Seeking Romance in the Crosshairs of Multiple-Partner Fertility: Ethnographic Insights on Low-Income Urban and Rural Mothers

By
LINDA M. BURTON

Using longitudinal ethnographic data on low-income rural and urban mostly single mothers, I explore the romance-seeking behaviors of women whose intimate relationships are characterized by multiple-partner fertility (MPF). MPF involves mothers and/or their love interests having biological children with other partners, frequently in nonmarital, transient unions. Romance comprises mothers' feelings and social interactions related to being chosen, erotic love, and adulation of the other. Findings indicate most mothers selectively engaged in one of four types of romance-seeking behaviors: *casual, illusionist, pragmatic,* or *strategic*. Mothers' romantic actions are associated with their desires to have loving experiences outside the challenges of daily life in poverty and its corollary uncertainty. Moreover, mothers involved in the most complex forms of MPF openly compete with other women for "first wife" status in a stratified partnering system called rostering—a term coined by respondents in the ethnographies reported here. Implications of these findings for future research are discussed.

Keywords: intimate-partner hierarchies; multiple-partner fertility; romance; single mothers; urban and rural poverty

Yes, I have five children and they have different fathers. I deal only with two of their fathers now. They are very mean and they abuse me, beat me, and spit on me, just like in my family I come from [her natal family]. One of them lets me stay in his house with my children . . . one is his son . . . when I have nowhere to stay. But, he kicks us out when he is mad or has a new chica [girlfriend] with their baby move in. When I live there, his other chicas want to fight me. . . .

Linda M. Burton is the James B. Duke Professor of Sociology at Duke University. She directed the Three-City Study and Family Life Project ethnographies reported in this article. Her current research examines how cognitions about intimate unions, social relationships, life-course experiences, and contextual inequalities shape the courses-of-action that low-income women take in their romantic relationships.

It is messy, I know, I know, but I keep messin' around with the same [kind of] men with children from many women. That is all I see where I live . . . men and women with children from [different] people. I do not know what is wrong with me, why I go for these men, why I be with them, why I keep two, sometimes three around for myself. I could look somewhere else [for potential partners] . . . maybe in another city. I need some attention, some love, a present, someone in my life to say I am beautiful and that he wants me and only me, some good surprises, and to be like his princess . . . but not [having these experiences] all the time is alright too because I don't need them every day. I never think I will marry any of these men I get with. [Their] lives [are] messy too, like mine, so we don't make more messes by being together like getting married or something . . . I have no house for my children to live in, no money, no car, no food, no clothes . . . I can pay no bills, so sometimes I need a special feeling from a man . . . not sex, just a special feeling he can give me. Then I can [figure out] what I [can] do about everything else [e.g., taking care of financial obligations] even though I don't know from one day [to the next] what will happen.
(Lourdes, 30 years old, first-generation, Mexican-American residing in Chicago)

Lourdes is a respondent in one of two ethnographic studies I profile in this article. Her comments foreshadow three issues I address: (1) low-income mothers' histories of involvement in serial multiple-partner fertility (MPF) relationships; (2) how, in the context of these relationships, mothers seek romance rather than marriage as a respite from daily life in poverty and its corresponding uncertainty; and (3) the extent to which some mothers participate in stratified MPF systems known in some romantic partner circles as "rosters." Lourdes's case study directed my attention to these issues because of her compelling sense of the complex parameters that characterize adult romantic relationships and family life due to MPF. Her experiences enlightened my understanding of these matters and led me to discuss issues about MPF and complex families in ways that represent a slight departure from the usual scholarly discourse on this topic.

First, through her words and actions, Lourdes showed me that the definition of MPF that I planned to use to examine her case and others in the two studies reported here was too restrictive. While Lourdes appeared to clearly understand the definition of MPF typically used by family demographers, economists, and policy-makers, her on-the-ground experiences with intimate relationships and MPF included many more twists and turns than the usual delineation allowed. According to the scholarly literature, MPF involves individuals having biological children with more than one partner, frequently in the context of nonmarital romantic relationships (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Meyer, Cancian, and

Cook 2005; Monte 2011). This definition relates solely to a couple's fertility status and differentiates them according to whether the couple reproduces exclusively as monogamous partners (no MPF) or creates progeny with several different partners (MPF). Lourdes's life experiences, however, broaden that definition to include serial transient romantic relationships within MPF networks of intimate partners, some of which concurrently involve (1) individuals with no biological children, (2) partners with biological children in common, and (3) men and women who have children with various partners. These networks serve as "romantic partner pools" comprising current and ex-paramours and newcomers.

Lourdes's story offered a cumulative perspective on MPF by calling my attention to the number of serial MPF romantic relationships she had been involved in over time, rather than allowing me to simply identify her as occupying a particular MPF (no MPF vs. MPF) status at a specific point in time. Lourdes is intensely aware of the collective impact of her involvement in these relationships on her psychological, social, and financial well-being and that of her children. She recognizes that her serial romantic transitions from one MPF partner to another complicate her life unnecessarily. Yet her involvement makes practical sense to her on some level because, as she said, "Once you are in these messy relationships with a man who has children with many women, and you have children with different men too, you are in it, [whether] you have a baby [together] or no baby [together]. It is just like that, everybody [biological and nonbiological parents, adults, and children] is in it whether you want to be or not, [especially] if you are looking for love from some-body, anybody. It is the chance you take when you are poor and have nothin' else."

Second, Lourdes's reflections suggested that her complex intimate-partner rela-tionships raise many unanswered questions about the nature of MPF and romance in the everyday lives of poor mothers. For instance, despite being caught in the crosshairs of MPF and poverty, Lourdes seeks romance rather than marriage in her relationships. Her mission is inconsistent with the perceptions of some family schol-ars and policy-makers who think marriage is at least a partial solution to serial MPF and the resulting financial travails for children in these families (Fincham and Beach 2010; Huston and Melz 2004; Manning et al. 2010; R. Wood et al. 2012). Marriage, according to Lourdes, is not the cure for what ails her and takes a backseat to her desire for romance. Romance comprises feelings and social interactions around being chosen, erotic love, desire, adulation of the other, spontaneity, fantasy, and the occasional gifting of material goods considered to be romantic gestures (Giddens 1992; Illouz 1998; Swidler 2001). Lourdes's preference for romance over marriage, while a sorely neglected topic of consideration in the extant scholarly discourse on poor women's retreat from marriage (see Edin 2000; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005), would not be surprising to some family scholars (e.g., Nelson 2004, 2005). They contend that understanding how and why women seek romance over marriage, particularly those involved in MPF networks, would provide novel, important, and necessary insights about partnering and childbearing as well as about marital ambivalence and delay in low-income populations.

Third, Lourdes's remarks prompted me to attend to her frailties. These include possible mental health problems, lifetime experiences of abuse, and myriad challenges stemming from intergenerational experiences of poverty and uncertainty that pervade her life and ultimately shape her romance-seeking

behaviors. Overall, she pursues fleeting romantic experiences as occasional sanctuaries from the vagaries and disappointments of life. Moreover, she is somewhat complacent about allowing herself to be a "rung" on two of her children's fathers' romantic rosters. Rostering, a term coined by several respondents in the ethnographies I report here, refers to being one of several women a man can call on for mostly sexual liaisons. It is also a course of action in which women develop their own lists and rankings of accessible male partners they can call upon to temporarily address their particular instrumental needs or romantic desires. Rosters are associated with power and privilege; the higher one ranks on someone's roster, the greater the benefits (e.g., gifts) one is afforded. For better or worse, in Lourdes's situation, she has little status or the requisite attributes (e.g., housing to offer a partner; see Clark, Burton, and Flippen 2011) to earn preferential treatment on her children's fathers' rosters. She has, however, created a roster of potential male intimate partners for herself. All of her roster's members have children with other women. Lourdes can call upon these men for romance (as she defines it) but unfortunately for little else such as economic support.

