

Low-Income Mothers as “Othermothers” to Their Romantic Partners’ Children: Women’s Coparenting in Multiple Partner Fertility Relationships

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In this article, we investigated low-income mothers’ involvement in multiple partner fertility (MPF) relationships and their experiences as “othermothers” to their romantic partners’ children from previous and concurrent intimate unions. Othermothering, as somewhat distinct from stepmothering, involves culturally-scripted practices of sharing parenting responsibilities with children’s biological parents. We framed this investigation using this concept because previous research suggests that many low-income women practice this form of coparenting in their friend and kin networks. What is not apparent in this literature, however, is whether women unilaterally othermother their romantic partners’ children from different women. How often and under what circumstances do women in nonmarital MPF intimate unions with men coparent their partners’ children from other relationships? We explored this question using a modified grounded theory approach and secondary longitudinal ethnographic data on 256 low-income mostly unmarried mothers from the Three-City Study. Results indicated that 78% of the mothers had been or were involved in MPF unions and while most had othermothered the children of their friends and relatives, 89% indicated that they did not coparent their partners’ children from any MPF relationship. Mothers’ reasons for not doing so were embedded in: (a) gendered scripts around second families, or “casa chicas”; (b) the tenuous nature of pass-through MPF relationships; and (c) mothers’ own desires for their romantic partners to child-swap. Implications of this research for family science and practice are discussed.

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This special issue's focus on coparenting affords the opportunity to explore an emergent and uncharted topic in the study of low-income complex families—women's involvement in multiple partner fertility unions and their experiences as "othermothers" to their romantic partners' children from previous and concurrent intimate unions. *Multiple partner fertility* [herein referred to as MPF] involves individuals having biological children with more than one partner, frequently in the context of nonmarital romantic relationships (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). *Othermothering* is the culturally scripted practice of women sharing parenting responsibilities with children's biological parents (Collins, 2000; Troester, 1984).

This article's focus is a departure from the prevailing discourse on stepfamilies and stepmothering, which are the most commonly studied forms of MPF unions and women's coparenting roles (Sweeney, 2010). To be sure, coparenting in stepfamilies bound by marriage and nonmarital MPF unions likely share some similar features. Yet, there is good reason to believe that the contextual and relational properties of nonmarital MPF, particularly in low-income populations, produce distinct coparenting processes and outcomes (Harknett & Knab, 2007). For example, compared to traditional stepfamilies, nonmarital MPF relationships tend to be more prevalent among younger couples with limited financial resources (Stewart, 2007). Moreover, these unions are often characterized by contentious relationships and serial childbearing through serial repartnering which ultimately produce fairly broad, fluid, and complex networks of multiple biological parents, "potential" coparents, and half-siblings (Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011). Consequently, we framed our exploration using the concept othermothering because it offered a broader perspective on women's inclinations to coparent the biological children of others, especially in the context of poverty.

Furthermore, the literature on othermothering has suggested that, in general, low-income women and women of color often take on this style of coparenting to help the biological parents of relatives and friends who have limited social and psychological capital to protect and raise "good children" (James, 1993; Naples, 1992; see also Gaskin-Butler et al., 2012). Like the women described in this literature, mothers in the study we present here have substantial histories of coparenting the children of relatives and friends who have fallen on hard times or are experiencing contentious family relationships. But do these women unilaterally extend their othermothering practices to their romantic partners' children with different women? How often and under what circumstances do women in nonmarital MPF intimate unions with men coparent their partners' children from other relationships?

To address these questions, we analyzed secondary data from a longitudinal ethnographic study of 256 Latino, African American, and White low-income families who participated in the *Three-City Study*. We used a modified grounded theory approach (LaRossa, 2005) to: (a) identify the prevalence and nature of mothers' MPF relationship histories; (b) discern which women othermothered their romantic

partners' children in these relationships and why; and (c) for those mothers who did not assume the role, determine what factors assuaged their involvement. In reporting the results, we begin with a brief review of the relevant literature on othermothering and repartnering in stepfamilies followed by a description of the *Three-City Study's* ethnographic methods and the results from data analysis. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research for family science and practice.

BACKGROUND

Othermothering

Whether disciplining a neighbor's child "from down the street," or tending the children of working mothers, many low-income women and women of color have long-standing traditions of othermothering children who are not biologically their own. Collins (2000), in her classic treatise, *Black Feminist Thought*, eloquently chronicled the centrality of this role in the lives of African American women, and other scholars have duly recognized its prominence and function among women across the life course and in a variety of racial and ethnic groups (see Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994). According to Collins (2000), othermothering comprises all the actions of mothering, from providing children with daily care and guidance to improving their life chances through social activism. Othermothers are said to engage in these activities without the explicit intent of usurping the status or parenting efforts of children's biological mothers. In this sense, othermothers serve as backstops for children's parents. They are women who step in to help and advocate for children when necessary, and to occasionally relieve the stresses involved in raising a child under complex and tenuous family circumstances.

