What Recent Research Tells Us About Low-Income Mothers' Romantic Relationships and the Persistence of Poverty and Childhood Inequality

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Who Am I and Why Am I Here?

Our Agenda

- Emphasis in extant research is on declines in marriage, rise in cohabitation and non-marital fertility, and more recently in complex families - - but little is known about the processes involved in low-income women's romantic relationships and how they contribute to persistent poverty and inequality among their children.
- We are going to dig a bit deeper today. . . using longitudinal ethnographic data we will explore context and meaning in these relationships and whether we are even asking the right questions about them . . .will move beyond the usual suspects of the "why"

Our Agenda (cont'd)

- Perspectives that guide the work
- Quick tutorial on team ethnography; what the data look like
- A word on reflexivity
- Three stories: (1) marriage or intimate union patterns and the role of domestic violence and sexual abuse; (2) the structure of complex multiple partner fertility relationships and the role of inequality; (3) circling back to the beginning - - the role of trust in low-income women's intimate unions
- Implications for public policy

What I Have Come To Know

- I need to become a better consumer of country western music because as Leann Rimes says "Nothin' 'Bout Love Makes Sense"
- Policy-makers, sociologists, and economists may be too captivated by marriage and miss the underlying story
- This is not a story anchored in the bifurcation of marriage and fertility, but rather one that is caught in the crosshairs of abuse, seeking romance, and parenting
- Jobs and money are part of the story, but not all of it

Ways of Thinking

- Will emphasize the potential contradictions between what low-income women *say* and *do* in the course of moving through relationships; pay attention to their "accounts"
- The importance of romance
- Stratification, inequality, and being "chosen" - - the validation story
- The role of uncertainty in women's everyday lives
- The role of development, domestic violence, and sexual abuse in the "marriage story"

Methods

Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study

The Design

Ethnography
Family and Neighborhood
- 256 African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Non-Hispanic White Families, with target child age 2 to 4, interviewed 18 to 24 months
- Follow-up interviews will take place every 6 months until completion of study
- TANF and Non-TANF
- 45 Families with a child under 8 years old with a disability
- 29 Neighborhoods

Embedded Developmental Study
- Subsample of the families in the survey
- 700 young children age 2 to 4 and their caregivers
- Home observations and child care observations every 18 months

Survey
- 2,402 Families
- Estimated 40% on TANF
- Estimated 80% of families with current incomes below poverty; 20% between the poverty line and 200% of the poverty line
- Structured interviews every 18 months

THE THREE-CITY ETHNOGRAPHY TEAM: THROUGH THE YEARS

Linda M Burton, Director, Family Ethnography and William Julius Wilson, Director, Neighborhood Ethnography

Boston: Constance Williams, William Julius Wilson, James Quane, Judith Francis, Gwendolyn Dordick, Helen Glikman. Gillian Addison, Ammad Bahalim, Marya Dantzer-Rosenthal, Silvia Dominguez, Richard Leibson Hawkins, Pamela Joshi, Johanna Martinez, Jal Mehta, Richard Mora, Jennifer Murillo, Bikila Ochoa, Diane Purvin, Bruce Rankin, Sandy Resnick, Brenda Samuel-Daly, Tracy Siwa, Michelle Sloan, Mario Small, Joan Walsh, Celeste Watkins.

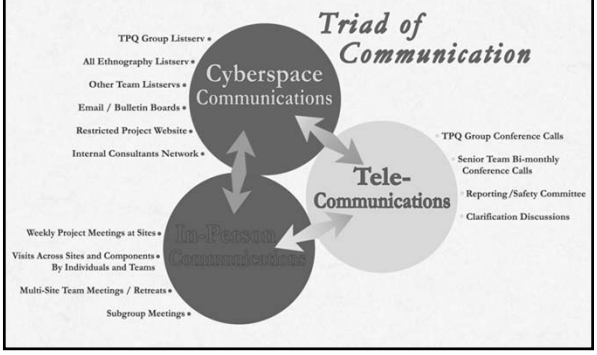
Disability: Debra Skinner, William Lachicotte, Diego Argibay, Peggy Auguste, Susan Brostrup-Jensen, Deborah Day, Jacqueline Douglas, Faye Manaster Eldar, Marieta Escobar, Blythe Farish, Melissa Fiske, Dorothy Flash, Lisa Greenbaum, Alicia Hadad, Aneta Jedrasiko, Janilene Jillson, Kristine Kuczynski, Amy Levine, Cynthia McMahon, Elisa Slattery, Michael Woods.