Overall, Lourdes's lessons bring to the forefront a gritty set of issues that have yet to be systematically explored in the existing literature on complex families, poverty, and MPF. I conceded to her behavioral prompts about the importance of identifying, studying, and understanding these issues and, as such, in this article examine the romance-seeking behaviors of low-income mothers who engaged in intimate unions characterized by MPF. I used a modified grounded-theory approach (see Glaser 1978; LaRossa 2005) to analyze secondary longitudinal ethnographic data on 101 rural and 256 urban low-income, African American, Latino, and non-Hispanic white mothers to examine Lourdes's "checklist." Data are from mothers who participated in the Three-City Study (see Winston et al. 1999) or the Family Life Project (see Vernon-Feagans, Cox, and The Family Life Key Investigators 2014) ethnographies. Below, I provide a brief overview of the relevant literature on MPF, poverty, and uncertainty as contexts for mothers' pursuit of romance, followed by a theoretical discussion of why mothers in the throes of economic disadvantage and complex relationships seek romance and participate in rostering. I then describe the two ethnographic studies that provided empirical evidence for this discussion and present the results from the data analysis. Results indicated that mothers fall into one of four categories relative to their MPF relationship histories—*No MPF, Mother-only MPF, Partner-only MPF, Both MPF*—and that their histories are associated with four types of romance-seeking behaviors that emerged from the data: *casual, illusionist, pragmatic*, and *strategic*. In addition, about one-quarter of the mothers in both studies participated to some degree in rostering. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research for future studies of complex families.

Background

MPF, poverty, and uncertainty

Recent demographic trends indicate MPF has become increasingly common in low-income populations and creates, in its wake, complex "family"

configurations comprising fluid networks of biological parents, parents' new and/ or serial romantic partners, and shifting complements of half and "temporarily related" nonbiological siblings (Burton and Hardaway 2012; Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011; Harknett and Knab 2007). Prevailing research suggests that these configurations are typically characterized by contentious relationships involving adult disputes about financial obligations as well as competition and jealousy among past and current romantic partners (H. Hill 2007; Monte 2007; Roy and Dyson 2005). Moreover, MPF couples' relationships tend to be fragile, with uncertainty about commitment, relationship status, and expectations for monogamy often plaguing these unions (H. Hill 2007; Roy, Buckmiller, and McDowell 2008). Yet as Lourdes has shown us, despite a single mother's knowledge and experience of such realities, she may still pursue romance in the minefield of MPF networks.

MPF, poverty, and uncertainty bedevil the lives of young single mothers and provide context and rationale for their decision to seek romance from various partners in the ways that they do. Chronic uncertainty is a central driving element and reflects a state of ambiguity in which immediate and future conditions or events are unpredictable or otherwise not clearly determinable by the actors involved (Burton and Tucker 2009; Harvey 1993; Silva 2013; G. Wood 2001, 2003). Daily life in uncertain worlds is characterized by social and economic instability, unpredictable others, and frequently tenuous social relationships (Solomon and Knobloch 2001). Realities such as low-paying and insecure jobs, erratic income flows, unpredictable daily schedules, and needy and unstable network members create conditions that inhibit long-term planning and reward short-term thinking (Alaszewski and Coxon 2009; Duck 2012; Harvey 1993, G. Wood 2003). These constraints are magnified by the everyday stress of managing households and rearing children, conditions that can test the mettle of any human being (see Dyk 2004; LaRossa and LaRossa 1981; Wijnberg and Reding 1999).

In low-income environments, uncertainty can produce a narrowed range of options, a hesitancy to act, and a diminished likelihood of acting in ways more likely to create better outcomes for individuals and their families. Under such conditions, mothers may often act with an eye toward the moment rather than the long run, as unpredictable resources and the omnipresent specter of privation require orientation to the here and now. This behavior emerges from a lack of control mothers may experience as they struggle to simply survive in a world of scarce resources and limited opportunities (Duck 2012; Edin and Lein 1997). Living in the inconstant, unsettling, and chaotic conditions that characterize poverty means having little time, energy, or resources to prosper in the short term, much less plan reliably for the future (Roy, Tubbs, and Burton 2004).

Following Harvey (1993), I argue that both economic and social uncertainty prove most incapacitating to low-income mothers. By this, I mean an inability to reliably predict the future availability and quality of material resources and social relationships. That level of unpredictability is often associated with the poverty that characterizes complex MPF relationships. When low-income mothers are involved in these relationships, material resources are often meager and must be shared across multiple households of children and current and former

romantic partners. These situations can infuse chronic uncertainty in mothers' lives that entails considerable anxiety and stress, comorbid physical and mental health problems (Burton and Bromell 2011; Geronimus et al. 2006), and the attendant dysphoria and ill health that prior research has indicated are other core features of living in such situations (Antonovsky 1979; Sapolsky 2005; Suls and Mullen 1981; Wolfe, Evans, and Seeman 2012). Many poor, single mothers also have extensive life histories of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Macmillan 2001). Such conditions constrain a whole range of actions for low-income mothers when coupled with their competing statuses and responsibilities as primary caregivers for their children and as individuals trying to craft meaningful lives for themselves.

Under these conditions, I contend, as has Nelson (2004, 450), that no matter how temporary a romantic encounter may be, low-income, single mothers (like anyone else under comparable pressure) will use such encounters to seek relief from the daily challenges of poverty in ways that "do not require constant calculations to meet practical needs," such as having enough money to pay utility bills, buy food, secure safe and quality housing, or obtain viable health care for oneself and one's children. They will do this despite the troublesome circumstances that often accompany the relational ties and social behaviors of potential partners in MPF networks. Moreover, some mothers with histories of MPF may be particularly interested in pursuing romance, especially if their previous partners have chosen other women over them and that new union produces a child. "For some women who have been hurt in prior relationships with men, the 'love' and adoration of a new partner [no matter what baggage accompanies him] can do much, in theory, to build self-esteem and a sense of self-worth" for a mother who has much less to look forward to" (Nelson 2004, 456).

Romance and rostering

As Lourdes's narrative suggests, it makes little sense to assume that the essence of any woman's romantic behaviors is primarily bound by her interests in marriage or cohabitation. The cultural and contextual meaning of romance is not synonymous, on the whole, with sexual and childbearing patterns frequently ascribed to poor women, especially racial/ethnic minority women (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; S. Hill 2005; Moran 2001; Harding 2007; Lindholm 1998). For example, a litany of research on African American women, especially poor, single mothers, demonstrates a historical predilection by some scholars to render these women's sexuality invisible by not discussing it at all, or by characterizing their behaviors as "pathological, deviant, hyper-sexualized, or jezebel-like" (Collins 2000, 129; see also Bensonsmith 2005; Burton and Tucker 2009). To be sure, prevailing social science on the romantic lives of economically privileged women has not been framed in the same ways as for poor women (Coontz 2005; Tucker 2005). Discussions have tended to focus on culturally acceptable forms of sexuality, eroticism, and love, mostly in the context of committed, intimate relationships (Hochschild 2003; Jamieson 1999; Rubin 1983; Santore 2008; Swidler 2001). The ensuing disparities in knowledge potentially imply that romance may be inconsequential in the lives

of poor mothers, particularly those in MPF relationships. Fortunately, such an assumption is inconsistent with present-day theoretical dialogues about modernity, culture, and love, which proclaim that humans' interest in romance and love is endemic to the natural order of life in contemporary society (Giddens 1992; Gross 2005; Illouz 1998; Lindholm 1998). Thus, it is now both necessary and timely to devote attention to the study of romance in the lives of poor mothers (Coontz 2005; Nelson 2004)—especially those in complex MPF networks—as Lourdes implicitly instructs scholars to do.

What constitutes romance varies greatly across women and their experiences in economically disadvantaged environments. In fact, Harding (2007) has identified a variety of romantic frames available to residents in poor communities. Although the action of "being chosen" is likely the dominant feature in these frames, one mother's penchant for romance might involve exchanging statements of love, cuddling, and public adoration with her partner, while another's includes sexual activity, texting about erotic desires, and gifts of large sums of money.

Mothers' cognitions and expectations about romance may also comprise elements of romance espoused by social scientists whose theories are derived from research on mostly white, middle-class, intact, married, or cohabiting couples. For example, Giddens (1992, 46) described the frame of the romantic quest where a woman "meets and melts the heart of a man who is initially indifferent to and aloof from her, or openly hostile." Swidler (2001) articulated ideas about the romantic myth that is likened to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as prosaic love that requires ongoing efforts, sacrifice, negotiations, and compromise to keep the relationship afloat. Sassler and Miller's (2011) genderized notions of women wanting and "waiting to be asked" (to marry or cohabit) by men as an expression of men's love and caring about them may also find their way into mothers' cognitions of romance.

