“I Wanted a Fresh Start from Where I Was:”
Rural Low-Income Women’s Experiences of
Multiple Partnership Transitions

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Abstract
Focusing on the experiences of 22 rural, low-income mothers, this qualitative study uses a critical feminist perspective to examine the nature of and explanations for multiple partnership transitions. The findings indicated that mothers’ multiple partnership transitions largely were motivated by gendered structural constraints that featured financial struggles, lack of support, and attempts to gain control despite family vulnerability. More supportive policies for mothers and children likely would increase healthier long-term partnerships.

Key words: family policy, low-income families, motherhood, partnerships, poverty, rural

Rates of union disruption between romantic partners—whether through divorce, separation, or dissolution of cohabitation—are substantially higher in the United States than other Western countries (Cherlin, 2008). It is estimated that approximately 25% of all American marriages end in divorce or separation within five years and more than half of cohabiting relationships are dissolved within five years (Cherlin, 2008). Yet, rates of re-partnering also are high, with more than half of the women who end their partnerships entering new relationships within four years (Andersson & Philipove, 2002). Partnership transition rates or instability, however, vary by social-class. Working or poor families are more
likely to experience partnership transitions than their middle-class counterparts (Wells, 2005). Those with less education, particularly women, are the most vulnerable (Cherlin, 2010). Consequently, it is becoming increasingly common for low-income individuals to experience multiple partnership transitions during adulthood in the United States.

To date, research examining partnership transition/instability has focused primarily on child outcomes or maternal parenting. In addition, the majority of studies conceptualize partnership instability as a discrete, singular event, such as divorce, separation, and dissolution of cohabitation, rather than a series of multiple transitions over time (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Further, most previous studies have investigated urban, low-income populations, even though the greatest increase in cohabiting households with children in the last decade has occurred in rural areas (O’Hare, Manning, Porter, & Lyons, 2009). This study begins to fill in some of these knowledge gaps by focusing on rural, low-income mothers’ experiences of and explanations for multiple partnership transitions.

The higher rate of family instability among low-income households compared to other social classes has become a national concern as it is associated with a decrease in family finances, increase in welfare dependency, and higher likelihood of negative developmental outcomes for children. A substantial body of literature indicates that as children are exposed to multiple changes in family structure, they experience less positive developmental outcomes (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Sun & Yuanzhang, 2008). Negative outcomes include behavioral problems, delinquency, and teenage pregnancy (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Fomby & Cherlin, 2008; Wu & Thomson, 2001). Osborne and McLanahan (2007) reported that each partnership transition modestly increased the likelihood of a child exhibiting behavioral problems. Even one partnership transition, such as a separation, introduces multiple stressors into family life, which could include changes in family rules and routines, reassignment of household roles and responsibilities, challenges in meeting the emotional needs of family members, and readjustment of family finances. In the case of partnership dissolution, mothers and children tend to experience substantial declines in their financial and social resources (Bradbury & Katz, 2002). Additionally, mothers often report more psychological distress following, rather than preceding, partnership transitions (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005), and these transitions often lead to high levels of mental distress (Blekesaune, 2008).

Despite the negative financial, emotional, and psychological outcomes that follow family transitions, recent evidence reveals that multiple partnership transitions over short periods of time are increasing (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor, 2009; Cherlin, 2010; Sassler, 2010). Burton et al. (2009) investigated the role of trust/distrust in low-income mothers’ partnership formations and claimed that mothers who rapidly enter romantic relationships are less likely to collect information about their partners’ trustworthiness than those who enter relationships gradually. Studying the case of rural, low-income single mothers, Nelson (2006) argued that the mothers’ desires to create a traditional family model—a legally married, heterosexual couple raising children, with the
male partner designated as the primary income earner—played a strong role in mothers’ decisions to enter romantic unions. Despite such recent efforts, more information is needed on multiple partnership transitions and how rural, low-income mothers make sense of their experiences during and after these transitions.

Currently, social policies targeting women on welfare are weighted strongly toward promotion of marriage and two parent families (Cherlin, 2008), even though these family structures are increasingly less common (Cherlin, 2010). As suggested by previous research, the creation of a stable family environment is critical for children (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Sun & Yuanzhang, 2008). However, partnership and family stability cannot be achieved without considering women’s perceptions and experiences of multiple partnership transitions. This exploratory study, then, addresses: (a) the nature of multiple partnership transitions for rural, low-income mothers, and (b) the factors that influence rural, low-income mothers to choose union dissolution, reunion, and/or entry into new partnerships at multiple times.