Stack and Burton (1993) have argued that the socialization for othermothering, in some contexts, is a well-defined process that is passed down in communities and families through the intergenerational transmission of kinscripts. Kinscripts are culturally generated norms and practices that delineate family roles and the tasks of family labor. According to these scripts, certain family members are identified as having attributes that render them likely to be "drafted" as othermothers while others' precarious life situations may eliminate them from consideration. These scripts also provide othermothers with clear expectations about their coparenting rights and privileges as they serve as points-of-reference for managing the conflicts and tensions that can arise between othermothers and biological mothers in providing care for children.

In addition, kinscripts delineate the roles biological fathers play in appointing othermothers to coparent their children (Roy & Burton, 2007). Fathers' enlistment of othermothers is often arrayed along a continuum determined by fathers' direct involvement with their children, their romantic unions with new partners, and their children's biological mothers' interests and investment in parenting. At one extreme, nonmarital single fathers who assume primary custody and care of their children when their children's mothers are unable to do so frequently co-opt their girlfriends or female family members as coparents (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Waller, 2009). At the other extreme, biological fathers who assume little or no responsibility for their children, and who consistently engage in short-term transient romantic relationships

with other women, rarely seek the support of their girlfriends as othermothers (Roy & Burton, 2007).

What is more, othermothering practices are fundamentally shaped by cultural norms around gender roles as evidenced in the coparenting behaviors of families of Latino-Caribbean, Mexican, and Latin American descent (Safa, 2005). While othermothering the children of kin is fairly common among Latinas, women may not extend this coparenting practice to their partners' children with other women because of gendered family scripts (Gutman, 1996). A brief foray into the Latino MPF and immigration literatures provides insights on this point.

Demographic reports have indicated that nonmarital MPF is relatively high in Latino populations (Landale & Oropesa, 2007). In particular, the prevalence of Mexican male immigrants who are legally married to or in a consensual union with one woman, but concurrently maintain secondary family households, or *casa chicas*, with other female partners, is relevant to this discussion despite some evidence that these arrangements are not as common as some Latina women report (Falicov, 2010). Nonetheless, Parrado and Flippen (2010) have advised researchers that while only a few of the Mexican male immigrants in their study had *casa chicas*, these men's wives' "fears were not unwarranted." Men and women in these complex primary and secondary family networks often subscribed to culturally scripted gender roles which shaped their coparenting arrangements. For example, men typically controlled the disclosure of information to their wives about their *casa chicas* and dictated whether "the other woman" would take part in coparenting his children (Parrado & Flippen, 2010). Several of the Latina mothers in the present study had *casa chicas* experiences and we recount their othermothering choices in the results section of this article.

Repartnering, Stepfamilies, MPF, and Coparenting

Although there are some inherent differences between stepfamilies bound by marriage and nonmarital MPF families, the repartnering processes involved in both share some generic features that are germane to configuring women's coparenting practices within them. Essentially, when members of former romantic couples repartner with others, whether they marry or not, the ensuing transitions in family composition and role expectations typically disrupt the broader family system and become the basis for conflict among its members (Bonach, 2005; Hutson, 2007). For example, studies of stepfamilies have shown that conflict commonly arises through repartnerings from jealousies between stepmothers and mothers, disagreements between husbands and their former spouses, differences in childrearing beliefs and practices, and disputes about financial obligations husbands have for ex-wives and their children (Knox & Zusman, 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

Another key issue concerns the allocation of divorced and remarried fathers' time and resources as a point of contention. The stepfamily literature has suggested that fathers' investments in their children shift when new romantic partnerships are established. Furstenberg (1995), for instance, hypothesized that fathers "swap" families when they remarry, redirecting instrumental and financial support from ex-partners and existing children to new partners and their children. In support of Furstenberg's hypothesis, research has shown that biological fathers decrease visitation and child support payments to existing biological children when they repartner and have additional coresident biological children (Manning & Smock, 2000).

Likewise, a growing body of research has shown that relative to father involvement, women in nonmarital MPF relationships experience repartnering challenges similar to those of stepmothers, only more complex (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). One's take on how repartnering and father involvement influence coparenting, however, depends on whose perspective is represented. For example, Monte (2007) reported that children from previous MPF relationships were a serious source of conflict when a *repartnered woman* felt that the time her new male partner spent with his children detracted from their romantic union, or the time he could spend with her children.