Furthermore, over half a century ago, Goode (1959) spoke eloquently about how romance and love, as elements of social action, contribute to the creation of partner stratification systems. He focused on how families' social control of romance and love directed members' partner selection for marriage and helped kin networks to retain their pedigree and status within societal-level stratification systems. Although Goode's focus is not directly in line with my attention to MPF relationships, the spirit of his discussion is nonetheless relevant. MPF relationships represent a brand of loose networks in which clusters of men and women are connected via serial and concurrent romantic attachments usually linked to the birth of a couple's children, but not always, as Lourdes has told us. The networks are typically quite fluid, with members moving in and out of the system on a fairly regular basis. But in some instances a standing stratification system or "roster" of present and past romantic partners is formed. A man or woman can have many romantic partners, some of whom they have children with and others with whom they do not, and they can stratify those partners according to contextually meaningful or individually relevant criteria. For example, a young woman in one of my exploratory ethnographic studies in the late 1980s (Burton 1990) had four children with four different men. She ranked these men in first through fourth place depending on her beliefs about their romantic value and rewarded

them with her time according to those rankings, which constantly shifted. This young woman was also immersed in a stratified system of women constructed by her top-ranked male partner, who ranked her third in terms of her romantic and material value to him. She talked often with me about "fighting her way to the top" of the roster because this ascension would win her the status of "first wife." The status was accompanied by "good loving and attention that would blow your mind," "bragging rights about being the favored one," and considerable power over other women in the system in terms of procuring material goods from them.

As I present the story about low-income mothers' MPF histories, their searches for romance inside and outside these relationships, and their decisions to engage in rostering, I must share an important caveat. I initially designed this exploration to be a comparative study of race and place, expecting to find differences between urban and rural; and African American, Latino, and non-Hispanic white mothers in their patterns of romance-seeking. Instead, I found numerous similarities and few differences among the mothers, leading me to believe that in matters of the heart—even in the context of poverty, uncertainty, and the complexity of MPF—the commonality of the human desire for romance and the need for respite from hard living and poverty is perhaps a leveler for the vicissitudes of these mothers' lives (see Nelson 2004).

Methods

Overview of the studies

To investigate mothers' MPF histories, the nature of romance, and the prevalence of rostering, I analyzed longitudinal secondary data on low-income mothers and their families who participated in the ethnographic components of the Three-City Study (TCS) and the Family Life Project (FLP). The TCS was a longitudinal, multisite, multimethod project designed to examine the impact of welfare reform on the lives of low-income African American, Latino, and non-Hispanic white families and their young children (see Winston et al. 1999). Study participants resided in poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. In addition to longitudinal surveys of a random sample comprising 2,402 families, and an embedded developmental study of 700 families, the TCS included an ethnography of 256 families and their children. These families were not in the survey sample but resided in the same poor neighborhoods as survey respondents.

The FLP was an interdisciplinary program project designed to investigate the ways in which community and family contexts influenced child development among African American and non-Hispanic white families residing in six poor rural counties in Pennsylvania and North Carolina (see Vernon-Feagans, Cox, and The Family Life Key Investigators 2014). Five interrelated studies were conducted through this program project, each addressing a unique aspect of family and child development. The ethnographic component focused intently on discerning the contextual meanings and shared understandings of local norms, beliefs, and practices in parenting and romantic relationship behaviors of

mothers and their partners. In addition to African American and white families, the ethnography added a small sample of Latino families for comparability with the TCS ethnography.

Recruitment

Families were recruited into the TCS ethnography between June 1999 and December 2000, and into the FLP ethnography between October 2001 and June 2002. Each study was conducted over a period of six years. Recruitment sites included formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start), the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, neighborhood community centers, local welfare offices, churches, and other public assistance agencies. Of the 256 families that participated in the TCS ethnography, 212 families were selected because they included a child two to four years of age to ensure sample comparability with the survey. To inform our understanding of how welfare reform was affecting families with disabilities, an additional forty-four families were recruited specifically because they had a child zero to eight years of age with a moderate or severe disability.

The FLP ethnography involved 101 families also with young children, mostly under age four. In keeping with the TCS ethnography design, twenty of the FLP families were recruited because they had a child with a disability. At the time of enrollment, in both studies, all families had household incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.

Sample descriptions

Although the TCS ethnography focused on populations in urban communities and the FLP on small-town and rural residents, the two samples are quite similar in their overall demographic characteristics, largely as a product of their comparable research designs, as shown in Table 1.

One exception is race and ethnicity, in which the majority of mothers (42 percent) in the TCS ethnography were of Latino ethnicity, while most of the participants (55 percent) in the FLP ethnography were non-Hispanic white, a characteristic that represents the dominant racial composition of Pennsylvania and North Carolina small-town and rural populations.

Initially, in gathering demographic data from respondents, the majority of TCS mothers indicated that they were neither currently married to nor cohabiting with a romantic partner. A much larger percentage of the FLP mothers (30 percent) indicated that they were in a nonmarital cohabiting union, compared to only 17 percent of the TCS mothers. Longitudinal interviews with participants, however, revealed that respondents' marital status and living arrangements shifted constantly during the studies as many mothers serially (and on occasion, simultaneously) moved from one romantic relationship to another. Thus, in both studies, mothers' romantic union and living arrangement status over time remained a moving target.

Previous analyses of these data on other aspects of mothers' romantic relationships repeatedly revealed significant associations among respondents' histories of

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics: Three-City Study Ethnography (N = 256) and Family Life
Project Ethnography (N = 101)

Characteristic	Three-City Study (TCS)		Family Life Project (FLP)	
	N	%[a]	N	%[a]
City/place				
Boston	71	28		
Chicago	95	37		
San Antonio	90	35		
North Carolina			42	42
Pennsylvania			59	58
Ethnicity/race				
African American	98	38	34	34
Latino/Hispanic	108	42	12	12
Non-Hispanic White	50	20	55	54
Mother's age at study enrollment				
15–19	21	8	14	14
20–24	67	26	34	34
25–29	62	24	29	29
30–34	36	14	14	14
35–39	35	14	4	4
40+	35	14	6	6
Education				
Less than high school	110	43	29	29
Completed high school or GED	67	26	38	38
College or trade school	79	31	34	34
TANF/work status				
TANF/working	40	16	7	7
TANF/not working	85	33	13	13
Non-TANF/working	64	25	60	59
Non-TANF/not working	67	26	21	21
Mother's age at first birth				
< 19	146	57	41	41
20–23	56	22	42	42
>24	54	21	18	18
Number of children mother is responsible for				
1 child	64	25	38	38
2 children	70	27	24	24
3 children	63	25	27	27
>4 children	59	23	12	12
Children's ages				
< 2	190	28	117	52
2–4	174	25	37	16
5–9	205	30	39	17

TABLE 1 (continued)

Characteristic	Three-City Study (TCS)		Family Life Project (FLP)	
	N	%[a]	N	%[a]
10–14	88	13	24	11
15–18	28	4	8	4
Total	685		225	
Marital status/living arrangements[b]				
Not married, not cohabiting	142	56	43	43
Not married, cohabiting	43	17	30	30
Married, spouse in home	42	17	21	21
Married, spouse not in home/sepa-rated	24	10	7	7
Mother's history of physical and sexual abuse[c]				
None	81	35	35	36
Sexual abuse	6	3	4	4
Physical abuse	59	26	39	39
Sexual and physical abuse	82	36	18	19
Mother's comorbidity status[d]				
Multiple chronic physical and mental illnesses	205	80	73	74
No reported physical or mental illnesses	50	20	26	26

a. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
b. There are missing data for five cases in the marital status and living arrangements category in the Three-City Study.
c. There are incomplete data for twenty-eight cases in the history of physical and sexual abuse category in the Three-City Study and five cases in Family Life Project Study.
d. There are incomplete data for one case in the mother's comorbidity status in the Three-City Study and two cases in the Family Life Project Study.

physical and sexual abuse, comorbidity, and their intimate unions (see Burton et al. 2009; Burton, Garrett-Peters, and Eason 2011; Cherlin et al. 2004). As such, I highlight the prevalence of these experiences in mothers' lives in Table 1. Roughly 65 percent of the mothers in both samples disclosed that they had been sexually and/or physically abused in their lifetime. And 80 percent of the TCS and 74 percent of the FLP mothers reported being comorbid, meaning that they had two or more chronic physical and/or mental health illnesses during the time that they were involved in the studies (see Burton and Bromell 2011).

