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ABSTRACT

There has been much work on social networks and interpersonal worlds, but until recently little discussion of the unique aspects of women's networks. To examine the factors that constrain or facilitate such female bonding, 43 low-income urban mothers were interviewed. For these respondents, female bonding was a significant aspect of their lives. The people closest to them, who were primary sources of help with childcare and emotional support, were more often women than men. These women lived near their own families and shared a common interest in childrearing which facilitated bonding and outweighed the constraints of the conjugal relationship, isolation, competition with other women, and lack of common economic interests. Membership in a more female world was related to greater self-esteem and emotional well-being. The findings suggest that the promotion of female bonding will improve the quality of women's lives. (JAC)

Female Bonding Among Low Income Mothers

Qualifying Paper

Submitted by

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In other cultures, and at times in our own, bonds between women have been an important aspect of women's lives. The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors that constrain or facilitate such female bonding and to explore the consequences for women of female bonding or the lack of it. I am interested in both the nature of the bond between two women -- the level of intimacy and the kinds of goods and services exchanged -- and in the extent to which women bond with other women in general -- how female their world is. The first part of the paper is a review of selected literature from several fields. The second part of the paper is an analysis of data from the Stress and Families Project's study of low income mothers and depression.

"Female bonding" is a generic term referring to all attachments between women, including mother/daughter, sisters, other kinships, friendships, shared group memberships, and so on. The attachments may carry positive or negative affect -- the salient characteristic is the bond or tie. Female bonding is not synonymous with, but may provide, support, cooperation or solidarity. "Support" conveys a sense of validating an individual's self-image and choice of action. "Cooperation" refers to the association with another for mutual benefit. "Solidarity" has been defined as "a committment to some kind of mutual aid or support based upon the perception, by those who are solidary, that they share certain significant characteristics, or they are equal with respect to some social principle" (Llewelyn-Davies, 1979).

Literature Review

Women's Networks

There has been much work on social networks, or interpersonal worlds, but until recently, little discussion of the unique aspects of women's networks. Lein and Stueve (1978) note that "research on both families and individuals indicates that men and women tend to have networks (1) with different structures, and (2) that provide somewhat different goods and services to the participants." For example, the women of the Flats (Stack, 1974) are involved in a network of daily cooperation and exchange of goods and services like meals, childcare, clothing and rent money.

For women, kin are a significant part of their interpersonal world. Kin are present in almost all networks and play an important role in an individual's life. As Bott (1971) notes, one's kin are especially likely to know each other, making one's social network more interconnected. Relationships with close kin are different from relationships with friends -- "one can find new friends and neighbors, but not new kin" (Bott, 1971). Among the English urban working class families of Bethnal Green, Young and Willmott (1957) found that relatives are a vital means of connecting people with their community, making "the local society a familiar society, filled with people who are not strangers." Komarovsky (1962) also found that kin, especially parents and siblings, are important to the American white working class families of Glenton, whom she studied, providing socialization of the married couple, emotional support, companionship in recreation, emergency financial aid and other services, such as house painting, carpentry or

help in moving. Kin are very important to the poor urban Blacks of the Flats (Stack, 1974) -- and the resources they exchange are even more essential to survival. Kin are so important in this community that friends who become involved in the exchange of resources are considered to be adopted kin. While kin are a part of almost all networks, they appear to play a more important role in women's networks.

One factor contributing to this is the significance of the mother/daughter bond. Different researchers (e.g., Young and Willmott, 1957; Komarovsky, 1962) have found mothers and daughters to be closer than mothers and sons in Western industrialized societies. For example, among the working class families of Glenton (Komarovsky, 1962), 66% of those women whose mothers live in the same town see their mothers several times a week or daily, compared to 52% of the men. Sixty-two percent of all the women in the sample were considered to be close or very close to their mothers, sharing their experiences with them, seeing them as frequently as circumstances permit, and expressing positive feelings towards them. Only 48% of the men were considered to be close or very close to their mothers.

Other female-female bonds, in addition to the mother/daughter bond, can be significant in women's networks. Stack talks about the importance of adult female kin in the domestic networks of the Flats. Domestic networks are generally organized around cooperating adult female kin who may pool financial resources, shop together, and/or care for each other's children. Changes in the household composition are based on links between children and adult females, such as the child's mother, mother's mother, mother's sister and so on. These kin

networks generally acknowledge the domestic authority of women.

Bott (1971) describes the close-knit network of one working class family in which a nucleus of women are the mainstay of the network, organizing the large gatherings of kin at weddings, funerals and christenings, persuading male relatives to help one another get jobs, and doing most of the visiting and small acts of mutual aid.

Women friends are also important in women's networks. Komarovsky (1962) found that, while her working class couples socialize as a couple with other non-kin couples, any socializing as individuals is done with same-sex friends. In addition, two-thirds of the women in her sample have confidants outside their marriage; all but two of these are women.

Emotional Intimacy

In a review of the literature on male friendship and intimacy, Tognoli (1980) notes "there is a myth in our culture that the greatest friendships are those between men. Although it is true that men seem to prefer the company of other men rather than of women, the intimacy level, the strength and the context of this bond must be examined carefully." Much of male social contact with other men occurs in formalized settings and in male groups, such as at school, at work, in sports and the military. In his review of the literature on male friendships, Lewis (1978) came to a similar conclusion. He notes; "although males report more same-sex friendships than women do, most of these are not close, intimate, or characterized by self-disclosure."[1]

[1] It is important to note that all of the studies covered by Tognoli and Lewis are of United States men. In contrast, Johnson and Johnson (1975) found that, at least in work organization patterns, male-male cooperation is less frequent than female-female cooperation among the Machiguenga.

These writers suggest that an important element in bonding is the contrast between comradeship and friendship or intimacy. Comradeship is more typical of male bonding; friendship or emotional intimacy is more typical of female bonding.

Such emotional intimacy is often seen as synonymous with dependency. However, Daly (1978) argues that this is not necessarily the case, as long as female bonding is based in a strong sense of self. Daly states that comradeship, or male bonding, involves the suppression of self-awareness and is epitomized in the bonding of soldiers in war who experience a "loss of self, caught up in the fire of communal ecstasy." Friendship, as defined by Daly, involves self-esteem (seeing the Female Self as friend, not enemy) and an acknowledgement of one's "radical aloneness". Friendship, then means "loving our own freedom, loving/encouraging the freedom of the other, the friend..." and thereby avoiding dependency or the danger of "binding instead of bonding".

