

participate in as many activities with the children. Or those writers could pack up all this information with nominalizations in a long noun phrase: *the decline in father involvement in parenting activities after a relationship transition.*

For those who are experts in the area of studying fathers' involvement with children born out of wedlock, the noun phrase can actually be economical to use. They don't have to write all those sentences each time they want to write about these ideas; after they present the material with sentences the first time, they can use the noun phrase to refer back to it. However, we often do not write only to experts, and when we do not, we need to remember that if we use such noun phrases as *the decline in father involvement in parenting activities after a relationship transition*, we run the risk of making our readers work too hard to unpack our meaning. And we might even risk looking as if we are trying to show off. Those are risks we should be very cautious about taking.

In Your Own Writing . . .

How do you know when to use long and dense noun phrases and when to avoid them?

- Use long noun phrases when you need a shorthand way of referring to a complex idea. You might want to describe the complex idea first using sentences. After that, you can refer to the complex idea with a noun phrase.
- Use long noun phrases to refer to information that your reader already understands.
- Avoid long noun phrases when your reader is unfamiliar with the subject matter in general or the long complex idea that the noun phrase specifically refers to.
- Avoid long noun phrases when you do not know how well your reader can read. Long noun phrases pose significant challenges for weaker readers.

STUDENT WRITING

INTRODUCTION

by Joy Van Marion, sociology major

The Assignment. In my Introduction to Sociology class, our professor often encouraged us to imagine possible human social relationships. When we conducted our own sociological research, we tested one of those potential relationships with a hypothesis-driven study. Because we were amateur social science researchers, our professor gave us a list of narrow topics with well-established theoretical frameworks. I picked “acceptance of cohabitation” (basically, whether or not people approve of unmarried people in a sexual relationship living together).

The Content. Because I was also taking a political science course that semester, I was doing a lot of thinking about how people identify with a particular political party. I began to wonder if these two aspects of human society related to each other, so I decided to research how students’ political views related to their views about cohabitation. This gave me an independent variable (a person’s established, chosen political views) and a dependent variable (a person’s views on cohabitation). To break these independent and dependent variables down further, I created categories for both variables. For example, I categorized

political views as liberal, moderate, and conservative. I categorized reasons to cohabitate economics, safety, and sex.

From there, I used surveys to gather information from a sample of college students. The survey method was ideal because the surveys didn’t take long to fill out, and that left me time to interview students. Once I collected all the student surveys, my professor ran statistical tests through the computer on the data, and I discovered if my hypothesis was right.

Learning to Write in Sociology. Sociologists use the structure of their report to emphasize their objectivity. The first part of my sociology report, the abstract, provided a short summary of the whole project. Then I included my problem statement, which includes my question and why they are important. In this section, I tried to grab the reader’s interest and show why the questions I asked were good ones. Next, in the “Literature Review,” I laid out my theoretical framework. I described what I had found in the scholarship on cohabitation and, in particular, how people’s political perspectives relate to their views on cohabitation. In this way, I fit my research into a bigger scholarly conversation on the subject.

In “Research Design,” I show the reader how I tested my hypothesis—with a survey. A section of my report called “Sampling and Data Collection” describes the characteristics of the people we studied and the strengths and weaknesses of my research design. In the “Data Analysis” (results) section I used tables to show the relationship between my independent variables and dependent variables. For social scientists, tables are like pictures in story; they present everything at a glance. In my conclusion, I described what I had learned and what my study can offer to other scholars.

[This student essay follows APA guidelines for formatting and documentation.]

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The Politics of Cohabitation

Joy Van Marion

Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to survey a sample of the student body at a small, Midwestern college to determine their views on cohabitation. Students were given the opportunity to relay personal information such as political identification and opinions on cohabitation. The data were then reviewed and patterns noted. The following paper specifically analyzes survey data regarding students’ political associations and their feelings about cohabitation.

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Problem Statement

The problem statement explains the need or purpose for the study, offering some background context, and sparking interest in the subject.

Cohabitation is reshaping the structure of family life and society on the whole. Statistics show that this specific relationship is on the rise. In 1970, 523 thousand American couples cohabitated. In 1993 that number rose to 3.5 million (Wilhelm, 1998). Two questions might be asked: "For what reasons do people choose to cohabit?" and "How do their political views correlate to their willingness to cohabit?" To answer these questions, researchers must explore the reasons people choose to cohabit rather than form another relationship such as marriage. Furthermore, they must study the attitudes that members of American society hold toward the social practice of cohabitation. This study attends to possible connections between people's political views and their attitudes toward the practice of cohabitation. By researching the relationship between people's political stances and their acceptance of cohabitation, we may start to better understand people's attitudes toward cohabitation.

