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Patrifocal and Matrifocal Discourses Among Homeless Mothers in Kentucky

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"He's Not Mr. Right, He's More Like Mr. Now"
Patrifocal and Matrifocal Discourses
Among Homeless Mothers in Kentucky

JOANNA M. BADAGLIACCO
University of Kentucky
Department of Sociology

What strategies do homeless mothers use to cope with their situations? In-depth interviews in Kentucky of 68 homeless mothers with children revealed similarities and differences among the women, as well as a continuum of approaches to gender relations. Although differing in race/ethnicity and place of origin (rural vs. urban) among other factors, the overwhelming majority of the women experienced unstable and abusive households and social relationships while growing up. Most did not complete high school and had their first births while still teenagers. Moreover, two primary approaches to gender relations were observed. These approaches delimit a continuum along which women with a matrifocal worldview tended to perceive themselves as the primary agents in their own and their children's lives. Women with a patrifocal worldview tended to see a man as their provider and as the solution to their crises. These two different discourses tended to be independent of region (rural or urban) and race/ethnicity. The study of these two discourses provides new theoretical insights into the social relations and behavior of homeless mothers and should contribute in developing programs for their assistance.

INTRODUCTION

Poor homeless mothers in Kentucky use discourses that fall along a continuum to address gender relations. I have labeled the extremes of the continuum matrifocal and patrifocal, based on their conceptualization of the centrality of men in their lives.
Through their own life histories and in their own words, this paper contributes to understanding the similarities and differences among homeless women in Kentucky. For a majority of these women, the household dynamics of their youth and teenage years were permeated by turmoil and violence, yet the consequences of similar childhood experiences resulted in different patterns of strategizing survival techniques in their adult roles.

The aggregation of my findings with regard to the realities and perceptions of these homeless women inductively appears to fall along the dimension of their relationships with men. Therefore, by focusing upon the patrifocal and matrifocal strategies employed by these homeless women, a richer picture of their lives and social interactions, and the dynamics of their processes of dealing with homelessness emerges. Variations in some characteristics are evident between rural and urban women, as well as between white and African-American homeless mothers. However, the focus upon patrifocal and matrifocal strategies, which cross regional and ethnic groups, appears to provide a new insight into the lives of these women and their attitudes and plans for the future. These are areas of study that have been seriously underexplored in the literature.

Little agreement exists on the actual numbers of homeless families; however, one estimate (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1993) is that one-third of the approximately three million homeless in the United States are families—adults with children present, usually women with their children. There is also little agreement as to what the characteristics of these families are, the roots of homelessness, levels of social support networks, prevalence of abuse, psychosocial problems, and what should be done to assist these families (see, for example, Axelson and Dail, 1988; Goodman, 1991a; Goodman, 1991b; McChesney, 1990). My work redresses portrayals of poor women with children as pitiful, problematic, "on the dole," or immoral, by validating their strength in dealing with their current situations and by identifying their survival strategies. The importance of gender in analyzing poverty is central here. I argue that the reason for differences among the women in this study rests with the degree to which they think about their lives as either patrifocal or matrifocal. The women
act in accordance with their internalized beliefs in the context of societal conceptualizations for families in poverty.

Through their telling of their own life histories, my study reveals that poor, homeless mothers in Kentucky, although bounded by many commonalities, are not a monolithic group. Among the differences that emerged in this study were that homeless women employ different discourses, which cross racial and regional boundaries, to conceptualize their relationships to men, their means of resolving their homelessness, and their reliance on the social welfare system. I considered a number of different possible labels for the range of discourses, but am convinced that the term "patrifocal" accurately conveys the concept of some women’s perception of the "fathering" role—that is, the "good provider" (Bernard, 1981) for both the woman and her children. "Matrifocal" also conveys the appropriate implications of a woman herself taking on not only the mothering role, but also the primary responsibility for providing for the physical and psychological needs of herself and her children.

As Bunis (1996) points out, sympathy toward the homeless is culturally patterned. I argue that listening to the women themselves discussing their definitions of their plights and their proposed solutions provides a needed counterpoint to many of the commentaries offered by the media, policy-makers, politicians, advocates, researchers, and others that sometimes depict homeless women as unidimensional, merely pitiful, passive, inept, immoral, lazy, and crazy. The diverse stories of homeless women themselves must be heard in order to effectively implement resources, policies, and supports that assist rather than punish and work for rather than merely on homeless women with children.

SELECTED PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The literature on homelessness spans a number of disciplines including medicine and health services, social work, psychology, sociology, economics, and policy evaluation and analysis—to name just a few. Moreover, the history of homelessness in the United States is a long one, especially since the Great Depression when it was conservatively estimated that more than a
million persons were displaced (Crouse, 1986; Hoch, 1987). Most scholars agree, however, that the composition of the homeless population changed dramatically in the 1980s, due especially to the deinstitutionalization of mentally ill individuals and the worsening economic situations of poor women and children (see, for example, Hartman, 1986; Rossi, 1989; Wright and Lam, 1987). Moreover, the issues involved in examining dire poverty that includes homelessness are quite varied, multi-faceted, and interrelated.

Although recent research has focused on the characteristics of single homeless individuals, in the 1980s, theories of family homelessness tended to center on systemic causes, for example, lack of housing (Leonard, Dolbeare and Lazere, 1989), or on what has come to be known as “personal deficit” theories. These “personal deficit” perspectives blamed homeless families for their problems because of some character flaw or behavioral trait, for example, substance abuse (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1984). Today, most researchers agree that the causes of family homelessness cannot be attributed to specific circumstances such as housing shortages or alcoholism. Rather, the causes tend to be related to multiple factors that cross individual and societal borders. For example, Snow and Anderson (1993) conceptualize homelessness as an interconnection of three dimensions involving housing options, kin support, and self-identity/self-esteem.

Baker (1994) builds on the constructs developed by Snow and Anderson (1993: 482) in her examination of gender differences among homeless families, and finds that “the homeless woman with children resembles closely her counterpart on the margins of extreme poverty who has yet to slip onto the streets. She shares those characteristics that make economic self-sufficiency elusive and the difference from her domiciled counterpart is more likely a matter of degree.” Similarly, Burt (1992) theorizes that the factors that influence homelessness are interactive, and offers a macro-level economic schematic model that incorporates these interactions.