When considered from the perspective of *children's biological mothers*, however, especially in light of Townsend's (2004) notion of the "package deal," a different take on the issue prevails. Several studies have found that children's biological mothers repartnering and having additional children is more strongly related to declines in fathers' involvement than is fathers' repartnering and subsequent fertility with another woman (Guzzo, 2009; Meyer & Cancian, 2011). Tach, Mincy, and Edin (2010) have argued that parenting, in these situations, is a "package deal" wherein nonresident fathers' involvement with children is highly dependent on the quality of the biological parent's relationship, not so much the predilections of the father's new partner. In fact, when the biological mother-father romantic relationship dissolves, each parent may seek to establish a similar "package deal" with a new partner that deprioritizes past partners and existing children (Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007).

Regardless of one's vantage point on these issues, the experiences of repartnering and child-swapping are inherently linked in MPF unions and are thus tied to othermothering experiences as described in Nelson's (2005) ethnographic study of low-income rural White single mothers. She reported that mothers in her study sought to repartner 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 could be ignored. By all accounts, Nelson's respondents were committed to othermothering the children of their families and friends as circumstances demanded. Yet, in the context of repartnering and MPF, they opted out of coparenting their partner's children and, instead, often subtly encouraged their partners to "swap children."

A final point concerns the veritable strength of repartnered couples' relationships and issues of fidelity relative to potential opportunities for women to coparent. Couples' relationships in nonmarital MPF unions compared to those in stepfamilies are often more fragile, with uncertainties surrounding commitment, relationship status, and expectations for monogamy often plaguing couples' unions (Hill, 2007; Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008). With no formal marriage agreement in place, issues of distrust, fidelity, and jealousy are all the more salient in these unions (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor, 2009; Manning, Trella, Lyons, & Du Toit, 2010). The tenor of mistrust can most assuredly filter into setting parameters around othermothering, and, quite likely, influence whether mothers (i. e., current and ex-girlfriends) are willing to cooperate with each other for the purpose of coparenting.

METHODS

Overview, Sample Description, and Recruitment

To investigate the link between othermothering and women's MPF relationships, we analyzed secondary longitudinal data on low-income families who participated in the ethnographic component of the *Three-City Study*. This study was carried out over a period of 6 years in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio to monitor the consequences of welfare reform for the well-being of families and children. Families were recruited into the ethnography between June 1999 and December 2000. Recruitment sites included formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start), neighborhood community centers, local welfare offices, churches, and other public assistance agencies. At the time of enrollment in the ethnography, all families had household incomes at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line.

The majority of mothers (42%) in the sample were of Latino ethnicity with the largest groups being Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans, in that order. Over half of the mothers (58%) were age 29 or younger when they enrolled in the study and a majority (57%) had a high school diploma, General Equivalency Diploma (GED), or had attended trade school or college. Forty-nine percent of the mothers were receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); one-third of these were also working. The 256 mothers identified a total of 685 children in their households, with 53% of the children being under 4 years of age. Initially, 66% of the mothers indicated that they were neither currently married to nor cohabiting with a partner, while 34% reported that they were either in a consensual union, legally married to, or in a nonmarital cohabiting arrangement with a partner. Longitudinal interviews with participants, however, revealed that respondents' marital status shifted periodically during the study as many mothers serially moved from one romantic relationship to another.

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 to coordinate the efforts of the *Three-City Study* ethnography team (see Burton et al., 2009; Cherlin et al., 2004). An integrated and transparent process was developed for collecting, handling, and analyzing data that involved consistent input from over 215 ethnographers, qualitative data analysts, and research scientists who worked on the project over the course of 6 years. Interviews with and observations of the respondents focused on specific topics (e.g., health, family economics, intimate relationships, neighborhood) but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings and relationships among variables. Ethnographers also engaged in participant observation with respondents that involved attending family functions and outings and witnessing relationship milestones (e.g., couple's decision to cohabit) between mothers and their partners. In 92% of the cases, an ethnographer was racially matched with a 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 34 families who preferred Spanish. Ethnographers met with each family once or twice per month for 12–18 months then every 6 months thereafter through 2003. Respondents

were compensated with grocery or department store vouchers for each interview or participant observation.

Data sources, coding, and analysis

Data sources for the present study included transcribed interviews and detailed ethnographer fieldnotes of participant observation activities with respondents. In addition, we consulted transcripts of principal investigators' group and individual discussions with ethnographers and qualitative data analysts about consistencies between families' words and behaviors. All sources of data were coded collaboratively by ethnographers and qualitative data analysts and then summarized into detailed case profiles about each family.