Another important aspect of female bonding and emotional intimacy is the level of cooperation associated with this. Again, contrasts between female bonding and male bonding highlight this. Miller (1976) sees bonding, or affiliation, as central to women's lives. Although both women and men need affiliation, it is women who develop in a context of attachment and affiliation to others. As a result, women's sense of self becomes organized around being able to make and maintain affiliations. By contrast, men's sense of self becomes organized around aggression, which interferes with affiliation. Pleck (1974) suggests that competition interferes with emotional intimacy between men. Vinacke (1959) notes that "men are concerned with winning, whereas women are more oriented

towards working out an equitable outcome, as satisfactory as possible to all participants." This is essentially what Gilligan (1977) found in her study of women's morality.

Sociocultural Context of Female Bonding

Female bonding is not equally likely to occur in all societies, nor with the same level of emotional intimacy or resource exchange. The extent of female bonding is related to certain sociocultural factors, including contact with other women, economic autonomy of women, common interests among women, competition between women, segregation of the sexes, conjugal intimacy and cross-sex antagonism.

Contact with other women. One of the first requirements for a bond to form and endure is contact. Collier (1974) suggests that a necessary condition to the formation of formal women's groups is a dense rather than a scattered settlement pattern. In a study of a babysitting exchange, Coombs (1973) found that women whose apartments faced on to the same courtyard interacted more often and developed ties of trust that facilitated the exchange of childcare. Certain residence patterns, such as matrilocality, sororal polygyny or virilocality under certain conditions can also bring women together and facilitate bonding (Quinn, 1977; Leis, 1974).

Common interests. Another factor that facilitates female bonding is common interests, particularly economic interests. Quinn lists as one factor facilitating the formation of solidarity groups the existence of trading activities which foster trade associations. Nelson (1979) saw the solidarity of the Mathare women of Kenya as a function of, among other factors, a common economic interest -- the brewing of

beer -- which required cooperation and coordination among the women. After reviewing a few ethnographies, Johnson and Johnson (1975) conclude: "These ethnographic cases seem to imply that cooperation in work generates cohesive social relations. Where husbands and wives cooperate, as among the Irish, their social relations are close; where women cooperate with women, as among the Mundurucú and Iroquois, women's solidarity is with other women." In their study of the Machiguenga, Johnson (1980) found a high frequency of women cooperating in work with other women and a higher than expected level of intimacy, as measured by food exchanges at mealtimes, between women.

These authors have all referred to common interests in "productive" labor. In a middle-class London suburb (Cohen, 1979) and among poor urban United States Blacks (Stack, 1974) women also developed patterns of cooperation based on their shared responsibility for childrearing. The salient feature is that women perceive their own interests to be in accord with the interests of other women and to be furthered by cooperation.

Conflict between women. When women's interests seem to lie with men, their children or their family unit, but not with other women, female bonding is not likely (Quinn, 1977). In a comparison of two polygynous societies, Leis (1974) found that one factor related to the development of women's solidarity was competition between co-wives. Among the Patani, the mother-in-law was initially responsible for feeding her son's wives and their children; the co-wives did not need to compete for resources. In contrast, among the Korokorsei, economic welfare is an individual matter, and co-wives compete with each other.

Therefore, there was more solidarity among the Patani women who did not need to compete, than among the Korokorsei.

Among the Rajputs of India where women live in a courtyard with other women, there are often conflicts and strained relationships between women because each woman's interests lie with her husband and/or sons and conflict with those of other women (Minturn and Hitchcock, 1966). Caplan (1979) concluded that the major reason why upper-middle and upper-class women's organizations of India do not provide examples of active female solidarity is because "many of the members use the organizations as a means of maintaining or gaining status, and women are placed in a situation of competition with each other." These organizations also seek to preserve social class interests, at the expense of those interests these women share with women from other classes and castes. Naish (1979) also listed competition as one factor constraining solidarity among the women of Desirade in the French Carribean. Because it is acceptable for men to have more than one sexual relationship at one time but unacceptable for women to do so, women view each other as sexual competitors.

Economic autonomy of women. Another factor which facilitates female bonding is the economic autonomy of women (Leis, 1974; Quinn, 1977; Naish, 1979). Such autonomy reduces women's reliance on men for their economic welfare which reduces the likelihood of competition between women. It also facilitates the development of female economic cooperation and of female work groups which encourages female bonding.

Segregation of the sexes. The segregation of the sexes into separate spheres has been seen as both a bane for women (Lamphere, 1974) and a

boon (Cott, 1977). Quinn (1977) outlines the evidence that women's isolation in the domestic sphere requires women to rely on men to mediate their access to the public world; when this happens, women's sexual freedom, personal autonomy, and legal rights are circumscribed. Cott (1977) presents the various arguements well and concludes that; whatever else segregation of the sexes and the existance of a separate women's sphere may mean for women, in nineteenth century United States, it also meant the development of the concept of "womanhood", and of "sisterhood", or intimate female bonding, as the expression of that shared consciousness. Whether or not this is the case in other situations depends on some of the other factors mentioned here.

Conjugal intimacy and cross-sex antagonism. In some societies the sexes are segregated, in others a strong incest taboo reduces contact between women and men, and in others a high level of male bonding is evident. What happens to husband/wife intimacy in these situations, and what is the relationship between conjugal intimacy and female bonding? In a cross-cultural study of a sample of the world's societies, Whiting and Whiting (1975) found a probable constellation of behaviors related to reduced husband/wife intimacy, including rooming apart of husbands and wives, low involvement of the husbands in other aspects of domestic life, and high male bonding ("the husband spends most of his time in the company of other men in some space that is not frequented by women.") Leis (1974) suggests that polygyny, even though husbands may still sleep with a wife, reduces the closeness of women with men and facilitates female bonding.

The work of Johnson and Johnson (1975, 1980) presents a more complex

picture. The segregation of the sexes during work and a strong incest taboo seem related to reduced intimacy between women and men in general. However, as noted above, work cooperation among women is associated with greater than expected intimacy between women. In addition, women also work cooperatively with their husbands which is reflected in higher conjugal intimacy. In comparing the Machiguenga to the Mundurucú (Murphy and Murphy, 1974) the Johnsons note:

> ... Machiguenga work cooperation includes husband/wife cooperation as well as female work groups. The Mundurucú appear to have a greater degree of female solidarity, but it occurs in the virtual absence of husband/wife cooperation and is accompanied by institutionalized sex antagonism. Machiguenga female cohesion is cross-cut by husband/wife interdependence, which dampens the kind of sex antagonism found among the Mundurucú...