Ethnographic methodology

To gather and to analyze ethnographic data on the mothers and their families, a method of *structured discovery* was devised to systematize and coordinate the

efforts of TCS and FLP ethnographic teams (for a detailed description of this approach, see Winston et al. 1999). An integrated and transparent process was developed for collecting, handling, and analyzing data that involved consistent input from more than 215 ethnographers, qualitative data analysts, and research scientists who worked on TCS over a course of six years; and for 62 team members who worked on FLP for over six years as well. Interviews with and observations of respondents focused on specific topics but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings and relationships among variables. The interviews covered a wide variety of topics including intimate relationships, health and access to health care services, parenting, family economics, support networks, and neighborhood environments. Ethnographers also engaged in participant observation with respondents that involved attending family functions and outings; being party to impromptu in-depth conversations; witnessing relationship milestones (e.g., a couple's decision to cohabit); accompanying mothers and their children to the welfare office, hospital, daycare, or workplace; and noting both context and interactions in each situation. In 92 percent of TCS cases and 98 percent of FLP cases, the ethnographer was racially matched with the respondent and remained that family's ethnographer for the duration of the study. In most cases, interviews and participant observations were conducted in English, with the exception of thirty-four families in TCS and three families in FLP that preferred Spanish. Ethnographers met with each family once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months, then every six to 12 months thereafter through 2006 for the TCS and through 2007 for the FLP. Respondents were compensated with grocery or department store vouchers for each interview or participant observation.

Data sources, coding, and analysis

Data sources for this article included transcribed interviews and detailed ethnographer field notes of participant observation activities with respondents. In addition, I consulted transcripts of principal investigators' group and individual discussions with ethnographers and qualitative data analysts about consistencies among mothers' and families' words and behaviors. All sources of data were coded collaboratively by ethnographers and qualitative data analysts, then summarized into detailed case profiles about each family.

As the primary principal investigator for both studies, I was responsible for designing, directing, implementing, and processing data for the studies. I also interviewed and engaged in participant observations with ethnographers and their respondents in each of the sites. With these extensive, detailed experiences in gathering and analyzing project data, I was able to easily triangulate all the data sources used in the analysis presented here. In each case, I compared what mothers said about their MPF histories, desires and experiences around romance, and the prevalence of rostering within their MPF networks, to mothers' behaviors as documented in ethnographers' field notes.

Three phases of modified grounded theory coding on complete sets of data for each mother and her family were conducted in this analysis. First, field notes, interview transcripts, family profiles, and discussion files were open coded with

common codes and sensitizing concepts around MPF, romance, and rostering (Glaser 1978). Next, coding patterns were examined within and across all cases using axial coding techniques adapted from constant comparisons of analytic induction (Huberman and Miles 1994). During this phase, I identified distinct patterns in (1) the parameters and prevalence of mothers' MPF romantic relationship histories, (2) mothers' thoughts and behaviors about romance including the prominence of their words and behaviors (Deutscher 1966; Mills 1940) about the value of "being chosen" by partners as distinct from their desires concerning practical aspects of their relationships, and (3) whether rostering emerged in mothers' quests to experience romance in their MPF networks. In the final phase, selective coding, I identified what LaRossa (2005) describes as deciding on the main story underlying the analysis. Below, I present this story line, using representative exemplar cases from the ethnographies to illustrate patterns that emerged from the data. An exemplar case (Abbott 1992, 53) is a particular instance of a conceptual class of phenomena or social actors that exemplifies some property or feature of that conceptual class (e.g., how mothers' different types of MPF histories are related to the types of romance they pursue). The use of exemplars or illustrative cases is a valid and well-established process for demonstrating empirical findings in ways that give readers a sense of the reality of particular experiences and the *verstehen* or viewpoint of the actors, as well as empirical verification of the patterns of behaviors that are identified (Mitchell 1983). Where specific case examples are used, respondents have been assigned pseudonyms.

Findings

Mothers' MPF relationship histories

To explore mothers' romance-seeking and rostering, I first identified the types and prevalence of mothers' MPF relationship histories in both datasets. I reviewed data about mothers' intimate relationship histories, including their legal, consensual, and common-law marriages; their patterns of nonmarital cohabitation; and their involvement in semicommitted to casual "dating" relationships such as "being together," "talking," "being just friends," "kicking it with each other," and "hanging out together." In doing so, I noted if mothers had biological children with various partners and if they had been in romantic relationships with men who had biological children with other women. Information about mothers' partners' MPF behaviors were based almost solely on the mothers' knowledge and reports about their various partners' MPF situations. I included that knowledge in creating the categories, but I realize there is a margin of error in doing so. In relying on mothers' reports of various partners having children with different women, the actual incidence of those occurrences may be under- or overestimated depending on how truthful partners were about their fertility and whether mothers had indisputable evidence about that fertility or speculated about it based on their suspicions concerning partners' past and present infidelities.

TABLE 2
Percentage Distribution of Mothers' Multiple-Partner Fertility (MPF) Relationship
Histories by Race/Ethnicity: Three-City Study Ethnography[a] (N = 251)

	Mothers' Race/Ethnicity			
MPF Histories	African American	Latino/Hispanic	Non-Hispanic White	Combined Subsamples
	%[b]	%[b]	%[b]	%[b]
No MPF (mother and her partners)	18	26	20	22
Mother-only MPF	21	13	24	18
Partner-only MPF	18	27	22	22
Both MPF (mother and her partners)	43	34	34	38
N	95	106	50	251

a. Total ethnography sample N = 256 (5 cases were not included in this analysis because of insufficient data).
b. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Consistent with existing studies of MPF (see Carlson and Furstenberg 2006), four categories—*No MPF; Mother-only MPF; Partner-only MPF*; and *Both MPF*—were evident in the data; their frequency of occurrence by mothers' race/ethnicity for both studies is reported in Tables 2 and 3. Mothers counted in the *No MPF* category said that they had biological children with only one partner and that partner had no biological children with other women. What is more, these mothers indicated that they had *never* (to the best of their knowledge) been in a romantic relationship (e.g., dating) with a man who had children with multiple women. These reports continued to hold true for the few mothers in this category who eventually ended their romantic relationships with their partners shortly after the birth of their child. Neither partner reportedly dated anyone with a child or had a child with another partner before the study ended. Roughly one-fifth of the total TCS sample of mothers (N = 251) were coded in the *No MPF* category, meaning nearly four-fifths (78 percent) of the respondents had MPF relationship histories. A comparable distribution was found among the FLP mothers (N = 95), with 79 percent having MPF relationship histories.

The number of mothers in both samples who had MPF relationship histories was consistent with but slightly higher than prevalence results reported in extant survey and administrative record studies of nonmarital births among women. For example, Cancian, Meyer, and Cook (2011, 957) found that "60% of a 1997 birth cohort of 8,019 firstborn children of unmarried mothers in Wisconsin had at least one half sibling by age 10" due to either the children's mothers having subsequent children with other men, their biological fathers having children with other women, or both biological parents having children with other partners. The

TABLE 3
**Percentage Distribution of Mothers' Multiple-Partner Fertility (MPF) Relationship
Histories by Race/Ethnicity: Family Life Project Ethnography[a] (N = 95)**

	Mothers' Race/Ethnicity			
MPF Histories	African American	Latino/Hispanic	Non-Hispanic White	Combined Subsamples
	%[b]	%[b]	%[b]	%[b]
No MPF (mother and her partners)	17	8	26	21
Mother-only MPF	30	8	13	18
Partner-only MPF	20	25	28	25
Both MPF (mother and her partners)	33	58	32	39
N	30	12	53	95

a. Total ethnography sample N = 101 (6 cases were not included in the analysis because of insufficient data).
b. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

prevalence of mothers' MPF relationships in the TCS and FLP ethnography was higher than one would expect because I paid attention to the definitions and meanings of MPF described by Lourdes and other respondents and coded mothers' *ever* involvements in MPF unions since the birth of their first child.

Another critical distinction about the TCS and FLP ethnography samples is that unlike most extant studies of MPF, particularly those from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; see also Waller 2012), in defining MPF categories I considered mothers' romantic relationships after the birth of their first child that did not involve them having a child with their new partners, including as MPF any romantic relationship with someone who had had children with another partner.[1] This definition was consistent with the ways in which Lourdes and other mothers in the studies described their involvement in MPF relationships. Fertility in and of itself was not the sole defining feature of MPF. Rather, the relational ties and social interactions within intimate partner networks that involved some individuals with no biological children, partners with biological children in common, and men and women who had children with various partners are what defined the MPF experience. As Lourdes indicated earlier, "You do not have to have a baby with a man who has children with other women to be a part of the mess. You are in it when you *have* to deal with everybody else in it."

In both studies, in slightly over half of the MPF relationships mothers reported *ever* being involved in, they did not have a biological child with their new partner. This distinction is important as most studies focus on relationships in which new MPF families are formed through the birth of the couple's child, rather than the

couple forming a new partnership without having a child in common (Waller 2012). By limiting samples in this way, one is unable to empirically explore how a mother's involvement in MPF unions that do or do not involve the birth of a child might be driven by her interest in romance over practical considerations such as money or assistance with child care. I was able to explore these caveats in my analysis because my definition of mothers' *ever* MPF histories includes situations in which the MPF partners did not have a child in common.