Theoretical Framework

We employ a critical feminist perspective that acknowledges intersectionality (see De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2005) to investigate the gendered expectations and experiences of rural, low-income women as they negotiate their intimate partnerships with men. This approach integrates the need to unveil issues of power, revealing structural conditions that oppress women as well as examines the “negotiation of a politics of location” (De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2005, p. 449). We acknowledge that linking women’s personal experiences to the structural context of rural poverty is not only a descriptive pursuit, but rather one that embraces a change orientation. Thus, the intent of our investigation is not only illustrative but also emancipatory, to help reduce and eradicate those power structures that limit women’s agency in regards to the creation, negotiation, and/or cessation of their intimate partnerships. Our hope, in particular, is to help illuminate multiple partner transitions from mothers’ experiences so that family policy may be created to address the needs of these families.

Method

Data for this investigation were drawn from three waves of interviews of rural, low-income mothers conducted by researchers involved in the multi-state project titled, Rural Families Speak (RFS; see Bauer, 2003). “Waves” refers to distinct interview periods: Wave 1 (1999-2001), Wave 2 (2000-2002), and Wave 3 (2002-2003). The objective of this longitudinal project was to understand mothers’ experiences in the wake of welfare reform in such areas as family relationships, health, employment, formal and informal supports, and rural community contexts.

Participants were rural, low-income mothers who had at least one biological child under the age of 13 living at home and an income below 200% of the U.S. poverty threshold. Participants were identified through human service agencies serving low income populations, such as Head Start, Extension, WIC, and Welfare-to-Work programs. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and
made available to all research team members. Pseudonyms were established to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Sample

This study utilized a subsample of participants who were interviewed at all three waves. Among the 252 mothers who completed three waves of interviews, mothers were consistently partnered with a same partner \(n = 121; 48\%\), consistently single without a partner \(n = 61; 24\%\), or experienced a change/changes in partner status \(n = 70; 28\%\). Among the last group, 22 mothers, the focus of this study, experienced multiple partnership transitions (more than two partnership changes) across three interview waves. An example of a multiple partner transition would be a mother who separated from her partner (first change) and then reunited with the same partner or started cohabiting with a new partner in a later wave (second change). We would consider this mother to have experienced two partnership changes.

On average, participants were 28 years old, had two children, earned $16,652 annually, and lived slightly above the federal poverty line at their Wave 1 interview in 2000. Ten mothers were unemployed and 12 mothers had either full-time or part-time jobs. Their types of employment included service \(n = 6\), laborers/helpers \(n = 3\), administrative support \(n = 2\), and production \(n = 1\). They were primarily White \(73\%\), with the mode educational level being high school/G.E.D. \(36\%). To further contextualize our sample, we compared the characteristics of our sample to the rest of the RFS sample \(n = 230\). We found no significant differences in demographic characteristics such as age, educational level, income, race/ethnicity, employment status, occupations, and the amount of parenting support. One difference, however, was the number of children. The mothers in this study had significantly fewer children \(m = 1.77\) than the other mothers in the RFS sample \(m = 2.38\).

Interview Questions

Throughout the longitudinal project, we asked mothers a range of questions regarding their partnerships. Examples of such questions include “How are things going between you and your partner?,” “How does your partner help you with parenting?,” and more broadly, “Overall, how would you say things are going for your family right now?” Because the interview protocol was semi-structured, mothers talked freely about related topics that were not directly linked to the interview questions. Mothers sometimes talked about partners in response to questions in other sections of the interview and these data were included in our analyses.