Their work suggests that conjugal intimacy does not preclude female bonding (nor vice versa) and that an important mediating variable is the level of cross-sex hostility. Nelson (1979) found that the sex antagonism in Mathare, as evidenced in the women's distrust of men and the denigration of Mathare women as filthy prostitutes, heightened the women's sense of mutual responsibility and sisterhood.

Psychosocial factors. Psychodynamics, role continuity and early socialization experiences have all been advance as factors facilitating the existance of female bonding. These clearly function in the maintenance of, and individual experience of, such bonds. However, I believe such factors are best seen as an image, or reflection, caste upon individuals from the social structure -- a very real image, but

not understandable without an appreciation of the societal reality. The Whiting and Whiting (1975) Model for Psycho-Cultural Research proposes a similar connection -- the behavior and values of individuals and groups come from the background of environment, history, social structure, and so on. How these background factors are translated into emotional experiences and the psychosocial development of individuals is complex.

One connection is through the roles associated with social institutions. For example, Young and Willmott (1957) found very close bonds between mothers and daughters. They explain this bond on the basis of role continuity -- in Bethnal Green, the daughter's role is identical to her mother's and is centered around the raising of children. This role continuity is possible because of the economic and social structure of that community. Smith-Rosenberg (1975) also saw the relative stability of the mother's domestic role during the nineteenth century in the United States as central to the close mother/daughter relationships of that time; daughters tended to accept their mothers' world and to turn to other women for support and intimacy.

Another connection between sociocultural factors and female bonding is in the early childhood experiences shaped by society. After reviewing the available research on sex differences in sociability, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) conclude:

> Any differences that exist in the 'sociability' of the two sexes are more of kind than of degree. Boys are highly oriented toward a peer group and congregate in larger groups; girls associate in pairs or small groups of agemates, and may be somewhat more oriented toward adults, although the evidence of this is weak.

Whiting (1980) notes that it is the settings that a child frequents and the characters in those settings that are most powerful in shaping interpersonal behavior. Eder and Halliman (1978) point out that dyads are more conducive to intimate behavior than are large groups; this may contribute to more intimate female bonding.

Miller (1976) suggests other ways in which sociocultural factors may be translated into psychological characteristics and interpersonal behavior. She focuses specifically on the inequality of women and men in the United States and its psychological manifestations. In discussing bonding, or affiliation, she notes that males are encouraged to move out of the initial intense involvemnt with people in infancy and early childhood, while females are encouraged to remain enmeshed. Women continue to develop in the context of affiliation; as a result, women's sense of self becomes organized around being able to make and maintain affiliations and relationships.

Consequences of Female Bonding

The existence or non-existence of attachments between individual women and among women as a group affects the quality of women's lives. Female bonding may be related to the availability of emotional support and needed goods and services, the existence of female solidarity, women's ability to influence the world around them, their self-esteem and their general emotional well-being.

Emotional support and intimacy. There has been much recent research devoted to the exploration of the role of supportive relationships as a buffer against emotional distress. Miller and Ingham (1976) found that women without a nearby intimate confidant had more severe

psychological symptoms than women with such a confidant; Henderson, et. al. (1978) found a strong association between neurosis and the lack of strong affectional ties. Intimate emotional support was an effective buffer against depression for women in difficult life circumstances or who had suffered important losses (Brown, et. al., 1975). Lowenthal and Haven (1968) also found that having close confiding relationships reduced feelings of depression. Finally, the Stress and Families Project (Belle, 1980) found that women who never had someone to tell how they were really feeling reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety and reported feeling less control over their own lives.

In these studies, the confidants or intimates may have been husbands, mothers, sisters or friends. This raises the question of whether female bonding is of particular importance. It is necessary to note that, in the United States and many other societies, intimate relationships between women and men who are not married or in a sexual union is problematic if not prohibited. As noted earlier in this paper (Miller, 1976; Lewis, 1980), women's attachments to other women are more likely to be intimate than are attachments between men. Bernard (1976) argues that, for various reasons, men in twentieth century United States are generally unable to provide the intimacy and emotional support that women expect and need. Pearlin (1975) notes that female bonds can "serve as sources of emotional support" conceding that "the immediate family [read 'husband and children'] simply cannot satisfy by itself the full range of emotional and affiliative needs of women".

Emotional support and intimacy are important to women. In a

society where close relationships with men outside of the conjugal relationship are discouraged and where men are less likely to be able to provide adequate emotional support to women, female bonding may be expected to be an important source of emotional support for women.

Resource exchange. Earlier in this paper, we described social networks in different communities and some of the resources exchanged between women in these networks, including childcare, information and money (Bott, 1971; Stack, 1974; Young and Willmott, 1957; Komaroysky, 1962). Miller (1976) argues that one of the results of female bonding or affiliation is cooperation. Coombs (1973) found that ties of trust between women were partly responsible for the development of ties of obligation between women in a babysitting cooperative; both types of ties facilitate the exchange of childcare.

Cooperation and the exchange of resources may also serve as a buffer against emotional distress. For example, Belle (1980) found that women who could count on regular childcare help from others had fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, a stronger sense of control over their lives and higher self-esteem.

Access to resources. When sexual segregation exists, and one sex controls a resource, same-sex bonding will affect an individual's access to resources. For example, Lipman-Blumen (1976) argues that the organization of United States society into separate worlds of women and men limits women to resources in the domestic sphere. "For ordinary purposes, women are excluded from the important realms of social life, except as adjuncts to men or until those realms lose their importance" (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Among the Saloio women of

Portugal, Riegelhaupt (1967) notes that, because of the greater contact between women than between men or between women and men outside the family, Saloio women have greater access to information about village indiyiduals and events than do men. The consequences of female bonding for access to resources varies, depending on the resources allocated to each sex and the significance of those resources.

The costs of bonding. In addition to intimate emotional support and concrete goods and services, female bonding can provide a degree of social connectedness. Pearlin and Johnson (1975) found that women who had lived in the same neighborhood awhile, who had good friends close by and who belonged to voluntary associations were less likely to report being depressed. Miller and Ingham (1976) found that people who felt that they knew more people in their neighborhoods and at work reported fewer physical and psychological symptoms. Henderson, et. al. (1978) found a weak relationship between neurosis and the lack of relationships with friends and acquaintances.

However, several studies have found that the degree of social involvement is not related to emotional well-being (Brown, et. al., 1975; Andrews, et. al., 1978; Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Belle, 1980). Belle suggests that the extent of involvement is not always a good indication of social support. Relationships bring with them both benefits and costs, in the form of mutual obligation and stress (Belle, 1980; Stack, 1974). Fischer (1977) suggests that it is the element of choice that determines the adequacy of support received from social obligations. Low income mothers, in particular, do not have the option of paying for services but must rely on mutually

obligatory and potentially stressful relationships. Therefore, although these relationships may provide social support, the costs effectively cancel out the benefits of this support for emotional well-being.