In another study, Vissing (1996) focused on the situation of rural homeless children who were enrolled in schools in five areas in New Hampshire. She conducted interviews with 40 homeless
children and their parents. She maintains that the term "homeless" is inappropriate, especially for the rural experience, and she argues that it is better to describe some families as "displaced," or in "housing distress." Vissing found multiple and complex causes for child-family homelessness, ranging from infrastructure causes (economic, governmental, housing, education, and human services) to demographic, personal, and ideological causes (see especially Vissing's excellent summary of the causes of homelessness among children, 1996: 229–233). While I used similar ethnographic methodology in this study of homeless families in central Kentucky, my analysis focuses on the different discourses homeless mothers use to cope and to strategize.

McChesney (1992) points out that the individual and immediate causes of homelessness are varied but usually result from the breakdown of relationships or long-term poverty, and in many cases both situations. Similarly, the women in my study interpreted their current homelessness in different ways, mediated by how they saw households and families. I would argue that it is important to examine how the women involved viewed their social relationships—particularly with regard to the centrality of men in their lives—that is, where they fall on the matrifocal-patrifocal continuum.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Snow, Anderson, and Koegel (1994) offer important suggestions regarding how to study homelessness so as to present "a more balanced understanding of the condition of homelessness," and to redress what they call "distorting tendencies" to medicalize and decontextualize the homeless. They recommend three procedures that will improve research: tracking the homeless across time and space, examining the contexts in which individuals find themselves, and articulating the voices of the homeless. They argue that "a more balanced, contextualized, and adaptive picture of the homeless emerges, a picture that puts their blemishes in perspective and recaptures their humanity."

This study incorporates all three of these recommendations: Tracking homeless families—Only a few of the families I studied could be re-interviewed because most homeless families are
transient. However, the original interviews contained substantial retrospective oral histories, including childhood experiences. **Contextualizing homeless families**—The interviews covered the current and past situations of these families, for example, work histories, kin networks, interactions with social agencies and the courts, and a record of how and where they resided over the past several years.

**Articulating the voices of homeless families**—This study presents the voices of the homeless women, and uses their own words to assist us in understanding how they view their situations. The women said that being interviewed was enjoyable, difficult, and even painful at times. Some said that no one had asked them about their lives before, and they felt important to be asked. Several acknowledged the opportunity to talk for the other women and children who proceeded and would follow them in the shelters and tried to suggest ways to make life better for residents. At times, women would be very reflective before answering questions, and said that they were glad to have the chance to think about a particular issue. For a fuller discussion of methodological issues regarding the study of homeless families, see Badagliacco (1993).

For this study, the working definition of a "homeless family" is one or two parents with at least one child residing in an emergency shelter during the period of the study, fall 1992 through spring 1994. This work is based upon 68 in-depth interviews (two to three or more hours) with homeless mothers who were temporarily residing in one of four emergency shelters in Lexington or Louisville, Kentucky.

Prior to interviewing, preparatory fieldwork (participant observation) was conducted, primarily to obtain a sense of the operation of the shelters and to gain the trust of the residents. I spent many hours at different times of the day and night at the shelters, immersing myself in the daily routine, observing activities and talking to residents, their children, visitors, and the staff. Schwartz and Merten (1971) suggest that in order to understand the distinctive culture of interest, it is necessary to grasp "the symbolic nexus between thought and action in (a) particular milieu." One of my strategies for accomplishing this understanding was to talk informally with mothers. Sometimes we stood or sat outside the
buildings, where people smoked and children played; at other times, we lounged in the TV area. I introduced myself, spoke very briefly about my research, and the conversation then quickly turned to “small talk” about parenting, the weather, food, shelter conditions, events in the shelter, children’s health, etc. In addition, many times I assisted in the dining area.

Women were eager to ask me questions about myself, and I answered all their questions honestly. Questions were usually about my marital status, my children, University of Kentucky basketball, and my job at the University. Being married and having a young child seemed to give me credibility to share in commentary, complaints, and jokes about men and children.

After gaining rapport with an individual woman, if she wished to be part of the research study, a time convenient for the woman was scheduled and a semi-structured interview was conducted. All adult residents in a family shelter on the days and times I was on-site were eligible to be part of the sample—usually single women with their young children. The strategy of being on-site at different times of the day and evening ensured that most families were contacted. Individual interviews were held in private settings with the mothers, perhaps children, and two student volunteers (depending upon whether there was need for child care). Interviews were tape recorded if the woman consented, and each participant was paid a small amount.

Limited resources constrained my ability to use more sophisticated sampling techniques, which might have included, for example, rural families at risk of moving to the city to seek shelter. (A continuation of this study that includes rural families is now in progress.) The decision to use sites in Lexington and Louisville introduced some bias with regard to the Kentucky counties represented. However, this bias is small because it was common for many of the families to have lived in various parts of the state and in other states before coming to these shelters.

The interviews covered many topics, perhaps all of which could be considered sensitive to some participants, as discussed by Zelan (1969), Bradburn and Sudman (1979), and Lee and Renzetti (1990). For example, women might speak about failed relationships, having had to relinquish a child, illicit behavior,
or the number of places they had lived in the last year. Great care was taken to conduct the interviews in ways that fostered an atmosphere in which mothers could feel that their voices were heard and their stories told, perhaps for the first time.

Women were encouraged to talk about their lives and relationships as they desired. Other topics that were explored included—either by direct questions or because women chose to bring up the subject—chronologies of their homelessness; familial relationships; parenting; social support; gender roles; health issues; family interaction and socializing; sexual behavior, family planning, reproduction, AIDS, and abortion; experiences growing up; childhood abuse and neglect; adult conflict resolution and domestic violence; drug and alcohol use; religion; shelter life; coping skills; and hope for the future (see Badagliacco, 1995a; 1995b; 1995c). This essay explores in depth the relationships of these homeless mothers with men, which are related to all of these aspects of their lives.

