The patterns found are similar to the ones discussed in the literature review. Regardless of employment status, being connected to loving families was the norm. Moreover, the women had numerous family contacts. They were a part of a supportive network of nuclear family members, extended family, and fictive kin relationships. This network was tightly woven and provided a strong safety net for all it's members. However, drugs and violence also influenced the women's families. When family violence or drug abuse occurred, family contacts were fewer or almost non-existent. For many women, this included more conflictual, or less trusting relationships with one or two family members. For others, however, it extended to the entire family network. These few women lacked the support of family.

### Support from Friends

All but two (one who was employed and one who wasn't) of the women reported having a friend. However, both employed and unemployed women reported two types of friendships. The first type of friendship was true friendship. True friends were those who had proven themselves to be loyal and trustworthy. Often family members were also true

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friends or true friends had become “fictive kin.” A second type of friendship was the associate relationship. The women defined associates as individuals one spent time with but did not confide in or completely trust. Angela, who was quoted earlier discussing safety in Flint, discussed her relationship with her true friend in the following manner:

Um, a true friend is Nancy because we've been through hell and back together. When she didn't have a job I was there for her. When I lost my job, she was there for me. Um, we don't never have to go to no day care center -- we got each other. You know, we baby-sit for each other's kids and um, we make food together, you know, we make sure if she ain't got nothin' I got it. . . .

Emotional intimacy was always found in these true friendships. Furthermore, true friendships were longstanding and less common than associate relationships. All of the women were wary of trusting others too quickly. They lived in unsafe environments and their lack of trust served to protect them from those who would harm them or take advantage of them. Because loyalty and trust took time to establish, true friendships were often described as being tested by time. Only after a gradual building of trust, could emotional intimacy occur. Many women's true friendships had lasted since childhood. For example, Angela felt that only Nancy, whom she'd known since high school, and her mother could be called true friends. Carmella had known her true friend for 17 years. They'd met when she first moved to Flint. She stated:

[A true friend is] a person that is there for you in good times and bad times, that will make the time to listen when you got a problem. . . . A true friend is someone you can trust. With Vanessa, I can talk about any and everything. I don't think I have any secrets. She know everything.

However, some women, like Vona, a 24-year-old, unemployed, mother of three, had chosen to have only associates. Although Vona knew that a true friend was “somebody you can trust,” she also stated that none of her friends were true friends.

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Other women had no true friends or associates. Some of the women who only had associates were those who experienced childhood abuse or were involved in drugs. This earlier trauma appeared to have contributed to a lack of trust in others. Edie, who had a difficult childhood, also didn't have any true friends. She relied on God and her pastor for guidance and support. In answer to the questions about her friends, she replied:

I don't have no friends. I don't do nothing with no friends -- nothing. The true friends I got is my children.

However, trauma and a lack of friends weren't always linked. At times a connection with an agency or church program helped build individual connections and friendships. For example, Serena who was quoted in the family section discussing her recovery from drug addiction and her lack of trust of family, had a true friend. Serena met Monica, her true friend, through the substance abuse program she attended. Their relationship evolved out of the personal discussions they had during their treatment. Moreover, church was a place Edie gained connection. Although, she hadn't established any friendships through church, she did talk to her pastor. For some less trusting women, formal agency support may replace family or friend support and help create connections that eventually grew into friendships. This pattern will be discussed more thoroughly in the agency support section.

Although the women only shared private thoughts with true friends, they had fun with both true friends and associates. These activities included eating together, taking their kids to parks, watching movies, going to clubs or parties, and shopping together. Angela and her friend, Nancy, did the following activities together:

We cook. We sit up and do things with our children together, you know. We might take the kids out to Showbiz [a pizza place], skating, bowling,

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whatever like that. . . . Um, we might go out and have a couple of drinks. We might just sit at each other's house and play cards, just listen to music, or just whatever. We just, you know, basically do it together.

Vona, who didn't have any true friends, did have associates. Although Vona didn't trust them or confide in them, they did have fun together. She stated:

We go out sometimes. We go bowling and they'll come over here and we'll play cards and stuff.

Edie, on the other hand, was more isolated. She didn't have friends to socialize with.

Exchanging favors was also a key component of some friendships. The women always felt comfortable giving to a true friend, because they knew this friend would return a favor. However, no one formally kept record of these exchanges. Each one simply helped the other when it was needed. For example, Angela and Nancy took each other places and watched each other's children. However, when Angela was asked if she expected Nancy to give her something back in exchange for a favor, she replied:

No, not with my friend. Now, if, like I ask the girl next door -- if she asks me for something, I expect her to do it back, because she just a neighbor. But with my friends, like with Nancy, she can borrow money and I don't even worry about if she pays me back or when she pays me back. . . . If she borrows and don't give me back, so what -- because one day I know it might just happen where she just gives me money or whatever, so we don't worry about it.

Edie, however, had established a different type of exchange pattern. Because, she didn't have friendships, she asked neighbors for help. When she asked, she always offered something in return. For example:

I have a washing machine, but I don't have no dryer, and I needed some things to be dry. I paid the lady down the street a dollar to dry some sheets and stuff. . . . I usually give a dollar for it or something. . . .

Vona also had established a similar associate-type exchange pattern. Sometimes, she and

her associates would take turns watching each other's children. However, they kept track of these exchanges.

A difference in the exchange pattern did occur between the employed and unemployed women, however. All six women who reported not having exchange networks with friends (their friends didn't ask for favors and neither did the women) were employed. The women were not asked why they didn't exchange favors nor did they offer such information. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain reasons for this pattern specifically from the data. However, Jeffries (1974) noted that the women who were the neediest in her qualitative study, were the most likely to participate in support networks. Perhaps, these employed women simply had more resources than others and did not need to be involved in exchange networks. Other reasons for this pattern also exist, however. Employed women may also be more independent or self-reliant. This quality may have led them to seek employment instead of assistance from others. On the other hand, employed women may simply have had fewer friendships. Perhaps because these women were alone, without the benefit of an exchange network, a need to find employment and be more self-reliant was created.

Stack (1974) in her classic investigation of low-income African-American families discovered that friendships were based on the balance between trust and profit. Individuals in the "Flats" sought to meet others to enhance their resources through the material support found in these relationships. They began to rely upon each other quickly. However, friendships could easily dissolve if reciprocity was not upheld or if one friend "made a fool of another" (Stack, 1974, p. 58). In friendships where trust was established, friends became fictive kin members as women friends became "sisters."

The true friendships described by the women were most like the fictive kin relationships described by Stack (1974). However, they were not balanced on reciprocity and trust but instead grounded in years of mutual confidences and a gradual increase in trust levels. Moreover, some women had chosen to create associate relationships only. Given that many of the participants of this study lived in unsafe neighborhoods with few resources, and that others had suffered through traumatic experiences, their lack of trust in those they've just met seemed appropriate. They must preserve what they had in an environment where others might take advantage of them and could be harmful. However, when the women ran low on needed items they had to rely on an informal exchange of favors to help provide for their children. This context seems to lead naturally into the associate friendship pattern and the long time period needed to establish true friendships.

#### Support From Romantic Partners

Most (twenty-nine) of the women had never married. However, men still played an integral part in their adult lives. About half of both employed and unemployed women reported current romantic involvement and eight of those women were living with their significant other. Furthermore, all the women spent a large amount of time with their partner. All of the employed women with partners lived with them or saw them daily. Most of the unemployed women also saw their partners daily or reported contact three or four times a week.

These relationships served many purposes. For most they alleviated loneliness and provided romance. The women felt loved and understood. They appreciated the emotional intimacy and discussed almost everything with their partners. Janeice, who was quoted earlier discussing discrimination saw her partner, Derrick, on a daily basis. She

said the following about him

He is the type to where the ideal person that I have been looking for. . . . I am the romantic type that likes walking in the rain and he will do things that make me happy. Like yesterday, we went home and just lounged around and then we went to have an ice cream cone. . . . He is just that type that he wants to do things I like for me or the girls. . . . Basically, we talk about everything. He is a friend as well as the man in my life. We can talk about anything.

Frequently the women's male friends played a surrogate father role to the children.

The men played with the children and many helped out financially. Although Edie doesn't have friends or family she can rely on, she does have a partner, Marvin, that helped out when needed. Marvin came over to Edie's house each day after he got off from work. She appreciated the fact that she could "share things" with him and that he didn't use drugs or alcohol. Her previous relationships had been with men that were alcoholics and many of her relationships were abusive. She stated:

. . . but a lot of things I don't have, he give it to me. As a matter of fact, he just went the other day and got the kids some bunk beds and bought them some mattresses. He helps me a whole lot. . . . He just respects me and my kids.

Moreover, a difference between the employed and unemployed women was found.

All of the employed women were either consistently positive or consistently negative in their descriptions of their partners and most of the women who described negative relationships also discussed ending those relationships. Unemployed women, on the other hand, were less consistent. For example, both Janeice and Edie who were employed, consistently discussed Derrick and Marvin with affection. Similarly, Marrisona who was also employed, was consistently negative about LeRoy, her partner. She stated that her relationship was dissolving and that there wasn't anything she liked about her relationship.

She said that LeRoy “is not who I thought he was.”

However, Kathy who was unemployed, 48 years old, and lived with her 18 year old pregnant daughter and a five year old daughter, was less consistent in her descriptions of her partner, Mickey. She liked conversing with Mickey, felt that he treated her with respect but worried that he wasn't very responsible or trustworthy. Jameka, who was also unemployed, also is inconsistent in her descriptions of her partner, Edwin. Although, she liked that they were closer than they'd ever been and that they were spending each day together, she didn't really trust Edwin. She stated:

They (respect, trust, and communication) happened in the beginning -- it had got where -- I just let him go ahead and go because if you are in a relationship and you have to worry every time your man go out the door, it's not going to get no better. . . . I don't fully trust him.

Overall, partners were important resources that provided both emotional and financial support. However, unemployed women seemed to stay in unsatisfying relationships longer and described more ambivalence about their partners. They may simply be assessing their relationships more honestly than the employed women and noting the complexity all relationships have. On the other hand, this pattern may again be due to their need for more support and help. Perhaps they were willing to make more compromises about their relationships. For example, they may have remained with a man that they didn't trust because he provided financial support and helped with the children. Moreover, because they appreciated the fact that their partner helped out but didn't like the fact that he was untrustworthy, their descriptions of their relationships were inconsistent. On the other hand, because employed women had more resources, they may not need to stay in a bad relationship. Perhaps their jobs gave them enough power to end

a relationship and to notice how negative it might really be.

### Support from Neighbors and Neighborhoods

Both employed and unemployed women described common, every day, neighborhood activities. Kids went to school in the morning, adults went to work or visited on their porches, lawns were mowed and cars fixed. However, these were day time activities. The majority of the women also feared living in their neighborhoods and those fears were strongest after the sun set. Many women ventured out of their homes only during the safe day time hours and the earlier they could get their errands done, the safer they felt. The gang members and drug addicts were still asleep early in the morning but as night time came, they became more active. The following series of quotes came from Bernetta, who was unemployed, and Tamara who was 37, employed as a housekeeper and the mother of two sons. They discussed life in two different neighborhoods.

**Interviewer:** Describe an average day in the life of your neighborhood

**Bernetta:** From 7:00 (am) everybody getting their kids ready -- the bus be out there blowing -- all the kids getting up going to school. Then at 3:00 they come home and after that the kids playing, everybody sometime talking . . . kids are hollering, crying. And after like 8:00 or something everybody come out sit on the porch. Then they go to bed -- it's quiet.

**Tamara:** In the morning, they sleep mornings because they be up all night. Its quiet in the morning. I sit out there on my porch and wait on the mailman and talk to him. And around 6:00 pm or 7:00 pm they look like they start coming out like ants or something, you know, and then they're all on the corner going with the loud music. Nighttime, around about the time it get dark, I don't sit outside, I come in because they start shooting.

Bernetta and Tamara also have very different feelings about their neighborhoods, their safety, and the way violence had affected their lives. Later in the interview they were

asked:

**Interviewer:** Do you have any safety concerns in your neighborhood?

**Bernetta:** Not really, It's not bad. It's one of the best apartment complexes for low income around. . . .

**Tamara:** Safety? Pray. Sometimes we sleeps on the floor, they get to shooting around here we get on the floor.

**Interviewer:** Has crime or violence affected your neighborhood?

**Bernetta:** No

**Tamara:** Well, there have been like two or three people died on this street, teenagers shot and killed. About a month ago this boy, well not even a month ago, he got around the corner. He killed this boy 20 years old.

Surprisingly most of the women had positive things to say about their neighborhoods, even among those who described safety issues and violence. Safe neighborhoods and respectful neighbors were most appreciated. However, cleanliness, quietness, and proximity to shopping, schools, bus lines and parks were also mentioned as positive neighborhood features. Bernetta focused on her neighbors:

It's [her neighborhood] nice, clean, quiet, peaceful. It's mixed. It's not a lot of violence. All groups of people live out here -- Black, White, Mexican, mixed, old, young -- everything.

Tamara appreciated the following:

Bus stops, restaurant across the street, grocery store on the corner. . . . I am right on the corner so I'm right at everything.

The women were also asked to discuss their neighborhood resources for shopping and transportation. Women in both the employed and unemployed group were fairly satisfied with shopping opportunities. Most of the women reported having sufficient grocery stores in their neighborhoods. However, many women also described grocery

shopping at two or three different places depending on advertised sales and personal preferences. Tamara shopped at two different stores each week because:

Okay, like on the corner we have a nice store . . . nice meat, fresh meat. But if you buy the canned goods or the boxes of cereal, you know, they got the prices up -- on one can you probably got to pay \$1 and something, but you can go to Kessel and get three for that one price, you know. . . .

Keisha, who was 19, unemployed, and the mother of a daughter, complained that the only stores in their neighborhoods were small corner stores where prices were high. Keisha also complained that she were sometimes afraid to shop at these stores because there were always people lingering outside them and they weren't well lighted. Keisha stated:

They need to involve security around the stores, cause it's like people be scared to go to the stores because they be like so many people just hanging out around the stores.

Moreover, most of the women did not use public transportation. The majority of employed and unemployed women owned cars and many complained of the car's unreliableness. Additionally, most of the women who didn't own their own cars were able to borrow them from others or have friends or family give them rides. Most of the women also described the public transportation system positively. However, most of these women didn't use the bus system on a regular basis. Of the women who frequently rode buses, they complained that the buses didn't run on time or they were worried about the disrespectful teenagers who were also on the bus. The Flint school system uses the public transportation system to transport their students to school. Some of the women felt uncomfortable riding the buses with the youth. Keisha borrowed her mother's car when she needed to get somewhere because she felt that there was "too much violence" at the



bus terminals. Phyllis preferred borrowing a car over taking the bus because:

If I use my mother's car I can go and come on back, but if I take the bus it's like that hour wait.

However, she felt fairly satisfied with the buses as long as she could avoid the students.

If I can get on and off before the kids get out of school, that's a hassle then

Interactions with neighbors was also of interest and the majority of the women, reported that they knew their neighbors, that they trusted them and that they would go to them for help. Furthermore, all but three reported daily or frequent contact. At first glance, these patterns appeared to portray large neighborhood networks. However, although some did have close contacts with neighbors, others did not. Bernetta was connected to her neighbors. She spoke with her neighbors on a daily basis, she trusted them and would go to them for help. She stated:

We speak everyday. They have kids my kids age. We don't have no other choice but to speak. They see me coming and going. We have kids. We talk, plant flowers. We do things together sometimes.

However, others spoke with neighbors out of politeness and their contacts were more superficial. These women often did not trust their neighbors. Although neighborhood safety was not linked to neighborhood contacts for most of the women, Tamara, was one of the neighbors who were more reluctant to socialize with neighbors.

I don't. I try not to, you know, far as speaking, but I don't really know them because they will want to borrow a cup of sugar and all that. I had that problem before I moved here. . . . So, I don't really know them, I speak to them but that's as far as it goes.

Again the length of time they'd known their neighbors was important. Just as true friendships needed time to establish, closer contacts with neighbors also seemed to take time for some women. However, exceptions did exist. Some women simply did not want

to know their neighbors regardless of the time they'd spent in their neighborhoods.

Moreover, some differences did occur between the employed and unemployed women. In general, three patterns of neighbor interaction and support occurred. Some women, regardless of how well they knew or trusted their neighbors, did not rely on them for support and would not go to them if they needed help. Other women reported living in their neighborhoods for extended periods of time, often since childhood. These women reported knowing, trusting and going to their neighbors for help. A third group reported that they did not know their neighbors well or did not trust them. However, if needed they would go to them to ask for help. This third group of women were overwhelmingly in the unemployed group. Overall, those who were unemployed were more likely to report asking neighbors for help than employed women.

The following women provide examples of these three patterns. Phyllis, who was quoted in the macrosystem section, was not employed. She was a long time resident of her neighborhood. She described her relationship with neighbors in the following manner:

(I know my neighbors) pretty well, they knew me when I was growing up. Everybody but Miss Davis on the right here. She just moved in about 6 years ago.

Phyllis also trusted her neighbors and asked them for help when needed. On the other hand, Keisha, was unsure if she really knew her neighbors, she stated:

It's hard to tell, some of them you don't know at all, some that you think you been knowing for years, you know, they keep stuff hidden. There's a lot of competitiveness to try to outdo one neighbor -- and one neighbor see this neighbor kinda fix up their home, so instead of fixing up their homes, they'll go destroy what that neighbor doing.

Furthermore, although Keisha didn't trust her neighbors, she would go to them for help in some situations. A third women, Denise was 33, employed as a teacher's aide and mother

of two. She knew some of her neighbors. She said

The neighbors right next door to me I don't know them well. But I lived down here . . . for 5 years, so I know the neighbors that live up the street more but not the neighbors right next to me.

Denise also trusted one of her neighbors, but did not seek help from them.

Why would women ask help of people they didn't trust? Perhaps the unemployed women needed more help and were less self-reliant. This theme is reflective of the patterns found in the women's discussions of their romantic relationships. Employed women may simply not need as much help as the unemployed women. However, unemployed women may also spend more time in their neighborhoods and lack connections with other sources of support. Therefore, they would also be more likely to go to neighbors for help, whereas employed women had co-workers or supports outside of their neighborhood who could be supportive.

Descriptions the women provided of neighborhood life were similar to both Burton's (1991) and Dunlap's (1992) research, in which many women only felt safe during the early day. Furthermore, almost all of the women had some safety concerns about their neighborhoods and for most this involved crime, violence and drugs.

On the other hand, the majority of the women also had positive things to say about their neighborhoods. This may be a way the women cope with their safety concerns. They may focus on the positive aspects of their neighborhood because the chance of moving to a safer area seemed unlikely. However, even if a woman liked aspects of a her neighborhood, she did not necessarily feel safe.

### Support from Community Institutions

Both employed and unemployed women reported that the agencies in Flint could be helpful and that they could find the help they needed. The only additional service consistently asked for was child care. Cheryl a 26-year-old, unemployed, mother of six children, discussed the need for child care in the following way:

I feel like they should have more baby-sitting services, like they have all these day cares. They should have some services to where some parents that are on ADC [welfare] would be able to go and have a low income rate fee . . . so we at least can see some of our own check.

Later in the interview Cheryl said:

I need a babysitter in order to get a job, or in order to keep a job. I can get a job. That's no problem, but I can't go to work on my job if I have no one to keep my kids. . . . If I have to give all my money to pay the baby-sitter I won't have any money to pay my bills or pay my groceries.

However, although most women felt that they could find the type of services needed, they complained that service providers treated them disrespectfully and that too much red tape existed. Often a professional's friendliness was the only criteria the women used to judge the helpfulness of an agency. In fact, positive comments about a community institution were difficult to find without also hearing positive comments about the people the women came into contact with. Keisha stated:

This one agency (was helpful) because they took time to find out about you as a person - not as a number that needed help. . . . They were a lot friendlier about offering the help. And when they offer help, they got right on the job.

Most of the women wanted more personalized services. They were tired of talking to answering machines and standing in line to speak to someone who did not understand. Lois, who was 40 and recently divorced (she was quoted in the exosystem section) wanted

the following type of services:

I think a place, agency, where you would go and you could like have a counselor you could talk to and explain your situation to. Somebody you could talk to and that understands what's happening . . . and that would be there for somebody. And being able to help them or tell them where to go to get that help, you know, instead of just "well look in the telephone book, maybe you'll find something" or "go to such-n-such a place." And just, you know, instead of somebody just more or less giving you the run-around or "I've heard people's problems all day and I don't wanna hear no more and I doesn't care about your problems." . . . It's like they don't have any feelings . . . a person with that type of job is supposed to be able to . . . work this thing out instead of just being negative to everybody that comes into their office. You just, it's not fair for those that need it, you know.

Yolanda, a 24-year-old mother of three, provided child care for her neighbors. She agreed with Lois.

. . . it don't make sense. If a person is going and reaching out to the community for help, there ain't no reason why they should walk in to social services and have the woman get smart. . . . It ain't right.

Agencies were used as a last resort. The women did not view agency help as a support for improving their lives. Instead they went to agencies when the they couldn't meet an immediate need and had already tried other sources such as family and friends. The majority of the employed and unemployed women reported feeling more comfortable first going to family or friends for help, then to schools and churches, and last to community agencies. Cheryl, Keisha, Lois, and Yolanda, all stated that they would ask a friend or relative for help before asking for help from an agency.

However, differences between the employed and unemployed women did occur in their answers to the question "How easy is it for you to ask for help?" The majority of employed women reported that it was hard for them to ask. On the other hand, most of the women who were not employed replied that it was easy to ask for help. Moreover,

when asked where they felt most comfortable seeking help, the unemployed women were more likely to list multiple sources. For example, Yolanda, who was employed, occasionally asked her sister for help, but preferred not to. She stated:

I don't ask (for help), I just don't ask. If I don't have it and I need it, I just go without. Now if it's for the kids, I'll ask. But if it's for myself I go without.