Data Analysis

Guided by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), our analysis utilized (a) family profiles created for each participant to understand family transitions and personal narratives across all interviews; and (b) interviews that utilized open coding strategies as suggested by Berg (2007). In our initial examination, we identified relationship trajectories. We found that some women experienced
multiple transitions with the same partner across three waves of data (i.e., a mother may have been married at Wave 1, divorced at Wave 2, and re-united at Wave 3; \( n = 8 \)) or with different partners (i.e., divorced at Wave 1, cohabiting with new partner at Wave 2, separated from second partner at Wave 3; \( n = 14 \)). In our sequential analysis, we first examined family profiles, transcripts, and field notes for the 22 cases using open coding. The broad codes that emerged included characteristics of partner relationships, factors influencing relationship formation, factors influencing relationship cessation, and structural constraints that influenced mothers’ agency in negotiating intimate relationships. In the second phase, we completed axial coding. We focused on relationship trajectories in order to understand family contexts, specific structural constraints, reasons that women pursued relationships with the same or different partners, mothers’ personal strategies used in pursuing relationships, the ways that children featured in relationship transitions, and financial/personal/family outcomes resulting from entering or ending relationships. In our final coding process, we looked across both groups, mothers partnering with the same or new men, to understand how these paths may be similar or different and to determine the storyline that underscored these mothers’ experiences.

**Findings**

The underlying reasons for multiple partner transitions appeared similar for mothers who were in relationships with the same or different partners. Mothers discussed issues which reflected the structural inequalities of poverty, gender expectations in intimate relationships, parenthood, as well as their intentional efforts to gain control in vulnerable situations.

**Negotiating Gender, Economic Uncertainty, and Relationships**

Mothers were poor, experienced continuous economic struggles in their daily lives, and expressed, explicitly or implicitly, their expectations for men to be providers. Approximately 80% of mothers focused on their financial needs and how lack of resources encouraged them to dissolve relationships, stay in less-than-satisfying relationships, or enter new romantic relationships. Mothers often expressed frustration with their partners’ inability to provide economic stability for them and their children. For example, Oceana, a 23-year-old mother with two children, described her reasons for staying with her husband: “I ended up going back together with him…because … since I was going to school, I wasn't bringing any income home.” Another mother, Nan, a 41-year-old mother of two children, ended her on-again-off-again relationship with her partner at the final interview, explaining that she had learned that her partner had betrayed her trust and had hidden a debt of $20,000.

Limited rural employment opportunities often negatively impacted the stability and quality of intimate relationships. Sueanne, a 21-year-old mother with two children, moved in and out of her relationship with her husband. During her first interview, Sueanne shared that there was tension because of her husband’s inability to earn a living wage for the family. She wanted to move in order to gain better employment for her husband, but he was unwilling to do so. She noted his
response to her suggestion, “Go ahead by yourself! I'm stayin.”” Because her priorities focused on her children, Sueanne also felt frustrated with her own work hours as she tried to manage both parenting and providing for her family.

During the second wave interview, Sueanne shared that she was divorcing her husband:

This time nothing is going to stop me cuz you [husband] don't do enough for my kids. They're better off without me even being married to you anyway. I will get more help with stuff than what I did with him instead of doin' without. At least if I do get a job, I'll feel better that I'm doin' stuff for my kids. I don't care if he is doin' anything for them. I don't have to let him see them if he doesn't pay child support.

During her final interview, however, Sueanne reported that she was back together with her husband. She explained:

We were separated for quite some time and then we ended up, we moved back in together. I'd stay there some through the week so I had a place for the kids because I didn't have a place...then on the weekend I would, you know, leave and let him have the kids and then we ended up working things out and we got back together.

Due to her dire financial situation, Sueanne compromised and reunited with her husband. She also noted a significant change in her intimate partnership with her husband that gave her hope: “We both started going to church and got saved. It's been a lot better.”

Seeking Residential Stability through Relationships

Housing issues appeared to motivate mothers to enter new partnerships and quickly “slide into” (Stanley, 2009) cohabitating relationships. Among the 14 mothers who had multiple partnership transitions with different partners, 10 mothers reported housing instability as a primary concern. Three women explained that their cohabitation with new partners initially started as a result of their partners’ housing instability.

Vanna, a 24-year-old mother of three young children (ages four, one, and two months) separated from her husband and started living with a new partner, Vasco, at Wave 1. She desired to provide a “stable environment for (the) kids.” By Wave 2, however, Vasco had left for another woman and, due to decreased financial resources, Vanna could not keep the apartment by herself. She shared, “you try to get back on your feet, and somebody kicks the ladder out from underneath you.” After staying at seven to eight different places, Vanna ended up living with a new partner, Brandt, at Wave 3. She added, “I had had one more boyfriend in between Vasco and Brandt, who went to prison.” Although Vanna did not explicitly state that her lack of stable family housing contributed to her multiple partnerships, she implied that the constant residential instability motivated her to seek men that could provide a place to live. Another mother, Norine, a 39-year-old with three children, also experienced two failed relationships during the first two waves of interviews. Asked about important changes in the previous year at her Wave 3 interview, Norine reported first that “I’m not in an apartment any more. I am living in a house now,” and then added,
"...and I'm married (to a new man)." In cases such as Vanna’s and Norine’s, their entry into multiple partnerships may be considered a strategy for gaining economic and residential stability.