Chicago: Monica McManus, Linda Burton, Kevin Roy, Angela Odoms-Young, Kathleen Abramovitz, Tennille Allen, Glenda Burnett, Beverly Betts, Kathleen Cangemi, Tyra Dixon, Martha Espinoza, Yolanda Fowler, Jeanette Galindo, Christine Garza, Celia Gonzalez, Jesse Harmon, Claudia Morales Haro, Nakisha Harris, Niomi Henry, Jayne Hoffman, Maya Jackson, Stephanie Jefferson, Maria Kroll, Ann Kuta, Ashanti Mackenzie, Lucille Martinez, Ana Nuñez, Helen Ositelu, Grace Paladines, Karen Pickett, Amanda Reid, Aureen Roach, Angelina Rodriguez, Lorena Roque, Nicole Rousseau, Wenona Rymond-Richmond, Julie Schliff, Stephanie Sosa, Jaqueline Tzena, Blanca Torres, Vickey Velazquez, Valerie Werner, Dona Wisniewski.

Penn State: Linda Burton, Laura Bodenschatz, Stephen Matthews, Don Gensimore, Alan Benjamin, Naomi Walton Abrams, Karla Altenburg-Caldwell, Chutney Arrington, Frank Avenilla, Shelly Bierly, Jennifer Brooks, Bridget Bayuk, Susan Brostrup-Jensen, Jennifer Clark, Sherri Lawson Clark, Constance Dallas, Lane Destro, Jim Detwiler, Chad Eline, Noemi Enchautegui-de-Jesus, Maggie Fox, William Franklin, Carmen Frost, Marisol Garcia, Bridget Goosby, Deborah Graefe, Steve Graham, Dina Guthoff, Cecily Hardaway, Suzanne Hunt, Tera Hurt, Lorena Jaramillo, Stacy Kline, Amy Kolak, Laurie Krom, Ellie Lalli, Christian Lampe, Cassandra Logan, Cassie Johnstonbaugh, Bonnie Madden, Betsy Manlove, Amanda Maull, Brian McManus, Zena Mello, Angie Morrison, Jodi Neidig, Romney Norwood, Akiko Nosaka, Hyun Joo Oh, M Miki Poy, Tracy Shutica Ray, Angel Ritzert, Melissa Robbins, Shermann Robertson, James Rodriguez, Monica Rodriguez, Daniel Salemson, Sharon Shaw, Ed Strechman, Elisa Slattery, Jason Smith, Tammy Snook, Carol Stack, Saskia Subramanian, Laura Tach, Carolyn Tubbs, Maria Urrieta, Arcel Vazquez, Reggan Walker, Stacy Woodruff, Erin Yocum, Sherry Yocum, Lyde Zavaleta, Michelle Zeiders, Debra Ann Zucco.

San Antonio: Laura Lein, Jane Hennici, Jeremias Alvarez, Ronald Angel, Reneliinda Arana, Adrienne Baker, Holly Bell, Melissa Biggs-Coupal, Neal Bowen, Quiana Brown, Beth Bruinsma, Jennifer Conrad-Graham, Byron Crites, Ana Cuenca, David Dominguez, Daniel Estabrook, Elizabeth Farrington, Carlos Garcia, Gerardo Gomez, Neill Hadder, Michelle Harper, Martha Henry, Mustafa Khan, Rebecca Kuipers, Javier Leon, Emily Leventhal, Elizabeth Lilliott, Neely Mahapatra, Anita McClendon, Carol Miller, Farah Mitha, Monica Molina, Mamta Morwani, Anne Ojeda, Joaquin Orozco, Jemima Pierre, Priscilla Ramos, Lillian Salcido, Janet Seagal, Terry Shanahan, Amy Sherburne, Doug Smith, Audrey Steiner, Vickie Vértiz, Diane Yentel, Aaron York, Meggan Watson, Tina Wei, Gregory Whitworth, Kim Wilson, Joseph Wilwayco.