In addition to the costs associated with mutual obligation, other factors which cause strained relationships between women may also be seen as costs. For example, it was noted above that competition between women is possible in certain sociocultural contexts (e.g., Quinn, 1977; Naish, 1979). Women have also been described as dependent (e.g., Millett, 1970). Bonds with women who are competitive or dependent could exact additional costs.

Solidarity. LLewelyn-Davies (1979) defines solidarity as "a committment to some kind of mutual aid or support, based upon the perception, by those who are solidary, that they share certain significant characteristics, or that they are equal with respect to some social principle". Cott (1977) traces the connections between female bonding and the emergence of a "women's sphere" in 19th century America, the awakening of a consciousness of "womanhood" and its affective expression as "sisterhood", and the rise of solidarity on the basis of sex and of "women's rights". Many authors have argued that solidarity is a crucial factor in women's ability to exercise political power and to take control of their own lives (e.g., Quinn, 1977; Caplan and Bujra, 1979).

In summary, the literature indicates that female bonding may provide emotional support which can buffer the severity of emotional distress in difficult life circumstances. Bonds between women can also facilitate

the exchange of important resources and onformation. However, female bonding can also bring with it the costs of mutual obligation and stress, and in a highly sex-segregated society, may be associated with limited access to certain resources. Finally, when bonding leads to a consciousness of "womanhood" and to solidarity, it can contribute to greater control over their own lives and greater self-esteem for women.

Questions

The literature suggests several questions to be considered in the second part of this paper when we look at female bonding in a sample of urban low income mothers of young children. The first set of questions concern the nature and extent of female bonding:

1. How female are the worlds of these women?
2. Is there emotional support and intimacy between women?
3. What goods and services are exchanged with women?

In order to understand female bonding and the answers to the above questions, it is important to understand the sociocultural context of these low income mothers. The important factors to be considered are: contact with other women, common economic interests, common interests in childrearing, competition between women, segregation of the sexes, conjugal intimacy and cross-sex antagonism.

Another set of questions are about the consequences of female bonding for the women's quality of life:

1. What are the costs of female bonding?
2. What are the correlates of emotional support?
3. What are the implications of female bonding for resource exchange?
4. What impact does solidarity have on these women's lives?

Sample and Method

The Stress and Families Project conducted a study of low income mothers and depression. The Project staff interviewed 43 women who were mothers of at least one child between the ages of 5 and 7 and who were living on an income that was less than or equal to the Title XX poverty line (see Table 1). The sample was selected so that approximately half of these women were Black, half were White; half of the sample lived with a male partner, half did not. All of these women lived in the Boston area.

Table 1
Title XX Cut-off Levels by Family Size

Family Size	Income Cut-off	Family Size	Income Cut-off
1	$5,200	5	$10,900
2	7,300	6	11,900
3	8,800	7	13,000
4	9,900		

The respondents were interviewed in-depth over a period of several months on such topics as daily activities, social relationships, work experience, parenting, stressful life conditions and events, discrimination, experience with institutions like welfare and their children's schools, family history and mental health. The interviews were a mixture of open-ended and forced choice items and provided both qualitative and quantitative data. Several standard measures of mental health were used, including the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), the Anxiety Section of the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist, the Pearlin Mastery Scale, and the Rosenberg Self-esteem

Scale (see Dill, 1980, for more information).

The Stress and Families Project developed a measure of the life conditions that give rise to the experience of stress, worry or upset called Life Conditions Stressors, and referred to as "stressful life conditions" in this paper. This measure consists of 11 scales containing items concerning life conditions in 11 areas (employment, family, friends, health, mental health, intimate relations, law or police, living conditions or housing, money, education and parenting). The Project also developed a measure of the extent of stress experienced by the respondent in response to conditions in each of the 11 areas, called Life Conditions Stress and referred to as "worries or concerns" in this paper. The Life Conditions Stress score is the respondent's rating of the amount of stress or worry, on a scale of 1 to 100, that each of the 11 areas caused her at the time of the interview. The Life Conditions Stressors scores were significantly related to the relevant Stress score at the .10 level or better, except for employment and education (see Makosky, 1980, for more information).

In the interview about social networks, the respondents were asked to name those individuals who were most important to them. One measure of female bonding -- of the femaleness of one's intimate world -- was the proportion of "important others" (excluding the respondent's children) who are women. For example, a respondent who listed her mother, her husband, her brother and sister and two female friends would receive a score of .67 on "femaleness of intimate world". A woman who listed only her mother would receive a score of 1.00. There is a danger that more isolated women might appear to be more female bonded than women

with larger networks. However, there was no relationship between the size of a respondent's network and the femaleness of her intimate world. A proportion score was used, rather than the absolute number of women, to correct for idiosyncratic (random) variation in the number of people named as "important others".

In the same interview, the respondents were asked if they received help with childcare in emergency and nonemergency situations, household repairs, transportation, problems with the children, finding a job, a family illness or death, or money matters. A second measure of female bonding -- of the extent to which a respondent relies on women for concrete resources -- was the proportion of task areas in which a respondent was helped only by women. In other words, if a woman named only women in 4 of the 8 task areas (e.g., emergency childcare, finding a job, money matters and household repairs) she would receive a score of .50 on the measure of relying on women for concrete resources. The respondents were also asked who, if anyone, they told good news to, who they chose to be with when feeling down or depressed, who they talked to about personal problems, and who knew them best. The proportion of questions in response to which a respondent named only women was used as a measure of the extent to which she relies on women for emotional support. These latter two measures were also combined to yield a proportion that represents the respondent's overall reliance on women.

Some of the respondents said that they relied on women and men for specific resources. From the data, it was impossible to tell how much help each individual offered; if relying on women and men had been included in calculating the reliance on women scores, it would have

been impossible to sort out bonding with women from bonding with men. Therefore, the more conservative measure of female bonding -- relying only on women -- was used. This does mean that a woman who relies heavily on her women friends, in addition to relying on her male partner, would receive no credit for these bonds with her women friends. It is also important to note that these measures can not be contrasted with receiving help or support from men. They can only be contrasted with receiving help from all other sources, including institutions, self-reliance, men, women and men for the same resource, and no help at all.

The data on female bonding has been analyzed primarily using correlations and multiple regressions. Unless otherwise noted, all correlations are Pearson product moment correlation coefficients, and all multiple regressions are done stepwise and with hierarchical inclusion, so that variables enter one at a time with the most highly correlated variable entering first, and so on.