On the other hand, Shari who was a 30-year-old, unemployed, mother of two said:

If I need it (help) I'm just gonna ask them. . . . It ain't hard for me to ask. . . . I try a relative first. If I can't get it from them then I go to an agency. . . . If they couldn't help me I'll go to a school or church. Whoever could help me.

Moreover, women like Serena and Edie, who were less trusting of family, were also reluctant to ask them for help. These women most often turned to friends or agencies for help.

Those women who were most isolated appeared to use agency support most often. They didn't have trusted others to ask for help. However, many employed women did have family or friends, yet they found it difficult to ask them for help. Perhaps, their reluctance to ask for help was a sign of independence. The employed women may be more self-reliant than the unemployed women. Yet self-reliance may precede employment or be a result of employment. Perhaps their jobs gave them the ability to be more independent. On the other hand, this quality may have allowed them to seek and gain employment.

Although many negative features of human service agencies were mentioned by the women, one positive feature was also found. As discussed in the friendship section, when a woman could establish a trusting, personal relationship with a professional, it often had a powerful effect. This was especially apparent for the women who were more isolated.

Most often these trusting relationships were with therapists or ministers. Serena had established trusting and supportive relationships with those she met in her substance abuse recovery program. Edie had connected with her pastor.

Many women found church involvement helpful. Churches facilitated a sense of spirituality and belief in a higher power that was beneficial to all of the women. All but one woman reported that spirituality or religion was important to them. Moreover, the employed and the unemployed were just as likely to go to church. The only difference was that some employed women reported that they couldn't attend as regularly as they would like because they worked on Sundays. Churches were important because they connected the women to a deeper sense of spirituality and a belief that a higher power was taking care of them and helping them. Moreover, some women sought guidance from their ministers. Even when the women didn't belong to a church community, their spirituality was a strength and a comfort. This sense of spirituality was more important than church attendance. Carmella discussed spirituality in the following quote:

I do believe that, in fact I do know that there is a God. And that all things are in his control. I'm not a fanatic, but I do know that prayer works. There are things that without prayer, I would never accomplish, would never happen. I do believe strongly that without God being in my life, I don't believe I could have gotten as far as I have.

Interesting patterns were found in the mesosystemic section. Most of the women were tied to supportive individuals such as family, friends and romantic partners. Some women were also connected to neighbors. However, some differences did exist. A few women, such as Edie and Serena, were more isolated. This isolation didn't appear to be linked to employment status but more so to past abuse, trauma, or drug use. Many times a childhood history of abuse or neglect created continued problems with family members

and at times impaired a women's ability to build trusting relationships with friends, a partner, and neighbors. Living in unsafe and often violent environments also appeared to contribute to a lack of trust in others. However, some of these isolated women were able to find connection and support through a human service agency. All of the respondents asked for a more personal connection with human service workers. For the isolated women, this connection sometimes had a powerful influence.

Some differences between the employed and unemployed women were found. Employed women had less contact with their mothers, were less likely to be involved with exchange networks with friends, were more consistent in their descriptions of their partners, were less likely to ask neighbors for help when they didn't trust them, and had more difficulties asking for help. These themes seem to indicate that the women were more self-reliant and were not depending on support systems where less trust or more conflict existed. However, self-reliance may have helped the women seek and gain employment or it may be a product of being employed and having more resources. Also employed women also had less time for social contact than unemployed women. Perhaps they would have had more contact with mothers and friends if they had the time. I will readdress these patterns in chapter five.

### Microsystem

The microsystem includes aspects of family life. In this section, I describe the women's daily schedules, their parenting, and family stresses. However, I begin this discussion at the beginning, by describing the themes found in the women's descriptions of their pregnancy.



## Pregnancy

Many women described hardships during pregnancy such as health problems or negative relationships with their baby's fathers or with their own parents. This was especially a problem for the women who didn't have the support of their baby's fathers or for those who were teen moms. In addition, problematic relationships with parents were strained during a pregnancy.

For most, becoming pregnant was unplanned and a surprise. Many of the women seemed to have little information about pregnancy. Keisha, who gave birth at age 15, and Valerie, who had her first child when she was 14, reported not knowing they were pregnant until they were six or seven months into their first pregnancy. Edie had a difficult time talking about her first pregnancy and even refused to answer some of the interviewers questions. She was 17 at the time and she dropped out of school because she was pregnant.

Edie: I was scared. I didn't want it, but I kept it. . . . The father wasn't around and I didn't know who the father was. My mama didn't care about me. They did things to me, hurting me

Interviewer: When you say "they", who do you mean?

Edie: My mama, but I don't want to talk about that. I was depressed, you know, but they say I got it and now I got to take care of it.

Carmella discussed being sick during her first pregnancy and also being afraid. However, she had more support and eventually became happy with the idea of giving birth. Carmella was able to finish high school before giving birth at the age of 22. She never married the father of the baby and their relationship soon ended.

Interviewer: What was it like when you were pregnant?

**Carmella:** Ooh, miserable, With the first one, Oh my Lord, for the first three months, I was too sick to even do anything other than stay in bed and eat soda crackers and drink grape juice. When I first found out, I told the doctor he had to go back and check again . . . about a month after that I kinda got used to the idea that I was going to have a baby. . . . Round about the seven or eighth month, I kinda got happy with it, him kicking around, and I got okay with it. But in the beginning, it was an adjustment. It was scary. I'm thinking about the pain everyone done told me about -- oh my Lord -- and the money won't be mine no more -- got to buy diapers -- and this baby going to keep me up all night. My whole life was going to change. . . .

Lois was 27 and had the support of the baby's father when she became pregnant with her first child. Her experience was different from Edie's and Carmella's. Although she was scared, she was also excited about her pregnancy from the very beginning.

Well, with my son, it was an experience for me. I'd never been pregnant and its like . . . not knowing anything, totally dumb to the fact, you know, I was excited but scared with him. I thought the baby was a tumor. He [the doctor] said, "No, you're pregnant. I laughed. The doctor laughed. I always remember that.

However, most described having an easier time with their following pregnancies.

Lois also enjoyed her second pregnancy. Carmella thought that her second pregnancy was "smooth sailing." Edie found more support with her second pregnancy. She joined a program at the local health center for young mothers.

When I had my second child . . . they had got this family support thing at the Mott Children Health Center and it was like a meeting every Tuesday or Wednesday and we all were young moms. . . . And it helped a whole lot, you know, to cope with self-esteem, how to take care of your baby, how to raise them. If you need any help, they had somebody who could talk to you. . . . I had a lot of support. . . .

However, Edie became pregnant six more times. Although most of the women had two or three children, Edie had seven with six different fathers in a ten year period. She worried that she'd made too many "mistakes." She talked about receiving help from a worker

she'd meet in the young moms program.

. . . I had an abortion, but Marsha (the human service worker) talked to me and told me everybody made mistakes. But I told her I thought I made too many. So when I finally had them all, with my last child, I went and had my tubes tied. She (Marsha) never would say nothing bad, but she said "Edie, Get your tubes tied". . . . I talked to her. She made me feel happy. . . . Sometimes I call her my mama.

Although Edie's frequent pregnancies did, in part, fit the welfare queen stereotype, she must be understood before judged. She wasn't lazy and she wasn't having more children just to collect extra welfare benefits. Instead she struggled with abuse and isolation. Her mother was abusive and she never knew her biological father. She had no friends or family members for support and she appeared to use her relationships with men as a means to become more connected. However, these men were alcoholics and sometimes abusive and they didn't provide the connection Edie desired. Although Edie's children did complicate her life, she was dedicated to raising her children with love. Moreover, she was employed and she was receiving help from Marsha, her pastor, and her current partner. In addition, she received some encouragement from her stepfather. Edie appeared to be in the process of changing her life to make it better for herself and her children. However, this wasn't an easy process and Edie was still fairly isolated. Her feelings about motherhood and her struggles with keeping her job are discussed in the following sections.

### Parenting and Children

Parenting responsibilities took up much of the women's time and energy. However, no differences were found when comparing the two groups on the number of children, their ages, their sex, and any existing special needs or disabilities.

Employed and unemployed women also defined the traits of a good mother similarly. Good mothers were loving and affectionate. They provided for their children and served as a role model. Moreover, the majority of the women reported that they fulfilled their definitions of a good mother and expressed confidence in their mothering skills. Carmella and Linda provide typical examples of these discussions. Carmella was raising two sons. Linda was 34, and worked full time as a clerk. She had three children. They defined the qualities of a good mother in the following manner:

**Carmella:** A good mother is the person that -- not the person that says "I love you," but the person that loves you in a way that you can feel it. The person that takes care of you . . . to put your own needs aside for your children. It's a mother's place to be sure that the child gets their education. My son is 10 now. I don't have to get up and dress him, but I do have to get up and make sure that things are in the right place, hair been combed and stuff like that. I do have to be sure he gets to school on time -- that he is there every day . . . just being there, caring for, protecting, providing, all of that goes into being a good mother.

**Linda:** A good mother makes sure that your kids had a decent home, food to eat, clean clothes, some of the things they want in life -- you're not able to get them all the things. And have them go to church. Basically to have them respect you. . . .

Carmella and Linda had the following to say when asked how they were like a good mothers:

**Carmella:** I try to do all of those things. I do my very best to make sure my kids are safe. I let them know, I show them that I love them. I have to give them a hug sometimes, even when they hasn't did anything. . . . I try to be here for them. I try to be sure that they get the things they need -- not the wants, not those baggy pants and stuff -- that the needs are all met - - just to listen, to make sure their homework is done, doing their washing, showing them how to do things.

**Linda:** I try to provide all the things above to them -- food, clothing, tasty meals, take them to church. They work in church. They respect me.

Eddie also felt that she was a good mother and she was trying to raise her children

differently than she had been raised. She said:

I'm proud [of being a mother]. I think I do a good job. . . . I know my background wasn't perfect. . . . I got all these children. . . . I got to give them all the love that they need -- cause I always say, they didn't ask to be here. . . . I ain't never going to tell my kids that they ain't going to be nothing in life. I can't do what my mama done to me. So, I got to do the best. I got to make it more better for them.

No differences were found in rules, methods of showing affection, expectations or disciplinary practices between the two groups of women. The women reported that they had similar rules for all of their children. These rules were designed to promote responsibility, respect for others, and safety. The rules Carmella had for her sons reflect all three themes. She promoted responsibility by having the children complete chores. Respectfulness was addressed through her rule that her sons couldn't call each other names. Carmella also had rules for her sons that involved safety. She needed to know where her children were at all times. She stated:

We don't call names. That's the first one. . . . We all got chores, so you must do your chores or you get cut out on some of the things you want. You don't get your allowances or what have you. Nobody leaves the home without asking. You don't go play, you don't go to the store, you don't go anywhere without asking. If, where ever your taken to or

dropped off, you are expected to be in that spot. Those are the main rules around here.

The women thought that the best way to discipline children involved teaching and talking. They also took away privileges, used time-out and spanked. Linda disciplined her children in the following manner.

I found to just be up front with them. With my 18 year-old, I just basically showed him -- if you don't do what you're supposed to do, you have to leave -- you have to follow the rules here or you have to live someplace else. . . . The word I'm looking for is being consistent. If you say something, be consistent with it. . . .

Showing affection to the children was a frequent occurrence. The women reported that they told their children they loved them, gave them positive feedback, and hugged and kissed them. Linda felt that positive comments were important.

I tell them I love them. I give them positive things about themselves -- tell them they're good looking or they did something well. . . .

The women also expressed similar hopes and fears for their children. Hopes included finishing high school and attending college. The women wanted their children to become independent adults. However, they worried that their children might not live up to their potentials. Fears that their children would become victims of crimes or get involved with drugs or gangs were also prevalent. Some women expressed fears that their children would be killed or murdered. Linda expressed the following hopes and fears about her son, Norman, who was 18:

My hopes is that he'll finish college and be able to get a good job and have a successful future. My fear is that he may get caught up with some of the wrong people and do some of the wrong things.

Getting "caught up with the wrong people" and doing "wrong things" was a fear that the women often expressed about their teen-aged sons. They knew that gangs were a powerful influence within their neighborhoods and they worried that their sons would succumb to that influence.

Linda's 15-year-old son, Devin had a learning disability and Linda had some special concerns about how this affected him academically and emotionally. At times she struggled with how to help Devin and she had difficulties coping with the added parental responsibilities his learning disability gave her.

. . .[I hope he'll] be able to perform the way he should academically, and be

able to open up and discuss some of the emotional things that are bothering him -- that he's going to feel like nobody cares and just fall by the wayside and then kinda stray away. Sometimes it seems like no matter how hard you try, it seems like sometimes you just feel like giving up -- but yet you know, they don't have nobody else.

And she said the following about her daughter, Jade who was four:

My hopes for her is that she'll stay as intelligent as she is for the rest of her life, because she's a very smart child. My fears are that her Dad, you know, him having her so spoiled is going to corrupt her -- cause some problems, just from that alone.

Many women worried about the influence men would have on their daughter's lives. Linda worried about how Jade's father would affect her, but others worried that their daughters would become pregnant early or be hurt by men in some way. Keisha had the following to say about her daughter, Ebony.

Almost everything is to be feared, premarital sex, diseases, pregnancy, violence, almost everything out there.

The love these women had for their children was overwhelmingly apparent.

However, so were their fears. In the literature review, growing up in a single parent household was associated with a number of negative outcomes such as poor academic achievement, higher rates of delinquency, and premarital pregnancy (McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). The women were aware of these issues. They feared that their children might have difficulties in school or become victims of their violent neighborhoods. However, like the women in Malson's (1987) qualitative study, they were also proactive and were actively combating these negative influences with their love and discipline. They wanted their children to grow up to be successful, independent adults and they were using every resource they had to ensure this.

### Single Motherhood and Stressors

Motherhood brought both joy and stresses for the women. Both employed and unemployed women felt that the joys included having fun and playing with their children, watching the children grow, and having someone to love. Marissa felt that the joys were:

Having them make things for you. Having them bring things home because they're thinking about you. They look up to you and respect you as an older adult person, as the one who's going to protect and take care of them. . . .

However, many women indicated that at times being a mother was not enjoyable. Children weren't always cooperative and they fought amongst themselves. These single parents handled each of these situations alone. Carmella discussed these stresses:

It's a struggle sometimes. Its happy, sad, up and down. But all around, I don't know of anything else I'd like to be. Sometime they make you sad, some-times they make you mad, sometimes they get on your nerves. Sometimes I don't want to be a mom.

Overall, employed women were more likely to discuss the stress of finding child care. Most of the employed women relied on family members or close neighbors to watch their children. As noted in the literature review, difficulties arranging child care were compounded by the women's non-traditional work schedules (Paltiel, 1988). Only three of the employed women had traditional forty-hour, 9-to-5, work weeks. Sometimes the stress and lack of support felt overwhelming for Edie. Edie was working 27 hours a week as a dishwasher and at times she felt like quitting her job. She struggled with child care difficulties, stress associated with raising seven children alone, and dealing with a manager who didn't understand her situation.

. . . sometime I just want to quit my job. I feel like I can't -- the managers they can't understand my situation with my children. Sometimes it's hard to get a babysitter to watch my kids. And now, when you do get a



babysitter, they wanting an arm and a leg -- with seven children -- there ain't anybody (child care providers) gonna want seven.

Other women did report that they had to quit jobs, or were fired from them, because their child care fell through too many times. Jameka, a 23-year-old mother of two stated that the best thing that had ever happened to her was getting a job as a nurse's aide in a nursing home. However, she was fired after two months because her transportation and child care arrangements weren't dependable and she missed work too often. Jameka had developed an elaborate plan to get to work on time. She awoke at 4:30 to get her children ready for child care and to make it to a spot by 6:00 where her uncle picked her up to take her to work. However, she never knew if her uncle would be at the spot or if her child care was available. She had to call these support people every morning to remind them, and sometimes they wouldn't answer the phone. She described her feelings in the following way.

I was so hurt when I was terminated from my job. It was stressful because it was my first job and I was so excited about it then. When I got terminated . . . I cried a little bit. . . . but I liked my job and that was stressful.

In another section she reported feeling unsupported.

I had to depend on other people, and I got terminated from my job -- nobody to really depend on.

In addition, even when child care was available, many worried that their children weren't being taken care of properly. Nikkia who was 25 and had four children was trying to go to school. She expressed the problem in the following manner:

. . . can't nobody treat your kids like you treat them or dress them like you dress them. I used to be mad up in school, because I used to call home and stuff to check up on the baby. . . . Then, I mean, I got to come home -- then she all dirty. . . . They was just looking like some throwed away kids --

like didn't nobody care about them. But like I say, don't nobody do your kids like you do them.

Often the women's stresses caused them to feel tired and unenergetic. On a daily basis, all the women had moments when they no longer had energy, but their children needed to be taken care of or fed. Vona described this problem most succinctly.

My basic struggle is dealing with the kids all day -- 'cause it's just me here, so I have to be 3 mothers all in one day.

Moreover, because the women were also struggling to get by with little money, they faced unique problems that middle class mothers wouldn't. For example, Shari, a 30 year-old unemployed mother of two, struggled with keeping her children's clothes clean. Because she didn't have a washer, she needed to wash out their cloths by hand. Every day, Carla, who was 37 and raising five children, had to find someone to help her get her daughter to Head Start. She couldn't depend on just one person and needed to double check to make sure the person who agreed to drive, would. Barb, who was 29 with three children, found the wintertime especially stressful because she was laid off every November, December, January and February from her job as a housekeeper at a hotel. She needed to re-enroll for welfare benefits each winter and she found this discouraging.

Financial worries were most often mentioned as stresses. Neither the employed nor the unemployed women had enough money to take care of their families' needs. For most, there was always one bill that didn't get paid each month. Furthermore, some women mentioned that there were certain times during the month when they didn't have enough food. Vona, who was unemployed had a difficult time making her welfare benefits last. However, Marissa, who worked for an optometrist, had the same problem.

**Vona:** Basically, food be ran out and I be done spent -- cause like I budget toward the beginning of the month -- so, I kinda don't eat toward the [end of the] month.

**Marissa:** About the end of the month -- the week before the last day of the month. That's when all my money is usually run out and that's about when all the bills come due.

The holidays also presented specific stresses. Christmas was mentioned by most as a particularly stressful time of the year because of gift buying. Carmella discussed her Christmas stress in the following way:

Christmas time -- it just seems to me it's a panicky time of the year. You're rushing -- everybody's rushing. . . . You're trying to get all the shopping done and you're trying to wonder, where is all the money going to come from. . . . Christmas time is the most panickiest time of year for me.

However, a difference between the employed and unemployed women was discovered when the women were asked "Is there anything that would make your life easier as a parent?" Although a lack of energy, child care worries, and financial problems were stresses identified by both the employed and unemployed women, employed women were more likely to ask for support and help in taking care of their children. Most women wished others (especially the children's fathers) would help with the children. Their frustrations with trying to work and raise their children alone was apparent. The unemployed women were more likely to report that there wasn't anything that could make their lives easier or that they simply needed a job. Marissa and Lois are quoted below. Marissa, like the women quoted earlier, wanted someone she could trust to watch her children. Lois wanted a job so that she could provide better for her children.

**Interviewer:** What would make your life easier as a parent?

**Marissa:** Someone to take care of them while I'm gone that I can trust. It

would help because I would know that they're well taken care of and they're in good hands while I'm gone. . . .

Lois: I think having a job would make my life easier. I would be able to do a lot more things with my kids because right now it's -- you really can't do anything on a fixed income with your kids. There's nothing you really can do by the time you pay your water bill and buy the necessary things you need -- soap, toilet paper, toothpaste -- you don't have anything left.

Most likely this difference occurred because the employed women were working and having a difficult time finding the energy to work and take care of children alone. Unemployed mothers, on the other hand, were focused on parenting and needed less help. Carla supported this idea. She stated.

Interviewer: Is there anything that would make your life easier as a parent?

Carla: Yeah, if I had more help with my babies. But by me not working, it doesn't matter. I be right here with them.

Interviewer: How would it help if you had a babysitter?

Carla: I could get out more, make myself more motivated. I won't leave my babies with just anybody, not with the things that are going on now.

### Daily Family Life

The employed women's days were full and left little room for relaxation. Most of the employed women worked afternoon or evening shifts and many also worked weekends. Their non-working hours were spent with children or completing household chores and errands. Shantay provided a typical schedule for an employed woman. She was 27 years old and the mother of three children. Shantay worked the night shift in a small factory while her father took care of her children.

. . . I get home about 4:00 in the morning. I go to sleep until 8:30 am and the kids come home. I get them ready for day camp and Head Start, and then after that about 11:30 I wake up again, pick up my youngest daughter from school. . . . I'll fix her lunch . . . and I clean. That's it.

On the weekends Shantay, like the other employed women, caught up with her housework and other chores.

On Saturday, I mostly do the things I couldn't do during the week, cause I didn't have the time -- like do my washing or something. . . . I mostly relax on Sundays and maybe I'll go to church. . . .

Many employed women often had difficulty discussing what they did in their spare time or for fun. Often they replied that they didn't have spare time or were too tired to have fun.

Again, Shantay provided a typical response:

Spare time? I just sit back relax and watch television. I sit back and watch television [for fun]. Maybe I'll rent a movie or something. I mean, fun is eliminated. Weekends I mostly spend time with my kids and fun is cut out.

Pam, a 32-year-old mother of three worked as a nursing assistant. She reported that she took her kids places for fun but no longer had time to do some of things she used to enjoy.

(I enjoy) just talking with guy friends, or take my kids to the beach, or Chucky Cheese, DZ Discovery Zone. I like to play baseball, but now I don't have time to play.

The stress involved in maintaining such a demanding schedule was evident. Often times their responsibilities were so time consuming that an employed woman didn't get enough sleep. Shantay was especially worried about how this affected her children and was increasingly concerned about the distance that was growing between them.

. . . Sometimes you know, it's hectic with my kid and stuff -- me working and I'm tired -- and I can't spend no time with them. It's stressful because I can't get them the quality time they deserve -- like we not growin' together, we growin' apart.

