Ain’t No Trust: How Bosses, Boyfriends, and Bureaucrats Fail Low-Income Mothers and Why It Matters

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Distrust Common

- 95 Women
- Both Sides of Welfare Reform
- Palpable Distrust
Multiple Contexts

- Not just caseworkers

- Also:
  - Employers
  - Child care providers
  - Boyfriends and husbands
  - Family and friends
Main Points

- Distrust key feature low-income life
  - Distrust across contexts
  - Distrust endures across time
- Learned through experience
- Blocks action -- Undermines policy
- Form of inequality
The benefits of trust

- Eases business, parenting, political and other practices (Coleman 1988)

- A “lubricant” for social action (Fukuyama 1999)

- Aids survival under economic stress (Sampson 2000, Stack 1974, Putman 2000)
(Dys)Functions of distrust

- Distrust, thus, is the enemy of action
  - Protects from harm when others untrustworthy
  - Keeps from opportunity when others trustworthy

- Conundrum: Low-income moms most in need of trust’s benefits, but their distrust is high
Literature suggests why this is so

- Trust greater between equal partners (Molm et. al 2000)
- Trust based on perception of shared interests (Hardin 2002)
- Agents of trusted institutions are trusted (Hearn 1997)
- Government institutions less trusted by the disadvantaged -- especially if deemed unresponsive (Goldsmith 2005; Levi 1998; Peel 1998)
The book

- Explores distrust and its consequences in 5 key contexts
  - Welfare office
  - Workplace
  - Child Care
  - Romantic Partnerships
  - Social Networks
In-depth Qualitative Interviews

- Total of 95 women with current or former AFDC/TANF receipt in Chicago, child <18
- Two time periods:
  - Pre-reform 1994-5 (26 women)
  - Post-reform 2004-5 (69 women)
- Audiotaped, Coded using NVIVO
A note on methodological approach

- Goal to understand *context* of low-income mothers’ learned distrust not produce population estimates or prove causal relationships
That said...Nature of Samples

Recruited through:
- Pre-reform: Job Training Programs, Survey Respondents
- Post-reform: Job Training and other Social Services

Comparison of Cohorts:
- Post-reform higher percentage African-American
- Post-reform higher percentage never-married
- Post-reform more leavers and leavers off longer

Compared to Representative Data:
- Both cohorts over-represent Latinas, under-represent African-Americans (in order to have enough Latina cases)
**Sample Descriptives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-reform (N=26)</th>
<th>Post-reform (N=69)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Latina</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African-Amer.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Yrs. Educ</td>
<td>10.2 (median 10)</td>
<td>10.8 (median 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Child &lt; 6</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Never Marr</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Yrs. Age</td>
<td>32 (median 34)</td>
<td>33 (median 34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Employed</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Current Welf</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>63</td>
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Many mothers at both time periods assert:

- “I don’t trust no one”
- “I have associates, not friends”
- One added: “I trust my mother and no one else”
Not always so protective

- Develop protective shells
- Experiences placing trust in those later deemed untrustworthy
  - Welfare caseworkers
  - Employers
  - Child care providers
  - Partners
  - Other network ties
Caseworkers

- Many shocked at
  - abrupt interaction style
  - failure to communicate rules
  - failure to deliver benefits
Julie Callahan

23 year old white mother; 2 children
Reapplied for TANF after birth of second child

“It was a big problem....
She was very disrespectful...
It was 45 minutes of hell.”
Distrust in voluntary incentives

- At both time periods, only trust “stick” not “carrot” work incentives will accrue in practice
- Ex: Work Pays, IL program allowing recipients to keep extra amount of public assistance grant when have earnings
Bernice Alexander

African-American mother of 12 and 13 year old
Fairly steadily employed

"Are you from Mars?"
When you call and request it, "Oh, you don't qualify for that."
That's something that they put out to get you to make that move, but they cannot make it up once you need that help.
Employers

- Many mothers at both time periods do not trust they are treated fairly
  - Often quit in response

- Perceived race/gender discrimination
- Suspicion about stealing and payment
- Scheduling of work hours and workplace conditions
Tahiera Jackson

- 28 yr old mother of a 6yr old girl
- Quit last job in liquor store
- Didn’t trust boss who didn’t trust her

“They were saying I was taking money… So I just quit… They asked me to come back, but I didn’t want to…, because it might happen again.”
Child care providers

- Post-reform less likely to describe child care as problematic
  - Likely due to subsidies

- But similar difficulty trusting providers

- Most distrust related to past experience of misplaced trust
Daeshawna Spurlock

Invited coworker to live with her and provide care:

I...come home, my baby got a burn on his arm

“How’d he get that burn on him?” “I don’t know.”

“These are my kids. How would you like it if I was watching your child and you come home and every day something wrong with your child?”

I had to let her go.
Boyfriends and Husbands

- Unreliable economic contributors
- Sabotaging of women’s advancement
- Drug sales and use create chaos
- Violence
- Infidelity
Juanita Soto

- 9 year relationship with Manny, ex-husband and father of children
- Manny changed through drug trade
- Belittling, demeaning behavior
- Ticket out, his 10 year prison term
Juanita Soto

“I wouldn’t want to get married again…

I don’t trust men….They scare me…

It’s like they just don’t want you to succeed.”
Other network ties

- Networks key source of support (especially child care) for many
- But some learn not to trust
- Inability to trust networks is disadvantage in labor market
- Feel pulled backward by networks in process of seeking economic stability
Georgia Burke

- Jailed then acquitted for murder, set up to take fall by fellow gang members
- When out, got training and a job
- Extricated herself from network by moving across town
Networks: Georgia

Now I have no company....

I just want more structure for my kids...

I don’t want all that nasty stuff around.
Many conclude: distrust is functional

- Hardin (2002:96) “Trust is functional in a world in which trust pays off; distrust is functional in a world in which trust does not pay off.”
Why?

- Experience with unreliable and untrustworthy others

- Structural arrangements negate trust
  - Opposite interests
  - Too powerless to make others accountable
How fix?

- Not an argument about “fixing” mothers
- To eradicate: big structural changes (welfare system, labor market, income distribution)
  - unrealistic
- To reduce: more modest changes
Changes to reduce distrust

- Caseworker incentives
- Money into child care supply (rather than just demand)
- Flexibility in Work First
- Marriage promotion recognize reality
- Move away from stigmatizing/blaming policy
Why does distrust matter?

- Luxury to talk about in this environment?

Two reasons we should not ignore:

- 1) Blocks very actions policy tries to promote
Form of Inequality

2) Those most in need of trust, highest distrust (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002)
   - Not in circumstances where trust will pay off
   - Not in conditions that promote trust

Wide “trust gap” between the advantaged and disadvantaged