Three-City Ethnography Communication Process

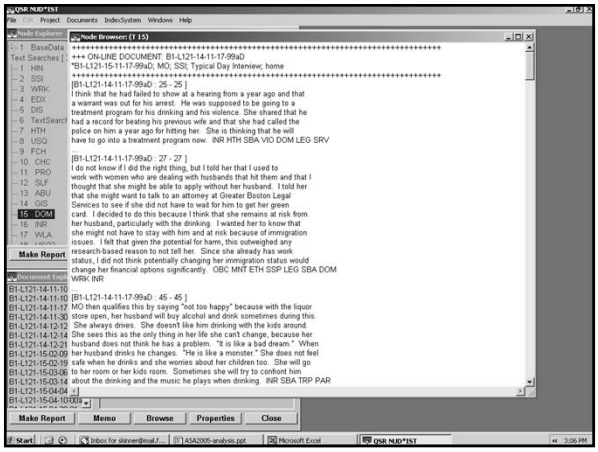


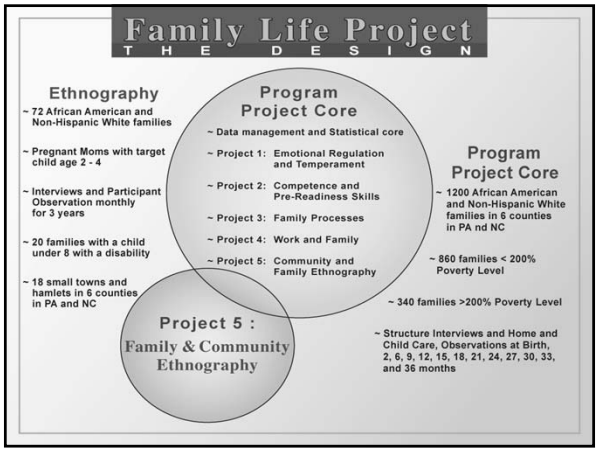
Forms of Data: Raw and Processed

- Field Readiness: 22 Focus Groups Across Sites and Neighborhoods with Disability and Non-Disability Families
- "Chronicles of Structured Discovery"
- Field Notes and Context Notes (e.g, In-depth Interviews, Key Informant Interviews; Participant Observations)—Also in NUDIST Projects
- Detailed Family Profiles—Organized by Topics
- Taped and Digitally Recorded Interviews (Transcribed)
- Family Records and Artistic Expressions (e.g., legal documents, letters from social service agencies, poems and songs written by respondents)
- GIS Macros (e.g., locations of family's support networks, childcare, and health care resources)—Geoethnography and "Jumping Scale"
- Transects with GPS units—Poverty and Homeplace
- Ethnography of Ethnographers
- All available relevant secondary neighborhood data (e.g, crime statistics, social service availability, etc.,)
- Historical documents, newspaper records, photos

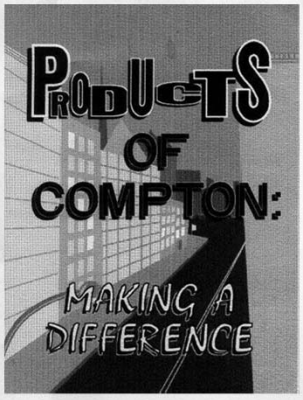
CODING SCHEME FROM THREE-CITY STUDY

ABU (abuse-- physical, verbal, sexual)
ADL (Adolescents—any information pertaining to adolescents in the household)
ADT (adultification—any reference to a child's taking on adult roles or responsibilities; being placed in adult situations; acting more like an adult than a young child; exhibiting adult knowledge)
AFF (Affect –Use to code text that indicates an emotional or psychological state or expression; emotionally laden reflections by the mother/caregiver on her life; topics that arouse strong emotion; any reference to stress, being overwhelmed)
CFL (conflict—Use to code situations, references to conflicts of various kinds)
CHC (Child care arrangements current and past, quality of care, typical day of child care)
CHD (Child development--the activities, context, goals, and values around the child as he/she acts/develops; the skills and behavior of the child; child's roles and responsibilities. Use to co-code with FCH when the information is specific to the focal child or with SIB or ADL when it is specific to the other children in the household.)