Literature Review

Cohabitation is a popular and growing development in social relationships across the United States. Cohabitation in this study specifically refers to a mutual relationship of emotional and/or physical intimacy between two members of the opposite sex who, though not married, share the same residency. This social relationship appeals to heterosexual couples for economic, safety, and physical reasons. Yet cohabitation remains controversial, as evidenced by two articles on this topic that appeared in magazines for the general public.

According to Carin Gorrell, "about half of American couples today live together before marrying" (2000, p. 16). In her article Gorrell describes the relationships of couples who cohabit prior to marriage and those who do not. Gorrell summarizes a study by Catherine Cohan, Ph.D., to suggest that couples who cohabit before marriage face more difficulties in marriage than those who don't. According to Cohan's research, cohabitating couples do not problem-solve or communicate as well as other couples (as cited in Gorrell, 2000). Cohan speculates that perhaps the people who choose to cohabit before marriage have weak communication skills prior to cohabitation, and thus their weaker communication skills are not a result of cohabitation.

I learned the importance of proper citation to verify statistics and give the author credit. Many of the social sciences use the American Psychological Association's formatting method (APA) to cite sources, and that is what was required for this course.

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Cohan also suggests that possibly the lack of commitment in a cohabitating relationship weakens a couple's investment in the relationship and diminishes their attempts to improve their communication patterns (2000). Gorrell's attitude toward cohabitation become clear when she concludes with this statement from Cohan: "There is no evidence that living together before marriage benefits couples" (as cited in Gorrell, 2000, p. 16).

On the other hand, Gunnell argues in favor of cohabitation, claiming that individuals should not be required to limit themselves to marital relationships alone. Furthermore, according to Gunnell, social relationships like cohabitation will evolve to meet society's needs; since social relationships evolve, people should be free to live and love as they like. While Gunnell expresses concern that the children resulting from male/female relationships are cared for in a healthy environment, she argues that all other decisions regarding the characteristics of the relationship should be left to the adults involved (Gunnell, 2000).

Hypotheses mark the research method of many social sciences. It all begins with potential answers to a question about human society.

These two views appear to suggest a population divided over cohabitation. Lye and Waldron (1997) offer four main hypotheses as to why people hold the beliefs that they do about cohabitating. First, they offer the Consumerism Hypothesis that focuses on people's lifetime goals as a factor that shapes their attitudes about cohabitation. According to this hypothesis, "high aspirations for material goods and living standards contributes to non-traditional family and gender role behavior and attitudes" (p. 201). In other words, people who want to prosper financially would tend to cohabit and would, as a result, have positive attitudes regarding cohabitation. Second, Lye and Waldron (1997) describe the Higher Order Needs Hypothesis. This hypothesis focuses on a pattern of human reasoning as the source for people's attitudes toward the social practice of cohabitation. This hypothesis suggests that people's desire for "personal fulfillment, self-actualization and individual autonomy" (p. 201) could cause them to choose a type of relationship (such as cohabitation) that satisfies their sexual needs but does not limit their personal freedom. Thus, the hypothesis predicts that people who focus more intensely on their personal needs and goals are more likely to cohabit and, in turn, to accept cohabitation as an acceptable (perhaps even preferable) social practice.

The literature review explores what other studies have been done on and/or relate to your research subject. This helps you decide where your study fits into the research, what it might verify or disprove that other studies have already looked at, or what it might accomplish that other studies have not yet set out to do. The literature review is therefore the theoretical foundation for my research design.

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Next, Lye and Waldron describe the Political Ideology Hypothesis. This hypothesis proposes a correlation between people's political views and their acceptance or rejection of cohabitation as a social practice. The hypothesis suggests that people who hold liberal views about political issues would be inclined to approve of cohabitation. People who hold more conservative views about political issues would be negatively disposed toward this relationship.

Fourth, Lye and Waldron discuss the Social Concerns Hypothesis. This explanation suggests that a combination of "traditional" and "non-traditional" views shape a person's social interactions, and consequently, their attitudes toward cohabitation.

Interestingly, the results of Lye and Waldron's research most closely supported the Political Ideology Hypothesis. Their research seems to suggest that people's political beliefs strongly correlate to their attitudes regarding cohabitation (Lye and Waldron, 1997). Wilhelm (1998) offers supporting data for the relationship between people's political beliefs and their attitudes toward cohabitation. She concludes, "Participation in left-oriented activism strongly affects the likelihood of cohabitation" (p. 310). For college students in particular, three central factors seem to influence their attitudes toward cohabitation. Knox (1999) outlines these: age, hedonistic sexual values, and interracial dating experiences. He argues that the evidence suggests those students who are older, believe in hedonist practices, and do or would date people of different ethnicities are more likely to enter a cohabitating relationship (Knox, 1999).