Field notes and interviews were transcribed, and then analyzed using qualitative techniques, as well as statistical software tools. Coding was straightforward in that language and meanings were clear, similar across interviews, and rarely tangential to the topic. My approach in interviewing and coding transcripts was in the hermeneutic tradition (Nielsen, 1990), in that I attempted to interpret the social meanings of the interactions of women with their children, their male partners, and their extended families, as they recollected their lives. Partially because the study of contemporary homeless families is multi-disciplinary and very recent, I approached this study as exploratory research, with several "pre-hypotheses," but with a plan to generate hypotheses for future testing.

**FINDINGS**

Before addressing the patrifocal and matrifocal discourses of the women in this study, it is necessary to briefly review some of my basic findings regarding the characteristics of homeless mothers in Kentucky. I confine myself here to those data that are relevant to the discussion of the degree of patri/matrifocality.

The women in this study had a number of characteristics in common, as noted in Table 1. The average age of mothers was
27, and the overwhelming majority had endured unstable and abusive social relationships growing up. They generally had two children with them at the shelter and, as expected, their children are also young—92% were elementary-school aged or younger. Sixty percent had their first pregnancy while still a teen, and several cited pregnancy as the reason for not completing high school. Mothers had, on average, completed less than 11 years of education. About half of the women also had children who were not currently living with them, having been formally or informally relinquished because their mothers could not care for them at present.

All but two of the women reported themselves as presently sexually active, and everyone spoke of previous or current relationships. Less than a third of the women reported being currently married. But, it is not possible to say precisely how many women were formally married even in the past, because the women often did not make the distinction between formal and informal unions. Moreover, because we do not have adequate language to describe former partners, "ex-husband" was a convenient way to describe a former relationship and household, where the man may or may not be the biological father of her children.

Less than a quarter of the women had ever worked for wages, and those who had, worked before the birth of their first child, and were only able to secure part-time retail or food service work, with no benefits. Given the fact that most mothers had not completed high school, few had any transferable work skills, and most received no child support, it is not surprising that 75% of the women reported that their annual income was well below the poverty level of $11,817 in 1994 for a family of three (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Fifty-four percent of the mothers reported an income of less than $5,000 in the previous year, or less than half the income acknowledged as "poverty" for a three-person family.

The women interviewed differed in three ways: time spent living in a city, race/ethnicity, and receipt of public assistance.

1. City vs. rural residence: Sixty percent of the women had spent most of their lives residing in Louisville or Lexington, which are moderate-sized cities and the major urban centers in Kentucky. Many of these women grew up not far from the emergency
Table 1

**Characteristics of Homeless Mothers in Kentucky, 1992–94 Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>All Women (n=68)</th>
<th>Matrifocal (n=34)</th>
<th>Patrifocal (n=34)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–19 years</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–25 years</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–30 years</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–35 years</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 years and older</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \bar{x}=27.0 )</td>
<td>( \bar{x}=26.7 )</td>
<td>( \bar{x}=28.8 )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>41.2**</td>
<td>73.5**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>58.8**</td>
<td>26.5**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not finish H.S.</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School, G.E.D.</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \bar{x}=10.8 ) yrs.</td>
<td>( \bar{x}=10.8 ) yrs.</td>
<td>( \bar{x}=10.8 ) yrs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partner/father living with family</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residence prior to shelter</strong></td>
<td>Rural Community</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>26.5*</td>
<td>52.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>73.5*</td>
<td>47.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual Income</strong></td>
<td>Less than $5,000</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$5,001–$9,999</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$10,000–$14,999</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$15,000–$19,999</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$20,000 or more</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \bar{x}=$7,550 )</td>
<td>( \bar{x}=$4,800 )</td>
<td>( \bar{x}=$10,000 )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aid to Families with Dependent Children</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>70.6***</td>
<td>29.4***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>29.4***</td>
<td>70.6***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*continued*
### Table 1, continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>All Women (n=68)</th>
<th>Matrifocal (n=34)</th>
<th>Patrifocal (n=34)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Five or more</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$\bar{x}$=2.3</td>
<td>$\bar{x}$=2.5</td>
<td>$\bar{x}$=2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$; *** $p < .0005$

shelter in which they were currently housed, had friends, current sexual partners, fathers of their children, and other relatives who visited them there, and they themselves visited friends and relatives in other parts of the city.

The other forty percent of the women had spent most of their lives residing in very rural communities. These women had recently come to the city in which the interview took place. They did so because they were unable to find public resources in their rural communities or were unwilling to use those available, and because they had depleted the resources of their personal social support networks of kin or were no longer welcome by kin. Several of the women had never stayed in the “city” for any long periods of time, while others had episodically used shelters in cities outside of Kentucky as they moved with partners and children in search of work or to seek refuge from domestic violence. Women from rural communities rarely had visitors or visited anyone.

2. Race/ethnicity: Fifty-seven percent of the mothers were white, and forty-three percent were African-American. Compared to the regional population as a whole, the participants in this study were disproportionately African-American. This is indicative of the racial imbalance among “at-risk” families who continually survive at the brink of eviction, where there is a very thin line between housed and homeless poverty. And, as I
demonstrate below, some of the women in this study strategized to use homelessness as a means to become housed.

While white and African-American mothers came from both rural and urban settings, whites were more likely to have come recently from rural communities, and African-Americans were more likely to have grown up in the city. Only eleven percent of the rural families were African-American while two-thirds of the urban families were African-American. This finding is consistent with general demographic characteristics of the geographic areas involved: the majority of African-Americans live in a few larger cities, and most rural communities have very few minorities (Ilvento, Harris, and Garkovich, 1992). Among the women in my study, these demographic traits (race/ethnicity and urban/rural origin) were statistically correlated ($p < .0001$).

3. Public assistance: Half of the women sampled received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and differences regarding AFDC assistance emerged between whites and African-Americans, and between single women and those with husbands present. African-Americans were more likely than whites to be currently receiving AFDC ($\chi^2 = 4.87, p < .0273$). Moreover, women with spouses present ($N = 12$) were much less likely to be receiving aid. In all but two cases (one white, one African-American), women who had spouses with them were not receiving AFDC, primarily because their husbands were working and the family was not, or did not think it was, eligible for any assistance, and/or because they did not believe in accepting welfare.