Results

Although no one respondent is "typical", Ms. Jones is an illustrative example of female bonding among low income mothers. She is 30 years old and lives in a Boston neighborhood with her husband and their 3 children. One of her brothers and his wife, one of her sisters and 3 close women friends live in the same neighborhood. Her cousin Debbie lives in the Boston area. Her best friend Mary, whom she has known for over 10 years, now lives in New York City. Her mother

and grandmother both live in Georgia. These are the people Ms. Jones names as most important to her. She received a score of .82 on the femaleness of her intimate world. Ms. Jones sees her husband, their children, her sister and 2 of her friends daily, and talks to her brother every day. She sees her cousin and a third friend several times a month and talks to her mother that often. She also has friends at work with whom she talks over problems, but she doesn't see them outside of work.

When Ms. Jones needs someone to watch the children, she can call on her sister, the woman who lives downstairs or her sister-in-law. Her husband, who she calls a "Mr. Fix-It", takes care of household repairs. She relies on friends, family and neighbors to take her shopping, to watch the children when she's sick, or to help out with money matters. When Ms. Jones has some good news, she tells her husband. When she's feeling down, she prefers to be alone. She talks over her personal problems with her sister-in-law who lives nearby, and says that, other than herself, its her friend Mary in New York who understands her best. Ms. Jones received a score of .25 on relying on women for concrete resources and a score of .50 on relying on women for emotional support.

Not all of the respondents who have a high level of female bonding have as frequent contact with others, name as many important others or have the same ratio of friends to family as does Ms. Jones. However, the pattern of more connections with women and relying on women, particularly for childcare and emotional support, is common. On the average, a respondent's world of "important others" is 65% women, with

a. range from no women to all women. Ten percent of the respondents nevery rely solely on women for help with concrete resources. Twenty-three of the respondents rely only on women for at least one quarter of the types of resources mentioned above (e.g., emergency childcare or household repairs). Fourteen respondents never indicated relying solely on women as a source of emotional support; sixteen turn to women almost exclusively or exclusively.

Women's Resources

An important aspect of many relationships is the exchange of resources, such as those listed in Table 2. The low income mothers interviewed by the Stress and Families Project were more likely to receive help with childcare than with other tasks. According to the literature, in a sex-segregated society resources may be predominantly in the domain of one sex or the other. This is true for childcare among low income mothers -- help with childcare came predominantly from women.

Table 2
Source of Resources*

Resources	Only Women	Only Men	Both Women and Men	Self	Other	N
emergency childcare	27 (64%)	0 (0%)	12 (29%)	2 (3%)	1 (2%)	42
regular childcare	20 (56%)	3 (8%)	4 (11%)	5 (14%)	4 (11%)	36
nonemer. childcare	18 (55%)	3 (9%)	3 (9%)	7 (21%)	2 (6%)	33
problems w/children	4 (10%)	6 (15%)	2 (5%)	19 (48%)	9 (23%)	40
family illness	3 (11%)	3 (11%)	12 (44%)	8 (30%)	2 (7%)	27
household repairs	1 (3%)	11 (28%)	4 (10%)	13 (33%)	11 (28%)	40
transportation	5 (14%)	6 (17%)	5 (15%)	16 (46%)	3 (9%)	35
money matters	3 (9%)	7 (21%)	2 (6%)	20 (59%)	2 (6%)	34
tell good news to	17 (43%)	12 (30%)	8 (20%)	0 (0%)	3 (8%)	40
be with when down	12 (29%)	11 (26%)	3 (7%)	13 (31%)	3 (7%)	42
tell problems to	21 (51%)	8 (20%)	6 (15%)	3 (7%)	3 (7%)	41
"understands me"	24 (57%)	9 (21%)	6 (14%)	3 (7%)	0 (0%)	42

* percentages are across rows (i.e., the percent of help from this source with this particular resource) and are based on all respondents for whom data is available.

Over one-third of the sample had to, or chose to, rely on themselves for help with household repairs, problems with children, transportation, finding a job and taking care of money matters. Both women and men helped out during a family illness or death.

Emotional support is another important "resource" derived from a relationship. The respondents would tell good news to both women and men (especially to family and to male partners), and would choose to be alone or with a woman or a man when they felt down or depressed. However, they were twice as likely to tell their personal problems to women rather than men, and twice as likely to feel that it was a woman who understood them best, rather than a man.

For this sample, at least, assistance with childcare and emotional support are highly associated with women. This is not surprising in a society where nurturance is seen as women's responsibility. Raising children, especially young children, is a task performed predominantly by women. Understanding other people and emotional expressivity are traits generally associated with women. Combined with the societal expectations of nurturance from women are the effects of the de facto sexual segregation of this society. Men are generally not available to help with childcare much of the day and often have less familiarity with the task. Because men's lives differ from women's lives, they do not have a comparable experience to aid them in understanding women or in listening to women's personal problems.

Sociocultural Context

These women live in worlds that are more female than male, where women are important sources of help with childcare and of emotional support. The literature reviewed above suggested several factors related to such female bonding, including contact with other women, common economic interests, a common interest in childrearing, competition between women, segregation of the sexes, conjugal intimacy and antagonism between the sexes.

Contact with other women. Urban living and nearby family facilitate female bonding among these women, while the nuclear family constrains it. These women live in densely settled cities which makes contact between women more likely. However, they live in nuclear families, sharing a residence with their children, and, for the coupled women, with a male partner. Only 2 respondents lived with siblings and none lived with their parents at the time of the interviews. The nuclear family physically separates adult women from other adult women. In addition, when domestic labor is organized around the home and a small nuclear family, contact with other women is less likely. However, many of these women do live near family. For example, 16% live within walking distance of their mothers, another 23% have mothers living in the Boston area.

Common economic interests. These low income mothers do not have common economic interests with other women. In the United States, women working full-time earn 59¢ for every $1.00 a man earns. This, combined with the cultural value of the nuclear family, means that a woman's economic interests lie with the husband/wife unit. It might be argued that a low

income woman has less economic stake in a nuclear family because there is simply less money in the family unit. However, a low income woman still earns proportionally less than a low income man of comparable education. Her economic survival may simply require that both she and her partner are employed.

Many low income mothers are also single parents and might conceivably have greater economic autonomy and a higher level of female bonding. However, in the Stress and Families sample, a single mother is no more likely to have a more female intimate world than a coupled mother. Single mothers are no more likely than coupled mothers to perceive a common economic interest with other women.