In the following report, cohabitation will be studied from the perspective of students enrolled in a small, Midwestern college. The data that were collected for this study are meant to confirm the young adult's attitude toward cohabitation and determine who favors it, who objects to it, and whether the political views of the individual correlates with her or his attitude toward cohabitation.

Hypothesis

There is a significant correlation between an individual's political views and his/her stance on cohabitation. People who hold conservative political views are more likely to disapprove of cohabitation. Persons who have liberal

This section on my hypothesis is where I get to make a statement about what I think the answers to my questions will be, where I put my theory to the test.

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political ideologies are more likely to approve of cohabitation. People with "middle-of-the-road" political ideologies are more likely to approve of cohabitation in some circumstances and disapprove of it in others. The independent variable is the political identity of each individual. The dependent variable is the individual's response toward cohabitation. The assumption is that the independent variable affects the dependent variable.

Research Design

Surveys were used to collect data on cohabitation. The advantages of this research method include its time efficiency, cost efficiency, and ability to examine a wide range of subjects. Surveys study a representative sample of the population in a relatively small amount of time (Tischler, 2000). People are asked direct questions and given the opportunity to respond in short answers. However, the answers received from the population are not always accurate. People may not be truthful in their responses if they are uncomfortable with the questions or feel threatened by them. Also, if the respondents misinterpret a question's meaning, their answers may not be accurate reflections of what they really think or believe. Consequently, the results will be skewed. Researchers must recognize the potential for error in a survey (Tischler, 2000).

Sampling and Data Collection

The target for study was the student body of a small, Midwestern college. The sample of subjects drawn from the population at this college included 478 students. Of the 478 respondents, 237 were males and 241 were females. The total number consisted of 143 freshmen, 143 sophomores, 101 juniors, and 91 seniors. Participants ranged from 17 years of age to 24 years of age. The population size was small enough to study carefully and large enough to monitor for results and significant patterns. The surveys were distributed to specific individuals in an attempt to gather data from an equal number of first, second, third, and fourth year students as well as an equal number of male and female students. Though the final sample of students did not match the original outline for the sample, the sample obtained is still valid for study.

Certain limitations of the sampling and data collection did occur. An equal number of first, second, third, and fourth year students were not

This is my methods section.

Here I explain some research limitations to help the reader know how to interpret the study's findings.

These explanations help show how the data are skewed. Later, I learned that some student subjects were confused about the definition of cohabitation. This confusion may have affected their answers.

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contacted. It is important to note, too, that the actual respondents could only choose between the answers provided for them and may not have been able to provide the fullest explanations. Furthermore, participants may have been confused about the meaning of questions and been unable to provide the most accurate information. Those who answered the questions may have purposely given a false reply if they felt ashamed or were offended by a question. In short, the survey did not reach equal populations of the student body and could not extract the most honest or complete data.

Data Analysis

the results section

The cross-tabs necessary to test this hypothesis address the political views and the social views on cohabitation of 478 college students. In Table 1, the data establish a foundation of political ideologies, distinguishing between liberal, middle-of-the-road, and conservative participants. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show which respondents approved of cohabitation for economic reasons, safety reasons, and the satisfaction of sexual desires. Finally, the data in Tables 2, 3, and 4 also depict the individuals' political views next to their estimation of whether or not there is a chance that they would cohabitate before marriage.

Based on survey data, the 478 respondents are divided into three categories: liberal, middle-of-the-road, and conservative as shown in Table 1.

Table 2 identifies student views on cohabitation for economic reasons. Of the 85 liberal respondents, 76.5% approve of cohabitation for economic

Table 1 Frequency Count Percentage Table

	Frequency	Percent
Liberal	85	17.8
Middle-of-the-road	215	45.0
Conservative	177	36.8
No Response	2	0.4
Total	<i>n</i> = 478	100.0

n = number of respondents

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Table 2 Cross-Tabs Correlating Political Affiliation with Views on Cohabitation for Economic Reasons

	Yes, I agree with cohabitation for economic reasons	No, I do not agree with cohabitation for economic reasons	Total
Liberal	76.5%	23.5%	100%
Middle-of-the-road	71.5%	28.5%	100%
Conservative	37.5%	62.5%	100%

Looking back, I think I might give a bit more of an explanation about Table 2 by summarizing the test results in words instead of relying on the table alone to illustrate the findings.

reasons and 23.5% disapprove. Of the 214 middle-of-the-road respondents, 71.5% approve of cohabitation and 28.5% disapprove. Of the 174 conservative respondents, 37.5% approved of cohabitation and 62.5% disapproved. The numbers suggest that for economic benefits the liberal students are more approving of cohabitation and the conservatives are less approving.