Three phases of modified grounded theory coding on complete sets of data for each family were conducted in this analysis. First, fieldnotes, interview transcripts, family profiles, and discussion files were open coded with common codes and sensitizing concepts around othermothering, MPF, and general family relations (Glaser, 1978). Next, coding patterns were examined within and across all families using axial coding techniques adapted from constant comparisons of analytic induction (Huberman & Miles, 1994). During this phase, we identified distinct patterns in: (a) the parameters and prevalence of mothers' MPF romantic relationship histories; (b) the nature and extent of mothers' involvement in coparenting their romantic partners' children; and (c) the circumstances that facilitated or inhibited mothers taking on the role of othermother. In the final phase, selective coding, we identified what LaRossa (2005) describes as deciding on the main story underlying the analysis. Below, we present this storyline using representative exemplar cases from the ethnography to illustrate patterns of othermothering and MPF relationships that emerged in the data. Where specific case examples are used, respondents have been assigned pseudonyms.

RESULTS

Mothers' MPF Relationship Histories

Identifying the types and prevalence of mothers' MPF relationship histories was the cornerstone of our analysis. We began by reviewing data about mothers' intimate relationship histories, including legal, consensual, and common-law marriages, non-marital cohabitation, and semi-committed to casual "dating" relationships referred to by mothers as "being together," "talking," "just friends," "kicking it," and "hanging." In doing so, we noted whether mothers had biological children with different partners and if they had been in romantic relationships with men who had biological children with other women.

Four MPF categories (*No MPF*; *Mother Only MPF*; *Partners Only MPF*; *Both MPF*) emerged from the data and their frequency of occurrence by mothers' race/ethnicity are reported in Table 1. Mothers counted in the *No MPF* category said that they had biological children with only one partner and that that partner did not have any biological children with other women. Moreover, these mothers did not report any history of romantic involvements (e.g., dating) with men who had children with other women. Roughly one-fifth of the total sample of mothers ($N = 251$) were coded in this category, meaning that nearly four-fifths, or 78%, of the respondents had MPF relationship histories.

TABLE 1

Mothers' Multiple Partner Fertility (MPF) Relationship Histories by Race/Ethnicity: Three-City Study Ethnography^a (N = 251)

MPF Histories	Mothers' Race/Ethnicity							
	African-American		Latino/Hispanic		Non-Hispanic White		Combined Subsamples	
	N	% ^b	N	% ^b	N	% ^b	N	% ^b
No MPF (mother and her partners)	17	18	28	26	10	20	55	22
Mother only MPF	20	21	14	13	12	24	46	18
Partners only MPF	17	18	28	27	11	22	56	22
Both MPF (mother and her partners)	41	43	36	34	17	34	94	38
<i>N</i>	95		106		50		251	

^aTotal ethnography sample *N* = 256 (5 cases were not included in this analysis because of insufficient data).

^bPercentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

The prominent number of mothers in the sample who had MPF relationship histories was consistent with, but slightly higher than, the prevalence results reported in extant survey and administrative records studies of nonmarital births among low-income women. For example, Cancian et al. (2011, p. 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. We believe that the prevalence of mothers’ MPF relationships in the *Three-City Study*’s ethnography was higher (78%) than one would expect because we coded mothers’ *ever* involvements in MPF unions since the birth of their first child. Thus, an unmarried mother like 28-year-old Trenita, who had three children with three different men (who also had children with other women), and who also had cohabited with two other men and seriously “dated” a third man (each one of these men also having had children with other women), was coded as having had six MFP *Both* relationships even though she did not have biological children with each man. Due to measurement constraints in most existing surveys and administrative records studies, Trenita’s latter three MPF relationships would not have been identified or counted in those studies.

Another critical distinction about the *Three-City Study* ethnography sample is that unlike most extant studies of MPF, particularly those from the *Fragile Families Study* (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; see also Waller, 2012), we included mothers’ romantic MPF relationships that did not involve her having a child with her new partner. 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. One might expect that mothers who had a

child with a new partner, not just a brief romance, would be more inclined to take on othermothering responsibilities for that partner's child from a previous relationship. One cannot empirically examine this expectation, however, without data on mothers who did not have a biological child with a MPF partner. We were able to explore this caveat in our analysis, however, because our definition of mothers' *ever* MPF histories met that criterion.