Vissing (1996) argues that "homeless" has only negative connotations in American culture, and that it evokes only images of urban stereotypes. Indeed, this could help explain why some rural families in Kentucky are extremely reluctant to seek public assistance in the urban areas until they are absolutely destitute. On the other hand, my research shows that some urban women do not place much import on being homeless or being sheltered. They accept the label reluctantly, and/or angrily, but only temporarily, as they plan for their precarious futures.

Each of the characteristics mentioned above is related to the way in which an individual homeless mother constructed her understanding of gender relations, both in the past and in the present. Many women in the study had similar characteristics
and comparable experiences (e.g., becoming homeless, childhood assault, domestic violence), but as we see below, they used and continue to use different discourses—along the matrifocal-patrifocal continuum—to interpret their experiences and plan strategies.

_Matrifocal and Patrifocal Gender Relations_

In the course of the coding and analysis it became apparent that the women were distributed toward the opposite ends of a continuum with regard to the centrality of men in their lives. I labeled these poles matrifocal and patrifocal. The factors that defined the classification and the women's placement are summarized in Figure 1. Individual mothers were assessed with regard to their position on each of the factors. Although not all women displayed all of the characteristics simultaneously, I was able to place them clearly toward one or the other pole. The concept of this classification scheme needs to be refined by future studies. Perhaps a scale can be developed for reliably measuring the placement of a woman on the continuum.

Fifty percent of the women (those toward the patrifocal pole) described their current situations as personal crises centering on the men in their lives—a breakdown of family because of, for example, violence, divorce, or substance abuse. The other half (those toward the matrifocal pole) saw their present need for public shelter as structural—a temporary reshuffling of household because they were evicted or lost jobs.

It should be noted that, although there appears to be an underlying continuum between matrifocal and patrifocal discourses, the women tended to describe themselves as primarily one or the other at this time in their lives. Therefore, for purposes of discussion, I have used just two categories to simplify this analysis. But these are not pure categories; women fit into several intersecting categories including race, family history, geographic origin, etc. Table 1 includes a comparison of the demographic characteristics of both matrifocal and patrifocal women.

_Matrifocal Women:_ As shown in Table 1, matrifocal women tended to be African-American and grew up in the city. Repeatedly I was told that the men currently in their lives were not "family," not partners with whom they shared their households
### Figure 1

*Factors that Define the Continuum from Matrifocal to Patrifocal*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Matrifocal</th>
<th>Gender Roles</th>
<th>Patrifocal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sees herself as central to and head of the household/family</td>
<td>Sees herself as subordinate, a caretaker, not the central leader or head of the household/family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sees females as providing for family through paid labor force participation</td>
<td>Sees male gender role as “good provider” and female as homemaker/caretaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Not currently married or seeking a male partner to share household</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Currently married or seeking a spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. May never have been married</td>
<td></td>
<td>Married (formally or informally) one or more times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Has a fluid conception of family, which may be multi-generational</td>
<td>Concept Of Family</td>
<td>Has a traditional, two-parent, nuclear, conception of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. More likely to have been raised by female(s)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>More likely to have been raised in a two-parent family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sees the role of the biological and/or social father of her children as peripheral to the family</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sees the role of the biological and/or social father of her children as central to the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Can envision herself as a single mother</td>
<td>Labor Force</td>
<td>Cannot envision herself as a single mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. More likely to have some job skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>More likely to have few or no job skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Has had labor force experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>Has little or no labor force experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*continued*
or with whom they wished to share their lives longterm, but often primarily sexual partners and, in many cases, the biological fathers of their children. Male partners entered the lives of matrifocal women periodically for various episodes. For example, men were mentioned as fathering but not rearing children and, in a few cases, not even being aware that they had fathered a child, or not maintaining a presence after the pregnancy was known.

Only a few men were described as being committed to longer, perhaps permanent coupling in formal and informal marriages. Often children knew who their fathers were, and fathers were reported to acknowledge children even if they did not (or could not) support them. Yet the majority of the matrifocal women did not rely upon men to fulfill “traditional” fatherhood and spousal family roles. As one woman put it when referring to the father of her son, “He’s got too many kids to be somebody’s father.”

Darlene, an urban African-American woman who was 16 at the time of the interview and the mother of two, had this say about her children’s father:

I have no contact with him now because I told him he can’t see his daughter—he wants to hit on her and stuff, so . . . He’s supposed to
pay child support but he doesn’t, so I don’t feel bad that he doesn’t see her if he’s not going to pay child support. [Question: How about Trey’s (her older child) dad?] He’s not in the picture—he’s just the same as her father. He says he’s going to help take care of them, but he never does.

Patrifocal Women: By contrast, a male father figure was seen by the patrifocal mothers as important for their children, even if the biological fathers were absent. Patrifocal women reported that their male partners had abandoned them, beaten them and/or their children, lost their ability to support the family, or lost their battles against substance abuse. Yet, each of these women was also more likely to report that the way out of their crises was starting a new union or mending the current one.

The patrifocal women’s answer to homelessness was a male partner: either her current partner, perhaps the father(s) of her child(ren), or a new male partner—“Mr. Right”—as he was often described or envisioned. For example, a mother of two sons ages nine and seven, reported that “my husband was a terrible abuser.” Yet, in answer to a question on how she copes, she answered “I keep thinking that one day I’m going to find me a good man and I keep hanging on.”

Voices of Matrifocal Women

Most women in this study contended with a broad array of arduous circumstances. Yet, I found that half of the women (the matrifocal mothers) neither described their current situations as traumatic, nor were they particularly emotional. For example, matrifocal women were more likely to report problems that resulted in changes of household—loss of jobs, unemployment, underemployment, eviction, and lack of public housing.