Regarding cohabitation for security purposes (Table 3), of the 85 liberal respondents, again, 76.5% agree with cohabitation and 23.5% disagree. Of the 214 middle-of-the-road respondents, 70.1% agree and 29.9% disagree. And of the 174 conservative respondents, 39.1% agree while 60.9% disagree. Here, too, there is a decreasing amount of support for cohabitation as the political status of an individual shifts from liberal to conservative.

In response to cohabitation for sexual desires as outlined in Table 4, 8.5% of the 85 liberal respondents approve while 91.5% disapprove. Of the 214 middle-of-the-road respondents, 2.8% approve while 97.2% disapprove. Of

Table 3 Cross-Tabs Correlating Political Affiliation with Views on Cohabitation for Safety Purposes

	Yes, I agree with cohabitation for safety purposes	No, I do not agree with cohabitation for safety purposes	Total
Liberal	76.5%	23.5%	100%
Middle-of-the-road	70.1%	29.9%	100%
Conservative	39.1%	60.9%	100%

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Table 4 Cross-Tab Correlating Political Affiliation with Views on Cohabitation to Satisfy Sexual Desires

	Yes, I agree with cohabitation to satisfy sexual desires	No, I do not agree with cohabitation to satisfy sexual desires	Total
Liberal	8.5%	91.5%	100%
Middle-of-the-road	2.8%	97.2%	100%
Conservative	1.2%	98.8%	100%

the 174 conservative respondents, 1.2% approve and 98.8% disapprove. In this case, too, the liberals were more supportive of cohabitation for sexual purposes than were conservatives.

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether there is a chance they might cohabit before marriage, based on their personal experience. Among liberal students, 63.9% said yes and 36.1% said no. Among middle-of-the-road students, 45.1% of the middle-of-the-road respondents said yes and 54.9% said no. Among conservative students, 19.3% of the conservatives said yes while 80.7% said no.

The results were as expected and the hypothesis made at the beginning of this study is supported. There appears to be a connection between people's political ideals and their views on cohabitation. The liberals strongly favored cohabitation in more circumstances than the conservatives did. Interestingly, the middle-of-the-road respondents were very supportive of cohabitation for economic or safety reasons while they were almost completely disapproving of it for sexual purposes. And overall the liberals were the most likely to cohabit before marriage, followed by the middle-of-the-road participants, with the conservatives least likely to cohabit of them all.

The information provided here is valid and reliable for the purposes of a research analysis in an introductory course in sociology. It evaluates a sample of the student body as they understood the questions concerning cohabitation and then reacted from personal opinion. The data are unreliable to the extent that participants may have misinterpreted questions and consequently

I wondered if another table would have helped to clarify these results.

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responded incorrectly, intentionally lied, or chosen not to answer at all. The results of this survey cannot be generalized to all college student populations.

Conclusions

In summary, the findings are consistent with the original hypothesis. If these patterns are representative of the college's student body, researchers may begin making predictions about the future social relationships within this local society based on the connections drawn here between the political ideals of students and their views on cohabitation. A greater number of liberals in the community may indicate the potential for a rise in the practice of cohabitation; whereas a greater number of conservatives may suggest the potential for a decline in cohabitating relationships.

On a broader scale, political identification may be taken as an indicator of one's standing on cohabitation. Liberals tend to embrace tolerance of new and developing social relationships that appear appropriate to the present-day culture. If a relationship is financially and physically satisfying, then they tend to approve. Conservatives tend to cling to traditional family structures and reject changes to these relationships. They are strongly tied to their historical and often religious roots, which make little or no room for relationships of cohabitation.

In closing, it is impossible to state from the evidence found here that an individual's political standing will confirm their position on cohabitation. However, the data strongly suggest that there is some association between political ideology and one's stand on cohabiting. The research and findings from this study form a base of empirical evidence on which to build future sociological studies.

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Out of the collective knowledge base come creative and resourceful applications.

Reading Responses

1. Review the research by Lye and Waldron on page 131–132. Prior to reading Van Marion's results, which did you believe to be the most influential factor on peoples' attitudes toward cohabitation? Did her study change your mind? If not, why not?
2. In her review of literature, Van Marion does more than present all the scholarly research on cohabitation; she builds the theoretical framework for her own study. Analyze how Van Marion builds this framework: What research does she begin with? What research does she end with? And recommend revisions: Which additional topics should she have researched? Which topics could she have eliminated from her review of the literature?
3. Working from Lye and Waldron, Van Marion looks only for a correlation between political affiliation and attitudes toward cohabitation, not for all the causes of students' attitudes toward cohabitation. Using sociological imagination, list possible factors that account for the correlation between students' political affiliation and their attitudes toward cohabitation. Then, rank-order your list from what you suspect to be the most significant to least significant factor.

