

## 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 people's 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 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 her job and the husband to work more. This produces discontent on both sides. The wife resents her husband's lack of involvement in child care and housework. The husband 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. Indeed, the researcher

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 voices of young, unwed mothers—those most affected by poverty and early childbearing—are seldom 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 Burke. Through rich description and Jen's own words, they paint a full picture of Jen's life as a young, poor, single mother. As readers come to understand Jen's life and perspective more 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 study, 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, her sister, and her 16-month-old son in a cramped but tidy row home in Philadelphia's beleaguered Kensington neighborhood. She is broke, on welfare, and struggling to complete her GED. Wouldn't she and her son have been better off if she had finished high school, 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 born to an unmarried mother. Today, that rate is 1 in 3—and they are usually born to those least likely to be able to support a child on their own. In our book, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor 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 across Philadelphia and its poorest industrial suburb, Camden. We spent five years chatting over kitchen tables and on front stoops, giving mothers like Jen the opportunity to speak over question so many affluent Americans ask about them: Why do they have children while still 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. A month and a half later, she was pregnant. "I didn't want to get pregnant," she claims. "He wanted me to get pregnant. As soon as he met me, he wanted to have a kid with me," she 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 those other girls he was with, he didn't want to have a baby with any of them," Jen boasts. "I asked him, 'Why did you choose me to have a kid when you could have a kid with any one of them?' He was like, 'I want to have a kid with *you*.'" Looking back, Jen says she now 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

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." Lately 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 idea 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 a 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! Not have a job! I still wanna do a lot of things before I get married. He [already] tells me I 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 Deal 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 I 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.