A low income woman on AFDC (Aid to Families of Dependent Children) has some economic autonomy from an individual man but must rely on the government. In the Stress and Families sample, the proportion of family income from AFDC is not related to the femaleness of the woman's intimate world. For low income mothers, the appearance of economic autonomy from a male partner is not enough to counteract their lack of autonomy within the economic system or to contribute to a common economic interest with other women.

Common interest in childrearing. United States society is not organized to facilitate cooperative childrearing. However, there is a tradition, at least among certain groups, of female kin and friends helping with day-to-day childcare. In fact, the pressures of motherhood are significantly related to the femaleness of a woman's intimate world in the Stress and Families sample (see Table 3). Although several variables were at least marginally related to the femaleness of a

Table 3
Variables Related to
Femaleness of a Woman's Intimate World

	Femaleness of Intimate World
Respondent's age	.22*
Respondent's race	-.10
Employment status	.11
Respondent's education	-.24*
Lives with male partner	-.04
Mother lives nearby	-.06
Per capita income	-.07
Hours spent alone with children	.29**
Number of children	.31**

*p<.10; **p<.05

woman's intimate world, the number of children was most strongly related. After controlling for the number of children, the only variable that is still significantly related is that of the number of hours a mother spends alone with her children. These two variables together (in a multiple regression equation) explain 14% of the variance in the femaleness of a woman's intimate world ($F = 2.59$, $p<.10$). Other variables do not add much to the amount of variance predicted. This suggests that, within the broader sociocultural context of these women's lives, major motherhood responsibilities contribute to greater female bonding.

Competition between women. A factor that may act against female bonding is the existance of competition between women. Because a woman's economic interest is linked to getting economic support from a man,

competition between women for men is possible. Also, because society links a woman's value to the success or worth of her children, there can be competition over children. When the Stress and Families respondents spoke about women, specifically their women friends, they did talk about competition and jealousy over men and over children. However, most of the time they talked about emotional support or exchange with their women friends and about reciprocity; conflicts were tied to a friend not observing the mutuality of exchanges by either asking for too much or giving too little. Statistically, having a greater proportion of women among one's "important others" was not related to more competitiveness with friends. These women's relationships are not without competition and conflict; however, these aspects are not so intense as to prohibit female bonding.

Segregation of the sexes. In other societies, and at other times in our own, the segregation of the sexes has clearly contributed to bonding among women, particularly when it yields a sense of "the shared lot of women". The Stress and Families respondents live in a world where women and men are not formally segregated. However, there is de facto segregation in many areas. Although women and men are both employed, most women work in a narrow range of occupations that are largely considered "women's work" (Tebbetts, 1980). Outside of the family or conjugal relationship, intimacy between a woman and a man is considered suspect of not dangerous and is discouraged. Within the family, the division of labor means that a woman's activities are centered around caring for children and other family members to a much greater extent than are the man's activities. These factors mean that, particularly

for mothers, women's lives are segregated from men's lives. This segregation of the sexes could contribute to female bonding. The relationship between mothering responsibilities and the femaleness of a woman's intimate world in this sample lends some support to this. Also, over half of the women spoke spontaneously, in response to the question "What does being a woman mean to you", about the common lot of women. This adds support to the proposed relationship between segregation of the sexes and a consciousness of "womanhood".

Conjugal intimacy and cross-sex antagonism. Most of the literature suggests that any factors that reduce conjugal intimacy, such as male bonding or sex antagonism, will increase female bonding. There is at least the myth of male bonding in the United States (Lewis, 1980) and a high level of cross-sex antagonism as evidenced in the high rates of wife abuse and rape (every 18 seconds a woman is beaten in the United States; 1 out of every 3 women will be raped in her life time -- FBI estimates). At the same time, conjugal intimacy is also highly valued.

The Stress and Families respondents did spontaneously report incidents of wife abuse and rape; the Project did not systematically collect such information. When the respondents spoke about their relationships with a male partner, they talked sometimes about support, companionship and enjoyment, about financial support and help in raising children. They also talked sometimes about feeling restricted by a man's needs and less in control of their own lives. However, their relationships with men and the level of conjugal intimacy do not appear to be related to the extent to which their intimate world consists of women. The femaleness

of a woman's intimate world was not related to whether or not she lived with a male partner. Nor was it related to the quality of her relationships with men; this was true for both coupled and single women.

Summary. No one of these factors can be considered in isolation. Together they create a picture of conditions that keep women apart counteracted by conditions that facilitate female bonding. The extent of conjugal intimacy is not related to the femaleness of a woman's intimate world. The nuclear family, the lack of common economic interests with other women, and the potential for competition between women constrain female bonding. Contact with other women in an urban setting and with family nearby, the valuing of mutuality between women friends, the de facto segregation of the sexes and a sense of womanhood for many women, a high level of sex antagonism and a strong common interest with other women in childrearing facilitate female bonding among these low income mothers.

Factors Related to Relying on Women

The preceding section described the sociocultural context of having a highly female social world. A second aspect of female bonding is the reliance on women for emotional support and resources such as childcare or transportation. As noted above, the extent to which Stress and Families respondents received assistance only from women is a measure of female bonding. They may have received help with emergency or non-emergency childcare, problems with their children, household repairs, transportation, money matters or a family illness or death, as well as emotional support (having someone to whom to tell good news or personal

problems, having someone with whom to be when feeling depressed, or having someone who understands the respondent best). Overall, respondents rely solely on women for 31% of the types of assistance listed. Five respondents never rely solely on women; six rely on women for more than half of the types of assistance. A total of 27 (63%) receive help or support only from women with more than one-quarter of the tasks.

Why are some women more likely than others to rely on women? The discussion in the preceding section suggests some possible factors. First, the availability of other women, as indicated by the femaleness of a respondent's intimate world, is highly related to relying on women ($r = .39$; $p < .005$). From a correlation it is not clear whether having a high proportion of women in her intimate world means a respondent is more likely to turn to a woman for help, or if a respondent's world of "important others" is made up of those people from whom she can expect assistance and support. I would suggest that both operate at the same time -- a respondent draws from her immediate social world those people on whom she chooses to rely for assistance and she chooses as her "important others" those individuals to whom she has been able to turn for help.

Secondly, the preceding section suggests that a combination of common interests with other women and good relationships with women would contribute to relying on women for assistance and support. In fact, this is the case for these women. A multiple regression of stressful life conditions on the respondents' scores on relying on women indicates that stressful conditions in the four areas of health, mental health, friends and living environment account for 30% of the variance in

the respondents' relying on women ($F = 3.94$; $p < .01$) (see Table 4). Women whose health is poor enough to require medical treatment and to interfere with their activities and who have seen a counselor because of their emotional distress, but who have good relationships with their friends and do not live in dangerous or overly crowded housing or neighborhoods that make trusting others difficult, are more likely to rely heavily on women.