Unemployed women either had non-eventful days or also had busy schedules due to having more children, helping family, going to school, or because they participated in a number of household activities such as cooking or sewing. The following quotes illustrate

these patterns. Keisha had a busier schedule than some unemployed women because she went to school and helped family. Tamika, who was an unemployed mother of one, had more free time. Tamika had quit school because of an unplanned pregnancy. They stated:

**Keisha:** I get up and get myself and my daughter ready for school. After being in school, I come home, straighten up the house or cook or whatever needs to be done. Then I drop my mom off at work, pick up the kids from school, come home, help with homework, let them watch t.v. or supervise their play outside . . . then give them a bath, put them to bed -- that's pretty much it.

**Tamika:** We get up, get dressed, run errands, practice her letters with her - - sometimes I'll go walking -- I've been trying to get some exercise -- talk on the phone -- that's about it.

However, both of their weekend schedules allowed for more free time than Shantay's did.

**Keisha:** Saturday is more of a free day. That's a day for shopping or you might go like to Chuckie Cheeses or something like that, you know, go out to dinner -- more of a break day.

**Tamika:** No, since I'm out of school, it's usually the same all the time. I go to church on Sundays -- sometimes I go to dinner. . . .

Although both groups of women wanted to spend time with their children, the unemployed women were more likely to have the time to do so. Activities included: reading, going to a playground, talking, going to McDonald's or Chuckie Cheese, going for walks, and watching movies. For the women who didn't work outside the home or go to school, their entire day was focused on the children. Tamika discussed how her time was focused on her daughter in the following way:

Sometimes when I have extra money, I'll like to do stuff with my daughter. Take her to the park or whatever. . . . Sometimes take her to the library or park, to Chuckie Cheese, the movies. She goes to the movies a lot. I really don't do anything for me, I guess. Most of the time I do something with her.

Employment took a heavy toll on many women. Juggling parenting responsibilities, work responsibilities and housework often left little time for sleep, fun, or visiting with other adults. However, unemployed women were also active. Instead of simply sitting around and watching television, they were involved in school and family responsibilities. In addition, even when their schedules were less demanding, they often had productive activities in their lives. Like Tamika, many unemployed women were working to teach their children or improve their own lives through exercise or reading. These pictures of the daily life of low-income women were very different than the laziness portrayed by stereotypes.

The strength of these African-American single mothers was evident. Although many women were surprised by their first pregnancies and seemed unprepared for motherhood, they provided love, support and discipline to their children. However, they did so alone and in a community where crime, drugs and violence threatened to hurt their families. Moreover, they often couldn't provide for their families financially. The stress associated with single parenthood was difficult for many and the support they received from family, friends, partners, neighbors, and community agencies was invaluable. However, at times this support also seemed inadequate and finding decent child care was extremely problematic. In spite of their hardships the women did their best to provide their children with close nurturing relationships and to raise them to be responsible and independent adults.

### Individual

In this section the women's individual or psychological variables will be discussed. Topics include: Education and work skills; motivation and a sense of control; depression;

self-concept; traumatic experiences; and coping and resiliency.

### Education and Work Skills

Surprisingly, no differences in education existed among the two groups of women. Women with high school diplomas, GED's and those who had dropped-out of high school were found in both the employed and unemployed groups. Most of the women reported mixed experiences with their own schooling and no differences among these descriptions existed between the employed and unemployed women. Although most reported receiving B's and C's, many also felt that school was just something they had to do and wasn't very enjoyable. Twelve women reported repeating grades and four mentioned special education placement even though this question was not asked. Again these women were found in both the employed and unemployed groups. When asked "What was school like for you growing up?" Many women responded with a brief O.K. Keisha stated:

It was o.k. It was pretty average. . . . I liked the work that I did, because I did extra stuff around the school, like working in the office. . . . It (school) was pretty much the same as everything else. I didn't really particularly care for it.

Moreover, although some differences did exist, most women reported similar work histories. Many woman had their first jobs in fast food or as cashiers and worked rather sporadically when young. As they got older their work histories reflected more consistent employment. However, most were employed and unemployed intermittently throughout their lives. These later jobs were also similar and included: waitress, housekeeper, worker at a dry cleaners or laundry, nursing assistants, and child care or teacher's aides.

What is striking about many of the women's work history, however, was the lack of consistency in training programs and employment. Many women had been enrolled in a



number of training programs. Training for cosmetology, clerical work, child care assistance and nursing assistance were common among many women. However, their job histories didn't reflect their training. Very few women actually seemed to obtain employment in the field in which they'd been trained. Moreover, their hopes for future employment or the descriptions of skills they wanted to learn didn't match the training programs they had attended or were attending. Many women simply appeared to become involved in training programs or gained employment because the opportunity existed for them to do so or because welfare workers asked them to. In addition, the women had little knowledge about careers or the steps needed to obtain the work they desire. Often, they reported interest in pursuing a training program or a career simply because someone told them it was a good opportunity.

For example, Bernetta, a 32 year-old mother of two, was unemployed. Her education included a high school diploma, a year at the community college and three months of computer classes. However, her previous employment included being a store clerk, working as a bartender, and as a fast food worker. When asked what type of work she'd like to do in the future, Bernetta replied:

I would like to work with kids, somewhat, like a teacher's aide or nursing or something. Then again I would like older people.

However, Bernetta also reported that she was going to begin studying mortuary science in the fall. A program existed that would help her pay for this training. However, she was a little vague when describing her plan.

I'm going to Mott (Community College) for my science stuff. But really I have to go to Detroit after that. Some school down there -- I don't know the school's name. It's all wrote down. 'Cause they don't have no school around here, you have to go up to Detroit and they pay for that on aid.

That's what the lady told me. They'll pay my gas and all that ol' stuff. Or maybe I can stay up there for weekdays and then come home on weekends.

Tamara also thought that mortuary science might be a field worth pursuing. She was 37 with 3 children and she currently worked as a house cleaner. She also had a high school diploma and a year studying interior decorating at a local college. Tamara had to quit college because she was having problems with her partner (which she didn't specify) and trouble with transportation. She knew that she wanted some other type of job or training and had heard that opportunities were good for morticians. However, her understanding of what training was needed was even vaguer than Bernetta's.

Tamara: I was thinking of going to Detroit College of Business. I'm ready to do something. I really want to go up to Mortuary. A long time ago my

mother's boyfriend he used to work in those. He always told me that was one job you never get laid off. He ain't never got laid off work.

Interviewer: Do you know of someplace you could go to learn Mortuary Science?

Tamara: Someone told me that I had to go to Mott.

However, work histories did differ somewhat. Seven women (three who were currently employed and three who weren't but were attending school) had developed a consistent career path. Interestingly, the path they'd chosen was remarkably similar. At some point all but one of these women received some type of medical training, usually as a nurse's aide. Often they completed on-the-job training. They also had work experience in the medical field and many had worked for a number of years in a entry-level position. Although, a couple of these planful women planned to continue with their current job, others were currently pursuing further schooling. Often they were working on LPN or RN degrees. Some wanted to become medical technicians.

A few more women have been consistently employed in one job, either full or part-time, for as many as ten years. Although most were employed, some were not due to a recent lay-off or because they had returned to school. However, all of these women reported wanting to do something different or mentioned that their best skills were in other fields. Even though, their current jobs were long term, they seemed to view them as temporary until they found something better.

Moreover, a fairly large group of women (eleven) reported less than a year of employment at anytime during their lives. Three of these women had never worked. Most of these women were currently not employed. However, two women who currently had jobs were also in this group. These differing work history patterns are explored more thoroughly in the second analysis.

Overall school and entry into the job market was problematic for many of these women and many of these patterns were supported in the literature review. The women lacked career information similar to many low-income individuals (Healy et al., 1984; Manuele, 1984; Miller, 1982). At times their education seemed inadequate or they were placed in special education courses (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988) and their jobs often had unpredictable hours (Paltiel, 1988).

### Motivation and a Sense of Control

The women interviewed did have a sense of personal power. All but a few women reported having control over all, or the majority of situations in their lives. For example, Marissa stated:

I feel like I have the majority of the control over the situations in my life. I don't have all the control, but I feel like I have the biggest control. I got the handle on it. . . . I feel like I can make good choices about what (my

children) learn. What they know. . . . I try to make it a point to reinforce things that I really feel should be part of their character and upbringing. So I think I have control over the way they grow up and think.

However, when questioned further, some women in both groups reported not having control over a few things. Most often these were things that occurred outside their home such as the behavior of other adults and crime. Some of the women reported little control over their income and over bills. Although they could control how their money was budgeted, their incomes were determined by welfare or by the low paying jobs that were available to them. Furthermore, bills came due every month. For example, Sheila, who works part-time as a teacher's aide, initially said, "I have total control over the situations in my life." However, later she noted that she didn't have control over the gunshots she heard in her neighborhood or over her lack of family support:

Like what do you do when you hear gunshots. They (the kids) come to me when they hear a car backfire, "that's gunshots, you got to go in the house. . . . What can you do? . . . If I was in control of everything, I wouldn't be living here. I would have that house I wanted, have that child care. So, I can't make it happen, when there's nothing to make it happen. And I can't do that because I don't have no family. I have a large family, but no ones close. I can't go to my family and say "Can you watch my kids" . . . You know there is no one there for me.

These women appeared to hold on to the illusion of control by focusing on the aspects of their life that they could control. For example, when answering these questions, most women discussed having control over how they raised their children. However, they were less likely to discuss their ability to control (or not control) discrimination, the availability of jobs, or the possibility that they would become victims of crime.

All of the women also reported controlling their future and were motivated to change their present circumstances. They wanted something more for themselves and felt

that work and education were the mechanisms that led to a better life. When asked "What plans do you have for yourself and how do you see your own future?" Almost all of the women mentioned plans for education, new jobs, or better jobs. A few women had hopes for marriage, better housing, or having more material goods. However, a small difference did exist among the two groups of women. Of the four women who had a difficult time imagining a positive future, three were currently employed. Perhaps their years of employment in low-paying jobs had left them feeling discouraged. Sheila who was employed and Bernetta who wasn't stated:

Interviewer: What plans do you have for yourself? How do you see your own future?

Sheila: I don't see it. I just take it day-by-day and hope that things will be better. . . . They say you can make things happen, but you can't always. You can try and you can try and it don't happen. So, you just have to take it day-by-day and hope things work out the way you want it to.

Bernetta: The plan is to go back to school and better myself -- to be a mortician . . . and move out to somewhere and get me a house and forget welfare.

Moreover, many women in both groups felt that their future circumstances depended exclusively on their hard work. Most of the women didn't see any problems that might prevent them from reaching their goals. They often stated that they simply had to just go ahead and enroll in school or find a job. For example, Serena thought that there were no barriers to meeting the following goals:

(I want to) have my own home, my children very educated. Um, me traveling and just living a life drug free. . . . I be wanting to own my own home, live in a nice neighborhood. That's my goals.

However, when she was asked what type of things she would need, she was vague in her

discussion:

Uh, uh, just do it. Just having the motivation to go back to school . . . figuring out what I really want to do. I been procrastinating.

Although, the majority of the women said that they needed certain things to fulfill their plans, these needs were often described vaguely. Most often they felt they needed money. Willpower, emotional support, education, child care, transportation, or a job, were also mentioned as needs to meet their goals. However, they didn't know how they were going to meet these needs. Although, the following quote is from Marissa, an employed women, her response is typical:

Interviewer: What plans do you have for yourself? How do you see your own future?

Marissa: I see myself in a nice home, being married and writing my books in my little room at my house. . . .

Interviewer: Are there any barriers or problems that would prevent your hopes for the future from happening?

Marissa: No, none

Interviewer: What types of things would you need?

Marissa: I would need more money and a better husband -- and I'll have it.

This pattern is similar to the women's descriptions of possible employment and training opportunities. The literature review provides one explanation for these themes. Perhaps the women didn't have enough knowledge about various opportunities nor know how to work towards them (Healy et al., 1984; Manuele, 1984; Miller, 1982). However, their ability to ignore these factors may also be a coping mechanisms similar to the possible reasons they ignored the affects of discrimination. Perhaps if they seriously looked at the number of barriers in their lives, they would feel much more hopeless then

they reported feeling.

### Self-Concept

The women were confident and proud. Overall, both employed and unemployed women used positive adjectives to describe themselves. Most often personality traits such as helpful, trustworthy, fun, honest, understanding, independent, energetic, and open-minded were used as self-descriptors. However, the women also described themselves in terms of their relationships. They were mothers, friends, and sisters. Furthermore, all of the women were proud to be African-Americans and felt that their children should be taught about their heritage. The following quotations are examples of positive self-descriptions and pride by Edie, Carmella, and Lois.

Edie: I'm a nice person. I get along with others. I'm a good helper. I like to help if I can. I like to sit around and talk, share things. . . . I'm a good mother. I try to do my best.

Carmella: I'm pretty much a reliable person. I do quite a bit of talking sometimes, too. I'm just an earthy person, that would pretty much describe me -- ordinary people . . . I like me. I think I'm a good person. I'm a good friend. I just like me . . .

Lois: . . . If you judge me just because of my color and you don't know anything about me and I am such a sweet person, you know, you have a problem because you cheating yourself out of a blessing, you know, because I'm a blessing when you meet me.

When discussing the aspects they disliked about themselves, they again referred to certain personality traits. They also had regrets about some of their decisions. The women wished they'd finished high school or that they had a job. Sometimes they regretted having their children too early in their lives, or getting involved with men who didn't support them or their children. A few women discussed dissatisfaction with their weight or looks. The following quotes are Edie's, Carmella's, and Lois's answers to the

question, "What don't you like about yourself?"

**Edie:** Oh, my attitude. I need to just gradually day by day work on my attitude. . . . somebody say something to me, I get upset too fast.

**Carmella:** I don't like my forgetfulness sometimes. Now that I don't like. Ain't too much I don't like.

**Lois:** . . . my height to a certain extent. I do think I'm kinda on the short side . . . my weight. . . . I don't like so far some of the things I've done in my life. I lost a great deal of my self-esteem. I gave up too easy, you know, you take those chances when you lay down, or whatever, you get a baby, but you all know that the father's just not gonna be there for the child. . . .

Although welfare reciprocity and an African-American ethnicity has been associated with a low sense of self-worth, the women interviewed did not speak of themselves negatively. Instead their self-descriptions were consistently positive. Smith (1985) proposed that many African-Americans compare their situations and themselves to others like them and do not suffer from low self-esteem. Furthermore, Leslie (1995) stated that African-American morality did not base an individual's value on the desirability of their actions. Therefore, people could make mistakes, such as being an unwed mother or being unemployed, without being inherently wrong. Perhaps this explains why these women didn't denigrate themselves even though many in their community had negative views of them. Regardless of the reasons for their positive self views, their levels of confidence doesn't appear to interfere with their abilities to obtain employment.

### Depression

However, signs of depression were apparent in both employed and unemployed women. Many women described feeling sad or blue and this worried them. When the women discussed what they didn't like about themselves, they often described some type



of bad mood. For example:

**Sheila:** The way I think on life. It's wrong and I know it's wrong -- but I haven't been proven differently yet. Maybe I need to go to psychology -- find out what it is. I have a negative look on life, period. I think real negative about life. The one good thing that I do is I try to tell my children differently. So they don't be like me. I give them a positive outlook. But when I look at it, it's negative.

**Bernetta:** Well, when I be grouchy . . . sometimes I be depressed. I be sitting up here singing the blues and that don't make it no better.

Similar types of descriptions from both employed and unemployed women were found in answers given to the question, "In general, how would you describe the way you feel most days?" Although, half of the women said they were happy, relaxed or peaceful, the other half described a mixture of sadness and happiness or said that most days they were depressed or angry. Many times they didn't understand what caused these feelings. Again no differences were found between the employed and unemployed women. Keisha and Edie described their moods in the following quotations:

**Keisha:** Sad, I don't know why. There's not really a reasoning for it. I just -- wake up sad.

**Edie:** Really bad, tired. Sometimes I don't do nothing.

In focus groups conducted by the VoICES project, human service professionals expressed a concern for the depression seen in some low-income women's lives. One professional called it "being stuck" and felt that at times her clients just didn't have the emotional and physical energy to complete simple tasks such as filling out Department of Social Services forms or going to the store to buy needed items.

Although the women had a positive self-concept, the stress of their environments may have led to depressive symptoms that prevented them from performing needed tasks

or from looking for employment. This finding was also supported in the literature review. Depression has been found to be connected to the chronic stress related to poverty and negative life events (Taylor et al., 1991). However, many of these women didn't understand the source of their depression. As someone looking at their lives from the outside, numerous contributors were apparent. They lived in unsafe environments and struggled with raising children on inadequate incomes. Perhaps again they were ignoring how these factors affected them. This issue will be addressed further in the following sections.

#### Personal Traumatic Experiences

Although the interview did not directly ask about abuse and domestic violence, many employed and unemployed women mentioned such experiences. Furthermore, incidents of crime, neighborhood violence and the death of family members were also discussed. Out of the forty women interviewed, ten had family members that were shot or murdered. Many of these passages were difficult to read. Furthermore, because the women revealed these problems without specific questions, the probability that the women's lives were filled with even more trauma was high. Although I have described some of these incidents in earlier sections, the prevalence of them indicated that a separate section was needed. When asked "What was the worst things that had ever happened to you?", Keisha discussed crime. Serena discussed how her brother was sent to jail and her own struggles with substances. While Serena was using drugs, her children had been temporarily placed in foster care. Edie described being beaten and violently raped by one of her children's fathers.

Keisha: My house got broken into, everything -- I wasn't really worried

about my stuff. I was worried about my daughter -- she really didn't understand.

Serena: . . . the worst thing, the worst things that ever happened to me -- my brother went to jail for murder and he was my role model. I lost my father in the same month and my kids went to foster care.

Edie: Oh, I been abused. Oh and a while back I had got raped. I got raped and then abused. . . . See what happened to me . . . I was going to get some change to catch the bus. Somebody was walking behind me . . . and it was him. . . . He pulled out a long butcher knife. We went to Jefferson Park where nobody around. He pulled the knife. . . . He said I could kill you. . . . I kept saying, my kids, take my life, whatever you're going to do, just take it, but my kids are real important to me. So he started up then. He was touching away -- shouldn't been touching me anyway. . . .

Recent research has begun to look at the role of violence in the lives of low-income women. One such study found that 65% of welfare recipients in Massachusetts were victims of domestic violence (Allerd, Albelda, Colten, Cosenaz, 1997). A second investigation found that 60% of their sample of low-income women had experienced violence by an adult partner and 72% had experienced either physical or sexual abuse as a child (Salomon, Bassuk & Brooks, 1996). Moreover, the mental health implications are numerous. Traumatic experiences not only contribute to depression but also problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). PTSD is characterized by the following symptoms: persistently reexperiencing the event; persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma; and persistent symptoms of increased arousal such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability or outbursts of anger, or difficulty concentrating (DSM-IV, 1994). Respondents in the Salomon et al. (1996) study were three times as likely to suffer from PTSD than those in the general female population. Breslau, Davis, Andreski, and Peterson (1991) studied the prevalence of PTSD in a random population of young adults

in Detroit, Michigan. They found that nearly 40% had been exposed to a traumatic event and almost 25% of this group had PTSD. Moreover, they found that PTSD was associated with an increased risk for psychiatric disorders, especially with mood disorders such as anxiety problems.

In addition, childhood traumas have not only been linked to psychiatric problems but also changed attitudes about people, aspects of life and the future. Some individuals who have been traumatized as children are more to believe that more problems will follow (Terr, 1991). Although the women weren't asked about trauma related symptoms, these problems would make building trusting relationships, parenting, and keeping a job more difficult.

### Coping and Resiliency

Both employed and unemployed women used prayer, talking with others, or simply ignoring their problems as coping strategies. Carmella, Edie and Shantay reported handling stress in the following ways:

Carmella: [I] go upstairs, close the door, turn the ringer off on the telephone and just go to sleep. When they wake me, I don't respond. Other than that I get in my car and drive. If I have gas, I'll get in that car and just drive, drive, drive or I'll go somewhere and park.

Edie: I try to forget it.

Shantay: Okay, I pray and meditate. I'm doing a lot of meditating for stress. And if I have to I'll go to a friend and see what they talkin' about and if they not talking about what I want to hear -- well, first of all, I go to God.

Carmella's, Edie's and Shantay's responses are typical. Many times the women reported that they tried to solve their problems alone or that they kept their emotions and stresses to themselves. As reported in the mesosystemic section, some women were

isolated and these women were most likely to keep their problems to themselves.

Although, Carmella had a true friend and family members that were only a phone call away, she chose to keep her problems private. Perhaps she worried about overburdening those who helped her. Similar to the women who felt depressed, she may also have had a difficult time understanding her moods. Therefore, she may also have had some problems describing them to others. Whatever the reason, the fact that many women were isolated in handling emotional problems was apparent.

However, the women were also resilient. Crime, violence, death, drugs, and poverty did not deter the women from wanting a better life for themselves and for their children. Their struggles, although difficult, didn't destroy them. Some women felt that they were better off than others and they were thankful for what they did have. The following quotations from Yolanda and Kathy exemplify this quality:

**Yolanda:** There has to be a God because I wake up every morning, I have two eyes to see, I have two hands to do, and I have peace and my kids are growing -- and there's a lot I'm thankful for.

**Kathy:** The best thing is that I was one of the lucky ones to be able to get married and then I was fortunate enough to go back to school and get a little education and, uh, . . . and keep up the necessities.

Many of these internal psychological variables were actually a strength for the women. Even through difficult times, the women were able to remain confident, motivated and resilient when faced with so many barriers. A few factors may have allowed them to do so. They women had a deep sense of spirituality; a belief that God had a plan for them and was taking care of them. Moreover, most of the women had families, friends, or partners that provided support and a place where they could forget about their worries. They also found joy and pride in their roles as mothers and they were

proud of being African-American. These factors sustained them.