This is not to say that personal trauma such as childhood sexual and physical abuse, or even current domestic violence did not exist, but that many did not view the causes of their homelessness as stemming from these issues but rather from structural or societal issues—that is, long-standing poverty. Indeed, several matrifocal women barely mentioned their current interpersonal relationships, which were on-going or very recent. For example, Delilah, a 32 year-old African-American mother of
two discussed only her eviction record when asked to talk about her situation:

If you’ve been evicted, it’s hard to find a place because they’re looking at your eviction records. With me I haven’t gone to court over eviction because I leave before [she is served with court papers], so I have no court records of being evicted, and that’s good. But the wait [for low-income housing] is from two to six months, and here at the shelter you can only stay for 30 days.

As indicated above and in Table 1, matrifocality and patrifocality emerged independently of race/ethnicity and of region of origin, but matrifocal African-American women, most of whom had lived in the city longer than their white counterparts, quite often described their homelessness or their shelter stay as a temporary situation that they had either planned, or that had befallen them, but from which they expected to recover in due course. Judy, a teenager with one child, is an example of a matrifocal woman who actually chose homelessness as a strategy.

I was staying with her father’s mother [her daughter’s grandmother]. I was just tired of being up under somebody’s roof, so I figured if I come here and be homeless they would give me a place because I have a child. I really ain’t got no cause really of some serious homeless[ness] like some people got around here. I don’t have it.

Valerie, an African-American mother who was 27, had suffered extreme abuse in her childhood and had rocky relationships with the four men who fathered her children. At the time of her interview, she had children ages five, three, and one, and she was nine months pregnant. When asked about how she came to be at the shelter, she did not speak at length about mending or terminating interpersonal relationships as many patrifocal women had, but about the difficulty of finding housing.

I was living with my daughter’s daddy and we had a lot of problems [her only reference to her partner] and so I had to move away from him. I stayed with one of my sisters, then another sister, and then my mother, and there just wasn’t enough room. So I called everyone I could think of for low-income housing—the housing authority, and every low income housing agency to see what I could do to get me
a place. And they told me to come here and wait. I've been trying to find everything. You sign up for low-income housing and they tell you you are on a waiting list for six to nine months. They tell you to stay at the [shelter] so you can go on a preference sheet and then it is two to four months. So, I came here.

Voices of Patrifocal Women

Patrifocal women conceptualized their current homelessness as a turning point in relationships, described their current situations emotionally, and lacked hope for the future. For example, nineteen-year old Emily described how she perceived her situation as a crisis. Prior to coming to the emergency shelter, she was living with her husband, four children, plus eleven other adult relatives of her husband in a 3-bedroom mobile home:

He [her husband] would work with his brother. His brother would pay him when he wanted to, what he wanted to, and it usually wasn't very much, and that created problems. So we had problems all the way around but it never escalated until three years ago and that's when the abuse started. He hit me and I would hit him back and the problems just seemed to get really, really worse. I got an EPO [Emergency Protection Order] and the judge ordered marriage counseling, and if we didn't go, we would both go to jail.

Marriage counseling failed, and with the threat from Social Services of losing her children, Emily moved to a shelter with her newborn twins, leaving toddler boys with her husband in the mobile home:

I said, "Do you want to keep our two oldest boys because they like to run outdoors and things and with me trying to concentrate on them and them trying to run outdoors and stuff, it will be kind of hectic." So he said "Yeah," and brought me and the twins up [to the shelter] and in our room he said, "Well, I want a divorce. I don't love you anymore." I mean, it's like whoosh! A brick hit me in the face!

Emily was younger than most of the other homeless mothers, and she lacked any other family to whom she could turn. A few days after I interviewed her, she was negotiating a compromise with her husband, mediated by a sister-in-law. Emily was despondent, and felt trapped no matter which way she
Mr. Right

turned. She wanted to keep her marriage and her family together, but did not want to go back to the extended household of her husband’s family. Nevertheless, she probably did return to this household because one evening shortly thereafter she left the shelter quite abruptly with her husband and twin infants and did not come back.

Older patrifocal women such as Carrie who was 42, with an eight-year-old son and an eighteen-month-old daughter, also did not escape instability and crisis. Her life had always been unstable, and she never felt that she had a family growing up:

I had a bad home situation. As far as I’m concerned, I don’t have a mother or father. My mother was mean to me. My dad sexually abused me. I have lots of handicaps—hearing and eyesight. I had no stability, no love.

Carrie found her family in Jim with whom she had two children; she tries desperately to keep her family intact, but her life continues from one crisis to the next:

We’ve moved every year for eight years because of Jim’s drinking. We were evicted [from five places in the past year]. Jim’s drinking got bad and he was in the hospital for drinking and he attempted suicide several times. Jim’s drinking has a lot to do with our situation.

Patrifocal women tended to be more recently from rural backgrounds and were more likely to be white and currently married. Erica typifies such a woman who placed great importance on being married, staying married, and working out problems that have caused homelessness, even after major setbacks. Erica was one of the few sheltered mothers whom I was able to re-interview two years after our initial meeting because her family was again homeless.

Erica, a white woman originally from Indiana, was 20 when I first met her. She was married to Mark, who is African-American and who was 21 years old at the time. Erica had one son who was almost 18 months old; he is biracial, but Mark is not his biological father. She was pregnant with Mark’s child at our first interview. Erica reported growing up in a rural area in a working class family without the problems such as unemployment, alcoholism, or abuse that plagued so many other homeless families. “I came
from a good family. We had some communications problems, but we were a close family.” Mark grew up an only child in an urban middle-class family, where he was given every opportunity—at 16 he had a car and at 17 a college basketball scholarship. Mark’s scholarship was withdrawn after one semester because of academic failure. He and Erica became a couple at about that time, and their troubles began.

Both sets of parents refused to assist the young couple. They had no social support network, save for Erica’s elderly grandmother who passed some money her way when she could. Erica and Mark spoke openly of their parents as being prejudiced toward the other member of the couple. Erica: “My father is prejudice [sic], especially since I became pregnant.” Mark: “Whenever the name ‘Erica’ came up, they exploded. They said that we would have to go out on our own.”