In the remaining MPF categories reported in Table 1 we see that: (a) 18% of the sample was counted in the *Mother Only MPF* category. These mothers claimed that while they produced multiple children with different male partners, those partners did not have children with other women; (b) 22% did not have children with multiple partners, but had been involved in romantic relationships with men who had children with other women (*Partners Only MPF*); and (c) in 38% of the cases, both the mother and her partners had biological children with multiple partners (*Both MPF*). Based on these counts, we expected that, at most, 60% of the mothers ($N = 150$) in the sample having *ever* experienced either *Partners Only MPF* or *Both MPF* relationships had the *potential* of being a coparent to their romantic partners' children.

In terms of racial/ethnic differences in mothers' MPF histories, overall, the data revealed prevalence patterns that were consistent with those of existing studies (see Cancian et al., 2011). A distinctive pattern, however, was the proportionately higher count of Latina mothers in the *Partner Only MPF* category (27%) compared to Whites (22%) and African American (18%) mothers. This count, as we learned later in the data analysis, was directly related to the prominent number of Latina mothers in the sample who were involved in *casa chicas* MPF family configurations.

Othermothering and MPF Relationships

In tandem with extant othermothering research, we expected that the majority of mothers in our study had coparented the biological children of others. At this point in the analysis, we were not focused on the children of mothers' romantic partners, but rather the children of mothers' relatives and friends. We found that 71% of the full sample ($N = 251$) had coparented the children of others, but we pose a note of caution about this estimate. Two-thirds of the participants in the *Mothers Only MPF* category ($N = 46$) did not report providing care for children other than their own. On average, these mothers had from three to nine children with different fathers, and 68% of them were suffering from medically diagnosed anxiety and/or depression (also see Turney & Carlson, 2011). These mothers did not engage in detailed conversations with ethnographers about their caregiving histories, nor had they ever spent much time gathering information about whether their partners had children with other women. According to ethnographers' observations, most of these women did not seem to care about the child-fathering behaviors of their past partners. For example, Melonie, a 42-year-old White mother, said of her children's fathers: "They are out of my life and I will never have nothing to do with another man. I hate them. They are worthless. I don't know if they have other children with other women. Next question?"

The upshot of this point is that we believe some mothers in the *Mother Only MPF* category under-reported their children's fathers' MPF as well as their own histories of providing care for other children in their family and friend networks. Nonetheless, our expectation of a high prevalence of othermothering the biological children of kin and friends within the sample was borne out, particularly among the mothers in the

Partner Only MPF and *Both MPF* categories ($N = 150$), who were the principal focus of our analysis. Of these mothers, 72% had engaged in some form of othermothering the biological children of relatives or friends. But, did these women extend their othermothering practices to their romantic partners' children with different women?

Women who othermothered their partners' children

Because the data were longitudinal, and interview and participant observation-based, ethnographers were able to identify and compare what mothers said about their romantic unions and coparenting their partners' children with what they actually did. Results from analyzing these data indicated that of the 150 mothers in the *Partner Only MPF* and *Both MPF* categories, 17 (11%) *ever* coparented their romantic partners' children. Of these mothers, six engaged in intensive coparenting, but only three had biological children with those partners. In all six situations, the mothers' partners were the custodial fathers of their children and had assumed that role because their children's biological mothers were unable to do so. The situations of Karen and Jennae illustrate.

Karen is a 25-year-old White biological mother of and othermother to 12 children. She and her 47-year-old cohabiting partner, Phillip, are raising children from previous relationships, from their union, and from Phillip's ex-wife Stella's recent marriage to another man. The children were age 2 months–17 years of age when the family enrolled in the study.

Phillip has eight children with Stella, Karen has one with her previous boyfriend Scott, Phillip and Karen have two children together, and Stella has one child with her recent paramour, Kenneth. Karen and her daughter, Sibel, joined Phillip's family when Karen became pregnant with Phillip's child and then moved into his two-bedroom public housing unit which Stella had acquired just before leaving Phillip and their children to pursue a relationship with Kenneth. When Stella's and Kenneth's relationship soured after the birth of their daughter, Ariel, Stella asked Karen and Phillip to raise Ariel too because she didn't have the wherewithal to do so. Stella said, "Karen you a good mother. One I could never be."

While there were myriad daily challenges that Karen experienced othermothering Phillip's and Stella's children, she tried her best to treat them as equal to her own. She felt sorry for their children because Stella didn't seem to care about them. Karen knew how that felt because her mother and father deserted her and her brother when she was a child. From the time Karen was 15, she raised her brother, Eric, who also lived with her, Phillip, and the children.

Needless to say, Karen and Phillip bitterly fought quite often, usually about Phillip's jealousy of Scott, the father of Karen's daughter Sibel. Phillip often kicked Karen out of the house after these arguments, but she still returned daily to prepare dinner for all the children even though she was temporarily not living with them.