There was also some evidence that the women were able to ignore some problems. Being able to ignore an uncontrollable situation has been found to be an effective coping strategy (Kessler et al., 1985; Paltiel, 1988). The women's abilities to focus on those situations they could change was probably healthy. They were proactive in their parenting roles and they had developed ways of meeting many of their basic needs. However, crime, discrimination and a lack of opportunity were factors out of their control. Thus, they ignored them.

However, their stresses often led to depression, a result that many women didn't seem to understand. Moreover, for many women it led to a lack of planning. Many women wanted to attend college. However, if they were to look at how they were going to enroll, find financial aid, take care of their children while studying, the dream may have seemed impossible. Perhaps it was better to dream than to look realistically at all those barriers. However, some women were able to plan, to recognize barriers and find ways to circumvent them. In the next analysis I examine this factor.

### Analysis Two

During my examination of the women's work histories, I noted that distinct differences existed in the women's overall work history in contrast to the first analysis where I compared the women based on their employment status. Some women had been able to work in the same job for a number of years, others had been able to hold jobs for only a year or less, and still others had never worked at all. One group of women were able to articulate distinct career plans and their work histories showed that they were pursuing these goals.

Thus, in this second analysis, I reread each transcript and compared the women's lives based on their work history. I first examined the group of women who were following career plans. Next, I analyzed the transcripts of the women who had been employed less than a year during their life. The remaining women (those without plans and who had worked more than a year during their life) were also analyzed. The grounded theory approach that I used allowed me to create hypotheses from the patterns that emerged during this analysis. A complete description of the procedures for this analysis is found in chapter three.

### The Planful Women

Seven women had a plan to reach their goals. Although, almost all of the women had goals, these women had plans that they discussed and were reflected in their work histories. This pattern was reinforced through interviewers' comments. The following vignettes describe some of these women:

#### Erica

Erica was quoted in the exosystem section discussing her experiences with discrimination in Flint because she was bi-racial. She was 20 years old, currently unemployed and the mother of two sons, Calvert who was 4 years old and Anthony who was two. Her previous employment included summer jobs doing landscaping and working at Taco Bell. Erica was pregnant at the time of the interview but was also pursuing college full-time. During high school she'd completed vocational courses in health careers. She was currently attending classes at the community college and she planned to transfer to a university to study physical therapy. She knew what was needed to become a physical therapist and knew what schools she could go to:

Right now I'm taking my regular classes at Mott College and then I'll be transferring to U of M. There they have a good physical therapy program.

She had this to say about her future:

. . . as of now I have my career goals straight -- what I want to do . But after I get my master's degree in physical therapy, I'll work for a couple of years and maybe start my own business.

Moreover, her interviewer made the following comments about her:

She seemed goal-directed at this stage in her life and determined to accomplish her goals.

Erica may have a tough road ahead of her. After all, she was only 20 years old, with two children, and a third on the way. However, Erica also had support. She received help from her mother, a brother, her step-father, a true friend, and her partner. Although Erica got help from all these individuals, she relied mostly on her mother and partner. Erica's mother was also in college, she lived a block away and they saw each other daily. Erica said the following about her:

She's been very helpful to me. She's helped me out when I need it. She's there for me when I need her.

Erica's partner, Malcolm, was actively involved in raising the children. Malcolm and Erica had been living together for almost a year at the time of the interview. Erica appreciated that he was "always there" and thought he made her life easier because she had "someone to lean on."

The support Erica received from her mother and from Malcolm allowed her to pursue her education and career goals. Without these individuals, she wouldn't have had someone to help watch her children as she attended school, or to help provide for them financially. These supports also allowed her to accomplish more than many of the other



women at a younger age. Although many women in their teens and early twenties were still struggling to find their first jobs, Erica had both worked and gone to college.

### **Pam**

Pam was 32 years old and has held two nursing assistant jobs. Pam was also raising two sons. Her son Demorio was ten and her son Zabien was five years old. She finished high school but reported receiving C's and D's. She also completed a training program in secretarial skills, and a six-month program in nursing at Mott Community College.

She had been working as a nursing assistant for four years and planned to continue with this work. She'd recently changed jobs to go from one nursing assistant job to another. She'd been working both jobs until the day before the interview. Before her training in nursing, Pam worked numerous short term jobs in food service. She would have liked to pursue an RN degree but reported having difficulty with reading. Pam was quoted in the last analysis discussing her mother and her inability to find the time to do the things she enjoyed. Pam had this to say about her future:

I want to see my kids grow-up. I want them to have a well life. I want to be able to give them what they need to get by until they grow up. Work 'till I get too old to work, probably be alone. Won't have too much, because of the job I have, but as for right now I think my life is fine.

When asked if there were any barriers or problems that would prevent her from fulfilling her goals, Pam stated:

Yes, I feel I should go back to school, to get a better job. I can read, but I don't like to, so that's why I don't go back to school. I really would like to be a nurse.

Pam grew up with both parents. However, she reported that they "fought a lot."

Neither of Pam's parents had gone past the ninth grade in school. However, Pam was close to her mother. She also saw a brother and two sisters on a daily basis. Pam's support system also included a true friend, Yvette. She and Yvette talked and went shopping together but Pam didn't often ask her for favors. Pam received no help from her children's fathers and was not involved with anyone at the time of the interviews.

Although Pam found it hard to ask for help, if she needed to ask, she asked her family:

I've never been the type to go to other people for help, I'd go to my family first.

Her interviewer comments included:

Participant plans what she wants and sets goals. She planned her pregnancies.

Pam had a few close supportive individuals. Although these relationships provided a safety net for Pam, she had developed ways to remain fairly independent. She had planned her pregnancies and made plans for ways to take care of her family. However, her reading ability provided a stumbling block for her. She felt that it kept her from going back to school and becoming a nurse.

### Linda

Linda, who was quoted discussing her parental role, was 34 years old and was working full time as a medical unit clerk. She had three children: Norman, who was 18 and attending college, Devin, who was 15, and Amber, who was 4. Linda had attended an adult training program to prepare her for her current job and she had a high school diploma. She hoped eventually to get an RN degree. Linda described her future in the following manner:

I want to go back to school to get my license as a registered nurse. That's

one goal -- to lose weight and to either get married or to live alone.

Linda grew up in Mississippi and moved as a child to Flint with her family because her parents hoped to get better jobs in the auto factories. Some of Linda's family lived out of state at the time of the interviews. However, she saw her sisters on a weekly basis. Linda also had true friends and associates. Although she didn't ask them for help much, she did talk with her two true friends, Juanita and Paulette. They shared both advice and enjoyed an emotional contact. Linda reported that they talked about:

When we were growing up, things our parents used to do and say, our kids. I might know something that might help her with her son. Or she know something that will help with my son -- or basically just spending time with them.

Linda also had a partner, Greg, that she'd been living with for ten years. Linda wanted to get married but he was unwilling. She described Greg in the following way:

He's a good father, a very good father. . . . The fact that he would do anything he could do to help me, but he doesn't want to marry me.

Later in the interview she said her life was easier with Greg in it:

Because you feel secure. You feel like you have another companion, and it helps to keep you from feeling that you're alone.

Interviewer comments included:

She is on the verge of stepping into financial independence.

Linda had developed supports similar to Pam's. She had a few close individuals who could help, but she didn't often ask for it. Instead she depended on them for emotional intimacy. Linda also had a partner whom she'd lived with for ten years. Greg provided both financial and emotional support. These supports combined with her ability to plan appeared to have helped Linda work towards self-sufficiency.

### Common Themes for the Planful Women

Erica, Pam, Linda, and the other planful women shared some common themes.

First, they had the ability to set goals for themselves and develop plans to meet those goals. Furthermore, these women discussed their plans realistically. They knew they needed to keep working hard and that their goals would take time to fulfill.

These planful women seemed to have career information and planning skills that the other women did not have or simply did not use. They had the ability to plan for the future and for a different environment than the one in which they were currently living. Although their environment discouraged planning (Baker, 1996), they were able to plan.

It was impossible to determine how they'd developed this ability while living with unpredictability. Changes and crises were frequent for many women and couldn't be planned for. Support systems changed. Crime and discrimination occurred and affected their future with little warning. Most women appeared to have adapted to this environment by ignoring how these factors personally affected them while continuing to dream of something better -- hoping that their luck would change. However, these few planful women had taken a different route. They paid attention to these barriers and had developed plans to overcome them.

This theme was also discovered in the planful women's discussions of discrimination. Interestingly, most of these women discussed early experiences with racism and all forms of discrimination were more likely to be salient for them. Unlike most of the other women, the planful women recognized racism and they had experiences combating it. This pattern did not occur in any other group. For example, Erica, Linda and Pam all reported that racism was a problem for them growing up. They also felt that

sexism and classism existed and affected them. Pam stated:

. . . I feel like in school they treated the white kids better than the black kids. Some teachers favored the white kids more or they'd answer the questions more.

She also felt that racism was a problem for her as she sought employment:

. . . certain places you go, it seem like they would want a white person for the position. They look at you and your skin color is not light or not real light or white, they take your application and say thanks we will give you a call. . . .

In addition, the planful women were self-reliant. They had a hard time asking for help and did not do so often. Again it was difficult to ascertain whether their independence preceded their employment or if their employment allowed them to be more self-reliant. Either way, the planful women had developed methods to handle their problems fairly independently. Although all of them had at least one person who provided emotional support and intimacy, they seldom exchanged favors with them.

However, two planful women had some problems due to a lack of support. Jolene, a 31-year-old mother of a five-year-old daughter, Jerika, had recently been separated from her husband after a six year marriage. Because of her separation and the loss of support from her husband, Jolene had decided to return to Flint to "regroup" and to gain the support of family. Although her family was helpful, her separation had precipitated a sense of discouragement as she changed her plan. She discussed this in the following quotation:

. . . I didn't really want to come here but I had to because my baby was young and this is family here and I . . . was able to get help with her. I really didn't want to come here. The best thing is family.

Jolene had a bachelor's degree in nursing and had previously worked as a nurse.

However, she could not find a job in Flint and was unemployed at the time of the interview. Jolene stated that she wanted to get a master's in nursing and with her family's help she'd been able to enroll in classes at Mott Community College. However, she had been temporarily sidetracked due to her separation and she wanted to leave Flint. She said:

Right now I'm at Mott (community college) but I ain't staying here. I'm just finishing up and I'm outta here. I came here to regroup. Let's say, Atlanta because I would like to go back. At Emory University because if I go into a hospital, then they'll pay for it (further training). . . .

She also couldn't understand why she couldn't get a job in Flint. She guessed that racism played a part.

To be honest with you . . . I have a bachelors degree. I have other certificates and I don't understand how come I can't get a job and then you got a person out here not even in that field and they can get a job. White person, I guess I'll put it that way -- and yea, its not fair. They tell you, you have to go back to get more education but what you need is experience, not the education. I already spent four years and I still don't have a job.

Laurielle, was a planful women who had few supports. She was 26 years old and was raising three children: Rumeal, a son, was five years old; Carrington, her daughter, was 3; and Keante, a son, was one year old. Laurielle had worked off and on as a nursing assistant since she'd graduated from high school. She wanted to continue with that work and eventually get more training. Although she could have a job as a home health aide, Laurielle was unable to take it because she didn't have anyone to watch her children. She didn't have any true friends nor was she currently in a relationship. She sometimes asked for help from her mother but stated:

. . . I can get out there and get what I need for me as far a woman but when it comes to my kids, I don't have no pride. . . . I don't like to go to

my mom if I don't have to. I'd rather go to one of these facilities that provide the kind of services that are there to help me. I'd rather go to them than take from my mom.

Laurielle's lack of support made fulfilling her plan difficult. However, her mom had recently agreed to babysit a few hours a day and Laurielle hoped to return to school.

In addition, almost all of these planful women with support described feeling happy, relaxed and were confident about their future. Pam, Jolene, and Laurielle were more discouraged, however. Pam was worried that her problems with reading would prevent her from becoming a RN, she reported that she would always be working hard and probably "won't have too much." Laurielle, who had less support was a little discouraged about her future but wasn't going to give up. She said:

Same place. Working. You know. I can't even see next year really. I gotta live for, you know, I just take today, now. I can't even see next year. That's like I told my mother, I used to see the plans I had for going to Eastern [University], medical school, and now I've got these kids. I'm taking care of them by myself. I really can't even see that far. I'm just not going to give up. Its gonna get better. It can't get worse.

Jolene just wanted to get a "decent job" and "take care of my daughter."

Interestingly, Pam, Jolene, and Laurielle were the only planful women without partners. The rest of the planful women had supportive partners that either lived with them or whom they saw on a daily basis. Although these women weren't married to their partners, their partners provided help with parenting responsibilities, finances, and crises. These women were not alone in handling their problems. Instead they had created a partnership for themselves.

Overall, the women in the planful group did not have a large network of supportive people. However, they did have a few individuals who were consistently

supportive and dependable. Furthermore, except for partners, they were most likely to use these supports for emotional connection and advice. Partners helped out both emotionally and financially. Moreover, the combination of support and planfulness was beneficial. Of the planful women with good support systems, one was in college full-time and the others were currently employed. Jolene was also taking classes and Laurielle planned to start in the fall. Moreover, all of the women but Pam, who had reading problems, had plans to pursue further training in their field.

### Low Work History Group

Distinguishing patterns were also found in the low work history group. All of these women had worked less than a year during their lifetimes and none had plans for their future. However, they all had goals that included prosperous futures and good jobs. Their goals, however, sounded more like hopes or dreams and they were not able to describe a plan for reaching their goals. Most often they reported that they just had to go out and do "it," without being able to define what "it" was.

Moreover, many of the women in this group discussed personal trauma, victimization, and a lack of current positive supports. Although many women, including those in the planful group, discussed parents who were alcoholics, harsh punishment or abuse as children, or domestic violence as adults, the low work history women had a tendency to discuss repeated traumas and mentioned them more often. These problems appeared to be more immediate for this group and were described as more severe. Furthermore, some of these women also mentioned previous problems with substance abuse, promiscuity, and school conduct problems during their adolescence or early adulthood. In addition, their present relationships were more likely to be problematic.



The following descriptions present examples:

Edie

Edie was one of the low-work history women. Although, she was currently working part time as a dishwasher, this was her first job and she'd held it for less than a year. Because Edie has been quoted in many different sections of the first analysis, I will only present a brief review here. Edie was 27 years old and had dropped out of high school during her junior year because of an unplanned pregnancy. She was raising seven children who ranged in age from one through ten years. Edie had been abused as a child and many of her partners had been abusive and/or alcoholics. One partner violently raped her.

Edie's experiences with violence and frequent pregnancies, most likely kept her from finding employment. However, as mentioned earlier, there were some signs that Edie's was making changes in her life. She'd also found a few positive supportive individuals. Her partner, her pastor, and even a human service worker seemed to be helping and encouraging her. Perhaps these new supports, also contributed to her ability to find employment for the first time.

Jameka

Jameka has also been previously quoted discussing her partner, Edwin, and her disappointment with losing her first job. Jameka was 23 years old and had been fired after two months from her nursing assistant job because she could not rely on her family to help with transportation or child care. She felt that losing this job was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. Jameka first became pregnant at the age of 15 and she hadn't finished high school. Two of Jameka's three children, Edwin who was five and Jamie who

was three, were living with her. Her oldest child, Richard, was being raised by her father and stepmother. However, she reported that her father was a drug addict and was in and out of rehab.

Although Jameka's goals weren't much different than Erica's, Pam's or Linda's, she had no plan to achieve them. Moreover, she had few positive supports. Jameka stated:

Like I said I want to get another job, get a car so I can go back to school, do what I'm supposed to do and I want to go back to school, get my GED, go from there to college, be a nurse.

However, she foresaw no barriers and only felt that she needed a car to met her goals.

Moreover, in another section, her goals were more conflicted:

I wouldn't mind teaching the little kids, like Head Start. I enjoy that so much when I go there. I like to help them, you know, read books and stuff. . . . I would like to learn more on the nursing -- or maybe like a teacher's aide.

Jameka grew up living with her grandparents. She said of them:

I always wanted to stay with my grandmother and grandfather. My grandmother and grandfather they spoiled me rotten. I always wanted to stay, I was always the only child in the house.

However, later in the interview she revealed that a few years ago, her grandfather hired someone to murder her grandmother because he wanted to live with another woman. Her grandmother is now dead and her grandfather is in prison. She described this incident in the following way:

Yeah, when my grandfather was guilty of having my grandmother killed, that was just so flipped out -- because my grandfather, he was a barber. He was a barber in our basement . . . and everybody in Flint knew him and loved him. It just flipped everybody out. . . . he had a mistress. . . .

Jameka also reported that she had behavior problems in school and used to stick people

with pins during junior high. She didn't understand why she did this.

Jameka did have one friend whom she's known since elementary school. She exchanged favors and confidences with her friend, Tiffany. Tiffany seemed to be the only reliable person in Jameka's life. Although Edwin, her partner, helped financially, he visited her only when he wanted to and she had problems trusting him. Moreover, Jameka had some difficulties trusting most people. She stated:

I trust people to a certain extent. You don't never know what somebody might or might not do.

Although Jameka did have family, a partner, and a friend, these individuals were less helpful than the supports of the planful women. Moreover, Jameka appeared to be less aware of herself and her needs. She didn't have a plan. She also didn't understand why she'd poked others with pins. She talked about her grandparents positively throughout the interview and only revealed the murder towards the end. She also had less to say about this than some of the women had when discussing their traumatic experiences. Perhaps Jameka was also ignoring the barriers in her life and the impact of her grandmother's murder. It may have been too painful to think about these issues. Moreover, her lack of positive supports made keeping a job difficult. Perhaps her inability to plan also contributed to her lower employment history.

### Sheleatha

Sheleatha was 21 years old and had four children under age 5. Brianna was almost five, Kevin was four, James was 2, and Martin was 1. Sheleatha had worked one summer as a child care aid, for two weeks as a secretary at the Army recruiting center, and for three days at a cleaners. Sheleatha wasn't sure what type of job she'd like but viewed her

future in the following way:

My plans that I have for myself is succeeding. I see myself gettin' a nice job. I also thought about going into the military, but I'm not too sure -- get my diploma though. I want to build a house . . . take trips, leave the city of Flint and go places I haven't been before I don't know what I want to do yet, but I do see myself working and getting a good job. . . .

She felt that she needed "just my diploma" and "a good resume" to make her goals occur.

However, she was not able to specify how she was going to obtain these things.

Sheleatha had become pregnant at the age of 16 and only been able to finish the tenth grade. She reported that she'd occasionally ran away from home during high school. At the age of 15 she'd moved in with her grandmother and at 16 she lived in a shelter for teen mothers. As an adult, Sheleatha only saw her mother, who lived in Flint, once a month. Moreover, she saw her siblings rarely and her father and grandmother once every few months. A couple of summers ago, one of Sheleatha's brothers had been shot. Sheleatha wasn't sure why this had happened but reported that it scared her.

Sheleatha was separated from her husband whom she'd been involved with since she was 13. Although she didn't discuss domestic violence specifically, she did report that she'd been previously living in a domestic violence shelter. She felt that getting married was the worst thing she could have done and that she'd been able to have more control over her life since her separation. She stated:

I regret it now, getting married is the worst thing that happened to me. . . ever since we got separated, I was able to do more with my money, accomplish more. He didn't like me spending money. . . . that's what I do now -- and buy what I need, what my kids need. . . .

However, the separation also took its toll on her. Sheleatha's husband had just walked out one day and Sheleatha felt lost for a while.

I was hurt. I got real angry frustrated. I went down for a minute -- started drinkin a lot, started back smoking weed. Kind of like gave up for a minute.

At the time of the interview she was involved with another partner, Omar, who helped her financially. Omar was also Sheleatha's only friend and support because she didn't trust women. She said:

He (Omar) really the only friend I have. I never really had friends. Especially female friends, I don't trust females. . . . Because they conniving, backstabbing -- someones you meet, not all of them -- but I don't trust them, jealousy, they get jealous. They a trip. . . .

Sheleatha also didn't have a plan and there was evidence of different types of problems in her life: living in a shelter as a teen, the shooting of her brother, living in a domestic violence shelter, and her separation from her husband. She also appeared to be more isolated than Jameka. She only had Omar for support. Moreover, Sheleatha's employment history was sparse. Perhaps her need to cope alone with her various problems left little energy to think of work.

### Exceptions in the Low Work History Group

Some exceptions did exist among the women in this group. Four women who had worked less than a year didn't describe trauma. Other women had been able to overcome traumatic experiences and had longer work histories. The following two sections describe these exceptions.

#### Lois and Nikkia

One of the four women who didn't discuss trauma, but who had less than a year of employment was Lois. Lois, has been quoted throughout the first analysis discussing the end of her twenty year marriage. She had never worked during her marriage and was

discouraged because she had been unable to find a job. Thus, her low work history appeared to be a result of maintaining a traditional wife and mother role during her marriage. More than likely her absence in the employment market and lack of viable skills prevented her from finding employment after she was divorced.

Two more women gave short responses to the questions and it was difficult to get a clear picture of their lives. A fourth woman, Nikkia, also described some trauma (her cousin was found dead with a gunshot wound in her head in the basement of her home). Nikkia was 25 years old and had four children. She had previously worked a summer job doing yard work. She hoped to someday get a cosmetology license. However, she didn't seem to be motivated to make this happen. She stated:

Well, I have always been saying that I wanted to do hair . . . yeah, I'm going to have my own business one day -- and who knows, it might come true.

However, Nikkia also had some positive supports. She saw her mother and her sister daily and relied heavily on her mother for help. She felt she could get whatever she wanted by "throwing a tantrum." When she had problems with her kids, she would call her mother who would watch the kids so that she could leave. She said:

. . . they (the kids) get me so stress out, it seems like I just be going crazy and like, shoot, I'll be glad when my mama get here. Yeah this is why I'm leaving y'all today and I ain't coming back until night time. And I do, too. When they be getting on my nerves like that . . . I'll leave.

Although Nikkia had life stressors, she also was fairly content with her life.