In the remaining MPF categories reported in Tables 2 and 3, we see that (see percentages in combined subsamples columns): (1) Eighteen percent of TCS and FLP samples were counted in the *Mother-only MPF* category. These mothers claimed that while they produced multiple children with different male partners, none of their romantic partners had had children with other women. (2) Twenty-two percent of TCS mothers and 25 percent of FLP mothers did not have children with multiple partners, but had been involved in romantic relationships with men who had children with other women (*Partner-only MPF*). And (3) in 38 percent and 39 percent of the TCS and FLP cases, respectively, both the mother and her partners had biological children with multiple partners (*Both MPF*). The overall MPF category distributions across the two ethnographies are remarkably similar considering that the samples were drawn from urban and rural locales.

In terms of racial/ethnic differences in mothers' MPF histories, overall, the data revealed prevalence patterns consistent with those of existing studies (see Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011). A noteworthy pattern (but one that should be approached with caution because of the small sample sizes of the ethnographies) was the proportionately higher count of Latina mothers in the *Partner-only MPF* category (27 percent) in the TCS and the *Partner-only MPF* (25 percent) and *Both MPF* (58 percent) categories in the FLP compared to white and African American mothers in these groups. These counts mostly comprised immigrant Latina mothers who were involved in MPF family configurations in which their partners had *casa chicas*, or second families, in the United States, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, or Central American countries. It is also important to highlight the percentage of African American mothers (30 percent and 21 percent) and non-Hispanic white mothers (13 percent and 24 percent) in the *Mother-only MPF* categories in the FLP and TCS, respectively. As the proceeding discussion shows, these mothers are particularly vulnerable to problematic romance-seeking behaviors that appear to be related to their histories of mental health disorders and of being sexually and physically abused as children and adults.

Patterns of romance

The modified-grounded theory analysis of the data revealed some mothers were initially reluctant to disclose information about their desires for romance, especially given the daily difficulties of living in poverty and procuring practical resources from their partners for their children. In general, mothers did not want to appear trite or superficial in conversing about romance when, as one respondent stated, "I have more important things to worry about." Nelson (2004) had similar data collection experiences in her study of romance and reciprocity

among low-income, single mothers in rural Vermont. Nonetheless, mothers in the two ethnographies discussed here eventually revealed their desires for and attempts to seek romance "on the down low" once they knew the ethnographers well enough to have a personal conversation about it. Consequently, I was able to identify in the data four emergent romance-seeking patterns across both samples: *casual, illusionist, pragmatic,* and *strategic.*

The defining features of these four types were: (1) a mother's expressed level of commitment to the romance; that is, whether it would involve interactions that would lead to a "real" relationship or was just a casual experience; (2) the types of romantic gestures a mother was seeking from a partner, including flirting, verbal or sexual signals that the partner "had chosen and desired" the mother above "all others," erotic love, opportunities for the mother to compliment or "pump up" the partner with accolades about his romantic prowess (e.g., adulation of the other), and whether the partner initiated dates or outings that were spontaneous and exciting; (3) whether the partner engaged the mother in fantasy talk or play about her status with him and their future together such as calling her "his queen," "indicating he would buy her the world if he could," and "that someday he would be rich and he would take her on an exotic tropical vacation"; (4) the degree to which, under the guise of displaying interest in a romantic interlude, the mother seemed to be strategically seeking romance with her primary objective being to determine what tangible resources the potential partner could provide for her and her children; and (5) the occasional gifting of material goods considered to be romantic gestures, such as the partner giving the mother candy on Valentine's Day. I categorized mothers based on whether their descriptions and behaviors indicated a frequent type of romance-seeking style relative to the categories described above. I then cross-classified mothers' dominant pattern of romance-seeking by their MPF histories. For example, a mother was classified in the *Both MPF/ Illusionist* category if she had a prominent history of being serially involved with men who had children with other women as well as having had children with different men herself, and if she demonstrated illusion-like romantic behaviors in her relationships such as (1) "being over the top" in quickly committing to relationships; (2) the need for her partners to "go to extremes" in letting her know that she was the chosen one; (3) demanding that her partners promise to treat her like a queen; (4) expecting her partners to stay away from their biological children with other women and only let her children call them "daddy" (a phenomenon known as "child swapping"; see Furstenberg 1995; Manning and Smock 2000); and (5) stipulating to her partners that they buy her expensive cars, houses, and jewelry (even though her partners rarely had any financial resources to do so) as symbols of their affection for her. In reporting these cross-classifications, for the sake of brevity, I provide detailed discussions of only the most frequently demonstrated romance-seeking pattern in each MPF category, although there is considerable variability in each group, with complex narratives that could be shared about each case.

Table 4 displays mothers' MPF histories and their romance-seeking behaviors. In the first column, the romance-seeking patterns of mothers with no histories of MPF relationships are shown. Results revealed most of these mothers

TABLE 4
Percentage Distribution of Mothers' Romance Patterns by Multiple-Partner
Fertility (MPF) Histories: Three-City Study (TCS)[a] (N = 251) and Family Life Project
(FLP)[b] (N = 95)

	MPF Histories							
	No MPF (mothers and her partners)		Mother-only MPF		Partner-only MPF		Both MPF (mothers and her partners)	
	TCS	FLP	TCS	FLP	TCS	FLP	TCS	FLP
Romance Patterns	%[c]	%[c]	%[c]	%[c]	%[c]	%[c]	%[c]	%[c]
Casual	7	10	9	12	23	33	44	44
Strategic	27	30	13	12	63	50	23	24
Illusionist	4	5	78	76	4	4	7	15
Pragmatic	62	55	0	0	11	13	23	18
N	55	20	46	17	56	24	94	34

a. Total ethnography sample N = 256 (5 cases were not included in this analysis because of insufficient data).
b. Total ethnography sample N = 101 (6 cases were not included in the analysis because of insufficient data).
c. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

(62 percent of the TCS sample and 55 percent of the FLP sample) had a very *pragmatic* style in seeking romance. The underlying pattern here is that these mothers were typically monogamous and either married or in long-term cohabiting relationships. They often stated that they had little time for romance because they and their partners were actively engaged in joint efforts (through work or schooling) to provide a future for their children and to become upwardly mobile. For example, Shana, a native of Chicago, is a 26-year-old, African American mother of two children and wife to her husband of four years. She talked incessantly about how she and her husband were "an old married couple" who were satisfied with just watching TV and taking care of their children. She indicated that it was not as if she did not want to experience romantic fantasies, but at that point in this couple's life, they "were about business" and keeping it simple. She also indicated that they loved and trusted each other completely, which was in and of itself enough romance for her.

   Comparable sentiments were shared by 26-year-old Elizabeth. Elizabeth, her husband, and two children live in a small rural community in central Pennsylvania. Despite living on the edge of poverty, they were true "go-getters" who focused their collaborative energies on getting ahead. Elizabeth often remarked that she did not have to prompt her husband, James, for romance; he just knew what to do for her and when to do it. Elizabeth shared that there was nothing more romantic in her life than she and her husband working together toward a

common goal. "We might be poor," she said, "but we are going to romance ourselves right out of it. Commitment and knowing he is there for me is so sexy!"

In the second column in Table 4, the distribution of romance-seeking behaviors among women in the *Mother-only MPF* is presented. Most of the mothers in this category adopted an *illusionist* perspective on romance-seeking (78 percent of the TCS sample and 76 percent of the FLP sample). This group had the highest prevalence of lifetime abuse and the poorest mental and physical health of mothers in both samples. They also, on average, had more children by different partners than mothers in any other group. They mostly pursued romance, on occasion with men who they believed, at least initially, had no children with other women. Cherise's profile aptly illustrates these points.

Cherise, a single mother of three children, all with different fathers, resides in Boston. She typically seeks romance with men 8 to 10 years her junior and rapidly envelops them in her "Cinderella" fantasy of love. Her romance requirements are extensive and involve creating outrageous fantasies about her partners buying her million-dollar houses, becoming CEOs of talent search companies, desiring her so much they cannot keep their hands off her, and immortalizing her in either song or poetry. Cherise's partners never stay with her longer than a month. During that period she is wildly happy, absorbed in the fantasy of the current romance. Once it is over, she experiences severe bouts of depression and her lupus symptoms erupt until the next potential paramour appears. It is important to note that Cherise successfully attracts suitors because she owns a house and can provide shelter to partners who are homeless.