**Prioritizing Motherhood over Relationships**

Mothers emphasized the importance of being a mother and listed parenting as their number one priority. “The kids are what come first” was a typical response when asked about their partnership transitions. At Wave 1, Gail, a 28-year-old mother of three boys and a newborn girl, had been married for ten years to the biological father of her children. Although busy with a newborn baby, she stated, “we’re doing quite well.” Gail and her husband separated temporarily between Wave 1 and Wave 2, but reunited after receiving marriage counseling. At Wave 3, however, Gail had divorced her husband and was cohabiting with a new partner. She reflected on single motherhood, explaining that, “I think the kids, with Bryce [her partner], is in charge. But with me and my kids, I think I’m in charge.” She also expressed frustration that he allowed the children to do things (e.g., play with knives and guns). These differences in parenting practices and other related issues caused her relationship with Bryce to become erratic. Glynnis explained, “we get along for a couple of weeks and then we fight and then we, it’s been off and on since we met, it’s been four years.” At the final interview, Glynnis was no longer living with her partner.

Co-parenting also could increase the likelihood of transitioning out of a relationship. Some mothers discussed difficulties in co-parenting children with partners who held different parenting philosophies. Glynnis, a 33-year-old mother of a five-year-old son, was living with her partner and his children in a blended family. During the first two waves of interviews, she detailed how she and her partner differed as parents and that her partner was too lenient. Glynnis shared, “I think the kids, with Bryce [her partner], is in charge. But with me and my kids, I think I’m in charge.” She also expressed frustration that he allowed the children to do things (e.g., play with knives and guns). These differences in parenting practices and other related issues caused her relationship with Bryce to become erratic. Glynnis explained, “we get along for a couple of weeks and then we fight and then we, it’s been off and on ever since we met, it’s been four years.” At the final interview, Glynnis was no longer living with her partner.

When mothers talked about moving in and out of romantic relationships, their statements typically were followed by comments regarding the impact of their decisions on children. Cherilyn, a 22-year-old mother was single at Wave 1 and enjoyed a strong bond with her daughter. She shared, “I think that my relationship [with my child] might be stronger because it is just her and I here, and not anyone else. So, I give her my attention, and she gives me hers...I think she’s going to be like my best friend.” At Wave 2, however, she had moved in with a new partner, Eddie. Cherilyn reported, “I’d have to say that Eddie is dealing with a challenge...he’s 22 and he walks into a relationship and he’s helping me raise my daughter.” But she was hopeful because “I know she [her
daughter] has a stable environment. I think that between Eddie and I, I think we’re doing a pretty good job. She’s got the both of us raising her, and we’re pretty cool people.” By Wave 3, however, Eddie had moved out of her household. Although “financially it’s more difficult,” Cherlyn felt it was a good thing. She explained, “honestly, it really hasn’t affected her [her daughter] as much as would have been expected…and it says a lot to me.” Formation and dissolution of partnerships appeared to be deeply intertwined with their identities as mothers, the perceived parenting abilities of partners, and the well-being of their children.

**Taking Action to Find a Healthy Relationship**

Moving between relationships appeared to reflect mothers’ attempts to gain control of their vulnerable situations. Mothers often reunited with the same partner or entered new partnerships believing that their experiences would be different. Most mothers, however, were quickly disappointed. One mother, Mallory (42-year-old, two children), acknowledged that her marriage was in trouble at her first interview, but she was “trying to work things out for the kids.” Shortly after the interview, Mallory divorced and, one year later, was cohabitating with a new partner. She explained, “I wanted a fresh start from where I was.” Mallory was determined not to repeat the same mistake she had made in her previous relationship, which was lack of open communication. She commented, “I did tell him yesterday that the problems are still there and they need to be resolved. We can’t just sweep them under the rug. I no longer do that in my life.”

