The sexual and romantic habits of urban black males have long been a subject of scrutiny. Forty years ago, the Moynihan Report—*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*—decried the prevalence of female-headed households in urban ghettos and focused on the absence of fathers as a key factor undermining the social and economic progress of African Americans. A decade later, “blaxploitation” films lampooned and sometimes celebrated the promiscuity of African-American men from the inner-city underclass.

Yet, as Nathan Fosse, a Harvard graduate student working with sociology professor Michele Lamont, writes in a recent, unpublished paper, “In over 50 years of urban poverty research, there has not been one comprehensive, qualitative study of sexual and romantic relationships from the perspective of inner-city black men.” The biggest problem with poverty research, Fosse says, “is that we’re constantly talking about inner-city black men—running statistical regressions to find out associations, writing essays about black culture—but very rarely do we ever actually talk to them and listen to what they have to say.”

Hence, Fosse launched an ethnographic study—his qualitative research is a work in progress, and Fosse continues to amass data—conducting face-to-face interviews with 26 young men from two low-income, African-American neighborhoods in Boston. His paper, “Money, Masculinity, Mortality, and Mistrust: Causes of Infidelity among Inner-City Black Men,” attempts to account for the much-ballyhooed prevalence of sexual infidelity in these men’s relationships with women.

In general, the men tended to sort women into one of two categories: “wifey” and “stunt.” A “wifey” is a wife or girlfriend with whom the man might form a continuing relationship and create a public, social identity; a “stunt” is someone he sees for sexual pleasure, personal gain, or company at a party, but never as
an emotionally intimate partner. “A stunt is like a low-class chick,” one respondent explained. “I ain’t gonna get trapped up [emotionally involved] with a girl like that, she ain’t worth it, there’s too many of them out to use you anyways....” In contrast, a wifey is someone the man wants to know as an individual, writes Fosse. Dustin, an interviewee, says, “For the wifey, you gotta feel more, you gotta know where they comin’ from, you gotta talk with her, it’s your girlfriend, someone you know, someone you trust, ‘cause it’s all about trust.”

The question of fidelity does not arise with stunts. But even with wifeys, only some men were interested in monogamy. "Arguements about black men's oppositional values, or their dependency on welfare, alone don't provide adequate explanations" for infidelity, he says.

Money, in Fosse’s context, means not only financial wherewithal, but also social resources: the availability of female relatives to care for offspring, for example, can lessen a man’s resistance to becoming a father. Masculinity draws support from the ability to attract sexual partners: “[W]hen girls start payin’ attention to you, that’s when you feel like a real man, like you got it goin’ on,” one interviewee explained. (That the men were rewarded by the responses they got from women—not necessarily from male peers—belie the common assumption that “stud” behavior by urban black males is mostly intended to impress other men.) Mortality—the frequency with which relatives, friends, and acquaintances die at young ages, and the men’s intimate contact with death—forms a backdrop for carelessness in sexual matters. “[M]en view their own lives as uncertain and devalued,” says Fosse, “and they see sexual risk as relatively unimportant, as opposed to other risks to their health and safety.” Furthermore, a global mistrust of women can grow from forlorn childhood experiences. One man described how, when he was 12 years old, his sisters and his mother suddenly left him: “I just came home one day, and there was, like, nobody there...I didn’t know where anybody went.”

Qualitative research of this kind can enlighten social policies, which often target irrelevancies. For example, Fosse argues that raising the cost of fatherhood through limits on welfare payments for child support has scant if any effect on the procreative behaviors of poor men. Drug and sexual awareness programs may not reduce pregnancies, either, as the men all understood the consequences of having a child and were aware of and had access to condoms.

“The men’s sexual infidelity often arises from a profound sense of despair, and not [from the lack of] a set of values in their behaviors,” writes Fosse. He concludes that men’s sexual infidelity is “not so much a moral problem as a mental health problem.” Consequently, interventions emphasizing “traditional values are ineffective,” he writes, “unless they aim at establishing trust between partners and within communities.”

Social policy also needs to de-stigmatize men and recognize that women are partly to blame for unwed parenthood, Fosse adds. Many inner-city women are probably just as “unmarriageable” as the men, he says, and they may assert their independence through retaliatory exploitation. He suggests that educating “both men and women about the consequences of parenthood early in life would likely make either of them less likely to use their own offspring as a means toward establishing lasting intimate relationships.”

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