Yvette also demonstrates the *illusionist* romance-seeking style. She is a 31-year-old, white resident of central Pennsylvania and mother of five children with five men. Yvette, like Cherise, says she only pursues romance with men who do not have children with other women. I have met several of Yvette's partners and doubt they are childless outside of their relationship with her. Nonetheless, Yvette believes she is the chosen one, if only for a short time. She says the men she attracts will make up for, in the moment, all the sorrow and pain she has experienced. Yvette's common expectation is that these temporary partners will take her on vacations to the beach, which most of them can do because they are drug dealers and have monetary resources. These romantic vacations have resulted in her five children.

In column three of Table 4, mothers in the *Partner-only MPF* category are presented. The most common pattern among these mothers is to seek *strategic* romance (63 percent of the TCS sample and 50 percent of the FLP sample). A fair number of the mothers in this category from both the TCS and FLP ethnographies are Latina. Overall, the mothers seem to be interested in engaging in romantic endeavors but with a purpose in mind. A dominant theme among mothers was that their partner chose them and their children (e.g., child swap) over the mothers of the partners' other children. Ariela is a case in point. A native of San Antonio and mother to her boyfriend Eduardo's son, Ariela indicated that she consciously pursued Eduardo even though she knew he had children with at least two other women. She thought him incredibly charming and romantic, saying he made her feel like the only woman in the world. Ariela also appreciated the way

Eduardo talked about his other children, with "so much love." Ariela admits she wanted that love for herself and her child, and she was not inclined to share Eduardo. So she strategically set out to win Eduardo's heart, deploying some romantic techniques of her own along the way. Her relationship with Eduardo lasted for a little more than a year—until she announced she wanted "all of him" for herself. Eduardo terminated the relationship that day.

Inez, a 32-year-old mother of one child and resident of rural North Carolina, had a similar story. She met Emmanuel at a local food bank. At the time, Inez was totally overwhelmed by her difficult lot in life. Emmanuel flirted with her, raising her spirits. She said he told her, "You are so beautiful, so beautiful; you should be mine." For the moment, his attention gave Inez a bit of relief. Even though Emmanuel had disclosed that he had a family elsewhere, Inez decided to work hard to attract him. Her romantic experience with Emmanuel lasted for less than a month as he returned to his family in Mexico. Inez does not regret the tender moments she shared with him and said she would try to win his heart again if he ever returned.

The fourth column in Table 4 includes mothers who are in the *Both MPF* category. The most common form of romance-seeking behavior among these mothers was *casual* (44 percent of the TCS sample and 44 percent of the FLP sample). *Casual* romance indicated that these mothers were looking for "short-term" good times with men who had children with other women, hoping that previous paternal commitments meant these men would not want a serious relationship. Julia, a 22-year-old, white mother living in central Pennsylvania with two children from different fathers, proclaimed: "Girls like me just wanna' have fun. You can pick a guy with a lot of baggage [other children] and he can romance you outta this world if you are not interested in anything serious. Love it! I feel special and I don't have to pay the piper. Yeah!"

Similarly, Margaret, a 28-year-old, Latina mother of three children with two men, started dating Gabriel after divorcing her abusive husband, having been single and celibate for a couple of years. Margaret was looking for romance when she met Gabriel, who had three children with two women. Margaret admits that she was attracted to Gabriel because she believed his circumstances made him unavailable. She was looking for a fun, spontaneous relationship that made her feel special and would not take her away from parenting her own children and managing her life in poverty. Gabriel had other ideas as he hastened to make the relationship a permanent one. Margaret ended the relationship quickly and chalked it up to experience. She said, "At least I had fun for a while!"

Rostering

This exploration of the association between MPF relationships and mothers' seeking romance in the context of poverty also revealed evidence of a stratified partnering system called rostering. As indicated earlier, in the context of MPF, a roster is a stratification system comprising present and past romantic partners, some of whom an individual has children with and others with whom they do not. The majority of mothers who engaged in rostering were either in the *Both MPF/*

Illusionist, Partner-only MPF/Illusionist, Partner-only MPF/Strategic, or *Mother-only MPF/Illusionist* groups. About 25 percent of the women from both ethnographies reported that they participated in some form of rostering and used it as a source for seeking romance and as a metric of self-worth. Partners were stratified in this system according to particular idiosyncratic criteria that varied across MPF networks.

Brianna, an 18-year-old, white mother of a little girl, lived in a small-town housing project in North Carolina and displayed rostering behaviors that were representative of those of the younger mothers in both studies. She consistently jockeyed for a spot on the roster of Alexes, her 28-year-old, occasional boyfriend. Among women in the housing project, Alexes was considered a strikingly handsome, strong, powerful, Latino male. He also dealt drugs. Alexes took up company with five single mothers residing in the housing project, several of whom lived next door to each other. He had biological children with two of them; all of them had children with other partners. To get on Alexes's roster, women had to physically fight each other, with the most successful fighter earning the title of "top woman." Brianna expressed overwhelming desire to be romanced by Alexes and to win his favor, so she was involved in numerous fights with other contenders. Depending on the prowess she demonstrated in the fights, she seesawed between the first and second spots on Alexes's roster.

Alternatively, 25-year-old Kendra was the self-proclaimed "queen of rostering" in her small-town rural community in Pennsylvania. Kendra is African American and had two children, both fathered by an Italian boyfriend. As one of few African American women in her community, and one of particularly meager means, Kendra always felt less attractive than her white female counterparts living nearby, particularly because African American men seemed more attracted to them. After producing two biracial children and breaking up with their father, Kendra sought to change her physical appearance slightly by getting green contact lenses; she also tried to raise her stature in the community. Kendra decided to pursue the most successful drug dealer in the area, Devon, who was also African American. So, she says, her plan was to make Devon want her. Devon also had children with five different white women in the area, who made up his roster. Eventually by playing "cat and mouse" with him, Kendra won Devon's favor. After a short period of time, he declared that she was now the "first lady" on his roster, and all his other women would have to treat her as such. Her children would even take precedence over his biological children with the other women.

Kendra used her status on Devon's roster to elicit the kind of romance she wanted, which involved designation as "the chosen one" as well as the ability to procure expensive gifts from him. Although Kendra knew her newfound power and privilege could be short-lived, she embraced the reprieve it afforded her from a life of poverty. What is more, her status gave her power over white women, even though these women were not the ones who had ridiculed her most of her life. (She had primarily been taunted by working- and middle-class white teenage girls in her high school.) Yet they served as symbols to her of the women who had. Devon made three of his girlfriends on the bottom rungs of his roster

buy Kendra cell phones, clothes, and other trinkets. Two women higher on the roster were not expected to purchase goods for Kendra because Devon characterized them as potential replacements for Kendra from time to time. Although Kendra had no biological children with Devon, her economic well-being and self-worth profited from his having fathered children with so many women. At this moment in time, Kendra felt she had greater status than the women with whom Devon had children and that her children were prettier and more deserving than these other women's children. Kendra longed for this status and power for some time and remarked, "This is sweet! That's what I call having power."

Melissa, on the other hand, is a 20-year-old, white mother of two children with two men and occupies the bottom rung of the MPF roster she has committed to. She lives in San Antonio and has notable mental and physical health problems. Melissa felt the only way she could have a chance at romance was to work her way up the MPF roster, but she did not have a clear sense of how to do that except to provide her occasional partner with sex. Melissa suffered from developmental delays diagnosed in childhood and was in frail health. Because of her physical and mental health maladies, she was not likely to rise in the roster, but she appeared to understand that and put an interesting spin on her situation: "I might be at the bottom, but at least this gives me a chance to be chosen someday."

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article I examined relatively unexplored territory concerning MPF and complex families. Through the eyes of Lourdes and other mostly single, low-income mothers residing in rural and urban communities, I explored the association between MPF and mothers' romance-seeking behaviors against the backdrop of poverty and uncertainty. In doing so, I attempted to expand how social scientists and policy-makers think about MPF relationships in complex families beyond focusing on parents' fertility status, per se. Building on Nelson's (2004, 2005) ethnographic work on romance and intimate unions among low-income single mothers in rural communities, I queried mothers' pursuit of romance over marriage in MPF networks and challenged family scholars to consider the romantic desires of poor women as important and necessary aspects of their lives. And I identified and considered the process of rostering in MPF networks and how they feed into mothers' pursuits of romance and feelings of self-worth.