Although undesirable and painful, ending a failing relationship gave some women a sense of power and control over their lives. Inocencia, a 20-year-old mother with two children, admitted that she was young (18 years) when she had her first child. Now the mother of two young boys with different fathers, Inocencia shared that by her third interview, she was no longer interested in having either father in her life as an intimate partner, despite her previous efforts. In fact, Inocencia asserted that she was reticent to bring any man into her life because it was simply too difficult, and she was not “fixin’ to raise my children calling nobody else daddy.” The husband of 22-year-old Nellie, who had three young children, left suddenly between Wave 2 and Wave 3 interviews. As Nellie described:

One morning, it was Saturday, and I got up out of bed and he was still sleeping. I woke him up ‘cause he wanted to go with his father, and he just said that he was leaving and he wouldn’t be back for a while….and he just never came back.

At Wave 3, Nellie was cohabitating with a new partner. Asked if there was a chance of reconciliation with her husband, she responded:

I will not take him back FOR ANY REASON…I told him straight out that I didn’t want him back…that’s just the way I feel. I mean, I’ve been through enough. The kids’ve been through enough…The way I see it is that he didn’t grow up and learn responsibility. So, I mean, he was still young, he wanted to do what he wants to do. So I’m like, “Fine. Whatever. Do what you want and then maybe you’ll get a chance to have a different family, settle down,” you know.
By actively ending or rejecting previous relationships and moving into new partnerships, many mothers in our study attempted to turn their partnership failure into an empowering experience.

By the end of Wave 3 interviews, 19 of the 22 mothers were no longer with the same partners they identified at Wave 1. Whether choosing new relationships or deciding to continue with old relationships, mothers described relationships that were vulnerable because of the lack of economic resources particularly housing, violated gender expectations, inconsistent or lack of parenting support, and reduced intimacy.

**Discussion**

Feminist scholars have argued that a reliable resource base and maintenance of a stable nuclear family are interconnected, and instability in family life is structurally produced by the multiple inequalities embedded in our society (Rapp, 1992; Stacey, 1991; Wells, 2005). Our findings echo these claims. Whether it is with the same or different partners, mothers appeared to follow a similar cyclical path of multiple partnership transitions shaped by competing tensions of relationship expectations and structural constraints. Figure 1 shows the typical pattern of mothers entering relationships (Hope), experiencing relationships (Reality), leaving relationships (Agency), desiring relationships (Needs), and, re-entering new relationships (Hope).

![Figure 1. Cyclical path of multiple partnership transitions among Rural Families Speak mothers](image-url)
Despite mothers’ desires to have stable partnerships, their relationships were easily trumped by the constraints they incurred due to the intersections of gender, class, and rural location. For instance, mothers contended with financial struggles compounded by scarce employment opportunities in rural communities, inability to meet basic needs, lack of parenting support, and failed gendered expectations. These daily struggles quickly eroded intimacy and replaced it with relational hostility and negativity. In some cases, mothers attempted to take control of their vulnerable situations by leaving relationships and actively rejecting their former partners who did not meet their expectations or were unable to lift families out of poverty. From a perspective of agency as a feature of resilience (Boss, 2002), it brought some mothers a sense of empowerment.

Leaving a failing relationship did not necessarily improve contexts for mothers and their children. All mothers talked about their needs for financial and material resources, parenting support, and residential stability. Additionally, mothers further were constrained by gendered expectations of their roles as primary caregivers of children, managers of households, and secondary workers engaged in productive labor pursuits (Pruitt, 2008). When partnerships offered the possibility of shelter and other basic necessities, they looked particularly attractive to mothers, even if they represented significant compromise. Faced with limited resources, mothers appeared motivated to reunite with less-than-ideal partners or form new partnerships sooner than they otherwise might. Although they made partnership decisions based on their desire for intimacy, romance, and companionship and were determined to improve their new relationships, it was apparent that multiple partnership transitions over a short period of time also functioned as a survival strategy. Consequently, mothers’ desires for a “fresh start,” quickly turned into a repeated pattern of entering into new partnerships with high hopes and exiting after becoming disappointed with the reality of their choices. These cycles also may have been accelerated because mothers were either unemployed or working in low-wage positions, a reality that underscores the precarious gendered position of rural low income mothers who head households in the short or long term (Glauber, 2009; Seccombe, 2011).