Furthermore, Nikkia reported that she "gets to drinking" when stressed and she frequently discussed "partying" with her friends and associates. Nikkia had this to say in answer to the question, "How would you describe the way you feel most days?"

I be saucy, mad, pissed off. I be wanting to do some devious stuff. . . . but then, shoot, I calm myself down -- after, I probably send somebody to the store for me -- to get me something to drink on. . . .

Perhaps, Nikkia had an addiction. Although it was impossible to determine this through her interview, Nikkia was less motivated and seemed less responsible than the other women interviewed. She frequently spent time with friends drinking and her mother seemed to handle many of her household and parenting responsibilities. Her lack of motivation and drinking probably prevented her from finding employment. However, they may also have masked some other problems she was unwilling to discuss during her interview.

#### Sara and Serena

Another women Sara, described repeated traumas, yet she was able to work for slightly over two years in fast food. Sara was 31 years old and was currently unemployed. However, she volunteered at the NAACP. Sara had finished high school and attended the community college for a year. She had three children. Her oldest daughter, Kenya was 13 years old and in junior high. Shantel was 7 and her son, Tijuan was 4. When Sara was asked to describe her plans for her future, she said:

I been lookin' at that too, my goals at this moment is to just continue my education, working and find a larger home, that's as far as I can go . . . I'm sure other things will be stirred up and what I'll be involved in I really don't know -- but something that will help me and my kids.

Sara was molested from age four to 17 by her stepfather. Before the interviewer could finish describing the interview, Sara revealed:

. . . is there anyway after you gather this information to . . . help mothers out of different situations. For instance, when I was a child I was molested, from four years old until I got 17. I got married, I got married, but I was in an denial I had completely forgot about my childhood because

it had been goin' on for so many years. I didn't never want to remember anyway. . . . I thought I'd be okay if I never thought about it, but it was still -- I still carry that around with me. . . .

Sara's first husband, the one she'd married at the age of 17, died soon after in a fight with his father over a gun. During the struggle, the gun had gone off killing both Sara's husband and her mother-in-law who witnessed the struggle. Sara either didn't know, or didn't discuss the cause of the fight. At the time of her husband's death, Sara was at the hospital because Kenya, who was 14-month-old at the time, had spinal meningitis. Furthermore, her husband had been abusive.

Sara had also ended a second violent relationship five days before the interview. Her baby's father had broken her nose and given her two black eyes. This relationship had lasted for eleven years. She had just begun counseling and wondered why she let others treat her badly. She described this in the following quotation:

When my kids daddy jumped on me. I mean, you know, all of that abuse was things that . . . I allowed. I was wondering what was wrong with me to let somebody hit me anyway. So I was trying to figure out, why was I stickin' in a situation like that, and I started asking myself different questions. I meant I had to go to work (her volunteer work) with a black eye, both of my eyes. It was terrible. But I mean, I was raisin' kids I wouldn't never want them to go through that, you know, feel that they got to be stuck or trapped into nothin'.

Sara's last partner had been controlling and didn't like her to communicate with her family. Therefore, these relationships had been distant. Sara did have two friends that she saw occasionally and she attended church with one. However, Sara was often alone and had little support. She described feeling:

Now, I feel lonely, but most days I feel O.K. 'Cause I just try to block things out. . . . I've just drifted in life . . . and this is what I've learned about myself by going through the class so far -- I mean, going to see the counselor, and I'm gonna look forward to going to see her next week.



Although it is impossible to determine why Sara had been able to work slightly more extensively than the other women who had survived traumatic experiences, her age may have been a factor. All of the other women in the low work history group (except for Edie) were under age 25. Sara was 31. Therefore, she had six to 13 more years to work than the other low work history women. Perhaps Sara had worked a bit more than the other women simply because she was older.

Serena, who also has been mentioned frequently in first analysis, also had a more extensive work history even though she'd experienced some trauma, had little support from her family, and was a recovered substance abuser. Serena had worked for four years in a Ford plant in the late 1970's. After she'd lost that job, she hadn't worked again until a year and a half before she was interviewed. Although Serena wasn't asked about the gap in her work history, it is probable that her substance use had prevented her from obtaining and keeping employment after her Ford job ended. Furthermore, as she continued with her recovery and gained the support of those she met there, it might have been easier for her to keep a job.

#### Common Themes among the Low Work History Women

Overall, the low work history didn't have much support. Although most had contact with their families and/or others, these individuals didn't often provide consistently positive support. Some of the women reported being abused by their families or that certain family members had been violent to others. If these women had partners these relationships were often conflictual and at times were violent. Often the only people in their lives who appeared supportive were the one or two true friends that they'd known for a period of time and trusted.

Age also appeared to be a factor. Most of the low work history women were under twenty-five. Overall, many of the women worked more sporadically when young. Various reasons may exist for this pattern. Perhaps maturity brought additional stability and supports. On the other hand, older women may have more opportunity based on their previous experiences with employment. They also may simply be more adept at finding employment.

Surprisingly, Jameka, Sara, and Nikkia were the only women who described feelings of depression. The rest of these women described feeling happy and confident about their future. However, they seemed to ignore their problems and any barriers they might face in trying to achieve their goals. Often they seemed unaware of the complexities of their lives. They ignored discrimination, how their experiences of trauma had affected them and the conflicts in their relationships. To an outsider, their stated goals often seemed to be dreams for their futures -- something they hoped for but would be difficult to obtain.

Moreover, these low work history women seemed to believe that fate was in control but was also on their side. Someday better things would happen for them. Therefore, their goals or "dreams" were also hopes that they could hold on to. Perhaps, by ignoring the difficulties involved in fulfilling their stated goals and believing in the positiveness of their future, they were able to remain happy and confident.

### The Remaining Women

This last section describes all of the remaining women. These women did not have plans and they had work histories that were longer than a year. Again, their employment status did not create distinguishing patterns in their lives. However, the type of social

support they were receiving appeared to contribute to the longevity of their work history. The women who appeared to have the best support systems were able to keep jobs longer. The following vignettes portray these differences in support and how they contributed to the women's employment history. Tamara and Denise had good supports and long term employment. Carmella also had good supports but a shorter employment history. Dhyana and Kathy had less support and some recent changes in their lives.

**Tamara:**

Tamara was 37 years old and was working for the past seven years cleaning houses and businesses. She had two sons, Darryl who was 13 and Kevin who was 4. Tamara has been quoted earlier discussing her fear of living in her neighborhood and her ideas about her future. She had stated that she wanted a different job of some type. She thought being a mortician might be a good job because morticians were never laid off. Someone had told her that there was a training program for morticians at a local community college.

Tamara was living with her sister whom also worked in the housecleaning business. Tamara also had good support from her family, a partner, and two close friends.

She had the following to say about her family:

They always there on time and stuff. Tell you they going to do something and they'll do it.

Moreover, she valued her relationship with her partner, Frank. She could tell him anything and he made her life easier:

It's easier because I have something to do besides get on the kids all the time, you know, have something to do with them. Have transportation to take them places sometimes.

Although Tamara didn't have a concrete plan for reaching her goals, she did have positive supports and a job that she'd kept for a number of years. Although it is impossible to say from her life alone that her positive supports allowed her to keep her job, it does fit into a larger theme that is also reflected in Denise's life.

### Denise

Denise was previously quoted discussing her neighbors. Denise had two children. Her son Ishmeal was 9 and her daughter Akiya was five. She was 33 years old and had worked at Sears for 13 years. However, she'd lost that job during the previous year because the store had closed and she'd ended a relationship with a live-in partner during that time. Because of these circumstances, she'd moved in with her mother for a few months. Denise appreciated this support and needed it to provide for her children. However, Denise had problems with her living arrangements because her sister, who was an addict, would steal from Denise and Denise's mother. Denise said:

. . . . I was stole from and . . . I left. I don't even know how to begin how stressful it was. It didn't work out to where -- that's when my blood pressure first went up there . . . when my job was ending, the one I had for 13 years. I don't know if you've ever had everything come before you and come together at one time and this is what was happening to me -- and when everything came before me I could see my life and my children's life and this wasn't good.

However, Denise had been able to use these few months to find another job as a teacher's aide and to find another apartment that was near her mother's home but away from her sister. Denise didn't have specific plans for herself. She saw her future in the following way:

Oh, I see myself getting more education and making more money on my job. Making sure my kids keep their heath and strength. Making sure they get the proper education and then maybe after they're grown, I might get a

husband or another boyfriend, but not now.

Denise was also close to her family. She had been able to depend on them to help her so often that she'd never had to go to a human service agency and had never been on welfare. Although she did worry about her sister's addiction, she felt that her family was close. She attributed this to the way her parents had raised them.

. . . . We're all pretty honest and close knit. I think that has a lot to do with it, us being so close because everybody a year apart. . . .

Denise also had a true friend, Anita, who was "always there when you need 'em." Denise and Anita took care of each other's children and occasionally borrowed money from each other.

It is even more apparent from Denise's life story, how important positive supports were to the women. Denise's supports had allowed her to stay off welfare, even when she lost her job and her partner, and couldn't afford to provide for her children. Although living with her mother wasn't ideal, it allowed her to regroup and eventually find another job.

### Carmella

Carmella has been quoted and discussed throughout the first analysis. She was 35 and had two children. She'd graduated from high school and had 28 weeks of medical training. Carmella had worked previously as a child care aide for 10 months, as a receptionist for a year and 8 months, and in a doctor's office for 1 year. She wanted to go back for EKG training some time in the future.

Carmella also had some good supports. She appreciated her family's closeness and enjoyed family gatherings. Moreover, she currently lived with her sister and her

sister's two children. Carmella also had a true friend that she'd known for 17 years. In many ways her support systems match those of the women who had longer work histories. However, some differences also did exist. Both of Carmella's parents were deceased. Her mother's death was particularly hard on her. She felt that this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. She said

We lost our mom -- that's about the worst thing that's every happened in my life. . . . It's been almost three years -- not as bad as it was -- but you know I don't think you'll ever get over it -- but it's in perspective now. . . . It's like emotional -- it's an up and down thing. I kinda got lost as far as life itself, you know, as far as my career goes, my children, as far as just myself. I was totally lost for a year or so, I couldn't comprehend it. I couldn't get a grip on it. It was no caring for anything -- nothing mattered. . . . Day to day living wasn't handled real good. That explains it as best as I can explain it -- you have to be there , I guess. Some of those feelings you can put into words and the rest of it, you can just feel it. You can tell someone whether a pain is subdued or what have you, but you can't exactly explain the hurt. It was just an emotional time. It took a while to things back in perspective -- but now I have kind of put it in [perspective].

In addition one of Carmella's brothers was killed in a drive-by shooting in Flint.

Moreover, many of Carmella's family lived out of state, making frequent contact impossible. Although Carmella shared an emotional bond with her family, it was difficult for them to provide other types of support. In fact, Carmella often seemed to be the provider of support. For example, one of Carmella's sisters was an addict and Carmella took care of her nephew when her sister was unable to do so. Perhaps, Carmella's grief over her mother's death, her physical separation from many of her family members, and her role as support provider prevented Carmella from developing a career plan or from working for longer periods of time.

## Dhyana

Dhyana was 27 years old and the mother of two sons, Deon who was five and Dwayne who was two. She'd graduated from high school and was unemployed. However, Dhyana had worked a number of short term jobs. Her first job was as an assistant activities director for a summer youth program. After that she worked at a fast food restaurant for two years. She left that job to work at Sear's and then moved on to K-Mart. She left K-Mart to work at a plastic factory that closed after she'd been there for only four months. Dhyana then got a job as a home health aide for 2 months and as an aide in a nursing home. However, she had to quit those jobs because she was pregnant and the smells made her ill. She also had a problem with the lifting that was required. Although Dhyana was motivated to seek employment and found finding a job easy, she often had trouble keeping them because of a lack of support during her pregnancies and trouble with child care. She found her second pregnancy especially difficult because of her lack of support.

. . . . It was rough because that whole time I was by myself. Uh, me that's not what I wanted to do. So, I learned to deal with it but it was very hard though. Because, you know, I didn't wanna, you know, have a child by myself and then here I am. I was having a baby by myself and I was very evil and resentful and I hated him a lot -- his father a lot.

She also felt that child care would make her life easier as a parent:

. . . . For both of them to go to day care so I could get me a job all year around instead of like sometimes in the summertime or just part-time. . . .

Moreover, none of the jobs she'd had, paid enough to allow her to move off of welfare and she wasn't sure how to find a job that would pay enough and be secure.

Dhyana discussed her welfare dependency in the following way:

I feel like their attitudes towards women that are on ADC (welfare) -- just sit around at home and do nothing and have a bunch of kids. I didn't even know anything about the program until I had my first child and I was five months pregnant when I went and got on it and I didn't like it. I didn't like it but I've been on it almost six years now. . . . I was working up until the time I couldn't work anymore. Until I had no other way to support myself and my unborn child, so I had to go and get on ADC and that hurt me because I didn't want to do that. . . . I feel like they should try to make it-- give us -- show us more ways to help us get off, not just bring us to orientation. . . . but they should also have a more advanced program for people who know how to make their own resume and do have some jobs skills to help them going and . . . help them find a better job or a much more secure job. . . .

Although Dhyana saw a brother almost every day and her mother once a week, she had little support from her family. They didn't get together often and she wasn't sure if she could trust them. She also didn't receive help from her children's fathers nor did she currently have a partner. However, she did have two friends, Tammy and Carmen, whom she could talk to and exchange favors with such as child care or transportation. However, her friends also had their own families to raise and couldn't provide the longer term child care and help that she needed.

Dhyana also wasn't sure what she wanted to do with her life. She described her future in the following quotation:

I don't know, I would like to seek out a career. I still don't know what I want to do. Um, I used to have an idea but then I started a few things and I didn't like them. I don't really know career-wise what I want to do, but I like to work. I know that. . . .

This combination of a lack of support and indecisiveness about her career contributed to Dhyana's pattern of taking a number of jobs for short periods of time. She had difficulty affording a child care center, and she didn't have family or friends who could watch her children. Moreover, she hadn't pursued additional training past high school



because she was unsure of what to study. These factors led to her cycle of employment and unemployment.

### Kathy

Kathy was 48 years old and was laid off one week before the interview from a full-time factory job that she'd held for less than one month. She'd also been previously laid-off from a job as a medical assistant that she'd held for two years. Her longest employment was as a direct care worker which she held for four years. Kathy wanted to get another job as a medical assistant. However, when discussing her future, she thought of her children:

I see my future, uh, trying, to make it better for my kids -- making it more easier for them plus showing them where being total independent is very responsible.

Kathy had four children. Two were adults and didn't live with Kathy. Kathy's daughter Katiesha was 18 years old, was pregnant, and was living with Kathy. Kathy had given birth to a second daughter, Maya, at the age of 42. This pregnancy was unplanned and a surprise. However, it also provided the impetus for Kathy to return to school and later seek employment. She described in the following way:

Me getting pregnant at 42 years old. It was the worst and then the best. The pregnancy turned out fine. I was in shock when I found out. I was scared all through my pregnancy and then I responded like, "okay, this happened" so I got up and that's when I went to Ross (for medical training) when I was carrying her and I finished so like I said, it could have been the best thing for me.

Although Kathy had a lot of people in her life, she also had few consistently positive supports. She had a hard time asking for help and she provided more support to her family than she received. Her interviewer said the following about her:

She has a lot of family but little support. She stresses independence in her life.

Kathy did have one true friend, Loretta. Kathy and Loretta shared an emotional connection and they could discuss anything with each other. They helped each other to raise their children. However, Loretta had recently moved out of town and could no longer provide the support she used to. Kathy said:

Oh, right now we don't do anything. She lives out of town but we used to visit, go on job hunts together, get our kids and raise them together most of the time.

Kathy also had a partner that she liked to talk to. However, she felt that her relationship made her life harder. She said:

Its harder because I feel more torn between my kids and my household, and like if I'm over his house, I always feel like I should be back here.

Like Dhyana, Kathy had less support from her family than did Tamara and Denise. Because of this it was also difficult for Kathy to keep a job. However, Kathy's recent pregnancy seemed to change her outlook on life somehow. During this pregnancy, Kathy had returned to school for medical training. Subsequently, she had gained employment as a nursing assistant, an occupation she hoped to return to. However, circumstances led her to a better paying job at a factory and circumstances also led to a lay-off. Again Kathy's lack of support and planning appeared to have contributed to her more sporadic employment history.

#### Common Themes among the Remaining Women

The lives of Tamara, Denise, Carmella, Dhyana, and Kathy demonstrate that the degree of positive support contributed to their ability to remain employed. Family often played an important role in helping the women with child care and assisting them in an

emergency such as a job loss. When a woman lacked this support, or when she provided more help than she received, her ability to remain employed was lessened.

However, most of the women also described feeling happy and relaxed, had confidence in their future and described having control over their lives. Only a few of the women in this group described feeling discouraged. Often a recent change in their support network or life circumstances appeared to be the greatest contributor to these feelings.

Throughout the interview the women who had recent negative stressors had less hope about their prospects or more depression. Most often changes in a women's support system, such as a partner leaving or the death of a family member, created these discouraged feelings. A recent job loss was also a significant stressor. For example, Carmella was discouraged and depressed after the death of her mother. For a time, she was unable to look for employment or take care of other responsibilities. Denise also was devastated by the loss of her job and the end of her relationship. Her family financially supported her and her children until she could find another job. During these crises, the help and support of family and friends was crucial.

### Summary

#### Analysis One

Overall, similar patterns were found in the answers given by both employed and unemployed women in the first analysis. Very few differences were found in the macrosystem and exosystem. The women described discrimination similarly. Although most of the women recognized that discrimination existed, rarely did they feel that it affected them personally or that it affected their future opportunities. Often the few women who did feel that racism may affect their chances of finding employment, also

described earlier childhood experiences with racism. The women also recognized that sexism might affect their employment opportunities. However, again they felt that it rarely personally affected them. Classism was the most salient variable and some women noted that they had less opportunity to obtain a loan or a credit card.

The women felt that racist practices in Flint were disapproval of interracial relationships or problems finding housing. Moreover, although there weren't differences between the employed and unemployed women, when personal stories of racism were told, they often occurred at work. However, again the most often recognized form of discrimination in Flint was classism. In fact, the only difference between the employed and unemployed women's discussions of discrimination was that the unemployed women were more likely to feel personally affected by classism when they interacted with others in Flint.

I attribute these themes to the women's environments and experiences living in Flint. Some women noted that Flint was segregated by race. Therefore, those women who spent most of their time in Flint would be less likely to encounter racism. However, racism might be seen in less segregated environments such as a work situation. Moreover, Flint is also a consumer society (Edsforth, 1987). Thus, classism would be a salient fixture in the community.

Furthermore, no differences were found in the women's views of Flint. They were all concerned about increases in unemployment and crime. In addition, many reported that they would move for additional opportunities. In fact, the only factor consistently mentioned as a positive feature of Flint was that family members also lived in Flint and the women appreciated that closeness.

In addition, the employed and unemployed women's support systems were often similar. Many of the women had close and supportive relationships with their families and family members most often were the core of the women's adult support networks. Many women had daily visits with mothers and siblings. However, a few women (in both the employed and unemployed groups) were isolated from some family members or from their entire family. This pattern of estrangement occurred most often in families where substance abuse or past violence existed.

Moreover, one difference did exist among the employed and unemployed women's interactions with their mothers. More unemployed women lived with or near their mothers. This occurred most often with young unemployed women who had not left their mother's home after the birth of their babies. Additionally, unemployed women may have simply had more time to visit with family because their daily schedules were not as busy as the employed women.

Friends also played an important role. However, both employed and unemployed women distinguished between true friendships and associate-type friendships. True friends were trusted individuals that the women confided in and exchanged favors with. True friends were described as being there whenever they were needed. Associates, on the other hand, weren't completely trusted. The women shared recreational activities with associates and sometimes exchanged favors with them. However, they usually formally kept track of these exchanges with associates and they did not confide in them.

Some women had only associates or did not have any connection with friends. At times, these women discussed a past history of drug use or childhood abuse, but this wasn't always the case. Moreover, some women had connected with others through

agency programs or church activities. One difference between the employed and unemployed women did exist, however. All of the women who reported that they did not exchange favors with friends were employed. I hypothesized that these employed women may have had more resources as the unemployed women and perhaps did not need these type of exchange networks or that they had less time to access them.

Partners were also supportive. Both employed and unemployed women saw their partners either on a daily basis or three or four times a week. The relationships alleviated loneliness and many women felt understood by their partners. Moreover, many partners provided a surrogate father role to the women's children as well as helping the family financially. Again, one difference between the employed and unemployed women occurred. The employed women were more likely to discuss their relationships consistently. They either described a consistently positive relationship or discussed their unhappiness and often their decision to end the relationship. Unemployed women, on the other hand, were more likely to describe both positive and negative qualities when discussing their partners. Again the unemployed women may have needed more help from their partners. Thus, they were more likely to stay in unsatisfying relationships or to ignore their unhappiness.

Many employed and unemployed women also worried about crime, violence, and drugs within their neighborhoods. Although the majority reported knowing their neighbors, often contacts included only saying hello or waving. In general, three patterns of interaction with neighbors occurred. Some women, regardless of how well they knew or trusted their neighbors, reported that they would not ask them for help. Other women described knowing, trusting, and asking their neighbors for help. A third group said they

did not know their neighbors well or did not trust them. However, they would go to them for help. Unemployed women were most likely to report asking neighbors for help and were more likely to be in this third group of neighbor interaction.

Overall these relationships with family, friends, partners, and neighbors provided both emotional support, companionship, and opportunities to borrow or exchange favors. A few additional differences also existed, however. Employed women were more likely to report that they found it hard to ask for help. On the other hand, unemployed women were more likely to identify multiple sources (both relationship-based and community-based) where they felt comfortable asking for help. However, the sources of support for unemployed women did not always appear to be as helpful. At times, support for unemployed women was accompanied by the possibility of negative interactions and unemployed women seemed to be more likely to ask help from those they didn't entirely trust.