The results of this investigation yielded a number of findings that provide novel insights on MPF, albeit understandings generated primarily from the perspectives and experiences of low-income urban and rural mothers. First, the results raised considerable concerns about how social scientists and policy-makers currently conceptualize and measure MPF in low-income populations, and whether they are doing so in ways that are relevant for understanding the everyday lives of poor mothers in MPF networks. For example, in conducting the

analysis reported here, I initially found myself severely limited in interpreting findings using the standard definition of MPF (see Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Meyer, Cancian, and Cook 2005; Monte 2011). As Lourdes's case study illustrated, there were many more dynamics at play in attempting to make sense of how she thought about and experienced MPF on the ground than just her MPF status. Ultimately, I realized that current studies of MPF do not incorporate a broad enough lens and have not yet developed the constructs to capture the dynamic qualities of MPF related to certain intimate-partner behaviors like romance.

The lens of Lourdes's and the other mothers' MPF histories also provided a richer, more detailed vantage point from which to explore how mothers sought romance in their lives, particularly given their expressed need to have respites from the vestiges of poverty and uncertainty. The analysis uncovered an emergent typology of romance-seeking behaviors—casual, strategic, illusionist, and pragmatic—that appeared to be related to specific forms of MPF. These forms of romance-seeking did undergird a number of the relationship behaviors that have been discussed in the extant literature, such as child swapping (Furstenberg 1995; Manning and Smock 2000) but also indicated that for some women romance-seeking was not entirely about garnering a reprieve from poverty through momentary romantic encounters. Nelson (2004), for example, reported that mothers in her study sought romance with men who had previously been in committed relationships with a wife and children. Mothers initially were attracted to these men's sense of responsibility toward their children, but once ensconced in their new romantic relationships, mothers often created situations in which their partners' obligations from previous relationships were ignored and transferred to her children. A majority of mothers in the *Partner-only MPF* category exercised this type of *strategic* romance-seeking.

The exploration of mothers' MPF and romance-seeking also pointed to the strengths, conundrums, and frailties that they faced. The majority of mothers in the *Both MPF/Casual* category wanted to have romantic experiences but were generally not interested in complicating their lives further by blending their own MPF situations with those of their partners. Mothers tended to feel that their lives were difficult enough, and while romance offered them a temporary release from stress, marriage involving compounded MPF from the mothers of their partners' other children would render the mothers in the two ethnographies reported here fewer resources and greater misery.

Mothers in the *No MPF/Pragmatist* category evinced a romance-seeking storyline that parallels what we know about the importance of romance for women with children in committed long-term relationships. Normally, life gets in the way of romance when a couple is building a family life together. But most couples find ways to share loving moments in manners that are most important to them, although the frequency of romantic interludes vary according to the length of the relationships and the ages of the children (see Gottman and Gottman 2007).

Mothers in the *Mother-only MPF/Illusionist* category were of the greatest concern. Much like MPF mothers in Turney and Carlson's (2011) recent work on fragile families, these women reported being overwhelmed with having children

by multiple partners and in over half the cases had been medically diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety. Taken at face value, some of the mothers in this category also appeared to be using idealistic optimism (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 2003) to manufacture unrealistic prototypes of romance. The data suggested that mothers frequently presented inaccurate profiles of their partners to themselves and to others who observed their relationships as a way to temporarily keep the fantasy of romance and the relationship alive. In doing so, mothers often put themselves and their children at risk for abuse and financial ruin. Mothers' impaired judgments seemed to be the result of problems that stemmed from past trauma such as childhood sexual abuse. The levels of physical and sexual abuse that women in this group experienced were extensive. Their patterns serve to heighten our awareness of the role of physical and sexual abuse in women's relationship behaviors and should hasten those who promote marriage programs for low-income women and their partners to carefully consider the impact of romantic illusion behaviors on MPF situations when encouraging marriage among at-risk partners.

My concern also extends to the mothers involved in rostering behaviors, a fair number of whom were categorized in the *Both MPF/Illusionist, Partner-only MPF/Illusionist, Partner-only MPF/Strategic,* and *Mother-only MPF/Illusionist* groups. All of these women suffered from feelings of low self-worth and most had serious comorbid physical and mental health problems that they felt made them less attractive on the relationship market. In some cases the frailties and poor images of self these women suffered from made them quite vulnerable to producing multiple children with different men and to continuing to seek romance through rostering. For others, particularly those in the *Partner-only MPF/Strategic* group, their pursuit of romance became a quest to knock out the competition from the mothers of their partners' other children and to win the heart of a man they saw as a reasonable mate and father for their children. At this point, there are no existing studies of rostering to compare these findings to, so I cannot say with any degree of accuracy how prevalent such behaviors are. Rostering is a difficult practice to identify in research without engaging in longitudinal ethnographic studies of MPF networks. The potential dangers of rostering to the well-being of men, women, and children, however, clearly warrant the need for further research on this topic and the development of interventions to mediate its potential harmful effects.

Having said all that, a rewarding aspect of this investigation is that I hope these exploratory ethnographic findings prod researchers to seriously consider studying romance in the lives of poor women. Sociological theorists such as Goode (1959), Giddens (1992), and Swidler (2001) have devoted considerable attention to the scholarly discourse on romance, culture, and modernity, but poor and racial/ethnic minority women have consistently been left out of this discussion. Perhaps knowing more about the romantic perceptions, expectations, and behaviors of low-income mothers could shed new light on their life course experiences, particularly as they relate to the ongoing scholarly and public policy discourse on the retreat from marriage and marital delay among the poor.

I also hope that the research questions I posed and addressed in this article can be systematically examined among men in general and low-income men specifically. How do poverty and uncertainty shape the romantic desires and behavior of men? How do men define romance, and what does it mean in their daily lives? How do men's desires for romance, beyond sexual encounters, contribute to relationships that characterize MPF networks? How common is rostering among men, and what are their perceptions about how women contribute to it? While I do not have the data to address these questions, I have been an ethnographer who studies poor families for more than 30 years now and have observed that there are a number of factors that likely drive men's behavior in MPF relationships that have yet to be explored. I have noticed for the most part that men are not as predatory or patriarchal as existing studies make them out to be, and the opportunities and the need for family, children, and the chance for romance may be powerful forces that are driving their quest for romance as well. These are, of course, empirical questions—ones that clearly deserve the attention of researchers who study complex families.

Note

1. There is not enough information to categorize men in a similar way: men are categorized by whether they have had children with other women, not whether they were romantically involved with a woman who had had children with another man.

References

Abbott, Andrew. 1992. What do cases do? Some notes on activity in sociological analysis. In *What is a case? Exploring the foundations of social inquiry*, eds. Charles S. Ragin and Howard S. Becker, 53–82. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Alaszewski, Andy, and Kirstie Coxon. 2009. Uncertainty in everyday life: Risk, worry, and trust. *Health, Risk and Society* 11:201–7.

Antonovsky, Aaron. 1979. *Health, stress, and coping*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bensonsmith, Dionne. 2005. Jezebels, matriarchs, and welfare queens: The Moynihan Report of 1965 and the social construction of African American women in welfare policy. In *Deserving and entitled: Social constructions and public policy*, eds. Anne L. Schneider and Helen M. Ingram, 247–60 Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Burton, Linda M. 1990. Teenage childbearing as an alternative life-course strategy in multigeneration black families. *Human Nature* 1 (2): 123–43.

Burton, Linda M., and Lea Bromell. 2011. Childhood illness, family comorbidity, and cumulative disadvantage: An ethnographic treatise on low-income mothers' health in later life. *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 30:231–63.

Burton, Linda M., Andrew Cherlin, Donna-Marie Winn, Angela Estacion, and Clara Holder-Taylor. 2009. The role of trust in low-income mothers' intimate unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71:1107–27.

Burton, Linda M., Raymond Garrett-Peters, and John Eason. 2011. Morality, identity, and mental health in rural ghettos. In *Communities, neighborhoods, and health: Expanding the boundaries of place*, eds. Linda Burton, Susan Kemp, ManChui Leung, Stephen Matthews, and David Takeuchi, 91–110. New York, NY: Springer.

Burton, Linda M., and Cecily R. Hardaway. 2012. Low-income mothers as "othermothers" to their romantic partners' children: Women's coparenting in multiple partner fertility relationships. *Family Process* 51:343–59.

Burton, Linda M., and M. Belinda Tucker. 2009. Romantic unions in an era of uncertainty: A post-Moyni-han perspective on African American women and marriage. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621:132–48.

Cancian, Maria, Daniel R. Meyer, and Steven T. Cook. 2011. The evolution of family complexity from the perspective of nonmarital children. *Demography* 48:957–82.

Carlson, Marcia J., and Frank F. Furstenberg Jr. 2006. The prevalence and correlates of multipartnered fertility among urban U.S. parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68 (3): 718–32.

Cherlin, Andrew J., Linda M. Burton, Tera R. Hurt, and Diane Purvin. 2004. The influence of physical and sexual abuse on marriage and cohabitation. *American Sociological Review* 9:768–89.