PUBLIC WRITING

INTRODUCTION

Stephanie Coontz teaches history and women's studies at Evergreen State University. She has appeared before Congress and many television audiences, and she has published several books and many scholarly articles on the history of marriage, global perspectives on marriage, and the nature of modern, Western marriages. In her writing for general audiences (as in this piece, written for the *New York Times*), Coontz encourages her readers to engage in sociological imagination by describing multiple factors that affect personal relationships like happiness in marriage. She does so to encourage her readers to follow the advice she provides in the main point of her article: that couples should invest time into maintaining their romantic relationship, even when they are busy raising children.

Even though she is writing for nonspecialists, Coontz develops a theoretical model from previous scholarship to narrow the focus of her claim. She limits her topic by identifying a cultural stereotype from long ago, describes the effect of parenting on different types of couples, and then focuses on the effects of parenting on one of those types: "collaborative couples."

Till Children Do Us Part

Stephanie Coontz

The New York Times, February 5, 2009

Half a century ago, the conventional wisdom was that having a child was the surest way to build a happy marriage. Women's magazines of that era promised that almost any marital problem could be resolved by embarking on parenthood. Once a child arrives, "we

don't worry about this couple any more," an editor at *Better Homes and Gardens* enthused in 1944. "There are three in that family now. . . . Perhaps there is not much more needed in a recipe for happiness."

Over the past two decades, however, many researchers have concluded that three's a crowd when it comes to marital satisfaction. More than 25 separate studies have established that marital quality drops, often quite steeply, after the transition to parenthood. And forget the "empty nest" syndrome: when the children leave home, couples report an increase in marital happiness.

But does the arrival of children doom couples to a less satisfying marriage? Not necessarily. Two researchers at the University of California at Berkeley, Philip and Carolyn Cowan, report in a forthcoming briefing paper for the Council on Contemporary Families very different routes that couples travel toward parenthood.

Some couples plan the conception and discuss how they want to conduct their relationship after the baby is born. Others disagree about whether or when to conceive, with one partner giving in for the sake of the relationship. And sometimes, both partners are ambivalent.

The Cowans found that the average drop in marital satisfaction was almost entirely accounted for by the couples who slid into being parents, disagreed over it or were ambivalent about it. Couples who planned or equally welcomed the conception were likely to maintain or even increase their marital satisfaction after the child was born.

Marital quality also tends to decline when parents backslide into more traditional gender roles. Once a child arrives, lack of paid parental leave often leads the wife to quit resents her husband's lack of involvement in child care and housework. The wife resents his wife's ingratitude for the long hours he works to support the family.

When the Cowans designed programs to help couples resolve these differences, they had fewer conflicts and higher marital quality. And the children did better socially and academically because their parents were happier.

But keeping a marriage vibrant is a never-ending job. Deciding together to have a child and sharing in child-rearing do not immunize a marriage. Indeed, collaborative couples can face other problems. They often embark on such an intense style of parenting that they end up paying less attention to each other.

Parents today spend much more time with their children than they did 40 years ago. The sociologists Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson and Melissa Milkie report that married mothers in 2000 spent 20 percent more time with their children than in 1965. Married fathers spent more than twice as much time.

A study by John Sandberg and Sandra Hofferth at the University of Michigan showed that by 1997 children in two-parent families were getting six more hours a week with Mom and four more hours with Dad than in 1981. And these increases occurred even as more mothers entered the labor force.

Couples found some of these extra hours by cutting back on time spent in activities where children were not present—when they were alone as a couple, visiting with friends and kin, or involved in clubs. But in the long run, shortchanging such adult-oriented activities for the sake of the children is not good for a marriage. The

Ellen Galinsky has found that most children don't want to spend as much time with their parents as parents assume; they just want their parents to be more relaxed when they are together.

Couples need time alone to renew their relationship. They also need to sustain supportive networks of friends and family. Couples who don't, investing too much in their children and not enough in their marriage, may find that when the demands of child-rearing cease to organize their lives, they cannot recover the relationship that made them want to have children together in the first place.

As the psychologist Joshua Coleman suggests, the airline warning to put on your own oxygen mask before you place one on your child also holds true for marriage.

Reading Responses

1. Describe a family portrayed on a television show or in a movie, paying special attention to how the parents interact with the children and each other. What factors from Coontz's article are evident in the television show?
2. What is the purpose of the final line of Coontz's article? How does that line encourage the reader to engage in sociological imagination? How does that line reinforce Coontz's point?
3. Writers for general audience magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, or the *New Yorker* regularly include references to scholarly research. List the reasons that writers might have for including that research.