Community agencies were another type of support that I assessed and both employed and unemployed women had similar views of them. They were found to be helpful but they also created stress for those who used them. Moreover, human services were most often used in an emergency and were not sought as a means to improve life circumstances. Surprisingly, the women did not request different types of services, except for affordable child care. However, they did ask for increased personal contact with agency professionals and complained about the amount of paper work involved in accessing services.

Churches helped some women foster a sense of spirituality. Spirituality was important to nearly all of the women and helped them to cope with the stressors in their

lives. Moreover, a few women had found a trusted pastor or human service worker who was helpful to them.

The family life of employed and unemployed women was different in some aspects. Employed women were more likely to have hectic schedules with little time for relaxation. Many worked non-traditional hours which made finding child care and time for sleep difficult. Some worried that their children weren't being taken care of properly when they were at work. Furthermore, the employed women found it easier to list specific needs they had to make their life as a parent easier. Most often they requested help with child care or from their children's fathers.

However, other aspects of family life were quite similar for employed and unemployed women. Parenting skills and styles were alike. The women hoped that their children would grow-up to be productive adults and they had rules that promoted respect, responsibility and safety. They felt that the best way to discipline their children was through teaching and talking. They also took away privileges, used time-out and spankings. The women felt that they were good mothers and made sure that they showed their affection to their children.

First pregnancies were difficult for many women, especially if they didn't have support from family or partners. They often reported that they had little information about pregnancy and many reported feeling ill. Second pregnancies were described as being easier because they had more information and usually more support.

Furthermore, both groups of women reported the same stresses. There were times when they did not feel as if they had the energy to complete all the tasks required of them and all worried about having enough money. Financial concerns were prevalent and some



women reported not having enough food or being able to pay bills on a regular basis.

Both employed and unemployed women also had similar education and work histories. Most of the women spoke of their schooling ambivalently. A woman's first job was often in fast food restaurants and her employment was more sporadic. As adults they found employment as waitresses, housekeepers, launderers, and nursing, child care or teaching assistants. Furthermore, most women had little consistency between job training and jobs. Only seven women (both employed and unemployed) had distinguishable career paths and future plans. Additionally, a number of women had long term (from two to ten years) employment in one job. Again, these women were found in both the employed and unemployed groups. A third group of women had less than a year of total employment.

However, all of the women interviewed were motivated and most felt that they had control over their future. All but a few of the women reported having control over all aspects of their lives. However, when questioned further, some employed and unemployed women mentioned that they did not have control over a few things such as crime and the income they received from welfare. All of the women also reported having control over their future. They wanted more for themselves and their children. However, of the four women who could not imagine a positive future, three were employed. Perhaps their employment in low-paying jobs had left them discouraged.

The women also had specific goals for themselves. However, although the women could describe their goals, they were vague in their descriptions of their plans to reach those goals. Often these plans sounded more like dreams. Perhaps they simply lacked career planning information. However, a second reason for this theme may also exist. Many women may simply be ignoring barriers in their lives because a recognition of those

barriers would be too discouraging.

The women also described themselves positively and with confidence. They were proud of their ethnicity and felt that their children should be taught African-American history. However, signs of depression were also evident. Often the women described feeling “blue” and often they couldn’t figure out what was causing these feelings. Many women reported coping with their problems by keeping them to themselves. Other women used prayer or asked others for help when they needed it.

A prevalence of traumatic experiences also were found in the employed and unemployed women’s interviews. Although specific questions were not asked about this topic, the women volunteered information about childhood abuse and domestic violence. Ten women had family members that had been shot or murdered. However, the women were also resilient and these problems did not keep them from hoping for a better future or from raising their children.

### Analysis Two

Distinguishing patterns did emerge, however, during the second analysis when I reanalyzed the women’s transcripts based on their work history. First, I analyzed the interviews of the planful woman who were actively pursuing their career goals. Secondly, I examined the transcripts of the women who had less than one year of total employment in their work histories. The remaining women were also a part of this second analysis. I reread these women’s transcripts based on their employment histories, looking at the women who had the longest employment history first and those with slightly over a year of employment last.

The planful women had a distinguishable career plan that they articulated and that

could be seen in their work histories. Furthermore, all but two of these women had positive support systems. They did not rely on a large group of people but those that did support them were consistently helpful and the relationships they had with these supportive individuals were positive. Interestingly, most of the planful women lived with a partner or they saw their partner's on a daily basis.

This combination of planfulness and support was helpful. All of these women were employed or enrolled in college. The planful women with less support appeared to be struggling more. They were unable to fulfill their plans because they lacked help with child care. A third woman also felt discouraged about her future. She worried that her reading problems would prevent her from pursuing nurse's training.

The planful women were also aware of the barriers in their lives and were realistic about their goals. Furthermore, they were self-reliant and reported having difficulty asking for help. In addition, they discussed early experiences with racism. Perhaps these early experiences helped them to be successful in racist work environments.

Another group of women had less than a year of total employment. Although all of these women had goals for their futures, none had plans. Moreover, these women had fewer positive supports and discussed personal trauma with more intensity than any other group. Although most had contact with family and/or others, these individuals didn't provide consistently positive support. Interestingly, most of these women also described feeling confident and happy about their futures. Often they appeared to be ignoring the barriers in their lives.

Some exceptions to these patterns did exist for women in the low-work history group, however. A few women who had trouble securing employment, did not describe

trauma. In addition some women who discussed personal difficulties were able to work for longer periods of time. These exceptions appear to be due to differences in age, to divorce, and to substance use.

For the remaining non-planful women in the study, social supports created differing patterns in their lives. Those who had positive supports were also able to stay employed in a job for a longer period of time. Often these supportive individuals were family members that provided child care or let the women live with them if needed.

Those women with less support had a more difficult time keeping employment and they worked more sporadically. In addition, a change in a woman's support system was difficult. The death of a family member or the end of a long term relationship often created intense difficulties for many women.

The results of this study indicate that work history is a more distinguishing feature among low-income women than work status. Furthermore, opportunity, social support, the ability to plan, and trauma experiences are important factors to consider when examining a low-income African-American single mothers ability to gain self-sufficiency. The following chapter addresses these issues and my research questions.

whose lives didn't fit those theme. Although I found that my results continued to support this idea, I also discovered that it wasn't the only factor involved. Divorce, substance use, death of a family member, and at times, geographical distance from family also played roles.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Because I have already addressed many of the themes found in the analysis section, I use chapter five to specifically address my research questions and to discuss limitations and further research.

**Question One: What similarities and differences exist among the employed and unemployed women?**

Very few differences were found among the employed and unemployed women in this sample. Perhaps, instead of asking what are the similarities and differences between the two groups, the more interesting question is why do so few differences exist? Why were there more similarities than differences between the two groups?

Two possible explanations exist. First, many similarities occurred among the respondents based on the design of the original research. All of the respondents were low-income African-American single mothers who lived in Flint. They had all enrolled a child in a Head Start program and they all had children under the age of five. Perhaps, having a common context is the major explanation for these similarities. Being an African-American woman who lived in Flint with few financial resources may create more similarities regardless of whether a woman's income comes from work or welfare.

Job availability was limited in this community. Unemployment was high and the jobs available to women without college degrees were those in the service sector (food service, retail work, housekeeping, and service-focused professions such as child care, teaching and nursing assistants). These jobs paid less, had fewer benefits, were more likely to be part-time and had inconsistent work schedules.

Additionally, although some women didn't recognize it, discrimination existed for

all of them. The jobs and job training opportunities that were most often offered to them were traditional female occupations that were accompanied by lower salaries. Moreover, they were often ones that African-American women have traditionally held, such as housekeeping, food preparation and laundry work (Newman, 1986; Zinn & Dill, 1994). The women also reported encountering racism while at their jobs and some felt that their opportunities for certain jobs were hurt by racism. They were also affected by classism and they recognized that those with less money were less respected than those with more.

Moreover, many of the women lived in unsafe neighborhoods and almost all of them had some concerns about crime in Flint. Many women had been personally affected by violence. Some were trauma survivors and a few had been substance abusers. Other women had family members or friends that were murdered or were also substance users. Thus, their experiences with violence and fear of their environments were similar and may have contributed to the women's stresses and lack of trust in others.

Furthermore, cultural and familial influences were similar. Many women had strong African-American families to support and help them. They'd learned to be proud of their ethnicity and of themselves. Perhaps these macrosystemic, exosystemic and cultural factors were a stronger influence on the women's lives than their employment status. Because of this they lived similar lives with similar stresses and supports. Bronfenbrenner (1979) supported this idea in his ecological model. He stated that within any culture or subculture the exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem are similar, whereas between cultural groups they are distinctly different. Therefore, we should expect to find more similarities than differences if employed and unemployed low-income African-American women are from the same sub-culture as the results of this research

suggest.

A second factor of the methodology of the first analysis may also have contributed to the prevalence of similarities between the employed and unemployed women. Very few of the women in the sample appeared to be self-sufficient and without the need of outside resources and help for very long. Because of the economic context they lived in, they were employed in low paying and unstable jobs. The women preferred to provide for their families through employment. However, their incomes from paid work outside of the home, never provided enough of a cushion to economically cover emergencies or unplanned events. An unplanned pregnancy, a change in child care or transportation, or an unexpected lay-off, would lead to a job loss and often, a return to welfare.

Thus, a cycle of work and welfare was created for most of the women. This pattern is supported in other's research. Corcoran et al. (1984) found that many women in their sample cycled on and off of welfare and did not remain dependent on it for any one extended period of time. In a second study, Salomen, Bassuk, & Brooks (1996) discovered a similar phenomenon among their respondents. The majority of their sample also had a "fluid" or cyclical pattern of AFDC (welfare) use.

Because this research was not longitudinal, the women were caught in only one part of the employment/unemployment cycle. Thus, some women who did have a longer employment history were currently unemployed. Others, who had worked less, happened to be employed at the time of their interview. Therefore, any factors that allowed a woman to remain employed for longer periods of time were not apparent.

This idea was supported through the second analysis. Examining the women based on their employment status was not as helpful as looking at the complete work history.

The women's work history and ability to plan provided a better classification system. Through this examination differences were discovered among the women who were employed for longer periods of time and those whose work history was more sporadic.

However, these two explanations (context versus the welfare and employment cycle) are not mutually exclusive. Because the women live in a context where discrimination and unemployment exists, finding stable, good-paying jobs is a difficult task. Thus, the context in which they live their lives may create this cyclical employment and welfare pattern.

Nonetheless, some women were able to keep their jobs for longer periods of time and a few were able to navigate through an emergency without returning to welfare. The differences between the women who had longer employment histories and those who did not, provided clearer answers to the questions concerning how service providers can help this population. Analysis two provided these clearer answers which will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Question two: What is the effect of paid work on the women and their family life?**

**Question three: What effect does unemployment have on the women and their family life?**

Although the finding that more similarities than differences existed between the two groups of women made finding the effects of employment and unemployment difficult, some effects were apparent. Employment did not improve a woman's income enough to lessen their stresses or concerns. In fact, having a job only increased a woman's responsibilities as she balanced the mesosystemic role of worker with the microsystemic role of mother. Both employed and unemployed women worried about money and being able to provide for their families. In addition, they had similar concerns



about community and neighborhood safety.

However, employed women had additional burdens. Their schedules were hectic and they juggled both work and family responsibilities. They had few opportunities to relax and, at times, they didn't get enough sleep. Many women worked late hours and this made finding time with their children even more difficult. Some employed women such as Shantay, felt distant from their children and they worried about not having enough time to spend with them. Edie also described the struggle of trying to manage child care responsibilities and the expectations of her manager. Although Edie was proud to be employed, she reported that she sometimes felt like quitting her job due the stress of finding reliable child care. Overall, the employed women requested more help in raising their children and in finding adequate child care than the unemployed.

This theme is also supported in the literature, Malson (1987) found that both single and married employed African-American women had more work to do than unemployed women. As in this investigation, all of the women in Malson's sample, had the primary responsibility for child care and household chores. However, Malson also found that the women were actively developing strategies to manage the dual responsibilities of parenthood and employment.

The women interviewed for this investigation appeared to be struggling more and differences in the samples might account for this discrepancy. The majority of women in Malson's (1987) study reported being satisfied with their work life. They listed benefits such as health care insurance, child care benefits, sick leave, and satisfaction of the accommodation of family needs as benefits to their employment. Moreover, although Malson did not ask about work hours, the majority of the women in her sample worked in

offices as clerks and secretaries. Therefore, it may be assumed that they were more likely to work traditional work hours, unlike many women in this sample. Moreover, the women in this study, such as Edie, asked for child care and some did not seem satisfied with their employment. Other women reported that they were unemployed because of a lack of child care. Therefore, it appears that some of the women interviewed for this study were not able to cope with the added strain of employment as the women in the Malson (1987) study. Perhaps this is due to the lack of employment benefits and the differences in work schedules.

However, some positive effects of employment were also apparent for the women in this investigation. Unemployed women appeared to have less status within their community and were less likely to encounter the disapproval of others. Although both employed and unemployed women confronted classism, the unemployed women found it most problematic. The quotation from Lois provided a good illustration of this point. She reported talking with a man who did not want to know her simply because she was on welfare and not employed. Employed women did not seem to encounter these type of exchanges.

Moreover, all of the women valued employment and wanted to work. Perhaps their perception that work was positive and rewarding outweighed the reality of the stresses involved. The employed women gained the satisfaction of being able to fulfill these goals and values. This idea is supported in Jackson's (1992) research. She found that employed low-income African-American single mothers who wanted to work outside the home had higher overall life satisfaction and less role strain than those who preferred to stay home.

However, Jackson (1992) also found that having less education did contribute to higher role strain and that the entire sample was at risk for depression. Jackson did not ask about work satisfaction, employee benefits or work schedules. Perhaps the less educated women, or those who reported wanting to stay at home with their children, had less satisfying jobs. Therefore, work satisfaction may be a confounding variable in her analysis that would contribute to role strain and life satisfaction. However, her results do support the idea that employment is beneficial to those who prefer to be employed.

Lerner and Abrams (1994) concluded in their review that single parents who work outside of the home need more support than married employed parents. This conclusion is also supported in this discussion. Employed women requested more help and many seemed overwhelmed by their responsibilities. However, it appeared that employment also had benefits in term of increased status and perhaps even satisfaction with self. In addition, the women wanted to be employed. Perhaps, with good employee benefits, child care, and appropriate work schedules, employment can be satisfying and beneficial to all low-income single mothers.

**Question Four: What factors contribute to a women's ability to gain and keep employment?**

All of the women interviewed preferred to be employed. They described themselves positively and their future goals similarly. They valued education and employment. Moreover, the majority of the women had finished high school, had attended job training programs, and were employed at some point in their lives. Why weren't they all employed? And why did they have problems keeping employment? Grounded theory allowed me to create some possible answers to these questions. Opportunity, support,

and planfulness appear to be important variables that helped a women to either gain or keep employment. The following sections discuss these factors.

### Opportunity

Opportunity, in terms of being able to access jobs, child care, and education is an important issue for low-income African-American women. The women interviewed, like many women of color, lived in an urban area where the unemployment rates were higher than the state average (Brewer, 1995; The Community Foundation of Greater Flint, 1994). They faced discrimination which has been found to decrease an African-American women's chances of receiving a quality education (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988; Peterson & Harell, 1992), equal opportunity for jobs, and comparable wages (Corcoran et al., 1984; Zinn & Dill, 1994).

Some of the women had not completed high school, had been placed in special education courses, or had failed a grade during their schooling. Most described their educational experiences ambivalently. Gordon-Bradshaw (1988) found this to be a typical pattern for poor female students of color and concluded that low-income African-American girls were often tracked into vocational or special education courses regardless of ability.

Moreover, most of the women interviewed had been involved in job training programs that infrequently translated into employment. Often they were trained for low paying occupations, such as nursing assistants and child care aides, and only a few of the women had attended college. Recently, some have criticized job training programs for not training women for jobs that pay enough to support their families. Other researchers have argued that in today's economy a college education is the only mechanism to self-

sufficiency for women on welfare. However, welfare dependent women are rarely given the opportunity to pursue college (Gittell, Vandersall, Holdaway, and Newman, 1996). Perhaps, due to the women's early experiences with school, misguided assumptions about their capabilities, or even a lack of a quality public school education, they hadn't had the opportunity to consider attending college. Thus, they were not able to access an important career option for themselves.

Moreover, due to their lack of educational opportunities, the women were only qualified for lower paying service occupations. However, they also had to face discrimination when applying for these jobs. These factors (opportunity for education and employment) impacted the women's ability to find employment and to be able to adequately support their families through their wages.

Many women were aware of how opportunity influenced their chances of finding a job. Although only a few women saw the personal effects of discrimination, most knew that it existed and that it might create problems when looking for work. Other women, like Janeice, saw the influence of discrimination clearly as they worked at their jobs.

However, the women's perceptions of discrimination are described as being most influential in the developmental process (Bronfenbrenner, 1987). Many women did not personalize the influence of prejudice. Therefore, their perceptions might lead them to search for other reasons for not being hired for a job when discriminatory hiring practices were actually be to blame. These women may mistakenly blame themselves for their own lack of employment.

They also saw further education as a mechanism to improve their lives and many felt that college was the best choice for them. Moreover, they were aware that the

opportunities to find jobs had decreased in Flint and that good paying jobs were difficult to find. Carmella, Janeice, Lois, and Cheryl provided quotes that lamented the economic changes in Flint, and most women reported that they would move from Flint for better opportunities for themselves and their children.

However, child care was the needed resource that many women felt was the most inaccessible. None of the women could afford to pay for child care in the child care centers used by those community members who earned more money. Moreover, often their non-traditional work schedules didn't match the operating hours of child care centers. Cheryl was one woman who saw the lack of opportunity for child care services for low-income families. She felt that she could easily find a job, but that the jobs she found did not provide enough income to pay for child care.

Overall, the lack of opportunity for education, employment, and affordable child care services, prevented some women from being employed. Again, however, some women were able to circumvent these barriers. Often this was due to the amount of support in the women's lives.

### Support

Differences in support networks also appeared to contribute to a women's ability to gain employment and to keep it. Those who had better supports could depend on them to help with child care and with transportation. These supports also helped the women during a crisis or emergency. Moreover, the psychological benefits of having someone to talk to about personal concerns, or simply to have fun with, was also beneficial. The women lived with many stressors and needed this emotional intimacy.

The importance of positive support was most dramatically illustrated in the second

analysis, however. The women who described positive supports were more likely to have longer term employment in their work history. Those who were more isolated, who provided more support than they received, or had conflictual or violent relationships, worked less. For example, Denise had worked at one job for thirteen years. Even when she was laid-off, the support of her family gave her time to regroup and find new employment. On the other hand, Laurielle, one of the planful women who had little support, had difficulty following her plan and keeping a job.

Moreover, it appeared that positive support from family or from a partner were most likely to help a woman keep a job. Family members were more likely to take over child care responsibilities while a woman worked or to allow a woman and her child to move in with them when needed. In addition, a close, supportive relationship with a partner was also linked to the ability to pursue their goals for many of the planful women. These relationships served as partnerships that appeared to provide a foundation for the women to pursue their goals.

In addition, experiences of personal trauma appeared to prevent some women from keeping employment. Women such as Edie, Jameka, and Sheleatha had shorter work histories and also discussed sexual and physical violence as children and/or adults. Although many women described victimization or other trauma, for some of the low-work history women traumatic events were discussed more frequently and often more intensely. Salomon et al. (1996) found similar results. Although shorter term welfare recipients had also experienced traumatic experiences in their study, long term recipients faced “extreme adversity” and violence. Perhaps the psychological problems associated with such abuse, such as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, prevented these women from maintaining

employment.

Changes in a relationship or other personal crises, also temporarily prevented some women from seeking employment. Women, such as Denise and Jolene, had problems with the end of a long term relationship. Carmella described being significantly depressed after the death of her mother. These type of changes in a women's support or unexpected crises, such as a job loss, or an unplanned pregnancy, often created discouragement or depression. This made finding or keeping a job difficult. However, positive support systems were still important. For example, both Jolene and Denise were able to depend on their families for support during their crises.

However, although the majority of the women with the shortest employment history had conflictual relationships, experiences with trauma, or were isolated, exceptions also existed in this group. Lois, who had some positive supports, couldn't find a job after a recent divorce from a twenty-year marriage. Moreover, Nikkia, who had worked less than year during her lifetime, received help from her family. She also discussed the use of alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. Therefore, personal circumstances such as divorce or substance use create additional barriers to gaining and keeping employed. Age also appeared to have some effect. Most of the women in the low work history group were under age 25. Perhaps the ability to gain positive supports increased with age or perhaps the women simply had more job opportunities based on previous work experiences.

The differences among the employed and unemployed women's support systems do create an interesting question, however. Unemployed women were more likely to ask for help from sources they did not trust and appeared to stay in conflictual relationships



longer. In the second analysis, the women who had the lowest work history also seemed to stay in problematic relationships and had significant trauma experiences. Did positive supports allow the women to be employed or does employment allow the women to develop positive supports? Because I was not able to follow the women longitudinally, it is difficult to ascertain a causal relationships. However, some guesses can be made.

Belle (1983) proposed that some women may withdraw from demanding support networks because they have sufficient personal resources and do not need help from others. Employed women may have more resources than unemployed women. Their employment may have given them enough extra money so that they did not have to rely on negative relationships. However, others may have treated employed women better due to the improved status associated with employment. Employed women may have had more potential, and/or stable, partners to choose from and their friends and family may also have responded to them more positively.

Other explanations might also exist. Employed women also had a harder time asking for help. Perhaps, the psychological quality of independence led women to rely on support systems less often and turn to more self-sufficient means such as employment. In addition, employed women also simply had less time to seek support from others. Self-esteem or pride may also be a factor. Again women with more pride in their abilities to provide for their children may seek employment instead of asking for help.

I believe, however, that for some women the relationship between social support and employment is circular. A woman who was unemployed and had fewer resources might need more sources of support. However, as she became more self-reliant and independent through employment, she could be choosier about whom she included in her

support system. In turn, these more positive supports could help her continue to maintain employment.