A Note on Ethnography, Poverty, Mothers' Lives, and Reflexivity



Otilia Burton
1972 - 2007

Are We Asking the Right Questions? Marriage, Intimate Union Patterns, and Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse and the Life Course

Patterns of Union Formation

- ***Sustained Unions*: One sustained union, or two unions, at least one sustained, with little time between them. Defining characteristic is that the woman has been in long-term unions most of her life with only one or two men.**
  - **48% fit this pattern**

Patterns of Union Formation

- ***Transient Unions***: A series of short-term unions. May be sequential with different men or a long-term involvement with a man that cycles between living together and breaking up. Women in this category experience unions as short-term partnerships and rarely live without partners for substantial periods of time.
  - 34% fit this pattern

Patterns of Union Formation

- ***Abated Unions***: One or two unions of modest duration and no subsequent unions. These are women who indicated that they are not interested in forming another union with a man and have effectively taken themselves off the market.
  - 18% fit this pattern

Definitions and Measurement of Abuse

- ***Sexual abuse***: Lifetime experiences of rape, molestation, parent-enforced prostitution, or witnessing incest acts.
  - 39% reported being sexually abused
- ***Physical abuse***: Lifetime experiences of physical beatings (not spanking), attacks with weapons, or witnessing extreme physical beating of parents or siblings.
  - 62% reported experiencing physical abuse
  - 65% reported either sexual or physical abuse

Union Patterns by Timing of Abuse

Timing of Abuse	Union Patterns: Sustained (N = 109)	Transient (N = 78)	Abated (N=41)
None	[65]	9	7
Childhood only	6	5	5
Adulthood only	17	21	[71]
Childhood and adulthood	12	[65]	17
Total	100%	100%	100%

Union Patterns by Type of Abuse

Type of Abuse	Union Patterns: Sustained (N = 109)	Transient (N = 78)	Abated (N=41)
None	[65]	9	7
Sexual abuse only	2	4	3
Physical abuse only	15	12	[83]
Sexual and physical abuse	18	[76]	7
Total	100%	100%	100%

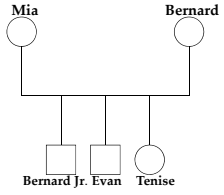
Multiple Partner Fertility, Complex Families, and Inequality

Types of Multiple Partner Fertility Family Structures

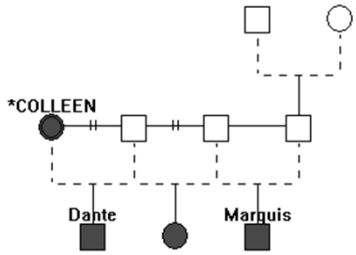
- ***Simple*** **-- children's parents have procreated only with each other**
- ***Complex*****-- children's parents have procreated with multiple partners**
- ***Complex Mother*** **-- children's mothers have procreated with multiple partners**
- ***Complex Partner*** **-- children's fathers and/or mothers' partners have procreated with multiple partners**
- ***Complex Both*** **-- both children's mothers and children's fathers and/or mothers' partners have procreated with multiple partners**