After 8 years of cohabiting, Karen and Phillip got married when Phillip was hospitalized with diabetes and realized that if he were to die, Karen would not have legal rights to custody of his eight children with Stella. Phillip wanted Karen to take care of his children if he died. And Karen believed that her destiny as Phillip's children's "othermother" was a role she had been prepared for since childhood. Taking care of others' children was just "something she did."

Jennae, a 36-year-old African American mother of four children to two men also talked about her “calling” as an othermother. She told the ethnographer that James, her current beau, hand-picked her to take care of his children. Jennae had been a friend of James and his wife, Elaine, for several years before she “took-up” with James. Elaine was dying of cancer when James asked Jennae to move in with them to help take care of his children, one of whom was his child from a previous relationship. Jennae clearly stated that she was only a friend of the family, like a cousin, until Elaine died and then she became romantically involved with James. Jennae said, “James picked me. I am a good mother and he knew that. I have been taking care of other people’s children since I was little girl.” James and Jennae did not have any biological children of their own.

The remaining eleven mothers in this category *occasionally* othermothered their various partners’ children usually because they wanted their own children to know their half-siblings. Although these women did not remain in unions with their children’s fathers, all of them tried to maintain good relations with his extended kin and his other children’s mothers. For instance, Kina, a 26-year-old African American mother of 5-year-old Brandon, frequently provided care for Jason, Brandon’s 2-year-old half-brother. Jason’s mother is 19-year-old Heather, a White female who started “kickin it” with Brandon’s father, Keith, when he and Kina were living together. Kina said of Heather: “She was really stupid to get hooked up with Keith. I felt sorry for her because she is so naïve and thought I would help her out. I give her advice and keep Jason sometimes so he and Brandon can know each other. They are brothers, you know. Heather [also] takes Brandon with her and Jason to see Keith in prison. I appreciate that because I can’t see myself taking Brandon to see his daddy in prison.” Similarly, 22-year-old Francesa has her ex-boyfriend’s son, who lives in the Dominican Republic, come for extended visits so that her daughter will know her half-brother. She remarked, “Being a good mother to these children is more important [to me] than being jealous and fighting over a man who I no longer love.”

“I’m not takin’ care of nobody else’s kids”

Although the majority of women in the *Partners Only MPF* and *Both MPF* indicated that they had provided care for the children of relatives and friends, 89% of them reported that they did not coparent their various partners’ children with other women, even if they had biological children with those partners. Mothers shared three reasons for not extending their othermothering practices to these children: (a) gendered scripts around *casa chicas*; (b) the tenuous nature of pass-through MPF relationships; and (c) their own desires for their romantic partners to child-swap.

Casa chicas

Latina respondents frequently cited their experiences around *casa chicas* as a reason for not coparenting their partners’ children with other women. Roughly half of the Latina mothers with MPF histories reported that they had been or were currently involved with partners who had *casa chicas*. Ten of the mothers were recent Mexican immigrants to the U.S. and indicated that *casa chicas* “were things to be kept secret,” and that they had no contact with their partners’ second families. The Dominican, Central American, and U.S.-born (includes Puerto Ricans) Latina mothers, however, took a more aggressive approach to their situations. Most actively competed against their partners’ other children and those children’s mothers, citing

their superiority over them, and demanding that their partners, do right by their [the respondents'] children. Mara, for example, was involved with Ricardo who had three children with three different women. His eldest child lived in El Salvador and the other children lived in Boston. Mara met the mothers of all Ricardo's children and said that "they don't like her [Mara] because she is attractive and they [the other children] are ugly." Mara also said that Ricardo "must have been drunk or something" when he had children with these women. She declared that she would never take care of his "ugly children."

Fiona, a 27-year-old Mexican American mother of five sons with three different fathers, is a *casa chica*. Alejandro, her 47-year-old boyfriend, is married to Paloma and has adult children who are also married. Fiona said that she would never be a mother to Alejandro's and Paloma's children nor would she be a grandmother to their grandchildren. Like Mara, Fiona "tortured" Paloma with her youth and beauty and flaunted her three young sons with Alejandro in front of her. Fiona and Paloma lived only two blocks away from each other. Fiona also maintained a strong relationship with Alejandro's parents so that her children were assured "of not losing out on anything" to Alejandro's adult and "future children with other women."