Table 4
Multiple Regression of Stressful Life Conditions on Relying on Women

Area	R Square	Beta	Simple R
Health	.162	.57	.40**
Friends	.236	-.49	-.05
Mental Health	.267	.16	.31*
Living Environment	.299	-.22	-.16
Parenting	.319	.30	.19
Intimate Relations	.336	.32	.07

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

Looking at the next two variables to enter the equation, we note that having more stressful conditions associated with parenting and more difficulties with intimate relationships (either a high level of conflict with a male partner or being socially isolated if not with a male partner) contributes to greater reliance on women ($F = 2.95$; $p < .025$). This raises the question of the role of conjugal intimacy in female bonding. A simple correlation of stressful intimate relations conditions with relying on women is nonsignificant (see Table 4). When the level of conjugal intimacy of coupled women is considered separately, the relationship is still nonsignificant ($r = .18$; NS). It is only in conjunction with other stressful conditions that the

quality of a conjugal relationship is significant.

Women who have stressful life conditions in the areas of physical and emotional well-being and in parenting -- all areas shared with other women and that women's resources could be expected to alleviate -- may have a greater need for female bonding. When a conjugal relationship is not able to provide concrete and emotional support or when a single woman is socially isolated without a male partner, and when relationships with women friends and neighbors are good, these highly stressed women are likely to rely heavily on women for assistance and emotional support.

Female Bonding and the Quality of Life

The literature reviewed in the first part of this paper found that female bonding is related to the quality of women's lives. It can bring the costs associated with obligation and with competition and dependency between women. Bonds among women are also an important source of goods and services and of emotional support. Finally, when female bonding provides a sense of solidarity on the basis of sex, it is expected to contribute to a greater sense of mastery, of being on top of things.

Costs. Belle (1980) suggests that social bonds can bring costs as well as benefits. In some discussions of female bonds, it is suggested that women friends are competitive and/or more dependent than men friends. However, for these respondents there is no relationship between the competitiveness and dependency of friends and either the femaleness of their intimate world ($r = -.01$; NS) or their reliance on women ($r = -.05$; NS).

Rather, the cost of female friendship seems to be in added worry or concern associated with obligation. Coombs (1973) distinguishes between ties of obligation and ties of trust -- both operate on social bonds. The exchange of resources like childcare with women seems to be strongly linked to ties of obligation and to greater worry and concern associated with friends. Respondents who rely more on women for concrete resources like childcare report more worry or concern associated with friends (see Table 5). This relying on women for concrete resources differs from relying on women for emotional support. Ties of trust, rather than ties of obligation, are crucial to the giving and receiving of emotional support. And, as this reasoning would suggest, relying on women for emotional support is not associated with greater worry or concern associated with friends (see Table 5).

Table 5
Female/Bonding and Worries or Concerns

Worries or Concerns Associated with:	Femaleness of Intimate World	Resources from Women	Emotional Support from Women
Employment	-.29**	-.14	.03
Family	-.03	-.04	-.03
Friends	.27**	.23*	.11
Health	-.08	.13	.36***
Mental Health	-.16	-.14	.23*
Intimate Relations	-.04	-.08	-.04
Law or Police	.14	-.05	-.30**
Living Environment	-.10	.02	.02
Money	.08	-.11	.22*
Education	-.03	-.008	.19
Parenting	-.08	-.06	.20*

*p<.01; ** p<.05; *** p<.01

The balance of the costs and benefits of female bonding is evident on the relationship between the femaleness of a respondent's intimate world and her mental health. There appears at first glance to be no relationship between these two variables (see Table 6). However, after controlling for the level of worry or concern associated with friends, having a more female intimate world is marginally related to greater self-esteem and to a greater sense of mastery. The beneficial aspects of a female intimate world are only evident when the strains of mutual obligation are considered.

Table 6
Femaleness of a Woman's Intimate World

	Depression	Esteem	Mastery	Anxiety
Femaleness of the Intimate World	-.14	-.19	-.20	-.07
After controlling for worries associated with friends:				
Femaleness of the Intimate World	-.20	-.22*	-.26*	-.15

* $p < .10$

Emotional support and intimacy. While receiving emotional support from women is not associated with more worry or concern associated with friends, it is related to greater worry or concern about health, mental health, money and parenting (see Table 5). It will be remembered that women living in more stressful conditions are more likely than other women to turn to women for both concrete resources and emotional support (page 33). After controlling for the influence of the stressful conditions in each of the areas, the relationship between worries or concerns and

receiving emotional support from women is no longer even marginally significant except for Health ($r = .22$, $p<.10$). Women living in stressful conditions turn to women; the stressful conditions create worry and concern. Emotional support from women does not create worry and concern.

Brown, et. al. (1975) pointed out the importance of a confidant to women's emotional well-being. For the women in Brown's study, their confidants were their male partners. While about half of the Stress and Families respondents who had male partners told them good news or chose to be with them when feeling down, only 5 named their male partners as their sole confidants -- as the person to whom they talked about personal problems (a few respondents named both their male partners and women as confidants). Bernard (1976) suggests that, when women do not have emotionally supportive and intimate relationships with their male partners, female bonding will be critical to the women's emotional well-being. In our society, men are less likely than women to be able to provide adequate emotional support to women. In addition, many low income mothers are single parents and do not have a male partner who would be a possible source of intimacy and support. The combination of these two factors make female bonding all the more important. For those respondents who do not rely only on their male partners as confidants or who are single, the femaleness of a respondent's intimate world is marginally related to greater self-esteem and to greater mastery ($r = -.25$; $p<.10$ for both correlations). Except for those few situations where the conjugal relationship is the sole source of emotional support and intimacy, female bonding is associated with greater emotional well-being, as Bernard hypothesized.

Availability of resources. As would be expected, receiving assistance with various resources is associated with better mental health (see Table 7). In particular, help with childcare, finding a job and taking care of money matters are significantly related to greater self-esteem and a greater sense of mastery. Childcare is a "women's resource" -- available primarily from women. Not surprisingly, women with a more female intimate world are more likely to receive help with emergency childcare than are other women ($r = .41$; $p<.005$).