Distribution of Multiple Partner Fertility Structures by Race/Ethnicity

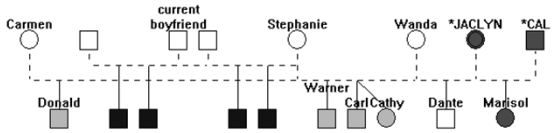
Mia's Family: No MPF



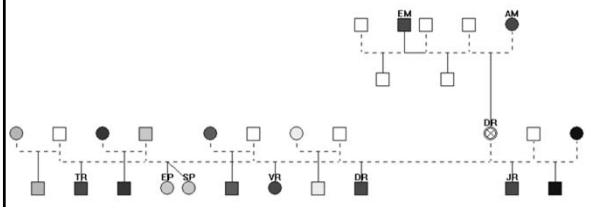
Colleen's Family: MPF Mother



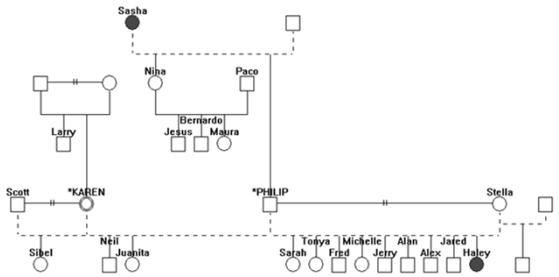
Jaclyn's Family: MPF Partner



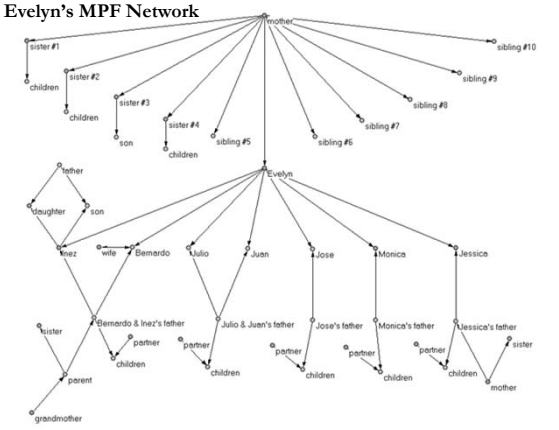
Desiree's Family: MPF Both



Karen's Family: MPF Both



Evelyn's MPF Network



Romance and Rostering

Inequality Among Siblings

Tracy has six children. Her two oldest children were fathered by Sean, her three middle ones by Samuel, and her youngest by Franklin. Sean and Samuel receive health insurance benefits through their employment. Sean provides health insurance for his two children, but Samuel refuses to pay for health insurance for his three children. Franklin is nowhere to be found, so Tracy's youngest child receives Medicaid benefits. Tracy reports that she and her three middle children are uninsured while her two oldest children and her youngest child have health insurance.

Stratification and Inequality

- Not so common "othermothering"
- Child-swapping
- "Choose Me"
- "And now I'm with a black man who has babies with 5 white women. But I'm his #1. Those women buy him stuff and he gives it to me. I got a cell phone that one of them bought right now. Gotcha! [She laughs]. Who's got the juice now, huh? Who's #1 now, huh?"

The Role of Trust in Low-Income Mothers' Intimate Unions

Marriage Going Once, Twice, Three Times…

I'm gonna' be just like that rich lady on the news. I'll get married three times. I hooked up with the first man for sex [lust] . . . the second man I will marry is the father of my children . . . and after they are all raised and he is dead, the last one will be for me. He will be the man I really love . . . the one I give my everything. He will be my soul-mate. I can't wait!

"Trust is Like Jell-o"

Trust is like Jell-o. Men and women don't know what it's made of, but can make it whatever they need it to be to justify a hook-up, stay in a bad relationship, leave what looks like a good one, or protect themselves from relationships altogether. Jell-o is jiggly. It comes in many colors. You can make it into something that doesn't look like the Jell-o you started with. Trust is jiggly and it can look like something it is not. You can't trust trust and you can't trust Jell-o! That's what I've learned about trust from working with poor families.