While current family policy efforts focus on marriage and partnership promotion as a way to reduce poverty, a stable, single-parent environment may be better for children than an environment where a new partner (mostly a father-figure) transitions in and out of the home over a short period of time (Cherlin, 2008). Scholars whose research focuses on families and poverty often ask family policy makers to prioritize addressing the structural constraints faced by these families rather than promoting and prioritizing certain family structures as a means to economic well-being (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Seccombe, 2011). We hold the same view regarding policy. Regardless of marital or cohabitation status, the economic success of mothers and the well-being of their children depend on affordable housing and childcare, job availability in a community, and wages that enable their families to meet basic family needs.

Families in rural America are particularly disadvantaged as they experience deeper and more persistent poverty conditions than their urban counterparts (Whitener, Weber, & Duncan, 2002). Rural poor women, specifically, are further
challenged as their employment options, expected under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), are more likely to occur in low-wage, low-skill categories and difficulty in accessing transportation, child care, and employment/education is exacerbated by geographic distance (Glauber, 2009; Pruitt, 2008). The best policy strategy, then, may be to provide assistance to increase the employability of women and their potential partners in rural regions; this may require special incentives that account for the often-hidden issues associated with the rural context (Pruitt, 2008).

Low-income women who experience multiple partnership changes also may reflect the unavailability of men who are good providers, nurturers, or healthy intimate companions (Lichter & Qian, 2008), perhaps underscored in rural locations (Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008). Mothers emphasized the importance of being a good mother and maximizing child well-being, and their quest for stable relationships was shaped by the presence of children in their homes. Family policies and related programs need to recognize mothers’ parenting priorities, creating and providing opportunities that target both potential partners and mothers to increase parenting abilities, communication expertise, relax rigid gender role expectations, and facilitate access to marketable education and job skills.

Our findings, however, should be interpreted with caution. This exploratory study focused on a small subset of mothers in the RFS sample; short-term multiple partnership transitions were not typical of the majority of rural, low-income mothers. As mentioned previously, we found few significant differences in key demographic characteristics between our sample and the RFS sample as well. Additionally, our analysis of partnerships of the RFS sample elsewhere revealed that partnerships, by and large, are unstable and that mothers face similar structural challenges (Sano, Manoogian, & Ontai, 2009). Comparing the results of this study and other partnership studies based on the RFS sample, we speculate that the amount of social support from their families of origin may partly explain differences in partnership stability. While mothers in this study rarely discussed social support other than their own partners (and thus, did not emerge as a dominant theme), other RFS studies found that rural, low-income mothers received strong support from their families of origin (Sano, Manoogian, & Ontai, 2009). Faced with structural constraints such as unemployment, lack of formal support, and limited opportunities for employment, education, and training, informal social support may play a key role in preventing single mothers from forming multiple partnerships over the short run. This conjecture warrants further empirical examination.

The vulnerabilities mothers expressed regarding stable housing also emerged as a strong motivator for multiple partnership transitions, underscoring the long term, persistent, and often invisible occurrence of homelessness in rural locations (Fitchen, 1992). Although a qualitative comparison between our sample and the remaining RFS participants was beyond the scope of this exploratory study, these issues need to be examined more closely. Multiple partnership transitions are a growing trend, especially among individuals with limited
economic resources, and we believe the mothers in this study reflect increasing family diversity in the United States (Cherlin, 2010).

Because more low-income women are foregoing marriage for cohabitation and experiencing increasing frequency of partnership transitions (Cherlin, 2010), understanding the motivations and process of cohabitation and partnership transitions for mothers and their partners requires new and critical examination by scholars (Sassler, 2010). As we learn more about these diverse family contexts, our hope is that family policy makers also will address critical challenges faced by women in transitional relationships who have children from multiple partners (Cancian, Meyer, & Reed, 2010) and/or are serial cohabiters (Lichter & Qian, 2008). Rather than simply emphasizing promotion of “normative” family structures as means to help families move towards self-sufficiency, a broader lens—one that recognizes the reality of families headed by single mothers in rural, poor communities who have the most critical financial need (Mattingly & Bean, 2010)—must be employed. Programs that provide financial, residential, parental, and relationship support will not help to reduce multiple partnership transitions unless mother and child vulnerability is first mitigated through the reduction of structural constraints, regardless of family structure.

References