For example, a woman with few resources may depend on a romantic partner to help financially. She may remain with this individual even if this relationship becomes problematic, because her need for the help he provides outweighs the problems the relationship creates. However, if she were able to be more self-reliant through consistent employment, she may find that the problems in the relationship outweigh the need she has for support from this individual, and she can end the relationship. Later, she may begin a relationship with a second partner who could provide positive support and help her reach her goals. Thus, as a woman gains positive support, she can become more self-reliant. And as she becomes more self-reliant, she can create more positive support systems for herself.

Psychological factors may also play a role in this cycle. Perhaps as women gain more independence and self-sufficiency their beliefs in their own capabilities increase. As this psychological change occurs they may end negative relationships. In other words, their belief that they deserve a positive relationship with a partner or friend also increases. In turn, the increased psychological benefits from this relationship may increase their belief that they can be self-sufficient.

This circular explanation is supported by some of the women's lives. For example, Edie, whose traumatic history is described throughout chapter four, had just recently obtained her first job. There is also some evidence that her support systems had changed. She had ended a cycle of destructive relationships and had a partner who was helpful. She'd also made some connections with her pastor and a service provider she'd met

through her involvement in a young mom's program. Serena's life has also changed. She'd gained support in her substance abuse recovery program and had also been able to return to work.

However, some women, such as Erica and Denise, seemed to have positive support systems from the beginning. The support from Erica's family and partner was helping her finish college at the age of twenty. Denise had held the same job for thirteen years and her family's help during a recent lay-off had allowed her to find subsequent employment. Moreover, her family's life-long support meant that she'd never had to go on welfare. Thus, it appears that the women who had this continuous support were able to stay employed longer or were better able to pursue their goals.

### Planfulness

Besides opportunity and support, career planning is a third important factor. For some women planfulness influenced their abilities to keep a job. Moreover, their ability to plan appears to be an effective method of moving toward self-sufficiency and away from welfare. Planful women such as Erica and Linda, had plans that would lead to higher paying jobs. Many of these planful women were currently pursuing their plan and their career paths reflected consistency. They were working in jobs they were trained for, and their plans involved further training in this field. These types of skills may be needed for a woman to obtain a stable job that earned enough money so that she could be financially independent.

However, these planful women also needed support. Jolene and Laurielle were planful women who had a harder time following their plans because of a lack of positive supports. Jolene's divorce had side tracked her from her plan and Laurielle couldn't

obtain child care to pursue her plan. Moreover, Pam did not have a plan to pursue further training in her field because of a concern that her reading ability would prevent her from being successful in school. She may be accurately estimating her abilities. Overall, these planful women were more realistic about their futures and could recognize both needs and barriers to meeting their goals. Therefore, learning problems or even a lack of self-efficacy about school, might also prevent some women from becoming self-sufficient.

Another important quality, however, was the planful women's ability to recognize barriers. Interestingly, the women who had plans for their futures also reported early incidences of discrimination. Perhaps, the ability to recognize and handle this discrimination gave these women an advantage. When they encountered racist practices at work, they'd already had experiences in recognizing and combating them. Thus, they may have an easier time working in a racist environment.

Moreover, they'd explored the careers they were working towards and they had a sense of what steps they needed to take and what barriers they needed to overcome. These women knew what schooling was needed and how they could get this further education. In addition, they had developed ways (or plans) to obtain the education and resources that they needed.

On the other hand, the women who hadn't planned talked about their future goals as dreams and appeared to be unsure of what training was needed. Most of the women had little information about jobs. They often relied on information they had heard from others and had completed little exploration for themselves. Many moved from one low-paying job to another and were not using their jobs as entry level positions leading to better employment. For example, women like Dhyana, were often employed but they also

jumped from job to job. Various personal crises and lay-offs prevented them from keeping any one job for a significant period of time. Although, these frequent job changes were often due to their lack of opportunity to find stable, good-paying employment, their lack of planning also impaired their abilities to keep employed and work towards a higher paying job.

However, being able to plan does not appear to be an easy task. As noted in this research, the women's lives were not predictable. They were unsure when they would be affected by crime and violence. Many times their support systems were unreliable. The women interviewed recognized that the variables beyond their homes were out of their control. Baker (1996) in her discussion of classism, proposed that low-income individuals who feel as if they have little control over their lives may not see a value in planning even if it appeared to be beneficial.

When asked to identify the things they had control over, most of the women felt that they had a great deal of control. However, they described having control over household and parenting concerns. As discussed previously, the women's abilities to gain employment was often largely dependent on opportunity. Many of the women ignored these factors. Perhaps, they might feel discouraged about reaching their goals if they were to recognize the barriers in their way. If this were true, planning may actually have a negative emotional effect on many of the women.

Therefore, the planful women appear to have the ability of recognizing barriers without feeling discouraged about them. Somehow they are able to remain confident in their ability to reach their goals even when faced with the reality of discrimination, financial difficulties, and parenting responsibilities that make achieving those goals

difficult. This ability appears to be difficult to obtain.

Clausen (1993) using data produced by a sixty-year longitudinal study of five hundred white, working and middle class individuals found that planning was an important factor in later success. Individuals, in this study, who had more “planful competence” as adolescents achieved more as adults in their educational and occupational goals. Planful competence was defined as a likelihood to secure information and to envision contingencies when faced with a decision. Planful competence also involved knowing about one’s abilities, skills, and interests. However, Clausen noted that those who had high social economic status in their families of origin were more likely to have planful competence. He concluded that conditions that diminished life chances, such as discrimination and economic instability, lessened the predictive power of planful competence. In other words, those with more resources were better able to plan and to avoid barriers to achieving their goals.

Question Five: What implications for policy and program development do these results have?

These results suggest that program developers and policy makers address the following factors in their efforts to help low-income African-American single mothers gain self-sufficiency: 1) opportunity, 2) support, and 3) planning. Moreover, counseling services are needed resources for many women who are experiencing unresolved trauma issues or recent changes in their relationships. The following discusses these issues in more detail as well as outlining improved methods for service delivery.

### Opportunity

Both policy makers and program developers need to increase their efforts to improve job opportunities for women on welfare. Specifically, policy designed to increase the availability of employment that provides a liveable wage, to decrease discriminatory practices, and to increase the availability of child care are needed. Policy makers are best able to address this issue on a macro level. Their efforts should be aimed at creating incentives to hiring low-income women and increasing funding for job training and child care.

Policy makers may also need to create incentives to hire low-income workers and to decrease discrimination based on race, sex, or class. Affirmative action and tax incentives to employers who hire low-income workers need to be continued. Moreover, to retain low-income workers additional benefits are needed. Women such as Jameka, quit or were fired from jobs because the arrangements they'd made for transportation or child care did not work for them. Others were fired because they needed to stay home for a sick child and some rejoined the welfare roles because they needed the medical insurance Medicaid provides. Policy makers and employers need to consider these needs to retain the employment of low-income workers. Employers may need to provide transportation from inner city areas, child care, and family leave. Policy makers and employers should provide medical insurance. Moreover, the provision of higher paying jobs and an increase in the minimum wage would also be beneficial to low-income workers.

In addition, all training programs need to be closely tied to available jobs and provide more opportunity for the women. Policy makers may want to consider assessing the employment needs of a community to create concrete links between the training and

available jobs. On-the-job training programs may actually be most beneficial. For example, many of the planful women who were working as nursing assistants had gotten their job training from those who employed them. In addition, policy makers should consider developing training programs that lead to higher paying jobs or to jobs that have room for advancement.

Moreover, recent evidence suggests that post-secondary education should be available to low-income women. Almost all of the women participants felt that education was a mechanism to escape poverty and some were pursuing a college education at the time of the interviews. Although these results can not ascertain whether those who were pursuing a college education obtained better employment, census data indicate that few women on welfare are college graduates (Shealy, 1995).

Furthermore, recent studies conducted by the Howard Samuels State Management and Policy Center in New York, have shown that low-income women benefit from college. For African-American female headed families, the poverty rate of those with at least one year of post secondary education is only 21%, compared to 51% of those who only have a high school diploma (Gittell et al., 1996).

Child care also needs to be designed differently to better meet the needs of the women who use them. Child care needs to be available during non-traditional work hours and for those who are furthering their education. Moreover, it must be affordable and of a caliber that allows a woman to feel that her children are safe and being taken care of well. Many of the women interviewed worried about the quality of the child care that was available to them and would most likely have difficulty leaving their children in poorly run child care facilities.



## Support

Positive support systems overwhelmingly helped the women. Thus, methods for creating a supportive element should also be helpful. This creation can be done by either strengthening existing supports or through helping women create new ones.

One method of strengthening families and supports is to create family focused programs. Programs that serve low-income single mothers should also consider the needs of her children. A program may need to address a woman's concerns for her children's needs. A woman may devote her energy and time to a child who has unmet medical, emotional or academic needs. Human service providers may need to help the mother find the necessary resources her child needs in order to gain her participation in a program. Moreover, the need for child care must also be considered for single mothers to participate in any type of program activities.

Program developers could also involve women's children, partners and other supportive individuals in aspects of the program. These individuals could be included in celebrations of a woman's accomplishments or in family planning sessions designed to create a career path. In turn, efforts to enhance a low-income woman's supports may contribute to her abilities to finish a program.

Mentorships and peer support could also be helpful. Some women may need to gain additional support through agency programs because the relationships they currently have with others are not helpful. Group therapy or psycho-educational services would allow women to meet and gain the support from others who are in similar situations as herself. A mentoring program, which matched a low-income woman with someone who had faced similar problems, would not only provide additional support but also needed

advice. Some evidence existed in this research that this type of support can be helpful. Although programs were often criticized by the women, some more isolated women, such as Edie and Serena, found connection and support from an agency program. Moreover, all of the women appeared to need more support in their roles as single parents. Most of the women spent their days either at their jobs or focused on their children. Many women, especially employed women, asked for more help. Respite care of children may allow women some time to herself to reduce stress and to gain support from others. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, some evidence exists that single mothers who have more support from employers may be more satisfied with their lives and less role strain. Employers may also want to provide better benefits for their employees or time for them to take care of family responsibilities. Perhaps, with these additional benefits, employers may have employees who are able to focus on job responsibilities during the time they spend at work.

Human service professionals can also supply support and connection to isolated women. The women asked for more personalized services and more connection to individuals who work in an agency. Agencies also need to be cognizant of these issues when developing services. They need to become more personally supportive of those they help by creating a positive relationship with them. Furthermore, because many women lacked trust, a human service professional must make efforts to establish a trusting relationship. Using home visits and taking more time to understand the individual needs of an African-American low-income woman may help develop such a relationship. The women also asked for less paper work. Reviewing and eliminating "red tape" would be beneficial for both workers and clients.

### Planning

One way to help low-income women plan is through career counseling. Many of the women interviewed had little knowledge about different types of careers, levels of a career ladder, or the type of training and experience they would need to reach specific career goals. Often they relied on information from family or friends that may or may not be accurate. Moreover, many gained employment simply because it was available to them, regardless of whether it fit their interests or would lead to higher paying employment.

Very little is written on the topic of career development for low-income individuals. In a literature search, I was unable to find any research on career planning services for low-income adult women. Women's career development, while not thought to be fundamentally different from men's is thought to be more complex (Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980). Based on the findings from this research, when gender is combined with an African-American ethnicity and poverty, that career development process becomes even more complex. What follows are recommendations based on what is known about career counseling in general, and what I have learned from this research.

Traditional counseling theories are based on the idea that individuals have numerous career choices and that a fit between their interests and these choices brings the greatest career fulfillment (Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980). Career counseling with low-income African-American single mothers should also include an examination of interests and career options. This process would help low-income women to identify their own interests and skills, to gain information about employment opportunities, and their training needs. Moreover, it should help them to explore their dreams. A realistic look at these dreams would help a women understand how possible the fulfillment of those dreams

were.

However, an assumption that low-income women have an unlimited field of career options may not be a safe one to make. Issues such as welfare policy, family responsibilities, support systems, and discrimination are going to effect their career choices. Thus, in addition career exploration also needs to help these women identify supports, needs and possible barriers. With this information, a career counselor could help a woman develop a career plan. Included in this plan would be not only the career goal, but also step by step methods to reach those goals. Such contingencies as training, financing an education, gaining emotional support, providing for children and understanding discrimination would need to be addressed.

For example, a women who wanted to be a RN would learn about that occupation and discover that she needed four years of college. She could evaluate the feasibility of this option based on her personal situation. She may discover that she would need more child care and a supportive person to encourage her. She may also need remedial reading classes and financial aid. If she decided to pursue this goal after this exploration, her personal career plan would include methods of finding child care and support while completing remedial reading classes and four years of college.

For career counseling to best benefit low-income African-American woman an exploration of support and opportunity are also needed, however. The women would not only need to identify barriers but also understand possible emergencies or crises that could sidetrack them from their plans. The women's lives were often unpredictable and often these unpredictable events, such as the end of a romantic relationship, the death of a family member, or being victimized by crime, seemed to sidetrack the women from their original

plans. Perhaps, recognizing that these issues may occur would help in the career planning process. In addition, the women may want to identify supports they could access when such events occurred. These supports, if accessed early, may help the women continue with their plans even during a crises situation.

Career counseling should also help the women better prepare for environments in which they find themselves employed or gaining an education. Some women described racism and poor treatment by management and customers at their work. Preparing women for these possibilities would help them develop methods of combating these practices before they encounter them. The planful women appear to have developed such methods and these methods may have helped them plan and work towards their goals.

Career counseling would also need to help a woman negotiate the welfare system. Welfare policies may also make a women re-evaluate career goals and plans. Because welfare reform is requiring women to leave welfare within a two year period, many women may need to find alternate methods of reaching their goals. For example, pursuing a four year degree while still depending on welfare payments is no longer possible. Therefore, a low-income woman may need to learn about financial aid, short term training programs, or other specialized programs that help individuals in her situation. She may also need to evaluate the possibility of finding a job to support herself and her family while she tries to pursue additional training. Or, she may need to get an entry level job with a plan of finding ways to advance. These options would also need to be explored during career counseling and added to her plan.

As mentioned previously, planning is not always easy for low-income women. Their lives are unpredictable and Baker (1996) speculated that low-income individuals

may not see value in planning for events that they perceive outside of their control. However, Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg & Roarke (1997) in a recent investigation of the school to work transition for young adults stated that although career planning may be difficult in an environment that has few options, it may also be necessary. Thus, they proposed that an adoption of an involved and purposeful approach to career tasks may place work-bound youth in a better position to create employment opportunities.

I propose that low-income women also need to purposefully plan for their careers. Perhaps, gaining an understanding of career issues and barriers to career goals will also help women living in poverty feel some sense of control over the employment process. The ability to create a plan and gain this control may be variables that work in conjunction with each other in a way that would help the women pursue their career goals.

Moreover, human service agencies also need to plan. They need to create a system of accessible community services. As mentioned previously, most services were designed to work independently from each other and different types of services were found in different locations with few, if any, links among them. Although the women interviewed had some common needs, they also had individual ones as well. Some women needed help with trauma or domestic violence, others needed further job training, and still others needed transportation. Therefore, human service professionals need to plan more collaborative links among community agencies.

An ideal situation would resemble the following. A women would be able to access a system of services at one location where she meets with someone who helps her to identify her needs and access appropriate services to meet those needs. In this manner

the community's system of services truly becomes personalized and supportive.

### Personal Counseling

In addition to career counseling, personal counseling services are needed. Some of the women interviewed discussed trauma, such as childhood abuse, domestic violence or crime victimization. The ones who did so most often and with the most intensity were those who also had the shortest work history. Perhaps, their inability to resolve these issues also impaired their ability to obtain and keep employment.

Other women had personal circumstances that appeared to impair their ability to find or keep employment. Often a change in a relationship led to depressive symptoms or other difficulties. For example, Lois had problems finding a job after her divorce and Carmella reported depression after her mother's death. Moreover, some women, such as Serena, had problems with substance use and would need services to begin or continue the recovery process.

Beyond these more severe circumstances, all of the women had considerable stress associated with being a single parent with few resources. Personal counseling can also help women find appropriate methods of handling this stress.

### The Role of Counseling Psychologists

Counseling psychologists are committed to facilitating human development by helping those they serve reach their highest level of functioning and to overcome barriers that might impede their development. They are trained to believe that only by understanding the context of an individual's interactions with her environment can a person be fully understood and helped. Additionally, the goal of counseling is to work with both the client and the environment to facilitate a "fit" between the developing person

and her environment (Blocher, 1987).

Thus, counseling psychology has an important role to play in helping low-income women gain self-sufficiency. Because counseling psychologists are trained to examine the strengths and the development of individuals within their environments, they will be able to help low-income African-American women supports and barriers to their growth and ability to find employment. Counseling psychologists also should be able to help the women recognize their strengths and use them to their advantage for continued development. Moreover, the type of interactionist framework used by counseling psychologists should lessen the tendency to pathologize low-income individuals and also to develop counseling services that recognize the women's environments as well as their personal situations.

A counseling psychologist's commitment to person environment fit also leads to a concern about the problems and resources that reside with in an individual's environment. Thus, problems with employment opportunities, discrimination, access to education and child care are also concerns of the counseling psychologist and she/he should be willing to intervene in these environmental concerns (Blocher, 1987).

In addition, counseling psychologists are trained to provide a number of direct and indirect services that could be helpful to low-income African-American single mothers. Perhaps most importantly, counselors are specifically trained to work with clients with career issues (Blocher, 1987). This training can be used to develop and conduct specific career counseling services for low-income women that consider the woman's environment and personal circumstances. Additionally, counseling psychologists can provide personal counseling for issues such as trauma, changes in a relationship, grief, substance abuse, and



stress. Counseling psychologists are also trained to led support and therapy groups. This type of leadership should help facilitate the development of positive supports in a low-income woman's life.

Indirect services provided by counseling psychologists include consultation and training (Blocher, 1987). Thus, counseling psychologists can consult with or train other human service professionals and policy makers within community agencies, vocational training programs, and schools concerning the needs of low-income African-American women. This type of collaboration should also help low-income individuals by creating a system or network of appropriate community services.

However, counseling psychologists may also need more training. Although counseling psychology programs have increased their training on diversity issues based on gender and ethnicity, very few psychologists consider class issues when working with clients (Russell, 1996). Furthermore, the importance of social class are often taken for granted in current career theories (Gottfredson, 1981).

Moreover, although counseling psychologists are supposed to address environmental barriers, this task is a difficult one. Sherman (1984) proposed that psychologists are actually more likely to maintain the status quo than to promote societal changes and challenged counseling psychologists to examine such issues as valuing individualism, believing in meritocracy, focusing on intra-psychic processes, and power dynamics.

In addition, as mentioned earlier counseling psychologists need to expand on traditional career approaches to best meet the needs of low-income African-American women. The career process for low-income women does not appear to reflect traditional

career approaches where individuals are thought to make largely autonomous decisions based on their interests and a limitless amount of opportunities. Although career development theories for women seem to agree that background factors (such as gender, ethnicity, and social economic status), individual attributes and contextual or environmental factors impact a woman's career development (Hackett & Lent, 1992), we have little knowledge about how these factors specifically impact low-income African-American single mothers. Moreover, contextual factors are often included as an afterthought (Blustein et al., 1997) and not given the careful consideration needed to help this specific population.

Astin's (1984) in her model of career development for women proposed that work behavior is motivated by three basic needs: survival, pleasure, and contribution. Because of the context in which they live, low-income African-American single mothers may need to consider the need for survival more than those of pleasure or contribution. Many women needed to depend on governmental assistance to meet financial needs, thus, they were subject to changes in those policies. They lived in a community where unemployment was high and opportunities for child care or employment that provided an income above the poverty level was low. Moreover, they needed to provide for their children. Thus, counseling psychologists also need to examine how to help women who have high survival needs and less opportunity. However, research and theory on this issue is currently lacking.

### Limitations

The goals of this VoICES project was to look broadly at the lives of low-income African-American women to develop more appropriate programming and to make

recommendations to the foundation that funded the research. This foundation was specifically interested in Flint, Michigan. Therefore, the participants were recruited from Flint. The interview was structured and asked numerous questions about various topics. These topics evolved from focus groups, interviews with key informants, and discussions at VoICES team meetings. Furthermore, the VoICES team made a decision to hire African-American women from Flint to complete the interviews. Strengths and limitations are involved in all of these decisions.

Because the funding agency was interested in Flint, the participants were Flint residents. Although, this leads nicely to specific recommendations for low-income African-American women living in Flint, generalizability becomes one limitation of this investigation. Generalizability is confined by ethnicity, marital status, age of children, and geography. Moreover, because the women had taken the initiative to enroll their children in Head Start, a stronger commitment to the education of their children and a sense of connection to community supports may exist among these women. Therefore, the results, the hypotheses generated, and the recommendations given, are most relevant for African-American women in similar situations.

The VoICES project also began the interviews with some pre-structured designs and ideas. The strength of using this approach and developing a structured interview was that it allowed for comparisons among different aspects of the women's lives and comparisons among the women. Because each woman answered the same series of questions, I was able to analyze the differences and similarities between those answers and cross case comparability was made easier. The trade-off with using this approach is that individual idiosyncracies and situations may have been lost. Some women may have had

individual concerns, strengths, or circumstances that our interview did not cover.

The VoICES project tried to lessen the chances of losing important information through careful construction of the interview. The data gathering process began with visits to a Head Start program, gathering information about the community, and a series of focus groups and interviews with community members. Information gained from these focus groups with similar women and with professionals, interview data, literature reviews, and discussions was used to develop the questions for the interview. In addition, the interview was critiqued by others and field tested. Admittedly, important information may still have been lost. However, the process used in developing the interview should have reduced this problem.

The VoICES project also made the decision to hire African-American women from Flint to conduct the interviews. This decision was made for a variety of reasons. During most of the interview process, the two African-American women on the VoICES team had left the university. The VoICES team thought that the women interviewed would feel more comfortable talking with women who were from the same community and ethnicity. If the women had been interviewed by myself, a white woman, or by the men who were a part of the VoICES team, they may not have been as comfortable or as honest with their responses.