Table 7
Availability of Resources

Resource[2]	Depression[1]	Esteem[1]	Mastery[1]	Anxiety[1]
regular childcare			-.29**	
emergency childcare		-.31**	-.28**	-.21*
nonemergency childcare	-.27*	-.25*	-.41***	-.30**
household repairs				
transportation		-.41***		
finding a job	-.28**	-.30**	-.36**	-.24*
help in family illness			-.23*	
help with money matters		-.33**	-.43**	-.24*
Receiving Resources from Women		-.30**	-.26*	-.35**
After controlling for worries associated with friends: Receiving Resources from Women		-.33**	-.31**	-.43**

1 a high score indicates poor mental health
2 a high score indicates the resource is available
* $p<.10$; ** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$

Given that some resources are predominantly available from women, and that women with more female intimate worlds rely heavily on women for concrete resources ($r = .30$; $p<.05$), it is important to know the relationship between receiving resources from women and mental health.

While receiving assistance from women may be no better than assistance from any other source, it is also no worse. Receiving concrete resources from women is related to greater emotional well-being, particularly after considering the worries associated with friends and the mutual obligation involved in resource exchange (see Table 7).

Solidarity. Solidarity has been defined as "a committment to some kind of mutual aid or support, based upon the perception, by those who are solidary, that they share certain significant characteristics, or they are equal with respect to some social principle" (Llewelyn-Davies, 1979). It is important to differentiate between the support associated with female bonding and solidarity. Solidarity is support, but support that is based on the belief that those who are solidary are "equal with respect to some social principle". The Stress and Families respondents were asked which of five attributes (their race or ethnic background, sex, single parenthood -- when appropriate, income, and education) made it hardest for them to get decent housing, to get into a good training program, to get a good job, to get a promotion or raise, to get a good education, to get credit or loans, and to be respected or valued. The rank order for sex as a basis for discrimination (averaged over the seven areas of discrimination) can be seen as a measure of the extent to which a respondent perceives women as a class, sharing certain significant characteristics.

For those respondents who ranked sex relatively low (below the sample median), there is no relationship between female bonding and mental health. For respondents who ranked sex relatively high, female bonding is significantly related to a greater sense of mastery and

marginally related to lower anxiety and fewer depressive symptoms (see Table 8). Respondents who perceive themselves as solidary on the basis of sex receive mental health benefits from their associations with women.

Table 8
Solidarity and Mental Health

	Depression	Esteem	Mastery	Anxiety
Sex Ranked Low:				
Female Bonding	-.03	-.14	.08	.05
Sex Ranked High:				
Female Bonding	-.32*	-.23	-.43**	-.28*

* $p<.10$; ** $p<.05$

Because Black women might be expected to rank discrimination on the basis of race higher than White women would, the observed relationship between the impact of female bonding and solidarity on the basis of sex could be confounded. However, there was no significant difference between Black and White women in their ranking of sex as a basis for discrimination ($t = -.101$; NS).

Discussion

For the Stress and Families respondents, female bonding is a significant aspect of their lives. On the average, the people closest to them are more often women than men. Women are also the primary sources of help with childcare and of emotional support -- important resources for these low income mothers.

These women live in a society where de facto segregation by sex and cross-sex antagonism separate women from men and encourage women to develop a sense of "womanhood" -- to understand the fact that they are women as an important aspect of their lives. These women also have contact with other women because they live in urban areas, near their own families, and hold a strong interest in childrearing in common with other low income mothers. These factors facilitate female bonding, outweighing the constraints on female bonding of the economic and affective importance of the conjugal relationship, the isolation of women within the nuclear family, the competition between women over men and children, and the lack of common economic interests. Women within this society who live under especially stressful conditions in the areas of health, mental health and parenting, who either have strained relations with their male partner or are isolated without a male partner, and who have good relationships with their women friends and neighbors, are most likely to rely heavily on women for help and support.

Female bonding is related to the quality of these women's lives. While relationships with women friends are not seen as especially competitive or dependent, they are sources of worry or concern. This is primarily from the strains inherent in the mutual obligation of watching each other's children or exchanging other resources. When this source of stress is considered, having a more female intimate world is related to greater self-esteem and a greater sense of mastery.

Women are the primary source of childcare and an important source of other goods and services. Having help with childcare, money matters

and other aspects of life contributes to better emotional well-being, particularly to higher self-esteem and a greater sense of mastery. Women are also a primary source of emotional support. Men often cannot provide all, or any, of the emotional support women need. When that is true for these women, having a higher proportion of women in their intimate worlds is related to greater self-esteem and a greater sense of mastery. And for women who perceive themselves as solidary with other women, having a more female intimate world means a greater sense of mastery or power and greater emotional well-being.

And what about the men? Does female bonding challenge conjugal intimacy and the relationships between women and men? As the Johnsons (1975,1980) point out and the Stress and Families data substantiate, it is possible to have female bonding and good relationships between women and men. Female bonding need not be a threat, per se. However, relationships between women and men in this country are already problematic and reflect a history of an imbalance between the sexes of value and power. For those who believe that relationships between women and men depend on maintaining this imbalance, female bonding is undesirable because it contributes to women's greater self-esteem and sense of power and thereby challenges the imbalance. However, female bonding does not perpetuate this imbalance and is not the cause of conflicts between women and men. In fact, it actually protects women from some of the costs of such an imbalance. Whether or not relationships between women and men improve will be determined by whether or not the imbalance continues, not by whether or not women bond with each other.

The findings reported in this paper have several implications for research and for improving the quality of women's lives. Future research should consider groups of women in addition to low-income mothers and should further explore the sociocultural context of relationships between women. The sociocultural context should also be examined as a mediating variable in the relationship between female bonding and emotional well-being. In addition, future research should consider the balance between costs and benefits in a relationship and separate the influence of ties of obligation and ties of trust. Finally, any research on female bonding will require the development of better measures of female bonding and must beware of the assumption that conjugal intimacy and female bonding are mutually exclusive.

This study also suggests several ways to improve the quality of women's lives. First, facilitating childcare exchange between mothers and reducing the sense of obligation by increasing mothers' choices about entering the exchange would benefit mothers. Second, women are an available and important resource for women; increasing the range of goods and services that individual women have access to would have a ripple effect on other women. In addition, women provide a level and type of emotional support to women that they can not often find in men; encouraging women to seek emotional support from women will improve the likelihood of their receiving support and will promote emotional well-being. Finally, when support for female bonding is combined with facilitating a recognition of women's common experiences, the possibility of improving women's self-esteem and sense of mastery is increased.

In general, promoting female bonding will improve the quality of

women's lives. Female bonding can be strengthened by increasing contact between women through changes in housing or work practices and fostering an understanding of women's common economic interests. With this, building on women's common interest in childrearing, and extending it to include an interest in adequate resources for mothers and children and in women's control over their reproduction, would encourage female bonding and a sense of solidarity that challenges women's lower status and lack of power within this society.

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