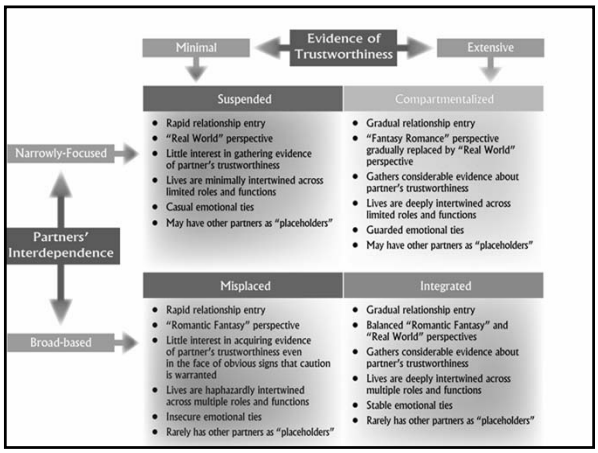
Generalized Gender Distrust and Forms of Situational Trust

- 96 % of the mothers in the ethnography consistently indicated over the course of the study that, in general, they did not trust men. Mothers made comments such as, "Men are dogs, you can't trust any of them;" "Don't trust a man any farther than you can throw him;" "They are dirty, all of them."

- Yet, mothers were not shying away from intimate unions.

- Rather, all mothers deployed some form of situational trust in their various unions over the 2- to 4-year period ethnographers regularly visited with them.

- What forms of situational trust did mothers' deploy?



Suspended Trust

I ain't looking for that love shit," she declared. "I need a man to help me for a minute, and he's out of my house after that. You see, we got to have an understanding. I get what I need, he gets what he needs, and it's a done deal. I don't need to know nothin' about how he gets what he gets [e.g., acquiring financial resources]. I don't want to know nothin' that particular. I'm in control. I run this shit up in here.

Misplaced Trust

I am scared to live alone, and I feel safe when a man is around. I know that he will learn to love me, because I give everything…a lot of love, mostly. My man right now, I give him a house to live in and a child to love. I believe he will do right by me. I trust him.

Misplaced Trust (cont'd)

Her boyfriend frequently climbed out of their bedroom window at night to visit the woman down the hall. Yet, Helena continued to hope that their relationship would last. She said, "He ain't going no where. We need each other." Within one week of making that statement, Helena's boyfriend moved in with the other woman.

Misplaced Trust (cont'd)

Shortly after her boyfriend left, Helena became so depressed and anxious that she had to be hospitalized for three weeks. When asked what she would do if her boyfriend returned, she said, "I would marry him. He can come back. He can come back. I know he didn't mean to hurt me. I know way down inside, I can trust him."

Compartmentalized Trust

Margarita indicated that she trusted her partner, but only to provide financially for her children and to send money to support her family in Central America. She said, "Our relationship is not love, I do not trust him with my heart. I have someone else [a paramour in Central America] that I can trust with my heart. We [Margarita and her husband] trust each other only for some things. It's like a business agreement and I can depend on him to do is job."

Integrated Trust

Shana recalls that she decided to pursue a relationship with her husband after "checking him out" for a year. "I watched how he handled his business and treated other people's feelings, and if he did what he said he was going to do….and he did." Shana and her husband were very mindful of each other's needs and devoted special time, in their day, to tend to their relationship. She stated, "We trust each other very much. I don't know what we would do without each other."

Percent Types of Trust by Intimate Union Patterns Three-City Study Ethnography (N=228 Families)

	Intimate Union Patterns		
Types of Trust	Sustained (N=109)	Transitory (N= 78)	Abated (N=41)
Suspended	12%	*31 %*	*56%*
Misplaced	0%	*61 %*	12%
Compartmentalized	*40%*	8%	*24%*
Integrated	*48 %*	0%	7%

Percent History of Abuse by Forms of Trust Three-City Study Ethnography (N=228 Families)

	Forms of Trust			
History of Abuse	Suspended (N=60)	Misplaced (N=53)	Compart. (N=60)	Integ. (N=55)
No	25%	13%	*37%*	*69%*
Yes	*75%*	*87%*	63%	31%

It is Complicated

- As policy-makers, researchers, and practitioners are we asking the right questions?
- We should be focusing on patterns of intimate unions rather than marriage
- Histories of Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Matter "Big Time!"
- Multiple partner fertility is creating new systems of stratification and inequality among siblings
- Romance is very important but not taken into account by most researchers and policy-makers.
- Trust is not what it often seems to be
- We have to look beyond aggregate patterns in the decline of marriage to understand the realities of romance among low-income mothers and what it means for sustained poverty and inequality

Questions and Discussion:
Implications for Public Policy