Erica and Mark had no money, no jobs, and very few skills. Mark physically abused Erica to the extent that in their short time together, she and her baby had lived in several spouse abuse shelters, and he had been court-ordered to attend spouse abuse counseling. In Erica’s words, “he needs to finish the training.” Yet, she continued to stay with Mark, seemed to be in deep denial of her situation, and even reported, “I’ve noticed a big difference, things are okay now.”

But things were not “okay,” when I ran into Erica and Mark two years later in the same shelter. They now had three children, ages 6 months, 18 months, and 3 years. Erica told me she wanted no additional children but expected to have more. With her three small children, she could not work. Mark also could not find a job that would keep them housed. Moreover, she reported continued physical abuse. Erica was always smiling, optimistic, and philosophical about her situation. She told me she was a devout Catholic, believed deeply in the sanctity of marriage and family, and was trying to cope.

We are trying to get a place. I’m tired of living in the shelter. Before, we weren’t trying, we were making excuses. But we are trying now, and maturing, we are tired of being like this.

Other patrifocal women mentioned similar marital and housing problems, but usually they had also suffered severely
throughout their childhood years, unlike Erica and Mark. Jackie, for example, was 30 years old when I met her, and currently in her fourth marriage. She had been raped by her father as a teen and became pregnant as a result; the baby died shortly after birth. Jackie first married at 16, had her second child, divorced, and remarried at 18,

which didn't last but six months. He left me for another woman and then I caught up with another guy right in between, and had my third child. We never got married—when he found out I was pregnant, he left. Then I got married again to a very, very violent man, who threw me down two flights of steps and broke my back. That marriage lasted six years, though.

Subsequently, Jackie remarried two years later to her current husband, from whom she has been separated six times in four years. Despite all of this, in response to a question on what her life will be like in five years, Jackie answers, “I'll still be married, and I'll be well off, and I won't have to worry about anything anymore.”

Influential Social Relationships

During the interviews, I asked each woman whom she thought had been influential or affected her life in some important way, either in a good way or a bad way. A few women replied that no one had been influential. However, of those patrifocal women who responded, 75% of the time a man was named and almost uniformly in negative references. Among matrifocal women, however, the responses yielded a more gender-balanced sphere of influence—men were named 54% of the time, again mainly because of a negative experience such as incest, physical abuse, or alcoholism. But, mothers were named almost as often, and were much more likely to be named as a good influence.

Among patrifocal women, husbands, boyfriends, fathers, and uncles were most likely to be named as the persons who most affected their lives, unfortunately because of incest or physical abuse. Nevertheless, as just illustrated, they still looked to men to lead them out of their dire poverty. For example, Tara, a white woman in her mid-twenties who has six daughters ranging in age from 2 to 10, reported a very unstable childhood, and blamed her
uncle for making her promiscuous and in her words "wild." She described life growing up with anger in her voice:

Abusive. My mother and father were abusive. My father was verbally abusive. My mother was physically abusive. My uncle—my mother’s brother—raped me over four years. My parents denied everything. My parents denied this even though my four cousins said he raped them too. Abuse has been in my family for many generations.

Tara feels that she has settled down now with Tom, who fathered two of her youngest daughters, after she relinquished custody of her three oldest daughters. Tara had a difficult time conceptualizing who could be considered “family” beyond Tom and her three youngest children, even though two of her eldest daughters lived with her mother.

Among matrifocal women, when men were mentioned as being influential, it was also often a negative reference; women were commonly mentioned as positive influences. For example, Judy, quoted above, reported that “my childhood was all right (but I was) getting beat up all the time by my three older brothers.” However, when asked why she came to Lexington from Florida, she said, “I just come back ‘cause I had a child. I just came back so I could be around my mama. With my mama, I’ve got family.”

Some women did relate happy childhood relationships and feeling nurtured and supported during their teenage years. For example, one 18-year-old matrifocal woman named her mother and father, siblings, and her children as her family, and her mother as the person most important to her. She is illustrative of a woman whose concept of family locates herself and her children centrally. She did not include the father of her two children as a member of her family or her household, even though they had one infant not yet a year-old, and she had given birth to their second child a week earlier. Referring to him, she said, “He helps me out with the kids.” Another matrifocal woman, Jackie, who had to quit high school because of pregnancy, also speaks of her mother: “We haven’t always gotten along but she’s always been there for me and loved me.”

I also asked subjects to think about their current situation and for each to name the person who was most important to her at
that moment, excluding her children. Several women had trouble naming anyone, indicative of their current loss of social support. A few women named God or Christ, and one woman insisted on naming her dog. Once again, I found that women’s responses were related to the role of men in their lives. Patrifocal women named men more often—60% of the time—usually husbands and boyfriends. Women who were named included mothers and sisters. On the other hand matrifocal women named other women more often—a corresponding 60% of the time—usually mothers, sisters, and friends, perhaps indicative of their more woman-centered kin networks.

Looking For a Future

Women also mentioned different paths out of their homelessness, depending on their views of family and households. Patrifocal women dreamed of stable traditional families—their current husbands (or each one’s future “Mr. Right”) would be working at good jobs, personal problems such as alcoholism would be resolved, and they would be well housed. Most often these women painted a picture wherein their men would lead them out of the shelter, out of homelessness, usually by being able to earn an income in the classic “good provider” model (Bernard, 1981).

Here are some of the responses patrifocal women gave in answer to the question, “What will happen to you in the next six months?” Note that these patrifocal women often used the plural pronoun “we” to discuss their future, even when they did not have a current partner living with them. They were referring to themselves and a partner and not directly their children nor to their extended kin.

We’ll have a place to live. We will be slightly on our feet—not completely on our feet. I hope we are never here again. I hope we are financially situated, and rebuild our lives again, and be like normal people.

I think we’ll have a place to live. Probably a job.

Things are going to get better. Either my husband and I will get back together or we’ll get divorced and try to work things out afterwards.
I'll get married, get my baby back, and be happy. Make something of my life.

I'll move in with my ex-husband.