MORE WRITING IN SOCIOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Many people are surprised by the number of poor women who become mothers when they are very young, some as early as 14 or 15. Some policy makers have proposed that fewer young women will get pregnant if these women have access to good sex education and effective birth control. Others seem to blame the girls themselves, pointing to lax morals or the breakdown of the nuclear family. Rather than rely on speculation, two professors of sociology, Kathryn Edin (Harvard University) and Maria Kefalas (St. Joseph's University), writing in a journal for sociologists, examine the sociological factors behind the number of poor, young mothers by asking two questions: Why do poor women have children when they are very young? Wouldn't it be wiser for them to wait until marriage to have children?

It might seem that previous research has already answered that last question. In the 1990s social scientists discovered a number of negative outcomes for children raised in mother-only families. Relying in part on these studies, some politicians reformed welfare in 1996 (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) and, even more to the point, politicians authorized nearly two billion dollars in 2003 to encourage welfare recipients to marry.

Edin and Kefalas find it striking that in the midst of these policy discussions the dom heard. So they interviewed single mothers from low-income communities in Philadelphia. Edin and Kefalas focus on the answers from one of their interviewees, Jen. Through rich description and Jen's own words, they paint a full picture of Jen's life: young, poor, single mother. As readers come to understand Jen's life and perspective fully, they are better able to imagine how Jen's social setting within a larger political and economic context, shapes the complicated choices she makes. Through this informal case Edin and Kefalas let readers hear Jen's story for themselves.

Unmarried with Children

Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas

Contexts: Understanding People in Their Social Worlds, 2005, 4(2):16–22.

Jen Burke, a white tenth-grade dropout who is 17 years old, lives with her stepmother sister, and her 16-month-old son in a cramped but tidy row home in Philadelphia's troubled Kensington neighborhood. She is broke, on welfare, and struggling to combat her GED. Wouldn't she and her son have been better off if she had finished high school and found a job, and married her son's father first?

In 1950, when Jen's grandmother came of age, only 1 in 20 American children was to an unmarried mother. Today, that rate is 1 in 3—and they are usually born to those *Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, we discuss the lives of 162 white, African American and Puerto Rican low-income single mothers living in eight destitute neighborhoods in Philadelphia and its poorest industrial suburb, Camden. We spent five years chatting in kitchen tables and on front stoops, giving mothers like Jen the opportunity to speak to question so many affluent Americans ask about them: Why do they have children while young and unmarried when they will face such an uphill struggle to support them?

Romance at Lightning Speed

Jen started having sex with her 20-year-old boyfriend Rick just before her 15th birthday month and a half later, she was pregnant. "I didn't want to get pregnant," she claims. I wanted me to get pregnant. As soon as he met me, he wanted to have a kid with me," explains. Though Jen's college-bound suburban peers would be appalled by such a declaration, on the streets of Jen's neighborhood, it is something of a badge of honor. "All the other girls he was with, he didn't want to have a baby with any of them," Jen boasts asked him, "Why did you choose me to have a kid when you could have a kid with any of them?" He was like, "I want to have a kid with *you*." Looking back, Jen says she believes that the reason "he wanted me to have a kid that early is so that I didn't leave him

In inner-city neighborhoods like Kensington, where child-bearing within marriage has become rare, romantic relationships like Jen and Rick's proceed at lightning speed

A young man's avowal, "I want to have a baby by you," is often part of the courtship ritual from the beginning. This is more than idle talk, as their first child is typically conceived within a year from the time a couple begins "kicking it." Yet while poor couples' pillow talk often revolves around dreams of shared children, the news of a pregnancy—the first indelible sign of the huge changes to come—puts these still-new relationships into overdrive. Suddenly, the would-be mother begins to scrutinize her mate as never before, wondering whether he can "get himself together"—find a job, settle down, and become a family man—in time.

Most poor, unmarried mothers and fathers readily admit that bearing children while poor and unmarried is not the ideal way to do things. Jen believes the best time to become a mother is "after you're out of school and you got a job, at least, when you're like 21. . . . When you're ready to have kids, you should have everything ready, have your house, have a job, so when that baby comes, the baby can have its own room." Yet given their already limited economic prospects, the poor have little motivation to time their births as precisely as their middle-class counterparts do. The dreams of young people like Jen and Rick center on children at a time of life when their more affluent peers plan for college and careers. Poor girls coming of age in the inner city value children highly, anticipate them eagerly, and believe strongly that they are up to the job of mothering—even in difficult circumstances. Jen, for example, tells us, "People outside the neighborhood, they're like, 'You're 15! You're pregnant?' I'm like, it's not none of their business. I'm gonna be able to take care of my kid. They have nothing to worry about." Jen says she has concluded that "some people . . . are better at having kids at a younger age. . . . I think it's better for some people to have kids younger."