Ariela was also in a *casa chica* situation and lobbied strongly for her son, Eduardo, to receive the benefits his father, Emmanuel, had to offer. At one point Emmanuel's son's mother from a previous relationship, Iris, could no longer care for their child Eric and she asked Ariela and Emmanuel to take him in. They did, but Ariela complained that Emmanuel was not treating Eric and Eduardo equally. Emmanuel took Ariela's comments to mean that she did not want to coparent Eric. Emmanuel subsequently ended their relationship, left their home, and never returned. He told Ariela that: "Our son, Eduardo, has his mother [Ariela] to care for him but my son [Eric] does not have a mother [Iris]. If you cannot mother [Eric], there is no reason for us to be together." Ariela later learned that all along Emmanuel had a *casa chica*, Elena, in Santo Domingo, and that she had several sons with him. Emmanuel took Eric to Santo Domingo to be raised by Elena because Iris eventually died.

Pass-through relationships

Two-thirds of the women in the *Partner Only MPF* and *Both MPF* indicated that coparenting their partners' other children had never been a serious consideration, even though most had othermothered children of their own families and friends. Many of these mothers had been in what we termed *pass-through* relationships with their partners that typically lasted from one to four months. About a quarter of the respondents had biological children with these men, although the men did not stay with the mothers for the duration of the pregnancy. Nonetheless, respondents talked about these relationships as meeting "certain needs at certain times" with several mothers saying that they were initially attracted to their partners because "they looked like [good] dudes" [they took care of their children from previous relationships]. But, the fantasy of the "good dude" was often short-lived. Earlina offers a case in point.

Earlina, a 26-year-old Latina mother of three children, starting dating Xavier after divorcing her abusive husband, Raul (who had a child with another woman), and then being single and celibate for 3 years. Earlina was not interested in a long-term committed relationship when she met Xavier, who was 13 years her senior and had children with two different women. Earlina admitted that she was attracted to Xavier because of the loving way he talked about his children. But, after only several weeks

of dating, Xavier asked if he and his two sons could move in with Earlina and her children. He said: "They [his sons] need a mother." Earlina promptly ended the relationship, indicating that there was no way she was going to take on that coparenting responsibility. She was looking for a fun relationship and one that would not take away from parenting her own children. "The cost for being with Xavier is too high," she declared. "I have needs of my own."

Mothers also indicated that they felt no responsibility to "help out" with their partners' children because they had not known the men long enough to determine whether there was a legitimate need for a coparent. In these situations, men talked very little about their kids, and because for most of these men, the relationship was not going to lead to marriage, the men reportedly told respondents not to query them about their children. One father stated, when a respondent inquired about his children: "It is none of your damn business!"

Still other respondents noted that their partners' children's mothers seemed to have "it all under control," at least according to what respondents say they heard or saw. Some of the respondents' partners' exes had "kicked them [children's biological fathers] to the curb" and moved on to other relationships with men who were rumored to potentially be more willing to assume responsibility for these women's children. Several respondents talked about these situations as troubling and one mentioned that, "If a baby's daddy don't show no interest in his baby [by] lettin' another man swoop in, then what he gonna' do for me and mine. It don't take no years and years to figure that out. You got to get out of that, like quick. Can you imagine what kinda mess that is gonna be if you stay in it?"

Child-swapping

The majority of mothers who indicated that coparenting their partners' children from other relationships was not an option also said that if the men they were involved with could not help them to provide resources for their [the respondents'] biological children with other partners, there was no reason for the couple to be together. Joyce, a 25-year-old African American mother of two children with two different men, resolutely proclaimed that: "I have enough trouble trying to get my children's fathers to take care of them. Do you really think I'm gon' get mixed up in the baby mama drama of a man with kids by different women. He has to be here for me and mine. I'm not even gon' pretend like I'm gon' take care of his!"

Although the majority of mothers who expressed such sentiments had children with different men and did not seem to appreciate it when their biological children's fathers' new partners "took food out their [the respondents] children's mouths," these very same mothers did not voice any accountability for implicitly conspiring to do exactly the same thing—that is, expecting their new partners to contribute to their children's well-being even if it involved partners withdrawing resources from their children from previous relationships. These mothers were exercising their own brand of "the package deal." For some women, the conflicts that ensued between their partners and their partners' children's mothers provided a cogent rationale for why these fathers should child-swap. Yvonne, a 27-year-old African mother of three, stated, "Yes, I worry about his other children. I care about children always. But there is nothing I can do about it. I'm not their momma. He and their momma fight all the time even though he tries to take care of them. I [figured] I would stay out of it and give him some peace. That way he will choose me and my kids instead." And, for others,