Matrifocal women, on the other hand, saw themselves as central to finding the way out of their homelessness. Indeed, many of these women discussed their homelessness as part of a strategy for their individual life plans. They certainly did not wish to be homeless, but saw their situations as part of a larger plan to obtain permanent housing in the future, and to keep their households—their children—intact. If they remained at the shelter for a week or more they would be eligible for priority standing on the waiting list for public housing. One woman told me that she went so far as to plan her college career around being homeless for a short period of time in order to gain special housing for herself and her son, which provided child care. Many of these women kept fairly close contact with their families—their parents, siblings, and other relatives, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

Notice in the following examples how these matrifocal women rarely included male partners in their plans for getting out of homelessness. Whereas the patrifocal women often said, "we'll do . . .," matrifocal women focused on themselves. For example:

I'll be out of school, have a good job, and my own car.

I'm going to start school in January.

I hope to have my G.E.D. and enter college.

I'll get a place, get a couple of sugar daddies, buy the kids new clothes. [Ronda laughed heartily.] Well, you asked me and I'll tell you the truth. [Earlier Ronda openly admitted to prostitution.] Maybe I'll take my husband back. I'll get AFDC checks to get a place.

Hopefully, I'll get an apartment, get back to school, get my life together, and get a job.

I'll have an apartment, a job, and have the kids in day care.

I hope to get a raise, move, and go back to school.
Mr. Right

I will have an apartment to live in and I will either have a job or be going to school so that I can get a job.

DISCUSSION

The fact that matrifocal and patrifocal mothers experience their concept of family and their homelessness differently is demonstrated by the findings presented above. Patrifocal homeless mothers perceived themselves as being in crisis and their men as often the cause and, as they see it, the solution to their family and household problems. Matrifocal mothers, on the other hand, were much more sanguine about their situations. Few reported themselves as being in crisis; rather, they described their homelessness as a transition, another "down on my luck" episode similar to earlier experiences and, in several instances, a strategy to gain public housing more quickly. They often blamed "the system" for the lack of low income housing, which they felt would have kept them from becoming homeless. For example, Judy said:

The housing authority kept on losing my paperwork and now I finally got it all in. Everywhere else I had to be 21 or my income was too low. But it's low income housing—that's what I don't understand. [Emphasis original.]

Risman (1998) argues that while gender structure organizes our lives there is also evidence that actors shape the gender structure they inherit. The women in this study make these distinctions apparent: they are trapped in poverty resulting from gender structure, but through their own agency formulate and reformulate their gender relations. For some, no doubt, gender structure (i.e., poverty, abuse) looms overwhelmingly larger than their ability to make choices, such as gaining work skills, or moving.

Some of the reasons for the differences between matrifocal and patrifocal women stem from the social construction of an ideal "traditional" family in the United States, which is grounded in gender relations. Throughout their lives these homeless mothers were entrapped in a patriarchal system that repeatedly failed them. As children they were assaulted by the very men who had been socialized to support and protect them, but who could or would not. As teens and young adults, they accepted the sole
adult role open to them—motherhood—only to find out that lack of opportunity, domestic violence, and substance abuse ensured that they could not change their circumstances. In their present situations, patrifocal women continue to believe that they would be rescued by a current or future husband and/or by a social system that brands them immoral and blames them for their poverty (for fuller discussions of the latter issue, see, for example, Abromowitz, 1988; Gordon, 1988; Katz, 1989; Katz, 1995).

Yet, both patrifocal and matrifocal homeless mothers in Kentucky are in jeopardy of losing their fight for survival, despite their strategizing. Personal agency can be quite limited when the societal conceptualization of "family" for those in dire poverty is itself located within particular social and political discourses in the United States that offer only three alternative models for survival, all male. Pearce (1990) and Gordon (1990) explain that, for example, poor women have few choices: to rely on (usually poor) men as the family breadwinners; to become second-class or underground workers in a male labor market; or to receive public assistance that differentiates between genders with regard to entitlements (e.g., unemployment insurance, social security, public assistance). All of these models leave poor women in dependent circumstances, barely making ends meet, if that is possible at all.

This societal discourse about poor women is largely framed by others ("experts," politicians, academics), and is often predicated on social control and dominance—for example, requiring single mothers receiving welfare to complete their high school equivalency diplomas and to work after two years of receiving benefits. The irony of the current proposed "stay-at-home" tax benefit for couples as opposed to single mothers would not be lost on these women. The women in my study were well aware that their life chances would probably not change because they passed a G.E.D. examination. Rather, what they need is jobs with fair wages, health-care benefits, and decent housing that they can afford. The best they can hope for are low-wage, service sector jobs probably in the fast-food industry, factory work, or the low end of retail businesses, such as gas stations and convenience stores. Zimmerman and Garkovich (1998) demonstrated that even with the availability of such low-wage jobs, in several rural counties in
Kentucky a hypothetical single mother of two may be unable to remain housed without additional support, because the average wage is approximately half of what is needed for subsistence.

Fraser (1990) suggests that the focus of inquiry must shift from discourses about the needs of poor women to "the politics of needs interpretation." She claims that the interpretation of what people need is not simple or unproblematic, and is often politically contested. When we examine the issues from this perspective, we quickly see the complexity of the issues that surface. For example, if housing is recognized as a basic need for families, what is homelessness? Will housing be provided for needy families? What kind of housing? Who will pay for it? If a woman does not or cannot work, will her family still be able to be housed? Will she be eligible for a "stay-at-home" tax credit?

We must expand on the structural explanation of poverty to include personal agency in the conceptualization of family forms as Jarrett (1994) and Risman (1998) remind us. Thus, if we acknowledge the personal agency that matrifocal homeless women have in defining their families (for example, to exclude the father(s) of their children), then we must also recognize that the decisions they make with regard to setting up households, applying for public assistance, or looking for work will probably be different from those of the patrifocal women who define their families with male partners at the core.

Gordon (1990) also proposes that some women are (more) in control of their situations within the welfare state, and the matrifocal women in this study seem to be trying to exert this power. They are strategizing and struggling to survive, even "using the system" to meet their needs. And, we can also argue that patrifocal women are using the patriarchal system (if not the welfare system) to their perceived best advantage and that of their children. The goals are the same for both groups of women—to survive and provide for their children. Their strategies differ.