Clark, Sherri Lawson, Linda M. Burton, and Chenoa Flippen. 2011. Housing dependence and intimate relationships in the lives of low-income Puerto Rican mothers. *Journal of Family Issues* 32:369–93.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empower-ment*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2005. *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Deutscher, Irwin. 1966. Words and deeds: Social science and social policy. *Social Problems* 13:235–54.

Duck, Waverly. 2012. An ethnographic portrait of precarious life: Getting by on even less. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642:124–38.

Dyk, Patricia Hyjer. 2004. Complexity of family life among the low-income and working poor: An introduc-tion to the special issue. *Family Relations* 53:122–26.

Edin, Kathryn. 2000. "A few good men:" Why low-income single mothers don't get married. *The American Prospect* 11:26–31.

Edin, Kathryn, and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making ends meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Fincham, Frank D., and Steven Beach. 2010. Marriage in the new millennium: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72:630–49.

Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr. 1995. Changing roles of fathers. In *Escape from poverty: What makes a differ-ence for children*, eds. P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, 189–210. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Geronimus, Arline T., Margaret Hicken, Danya Keene, and John Bound. 2006. "Weathering" and age pat-terns of allostatic load scores among blacks and whites in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health* 96 (5): 826–33.

Gibson-Davis, Christina M., Kathryn Edin, and Sara McLanahan. 2005. "High hopes but even higher expectations": The retreat from marriage among low-income couples. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:1301–12.

Giddens, Anthony. 1992. *The transformations of intimacy: Sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern socie-ties*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Glaser, Bernard G. 1978. *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Gonzalez-Lopez, Gloria. 2005. *Erotic journeys: Mexican immigrants and their sex lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Goode, William J. 1959. The theoretical importance of love. *American Sociological Review* 24 (1): 38–47.

Gottman, John M., and Julie Schwarz Gottman. 2007. *And baby makes three: The six-step plan for preserving marital intimacy and rekindling romance after baby arrives*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.

Gross, Neil. 2005. The detraditionalization of intimacy reconsidered. *Sociological Theory* 23:286–311.

Harding, David J. 2007. Cultural context, sexual behavior, and romantic relationships in disadvantaged neighborhoods. *American Sociological Review* 72:341–64.

Harknett, Kristen, and Jean Knab. 2007. More kin, less support: Multipartnered fertility and perceived support among mothers. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69:237–53.

Harvey, David L. 1993. *Potter addition: Poverty, family, and kinship in a heartland community*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Hill, Heather D. 2007. Steppin' out: Infidelity and sexual jealousy among unmarried parents. In *Unmarried couples with children*, eds. Paula England and Kathryn Edin, 104–32. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Hill, Shirley A. 2005. *Black intimacies: A gender perspective on families and relationships*. New York, NY: AltaMira Press.

Hochschild, Arlie R. 2003. *The commercialization of intimate life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Huberman, A. Michael, and Matthew B. Miles. 1994. Data management and analysis methods. In *Handbook of qualitative research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 428–44. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Huston, Ted L., and Heidi Melz. 2004. The case for (promoting) marriage: The devil is in the details. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66:934–58.

Illouz, Eva. 1998. The lost innocence of love: Romance as a postmodern condition. *Theory, Culture, & Society* 15 (3–4): 161–86.

Jamieson, Lynn. 1999. Intimacy transformed? A critical look at the "pure relationship." *Sociology* 33: 477–94.

LaRossa, Ralph. 2005. Grounded theory methods and qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:837–57.

LaRossa, Ralph, and Maureen M. LaRossa. 1981. *Transition to parenthood: How infants change families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lindholm, Charles. 1998. Love and structure. *Theory, Culture, and Society* 15 (3–4): 243–63.

Macmillan, Ross. 2001. Violence and the life course: The consequences of victimization for personal and social development. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27:1–22.

Manning, Wendy D., and Pamela J. Smock. 2000. "Swapping" families: Serial parenting and economic support for children. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62 (1): 111–23.

Manning, Wendy D., Deanna Trella, Heidi Lyons, and Nola Du Toit. 2010. Marriageable women: A focus on participants in a community healthy marriage program. *Family Relations* 59:87–102.

Meyer, Daniel R., Maria Cancian, and Stephen T. Cook. 2005. Multiple-partner fertility: Incidence and implications for child support policy. *Social Service Review* 79 (4): 577–601.

Mills, C. Wright. 1940. Situated actions and vocabularies of motive. *American Sociological Review* 5: 940–13.

Mitchell, J. Clyde. 1983. Case and situation analysis. *Sociological Review* 31:187–211.

Monte, Lindsay M. 2007. Blended but not the Bradys: Navigating unmarried multiple partner fertility. In *Unmarried couples with children*, eds. Paula England and Kathryn Edin, 183–203. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Monte, Lindsay M. 2011. Multiple partner maternity versus multiple partner paternity: What matters for family trajectories. *Marriage and Family Review* 47:90–124.

Moran, Rachel F. 2001. *Interracial intimacy: The regulation of race and romance*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Murray, Sandra L., John G. Holmes, and Dale W. Griffin. 2003. Reflections on the self-fulfilling effects of positive illusions. *Psychological Inquiry* 14 (3/4): 289–95.

Nelson, Margaret K. 2004. Reciprocity and romance. *Qualitative Sociology* 27 (4): 429–59.

Nelson, Margaret K. 2005. *The social economy of single motherhood: Raising children in rural America*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Roy, Kevin M., Nicolle Buckmiller, and April McDowell. 2008. Together but not "together": Trajectories of relationship suspension for low-income unmarried parents. *Family Relations* 57:198–210.

Roy, Kevin, and Omari Dyson. 2005. Gatekeeping in context: Babymama drama and the involvement of incarcerated fathers. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers* 3:289–310.

Roy, Kevin, Carolyn Y. Tubbs, and Linda M. Burton. 2004. "Don't have no time": Daily rhythms and the organization of time for low-income families. *Family Relations* 53:168–78.

Rubin, Lillian B. 1983. *Intimate strangers*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Santore, Daniel. 2008. Romantic relationships, individualism and the possibility of togetherness: Seeing Durkheim in theories of contemporary intimacy. *Sociology* 42:1200–1217.

Sapolsky, Robert. 2005. Sick of poverty. *Scientific American* 293:92–99.

Sassler, Sharon, and Amanda J. Miller. 2011. Waiting to be asked: Gender, power, and relationship progression among cohabiting couples. *Journal of Family Issues* 32:482–506.

Silva, Jennifer M. 2013. *Coming up short: Working-class adulthood in an age of uncertainty*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Solomon, Denise H., and Leanne K. Knobloch. 2001. Relationship uncertainty, partner interference, and intimacy within dating relationships. *Communication Monograph* 61:345–60.

Suls, Jerry, and B. Mullen. 1981. Life events, perceived control and illness: The role of uncertainty. *Journal of Human Stress* 7:30–34.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of love*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tucker, M. Belinda. 2005. Intimate relationships and psychological well-being. In *In and out of our right minds: The mental health of African American women*, eds. Diane R. Brown and Verna M. Keith, 139–59. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Turney, Kristin, and Marcia J. Carlson. 2011. Multipartnered fertility and depression among fragile families. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73:570–87.

Vernon-Feagans, Lynne, Martha Cox, and The Family Life Key Investigators, eds. 2014. *The Family Life Project: An epidemiological and developmental study of young children living in poor rural communities*. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development. New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell.

Waller, Maureen. 2012. Cooperation, conflict, or disengagement? Coparenting styles and father involvement in fragile families. *Family Process* 51:325–42.

Wijnberg, Marion H., and Kathleen M. Reding. 1999. Reclaiming a stress focus: The hassles of rural, poor single mothers. *Families in Society* 80:506–16.

Winston, Pamela, Ron J. Angel, Linda M. Burton, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Andrew J. Cherlin, Robert Moffitt, and William Julius Wilson. 1999. *Welfare, children, and families: Overview and design*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wolfe, Barbara, William Evans, and Teresa Seeman eds. 2012. *The biological consequences of socioeconomic inequalities*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Wood, Geof. 2001. Desperately seeking security. *Journal of International Development* 13:523–34.

Wood, Geof. 2003. Staying secure, staying poor: The Faustian bargain. *World Development* 31:455–71.

Wood, Robert G., Sheena McConnell, Quinn Moore, Andrew Clarkwest, and JoAnn Hsueh. 2012. The effects of building strong families: A healthy marriage and relationship skills education program for unmarried parents. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31:228–52.