the bid for child-swapping was more subtle, yet intentionally targeted, especially when the respondent also had a biological child with her partner. Wenona, a 26-year-old White mother of two children, one with her current boyfriend Spencer, declared: "His other children's mommas can have the child support from him. I'll keep the man. My children need a father more than we need the money."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we investigated low-income mothers' involvement in mostly nonmarital MPF relationships and whether they coparented their romantic partners' children from concurrent or previous intimate unions with other women. Our query was driven, in part, by undergirding assumptions about othermothering (Collins, 2000) and low-income women's histories of coparenting the biological children of others, especially those of families in need. We found, as previous research suggested, that low-income women frequently coparented the children of family and friends (Stack & Burton, 1993). Women's othermothering, however, did not unilaterally extend to their romantic partners' children with different women. Results indicated that only 11% of the mothers who had MPF relationship histories coparented their partners' children and did so for one of two reasons. Comparable to findings in the extant literature (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Waller, 2009), six of the mothers coparented their partners' children because the partners were the children's custodial parents and the children's mothers were not able to provide care for them. The remaining eleven mothers in this category occasionally othermothered their various partners' children but typically because they wanted their own children to know their half-siblings. To our surprise, 89% of the mothers, most of whom had othermothered the children of families and friends, did not take on a coparenting role with their various partners' children with other women, even if they [the respondent] had biological children with their partners. These findings, we argue, signal several issues that require the present attention of family process and therapy researchers.

First, our efforts in reporting these findings underscored the complexity of characterizing nonmarital MPF arrangements and discerning what they mean for women's coparenting practices. For example, we were struck by the life circumstances of women in the *Mother Only MPF* category and their inability or unwillingness to discuss with the ethnographers the nature of their ties and parenting practices with the fathers of their children. 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. Our immediate concern, and the question we pose to family therapists, is: What types of programs and practices are available to meet the mental health needs of these women, particularly in light of what their circumstances may mean for effectively parenting their children, let alone coparenting the children of others?

Secondly, mothers' experiences in MPF relationships seemed to be somewhat similar to those documented in stepfamilies, albeit more intense and complex. Clearly, conflicts inherent to repartnering were experienced by the mothers and considered as factors in mothers choosing not to become involved with their partners' children (Monte, 2007). However, the gendered scripts around *casa chicas* for the Latina

moms, as well the frequency with which mothers passed through MPF relationships, indicated to us that there is a need for research that goes beyond using the stepfamily template as a model for addressing what Cancian et al. (2011) have described as the complexity that is nonmarital MPF unions. What our study suggests is that the empirical stepfamily literature, and perhaps even therapies designed to work with stepfamilies, do not unilaterally map on to the complex coparenting dynamics that emerge in nonmarital MPF unions.

Third, it appeared, as the extant demographic literature has also shown, that a fair number of mothers in our study who had children with multiple men were continuing to enter into relationships with men who had children with multiple women. In slightly more than half of these new partnerships, however, the couple did not have a biological child in common. Under these circumstances, there was a much stronger undercurrent than we expected of women encouraging their new partners to child-swap whether they had a biological child with that partner or not. Consistent with existing research (Furstenberg, 1995; Manning & Smock, 2000; Nelson, 2005), what seemed to be happening for many of our respondents was that the biological fathers of their children conferred their resources onto their new partners, and subsequently our respondents attempted to acquire those same resources from their new partners who withdrew or “swapped them out” from their previous partners and children. In line with research on “the package deal,” this direct passing on of resource debts owed to one’s children to others who did not incur those debts, but who also are responsible for debts to their own children from previous relationships, is creating a new economy for women securing what they need from men to insure the well-being of their children. This economy is likely not optimal in that it literally, as one respondent said, “takes the food out of one child’s mouth to give to another,” and it ultimately pulls biological mothers and fathers away from their children to support the needs of children they did not create (see Meyer & Cancian, 2011). In some sense, this economy is antithetical to the traditional ethos of othermothering.

We acknowledge that the findings presented here are not derived from data on a probability sample and that they represent only the perspectives of women rather than couples. Moreover, with a specific focus on low-income women, some researchers and therapists may raise questions about the generalizability of the results. Nonetheless, we contend that by attempting to unpack the layers of complexity involved in MPF unions and coparenting, especially among low-income women, we have offered family scientists and practitioners additional perspectives to consider when studying or providing therapy for these families. Indeed, we hope that these perspectives have captured your attention and piqued your interests in developing more expansive research programs and therapeutic approaches for addressing the complex issues that seem inherent to coparenting practices in nonmarital MPF unions. As McHale et al. (2012) note, this is an extremely important undertaking in caring for the sensibilities and development of children growing up in such family systems.

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