However, my absence from the interviews was also a loss to the analysis. During the interview observations of the women's environments, understandings of the women's vocal tones and feelings, and a gradual building of themes, patterns, and hypotheses can be made. Although the interviewers were asked to note these factors, my absence from the interviews lessened my understanding of these nuances and I was left to draw them from

the transcripts, tapes, and interviewers comments. These lost nuances may also have contributed to a different or more complete understanding of the women. Perhaps information was again lost.

Furthermore, as previously discussed, this dissertation is limited by the time period in which it was conducted. The women were interviewed at one point in time. Therefore, it is impossible to predict causality nor how changes in the economics of the community, in welfare reform policies, in the women's supports, or changes in individual life circumstances will impact their work histories and abilities to become self-sufficient.

Researcher bias may also have been a limiting factor. During the VoICES analysis I was able to consult regularly with other team members to check on my own bias. However, the analysis for this dissertation was conducted in relative seclusion. I was aware that this might bias my analysis and found some methods of checking my results. Although I did not have the VoICES team to consult with on a regular basis, I was able to occasionally consult with the principal investigator, Dr. McKinney, and team member, Mickey Melendez. Furthermore, I discussed my results with other African-Americans and women of color.

I also was careful to recheck my results and reread transcripts and passages. I was especially concerned that I might over interpret the effects of trauma on the women's lives because of my previous work experiences. I also made notes of my process as I completed the reading of the transcripts and the analysis. These observations are recorded at the end of chapter three. However, the analysis was conducted through my framework and way of examining the world. Thus, bias still remains a factor.

### **Future Research Directions**

The goals of this research was to qualitatively examine similarities and differences in the lives of employed and unemployed African-American single mothers and to create hypotheses through grounded theory as to the causes and effects of employment and unemployment. Therefore, one future research direction is to more closely examine the hypotheses generated by this research. Moreover, research on this population is only recently being conducted. Therefore, numerous areas of future research exist.

Based on the results of this research, opportunity was hypothesized to be an important factor that affects a low-income women's chances of finding employment. However, additional research concerning how current economic conditions and discrimination affect employment is needed. Although psychological research often focuses on individual attributes, these macro-systemic factors need to be considered in any type of research project that examines the employment capabilities of low-income individuals. If these larger contextual factors are ignored, it seems possible that people may be blamed for situations that are often out of their control.

Support was found to be an important variable that helped a women gain and keep employment. A closer examination of how support systems contribute to a low-income African-American women's ability to keep a job would be beneficial. Specifically, the quality of these relationships appears to be important. Research designed to investigate how some women develop these positive relationships and how improving one's life affects supports is also needed. In addition, the effects of negative support systems would also be helpful. Moreover, I suggested that a circular relationship between support and self-reliance may exist for some women. Longitudinal research would help in the

understanding of how supports change as a woman's personal circumstances change and would help examine the possibility of this circular relationship between supports and self-sufficiency.

Moreover, partners and family members appeared to be the most beneficial types of support for some women. Although a few studies concerning family support exists, only a handful of researchers have investigated the role of partner support. These areas are also subjects for further study.

Trauma was prevalent in many of the women's lives. The women with the least amount of work experience described past violence most intensely. Research which examines the role of trauma on a woman's ability to gain and keep employment would be an important contribution. Moreover, there was some evidence that past trauma experiences affected support systems. Some of the most isolated women also described past childhood abuse or domestic violence.

Furthermore, other factors such as divorce, the end of a relationship, death of a family member, and substance use all appeared to affect some of the women's abilities to obtain and remain employed. Changes in a relationship often seemed to precede depression. Divorce also appeared to led to emotional difficulties for some. In addition, one women had trouble re-entering the job market after a long marriage and subsequent divorce. The effect of these issues on the employability of low-income women, along with the impact of substance use, also have not received much attention in the psychological literature.

This research also examined a number of psychological factors such as depression, self-concept, stress and coping skills, motivation and a sense of control. Again, because of

the paucity of research on these topic for low-income women, these areas could also use further investigation. The effects of all of these factors on a woman's employment status and history would be helpful. Moreover, their impact on family life and parenting are also research areas that could use further attention.

In addition, the influence of work on the lives of the women's families and on the women's perceptions of her life is another fruitful area of inquiry. I hypothesized that low-income women who are employed may feel more satisfied with their lives. This is a question that needs to be examined.

The importance of affordable, high quality child care was highlighted in this research and has received some attention in the media. However, research is again lacking. Moreover, the women also complained about the lack of personalized services from human service professionals. Additional research on how human service programs can be designed and conducted is also needed. Specifically, methods to personalize service and encourage collaboration among agencies should be pursued. New programs, perhaps using the suggestions that I made earlier, should be developed and their effectiveness needs to be evaluated.

Furthermore, the ability to create a career plan for oneself was hypothesized to be an important contributor to the long term self-sufficiency of low-income women. However, career issues for low-income women has received little research. Very little has been written concerning the career development process for low-income individuals. Therefore, this is another area where deeper understanding would be helpful. Research that links class issues to the career process is sorely lacking and studies that continue to examine the career maturity, career knowledge, and career choice process for all low-



income individuals is needed.

Perhaps most importantly, the generalizability of this study needs to be expanded. To increase the generalizability of the results and recommendations, women of other ethnicities and from various geographical locations need to be studied. Moreover, longitudinal study would be effective in helping to understand cause and effect relationships and factors which influence the welfare and employment cycle in which many women find themselves living.

In addition, this results of this dissertation indicate that using a woman's work history is a more appropriate classification tool than current work status. Additional research that used work history as a criterion variable would add important information to the field of current knowledge.

### Summary and Conclusions

This investigation examined qualitatively the lives of low-income African-American single mothers. The goals were: 1) to describe similarities and differences between the employed and unemployed women's lives along the dimensions of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model; 2) to understand the effects of employment and unemployment on the women's lives; 3) to use grounded theory approaches to create hypotheses concerning what factors may influence a low-income African-American single mother's abilities to gain and keep employment; and 4) to make recommendations for program development based on the results of the investigation.

More similarities than differences were found among the employed and unemployed women. Two possible reasons were given for this finding. The experience of living in Flint, Michigan may be similar for low-income women regardless of employment

status. Secondly, other researchers (Corcoran et al., 1984; Salomen et al., 1996) have found that many women in their sample cycled between welfare and employment. Perhaps the women in this study, also completed this cycle and differences would be more contingent on work history. This idea was supported in a second analysis which did discover differences among women based on their work history.

The effects of employment on the women's lives were found to be busy days with little time for relaxation. Some employed women also had concerns that they were growing apart from their children and the quality of child care was also an issue. Moreover, employment did not lessen the women's financial concerns and stresses. However, the unemployed women were more likely to discuss the effects of classism and to describe hopes for future employment. These findings, combined with Jackson's (1992) research that discovered that employed low-income women reported more life satisfaction, led me to hypothesize that the employed women may also be more satisfied with their lives.

Based on the results of this investigation it appeared that opportunity, support and the ability to plan were most likely to affect a low-income woman's ability to obtain and keep employment. Opportunity, in terms of access to employment, education, and child care, appeared to affect a woman's ability to find a job. Discriminatory practices based on racism, sexism and classism were also thought to impact opportunity. The women, although recognizing that discrimination existed, often seemed to ignore the personal impact of prejudism.

The importance of a positive support system was also noted. The women who had longer work histories were also more likely to have positive individuals in their lives to

support them. Often these individuals provided child care or other needed services for the women. Moreover, they often helped in an emergency such as a job loss or unplanned pregnancy. In addition, the women who had worked less than a year during their lives were more isolated. They also often discussed trauma issues with more intensity than the other women. The unemployed women also appeared to remain involved in negative relationships and identified more resources where they could obtain help. I hypothesized that a circular relationship between self-reliance and support systems existed. Perhaps, as a woman became more self-sufficient, she could be choosier about whom she wanted to be her friends or partner because she was less dependent on others support. In turn, these supports may have helped her to continue to move out of poverty.

However, exceptions to these patterns in support also existed. Such factors as a divorce, the death of a family member, and substance use also affected employment capabilities for a few women. Age appeared to also play a role. Many women worked more sporadically when young and most of the low work history women were under age 25. Perhaps, positive supports also increased with age. On the other hand, work opportunities may have also increased based on increased maturity and job experience.

Moreover, simply having a job did not guarantee self-sufficiency. Some women had worked years in jobs that paid little. Rarely did women become employed in areas where they'd completed job training. However, some women had developed career plans for themselves that they were able to follow. These women appeared to be closer to moving out of poverty than the other women.

My recommendations for program development also focused on the areas of opportunity, support and career planning. Policy and programs need to ensure that

opportunity exists for low-income women in terms of increasing employment opportunities, access to child care and education. Moreover, programs need to include a supportive element by either helping women strengthen existing supports or by creating positive support networks. Professionals also need to be supportive and create personal connections with their clients. Career services would not only help the women gain career information but also develop a career path. In addition, some women may need personal counseling for trauma issues, depression, substance abuse, or stress.

The road out of poverty is complex and filled with barriers. The women appear to have a strong foundation. They are proud of themselves, motivated, and resilient. However, this research demonstrated that they also have needs. The women needed positive relationships with friends, neighbors, partners and family. They needed the opportunity to obtain employment that paid decent wages and an understanding of career options and planning. They also need researchers and human service workers to understand the context of their lives and to provide information and appropriate services.

Denise stated:

(I'm) just a mother trying to survive, to take care of the children and teach them things, you know, to give them structure.

Perhaps, with support and further understanding, Denise, and other women like her, can do more than just survive.

## **APPENDIX**

## APPENDIX

### The Interview Questions

#### Macrosystem: Ideological issues: racism sexism and classism

- Was race/racism a problem for you growing up?
- Do you think racism is a problem for you now? Do you think it is a problem when you look for work or think about changing your life? Is it a problem for you as you go about your daily activities?
- Do you think race/racism is a problem for your children?
- Do you feel that people respond to you differently because you're a woman? If yes, how?
- Do you think that people respond to you differently because you may not have as much money as others? If yes, how?

#### Exosystem: Questions concerning Flint and perceptions of isolation.

- Are there any racial problems in Flint?
- Do you feel that women have different opportunities or are treated differently than men in Flint?
- Do you think people with less money are treated differently than those with more money in Flint?- What do you see as the future of Flint?
- What do you like about living in Flint?
- What do you dislike about living in Flint?
- Has drugs affected Flint?
- Has crime or violence affected Flint?
- Would you move out of Flint if you had the chance? Why or why not?
- Focus groups with professionals and Interviews with key informants: Perceptions of Flint and of low-income populations

#### Mesosystem:

##### Informal support networks: Family

- Can you tell me a little about your mother?
- Can you tell me a little about your father?
- Were you raised by anyone else? If so, can you tell me a little about this person/people who raised you
- How was parental love and affection shown to you growing up?
- How was parental disapproval shown?
- Do you feel that someone cared about you as a child?
- Was there any other adult you were close to as a child? Who was

this person? What was she or he like?

- Does your family ever get together for a gathering now? How often do they do this? What is this like for you?
- What are some of the positive things about your family?
- What are some of the things you'd like to change about your family?
- Generally, do you feel that you can trust your family members, why or why not?
- Have drugs affected your family, If so, how?
- Has crime or violence affected your family? If so, how?
- The Kin network

Informal support networks: friends

- How would you describe a true friend? Do you have a friend like this?
- What type of things do you do with your friends?
- What types of things do you talk about?
- Do you friends ever ask for favors? If so, what kinds?
- Do you ever ask for favors, If so, what kinds?
- Generally, when you ask people for favors are you expected to give something in return?
- When you do a favor for someone do you expect, or do you usually get something in return?
- Generally, do you feel you can trust your friends, why or why not?

Informal Supports: romantic relationships

- Are you currently in a romantic relationship with someone?
- What do you like about your current relationship?
- Are there things you'd like to change? What are those things and why would you like to change them?
- What type of things do you argue about? How often do you argue about these things?
- What type of things do you usually look for in someone you want to have a relationship with?
- How much time do you usually spend with the person you're in a relationship with? What type of things do you usually do together?
- Do you think life is easier or harder when you're in a relationship? Why?
- What type of things do you talk to your romantic partner about? Are there things you don't feel comfortable discussing with a romantic partner? If so, what are they?
- Are there certain ways you think people who are in a relationship should treat each other? What are those ways?

Informal Supports: Neighborhoods

- What do you like about living in your neighborhood?

- What do you dislike about living in your neighborhood?
- Do you have any safety concerns for yourself and/or your children in your neighborhood? What are they?
- Have drugs affected your neighborhood?
- Has violence affected your neighborhood?
- How well do you know your neighbors? How often do you speak to them or wave to them? Do you think you can trust your neighbors? Would you go to them for help?

#### Formal Support Networks: Agencies

- Overall, how well do the services of Genessee county work for you? If you could make changes in them what would those changes be?
- What kinds of new or different services do you think would help you better meet your needs? Why are those services important to you?
- What do you think of the location of most services? Are they convenient for you?
- Are there places you would feel more comfortable receiving help? For example, would you prefer going to your church or school or someplace other than agencies for help?
- How easy is it for you to ask for help? Do you prefer going to friends, relatives, or professional agencies?
- Of the professional agencies you've used was any one more helpful than others? What was it and why did you find it helpful?
- Was there one that was less helpful? What was it and what didn't you like about it?
- Of the services used, are there any places where the people who work there were friendlier or nicer to you?
- Were there any places where the people were less friendly?
- Do you currently or have you ever had contact with the Department of social services? If yes, how would you rate the help you received there?
- What do you think about support groups - where different people get together to discuss problems? DO you think you might like this?
- Where do you usually go to do your food shopping? Is this place in your neighborhood? Are you satisfied with this place, why or why not?
- What do you usually use for transportation? Are you satisfied with this? Why or why not?
- Generally, do you feel satisfied with the public transportation in your neighborhood? Why or why not?



**Formal Supports: Church and spirituality**

- Do you consider religion/church/spirituality to be an important part of your life?
- If so, in what ways is it important?
- Do your activities change on Sunday? If so, how?

**Microsystem:****Family Mechanisms: daily family life**

- Describe the average day in the life of your neighborhood: What happens in the morning and afternoon? What happens in the late afternoon and morning? What happens at night?
- Many people have some kind of rhythm and pattern to their days. Can you tell me what you did yesterday? Was that a typical day?
- Do these activities change on Saturday? On Sunday? If so, how?
- What do you do in your spare time? For fun?
- Do you have any interests or hobbies that you enjoy?

**Family Mechanisms: Children and parenting**

- What are your children's first names or initials? Are they boys or girls? What are the ages of your children?
- Are you currently pregnant?
- Do any of your children's have special needs? If so, what are they?
- Do all of your children have the same father?
- What was it like for you when you were pregnant?
- What is it like being a mom?
- What is your definition of a good mother? How are you like this? Are there things a good mother does that you don't know how to do or don't think you do well?
- Can you tell me about the expectations you have for each of your children?
- Can you tell me how satisfied you are with the way your children are turning out?
- Specifically, how close do you feel to each one of your children?
- Do all your children live with you? If not where do they live? How long have they lived there? And why are they living there?
- Do you feel that you have enough time to spend with your kids?
- What are some of the things you and your kids do together? How often do you do these things?
- Are there some common rules for your kids? What are they?
- What would you consider a bad way to discipline? Do you ever find yourself doing these things?
- How do you show affection and approval in your family? How

often do you think you do this?

- Is there anything that would make your life easier as a parent?  
What is it? How would it help?
- What is your relationship like with your child/children's  
father/fathers?
- How much time do your children spend with their father/fathers

#### Family Mechanisms: Stresses

- Good and Bad things happen to everyone. What do you think are  
the best and worst things that have happened in your life  
time?
- What is the best thing that has happened to you in the last six  
months?
- What is the worst thing that has happened to you in the last six  
months?
- On a day to day basis are there things you struggle with? What  
are those things? How do you usually handle them?
- Are there certain times of the year that are more stressful than  
others? What are they and why?
- Are there certain times of the month that are more stressful?  
What are they and why?
- Are there certain times of the week that are more stressful: What  
are they and why?
- Are there certain times during the day that are more stressful?  
What are they and why?

#### Individual

##### Individual: Education

- Did you graduate from high school or get your GED?
- If not, why not? What kept you from completing high school?  
From getting your GED
- What was the average grade you usually got in your courses at  
school?
- Did you ever repeat a grade?
- What was school like for you growing up? What did you like?  
What didn't you like?
- Were you involved in any special activities?

##### Individual: Work Skills

- Aside from regular schooling, have you ever received additional  
job training that lasted for at least one month? What were  
these training programs called? How long were you in  
these programs?
- Not counting jobs around your own house, have you ever worked  
for pay

- Are you presently working for pay?
- How many hours do you work?
- What kind of work do you do or did you do in your last job?
- How long (have you/had you) been a (state occupation)
- Have you ever had any other jobs
- Can you tell me what those jobs were and how long you worked at them
- The Capacity Inventory

**Individual: Work motivation**

- Do you have any plans for starting a job or changing jobs in the future?
- What kind of work would you like to do?
- Do you plan on getting more schooling or job training? What do you want to learn?
- What plans do you have for yourself? How do you see your own future?

**Individual: Sense of Control**

- Are there any barriers or problems that would prevent your hopes for the future to come true?
- Suppose something magical happened and you could have your life different. What would be different? What do you think are your chances of making this happen? What type of things would you need?
- How much control do you feel that you have over situations in your life? Do you feel that you can change some of the stresses you have? Do you feel that you have some choice in the things that happen to you on a daily basis?
- Are there any things in particular that you feel you do have control of and can make good choices about? What are those things and why do you feel you have control over them?
- Are there any things in particular that you feel you do not have control of - things you can't change or make choices about? What are those things and why do you feel you don't have control over them?

**Individual: Mental Health Issues: Depression and Self-Concept**

- Generally, how would you describe yourself?
- Tell me something you like about yourself?
- Tell me something you don't like about yourself?
- In general, how would you describe the way you feel most days?
- Are there typical ways you handle stressful situations?

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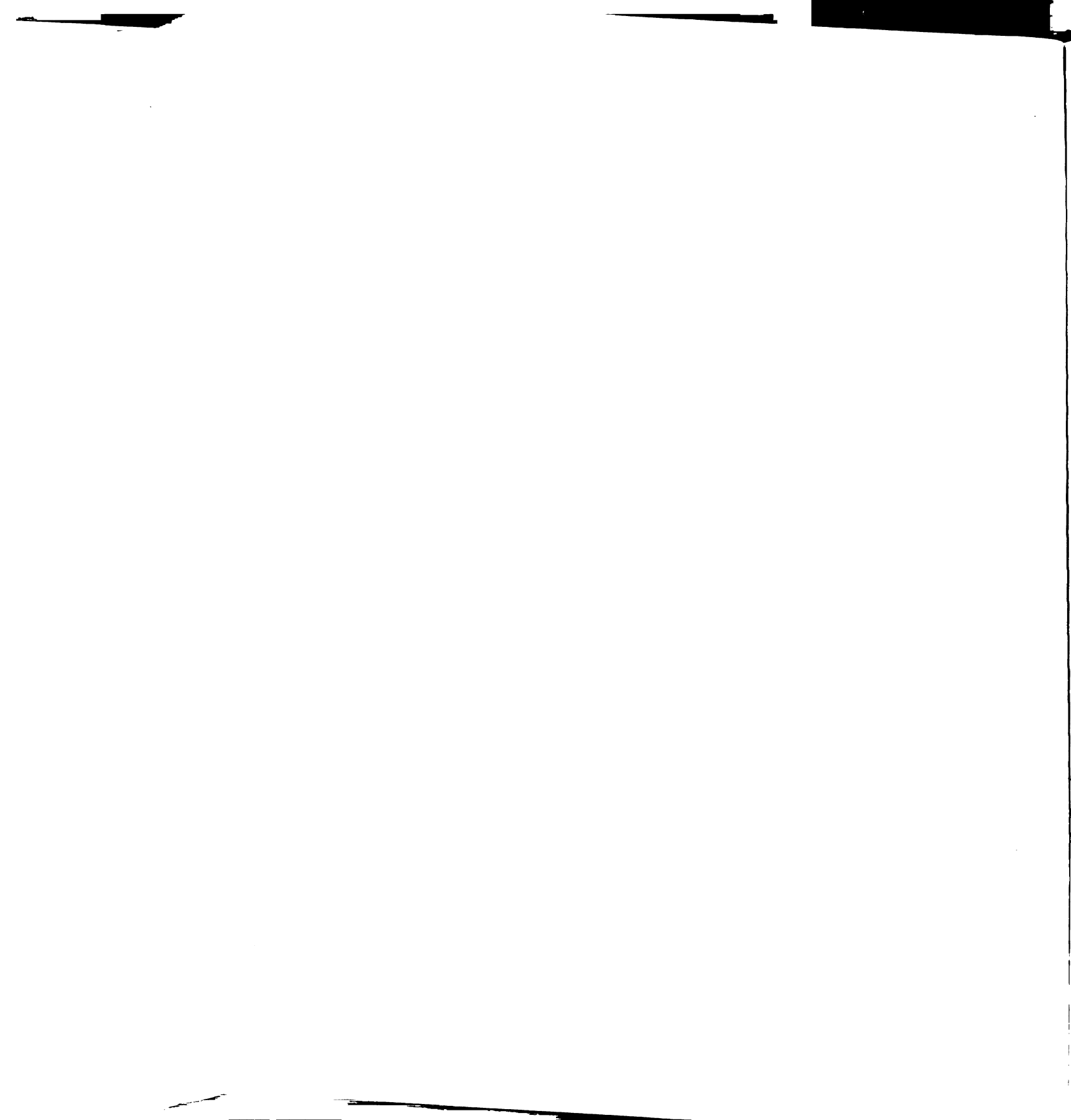
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