Patrifocal women supported the notion that while women may need to work for financial reasons, this role is temporary and secondary to a husband's role as primary breadwinner for the family. This is confirmed by the fact that only one of the patrifocal women whose husbands were present had ever worked
in the formal labor market or was looking for work. This was true as well of patrifocal women who were currently separated or divorced. Furthermore, by conceptualizing their situations as male-centered, they defined their families as "naturally" including husbands if present, but also tended to include men with whom they might have a relationship, using words such as, "Well, now, I guess it is myself and the children," suggesting that the situation would (hopefully) change.

Matrifocal women also expressed personal agency through their plans, strategies, needs or desires to focus on themselves as being at the core of their own and their children's lives rather than on their partners or the children's father(s). They made clear distinctions between households—"myself and my kids"—and "family" that included a larger group of individuals, generally women kin. Often these relatives were not necessarily individuals with whom they had lived, but persons with whom they had strong emotional ties, such as grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and full- and half-siblings, as Collins (1990) and Stack and Burton (1993) discuss. For example, Teresa, a single mother of three pre-teen boys, was not receiving welfare, and vowed that she would manage:

I plan to do better than I'm doing. I'll have a roof over my children's heads. I'll be alive and in good health. I'll provide comfort [for them] and enjoy life with my children.

It is clear that matrifocality and patrifocality constitute the poles of a continuum. Women place themselves along this continuum and at various times, depending upon current circumstances, may modify their position. It seems likely that if the women can achieve a stable balance they will have a far greater chance of becoming or remaining housed. Although none of them felt he was sufficient or necessary for survival, a few of the matrifocal women felt that a man's role could be that of the primary breadwinner. For example, Ronda spoke openly about her prostitution, and several times said she would "sell ass" to get her kids whatever they needed, reporting to me that she would provide for her kids. She was currently sheltered after having suffered a brutal physical attack from her third husband who left
her on the streets alone with her three children. Yet, she expressed her tremendous ambivalence about being alone:

For all the shit my husband has put me through, I still love him. I still believe [that] no matter what happens if you truly love someone there ain’t nothing you can’t fix.

One of the questions that emerges from the new welfare reform statutes is the degree to which homeless mothers may be forced to adopt such a patrifocal approach. If it is not possible for a woman to support her children alone, and the state no longer carries the same share of the burden, she may have to find and rely on a partner. Alternatively, a matrifocal approach would entail increased reliance on additional kinship support.

It is important to consider how these women perceive their social relationships. By doing so we can begin to understand not only the causes and conditions of their homelessness, but also the varying approaches of women to dealing with and improving their situations. To the extent that a woman feels that her future depends upon having a male provider for herself and her children, she may choose different strategies to alleviate her situation than a woman who sees herself as the primary provider. Each woman will attempt to choose those strategies that are in concert with her beliefs and her current situation. For example, one might elect to defer job training in favor of her male partner while another might choose to avail herself of the training.

Gordon (1990) adds another important dimension: the acknowledgment of responsibility along with power. I believe that the homeless women whom I interviewed recognized and accepted the responsibility of heading households and being members of families. What they need is a fair chance at survival. As one woman put it, “There are lots of reasons why people are homeless. Most have an abusiveness factor in common, a feeling of not being in control, a feeling of hopelessness.”

CONCLUSION

This research was exploratory, and these findings should be studied further. Both matrifocal and patrifocal women (and their partners and children) require extensive assistance in dealing
with and recovering from childhood physical and sexual abuse and neglect.

Moreover, welfare change is likely, at least temporarily, to increase homelessness among these women, and women in similar situations who are currently housed but are at-risk of being displaced. All the families I studied needed adequate housing, jobs, and affordable child care if the family (matrifocal or patrifocal) could ever become economically self-sufficient. But, they also needed substance abuse counseling, spousal abuse prevention programs, self-esteem counseling, job training, and equally importantly, life skills training—household management, budgeting, strategies for obtaining and keeping a job, parenting skills, and information on identifying and acquiring community resources. The significant dissimilarities in the roles of men in the families have distinct implications for the provision of services to matrifocal and patrifocal families. And, the provision of services continually crosses the borders between gender structure that perpetuates families in poverty, and gender agency that mediates how individuals negotiate their lives in poverty.

The saliency of certain programs or services is different for families that are male-centered and those that are not. Therefore, in order for distressed families to become housed and remain housed, the above services must be provided with a range of options depending upon where the woman places herself on the matrifocal/patrimonial continuum. For example, patrifocal women are much more likely to be and are desirous of finding themselves in a two-parent situation. Matrifocal women are more likely to be in and are willing to accept a one-parent family. Therefore, needed parenting skills will be different and the training offered to these women should take into account these differences. Likewise, the daycare needs of single-parent families are often quite different from the daycare needs of two-parent families. Also, self-esteem training must be tailored to the role that a woman chooses, either as a patrifocal partner or as a matrifocal single mother after taking into consideration the abuse histories the overwhelming majority of the mothers reported. And as a further example, Brooks and Bruckner (1996) developed a predictive model of factors that facilitate employment possibilities for some single-parent low-income women but that deter others. We need to explore if similar
predictive models of employment possibilities can be developed for matri/patrifocal homeless mothers and fathers.

One of the tragedies for most homeless families is that men are often unable to contribute to a stable environment for themselves, their wives/partners, and their children. Frequently, they are unemployed or underemployed; they are often substance abusers; and they may be spouse abusers as well. The work that lies ahead is to determine—based on the women's conceptualization of family, and the role they desire for men in their lives—how to provide appropriate services to the families as a whole, and to the women and the men individually, to enable them to fulfill their roles. One of the major challenges is to accept that poor, homeless mothers have agency and are entitled to define, for themselves, where they wish to be on the matrifocal/patrifocal continuum.

Camile, a married 24-year-old, rural, patrifocal, mother of four warns us, “Grandma always said that family is like a house. If you don’t have a good foundation, you don’t have nothing.” The agency of homeless mothers to choose the building blocks and definition of their family cannot be denied.

REFERENCES


Cline, Richard. 1996. “He’s Not Mr. Right, He’s More Like Mr. Now.” Cartoon caption in The New Yorker Magazine, October 7, page 76.