When I Became a Mom

When we asked mothers like Jen what their lives would be like if they had not had children, we expected them to express regret over foregone opportunities for school and careers. Instead, most believe their children "saved" them. They describe their lives as spinning out of control before becoming pregnant—struggles with parents and peers, "wild," risky behavior, depression, and school failure. Jen speaks to this poignantly. "I was just real bad. I hung with a real bad crowd. I was doing pills. I was really depressed. . . . I was drinking. That was before I was pregnant." "I think," she reflects, "if I never had a baby or anything . . . , I would still be doing the things I was doing. I would probably still be doing drugs. I'd probably still be drinking." Jen admits that when she first became pregnant, she was angry that she "couldn't be out no more. Couldn't be out with my friends. Couldn't do nothing." Now, though, she says, "I'm glad I have a son . . . because I would still be doing all that stuff."

Children offer poor youth like Jen a compelling sense of purpose. Jen paints a before-and-after picture of her life that was common among the mothers we interviewed. "Before, I didn't have nobody to take care of. I didn't have nothing left to go home for. . . . Now I have my son to take care of. I have him to go home for. . . . I don't have to go buy weed or drugs with my money. I could buy my son stuff with my money! . . . I have something to look up to now." Children also are a crucial source of relational intimacy, a self-made community of care. After a nasty fight with Rick, Jen recalls, "I was crying,

My son came in the room. He was hugging me. He's 16 months and he was hugging me with his little arms. He was really cute and happy, so I got happy. That's one of the good things. When you're sad, the baby's always gonna be there for you no matter what." Later she has been thinking a lot about what her life was like back then, before the baby. "I thought about the stuff before I became a mom, what my life was like back then. I used to see pictures of me, and I would hide in every picture. This baby did so much for me. My son did a lot for me. He helped me a lot. I'm thankful that I had my baby."

Around the time of the birth, most unmarried parents claim they plan to get married eventually. Rick did not propose marriage when Jen's first child was born, but when she conceived a second time, at 17, Rick informed his dad, "It's time for me to get married. It's time for me to straighten up. This is the one I wanna be with. I had a baby with her. I'm gonna have another baby with her." Yet despite their intentions, few of these couples actually marry. Indeed, most break up well before their child enters preschool.

I'd Like to Get Married, But . . .

The sharp decline in marriage in impoverished urban areas has led some to charge that the poor have abandoned the marriage norm. Yet we found few who had given up on the ideal of marriage. But like their elite counterparts, disadvantaged women set a high financial bar for marriage. For the poor, marriage has become an elusive goal—one they feel ought to be reserved for those who can support a "white picket fence" lifestyle: a mortgage on modest row home, a car and some furniture, some savings in the bank, and enough money left over to pay for a "decent" wedding. Jen's views on marriage provide a perfect case in point. "If I was gonna get married, I would want to be married like my Aunt Nancy and my Uncle Pat. They live in the mountains. She has a job. My Uncle Pat is a state trooper. He has lots of money. They live in the [Poconos]. It's real nice out there. Her kids go to Catholic school. . . . That's the kind of life I would want to have. If I get married, I would have a life like [theirs]." She adds, "And I would wanna have a big wedding, a real nice wedding."

Unlike the women of their mothers' and grandmothers' generations, young women like Jen are not merely content to rely on a man's earnings. Instead, they insist on being economically "set" in their own right before taking marriage vows. This is partly because they want a partnership of equals, and they believe money buys so in a relationship. Jen explains, "I'm not gonna just get into marrying him and not have my own house! No have a job! I still wanna do a lot of things before I get married. He [already] tells me can't do nothing. I can't go out. What's gonna happen when I marry him? He's gonna say he owns me!"

Why is Jen, who describes Rick as "the love of my life," so insistent on planning an exit strategy before she is willing to take the vows she firmly believes ought to last "forever"? If love is so sure, why does mistrust seem so palpable and strong? In relationships among poor couples like Jen and Rick, mistrust is often spawned by chronic violence and infidelity, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity, and the threat of imprisonment.

Trust has been an enormous issue in Jen's relationship with Rick. "My son was born December 23rd, and [Rick] started cheating on me again . . . in March. . . ." Things finally came to a head when Rick got another girl pregnant. "For a while, I forgave him

for everything. Now, I don't forgive him for nothing." Now we begin to understand the source of Jen's hesitancy. "He wants me to marry him, [but] I'm not really sure. . . . If I can't trust him, I can't marry him, 'cause we would get a divorce. If you're gonna get married, you're supposed to be faithful!" she insists. To Jen and her peers, the worst thing that could happen is "to get married just to get divorced. . . ."

These Are Cards I Dealt Myself

. . . Jen clearly sees how her life has improved since Rick's dramatic exit from the scene. "That's when I really started [to get better] because I didn't have to worry about what he was doing, didn't have to worry about him cheating on me, all this stuff. [It was] then I realized that I had to do what I had to do to take care of my son. . . . When he was there, I think that my whole life revolved around him, you know, so I always messed up somehow because I was so busy worrying about what he was doing. Like I would leave the [GED] programs I was in just to go home and see what he was doing. My mind was never concentrating." Now, she says, "a lot of people in my family look up to me now, because all my sisters dropped out from school, you know, nobody went back to school. I went back to school, you know? . . . I went back to school, and I plan to go to college, and a lot of people look up to me for that, you know? So that makes me happy . . . because five years ago nobody looked up to me. I was just like everybody else."

Yet the journey has not been easy. "Being a young mom being 15, it's hard, hard, hard, you know." She says, "I have no life. . . . I work from 6:30 in the morning until 5:00 at night I leave here at 5:30 in the morning. I don't get home until about 6:00 at night." Yet she measures her worth as a mother by the fact that she has managed to provide for her son largely on her own. "I don't depend on nobody. I might live with my dad and them, but I don't depend on them, you know." She continues, "There [used to] be days when I'd be so stressed out, like, 'I can't do this!' And I would just cry and cry and cry. . . . Then I look at Colin, and he'll be sleeping, and I'll just look at him and think I don't have no [reason to feel sorry for myself]. The cards I have I've dealt myself so I have to deal with it now. I'm older. I can't change anything. He's my responsibility—he's nobody else's but mine—so I have to deal with that."

Becoming a mother transformed Jen's point of view on just about everything. She says, "I thought hanging on the corner drinking, getting high—I thought that was a good life, and I thought I could live that way for eternity, like sitting out with my friends. But it's not as fun once you have your own kid. . . . I think it changes [you]. I think, 'Would I want Colin to do that? Would I want my son to be like that. . . .?' It was fun to me but it's not fun anymore. Half the people I hung with are either. . . . Some have died from drug overdoses, some are in jail, and some people are just out there living the same life that they always lived, and they don't look really good. They look really bad." In the end, Jen believes, Colin's birth has brought far more good into her life than bad. "I know I could have waited [to have a child], but in a way I think Colin's the best thing that could have happened to me. . . . So I think I had my son for a purpose because I think Colin changed my life. He saved my life, really. My whole life revolves around Colin!"

Promises I Can Keep

There are unique themes in Jen's story—most fathers are only one or two, not five years older than the mothers of their children, and few fathers have as many glaring problems as Rick—but we heard most of these themes repeatedly in the stories of the 161 other poor, single mothers we came to know. Notably, poor women do not reject marriage; they reverse it. Indeed, it is the conviction that marriage is forever that makes them think that divorce is worse than having a baby outside of marriage. Their children, far from being liabilities, provide crucial social-psychological resources—a strong sense of purpose and a profound source of intimacy. Jen and the other mothers we came to know are coming of age in an America that is profoundly unequal—where the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. This economic reality has convinced them that they have little to lose and, perhaps, something to gain by a seemingly "ill-timed" birth.

The lesson one draws from stories like Jen's is quite simple: Until poor young women have more access to jobs that lead to financial independence—until there is reason to hope for the rewarding life pathways that their privileged peers pursue—the poor will continue to have children far sooner than most Americans think they should, while still deferring marriage. Marital standards have risen for all Americans, and the poor want the same things that everyone now wants out of marriage. The poor want to marry too, but they insist on marrying well. This, in their view, is the only way to avoid an almost certain divorce. Like Jen, they are simply not willing to make promises they are not sure they can keep.

Reading Responses

1. Did Edin and Kefalas offer you a new way of understanding why young, poor women have children? What surprised you most?
2. Because they use a case study methodology, the authors never state their theoretical framework explicitly. How would you describe their theoretical framework?
3. What in Jen's story most sparked your own curiosity? What aspect of Jen's story would you research in greater depth, if you had the opportunity?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 1

Your task for this assignment is to create a theoretical framework for a hypothesis about a specific factor affecting marriages in the United States.

To begin, use the readings in this chapter to brainstorm about possible factors. Extend your brainstorming by researching previous scholarship (consult a reference librarian for help) to help you locate a single factor. Do additional research to identify how previous scholars have investigated this factor.