MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 321

PART FOUR

Social Institutions

TOPIC 11 **Family** 323

READING 31 *Relationship Quality Dynamics of Cohabiting Unions* by Susan L. Brown 325

READING 32 *Peer Marriage: How Love Between Equals Really Works* by Pepper Schwartz 336

READING 33 *Inequality Starts at Home: An Introduction to the Pecking Order* by Dalton Conley 347

TOPIC 12 **Education and Religion** 355

READING 34 *The Meaning of Meanness: Popularity, Competition, and Conflict among Junior High School Girls* by Don E. Merten 358

READING 35 *Civilize Them with a Stick* by Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes 369

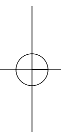
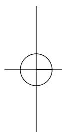
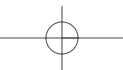
READING 36 *When the Clergy Goes Astray: Pedophilia in the Catholic Church* by Theresa Krebs 379

TOPIC 13 **Politics and the Economy** 389

READING 37 *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills 391

READING 38 *Corporate Restructuring, Downsizing, and the Middle Class: The Process and Meaning of Worker Displacement in the "New" Economy* by Charles Koeber 400

READING 39 *Somebodies and Nobodies: The Abuse of Rank* by Robert W. Fuller 412

TOPIC 11
Family

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR SUBJECTS IN SOCIOLOGY IS THE study of family. The family is a common experience for nearly every person in society. We might idealize the family to be something that nurtures us and out of which we are launched into life, a source of affection and encouragement. It is also true that the family is a place of violence and pain for many people. Families, as a part of society, have many different roles to play in the lives of people who inhabit them. There is an economic role the family plays, an emotional role, and a role to socialize and parent children, and it is also a place where couples play out their relational lives. Family is central to our existence as social beings. Family is an institutional pattern, a social structure that focuses social life into a home where busy lives of work and school and activities must be integrated into some semblance of order. This organizing principle of the family is fraught with pitfalls and potential problems. It is not easy for all these goals to be met, and it is not easy for all persons involved to feel as though they receive what is due them as members of families.

People fall in love, may marry, and often have children. These children will grow up and fall in love and likely marry and have children of their own. These generational patterns create any number of subjects for sociology to study. Dating, courtship, marriage, parenting styles, divorce, dual-earner and dual-career families, grandparents, and many more areas of study arise out of the family. Many of us who study sociology find our own lives represented in these "sociological snapshots" of family life, and we can become interested in how it is that people select a partner or what class and ethnicity differences there are in child rearing. We could wonder how the divorce our own parents might have

experienced will affect choices we make about marrying and whether their divorce will affect our own chances for divorce. These and many other topics enliven the pages of sociology texts and research journals.

The intimate relationships that occur inside families are among the most important in our lives. The love and support of a partner, as well as the close connection we experience between parents and children and between siblings, will last for decades and bring us a sense of importance and belonging. Alternately, intimate family relationships are full of a history, which can be negative. Negative history in family relations burdens them with "baggage" and resentments where we might find ourselves struggling to grow through the problems we inherit as a result of family life. Positive and negative, families are crucibles of intense feelings and strong allegiances. Learning about the family allows us to bring closure on much of our own childhood while understanding that we are caught in and creating patterns for the next generation as well.

Families, the bedrock of any society, are changing. As society changes, families must adapt to the new structures and processes resulting from this change. Families are the nexus of activities that include gender and employment and parenting and leisure. As the roles of American women have changed through increased employment and the emancipation from household labor, this has put additional pressures on the family to adapt to dual-earner households, higher divorce rates, and the need for childcare. In the personal lives of many, these changes have become significant political and economic issues.

Article selections in Topic 11: Family focus on cohabitation, "peer marriages," and how the family contributes to the relative success of siblings once they become adults. First, Susan L. Brown gives us a look at relationship quality among cohabiting couples. Cohabiting is one of the fastest growing trends in American families, and understanding the variables that affect the outcomes of cohabitating is the insight in this quantitative research. Second, Pepper Schwartz takes us inside the marriages of people who are more friends than lovers. Peer marriages illustrate equity and equality, but they have their own, unique problems as well. Third, an except from an award-wining book by Dalton Conley calls into question some of the most "tried and true" notions about social class and success, at least as tied to the family. Conley mounts a persuasive argument showing that most of our relative success in adulthood starts with the way we are treated by our family, and sibling differences in this regard are tied to which ones get the most resources as we grow up.

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 325

READING 31

SUSAN L. BROWN

Relationship Quality Dynamics of Cohabiting Unions

Cohabitation is now a common feature in the life course. In 1970, there were 500,000 cohabiting couples, whereas today more than 4.2 million couples cohabit (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). A majority of marriages today are preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Most of the decline in the first marriage rate and all of the decline in the remarriage rate are offset by corresponding increases in cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). The rapid increase in cohabitation has led researchers to explore its linkages to other important life events, such as divorce (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988; Booth & Johnson, 1988; DeMaris & MacDonald, 1993; DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Schoen, 1992) and nonmarital childbearing (Bachrach, 1987; Landale & Fennelly, 1992; Loomis & Landale, 1994; Manning, 1993, 1995; Manning & Landale, 1996). Essentially, researchers have treated cohabitation as a measure of a premarital event that may influence the likelihood of subsequent events.

But is this how cohabitation ought to be conceptualized? Researchers continue to debate the answer to this question. Cohabiting unions are typically so short (averaging less than 2 years in duration) that we often think of them as transitory in nature. Indeed, research indicates that for most groups, cohabitation serves largely as a stepping-stone to marriage (e.g., Manning, 1993, 1995). For some segments of the population, however, cohabitation appears to be a long-term substitute for marriage (e.g., Puerto Rican women; Landale & Fennelly, 1992). Some researchers have argued that cohabitation is similar to being single

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 326

(Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990), whereas others have maintained that cohabitation is very much like marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996) and ought to be treated as a family status (Bumpass et al., 1991).

To resolve this debate, we need to move beyond research whose interest in cohabitation lies solely in its relationship to other life events (e.g., childbearing and divorce) and begin to explore the nature of the cohabiting relationship itself. In fact, understanding the nature of cohabiting relationships will help us to decipher those links between cohabitation and other important life events.

Relationship Quality among Cohabitors

Cross-sectional studies demonstrate that on average, cohabitors are involved in unions that are of poorer quality than marriages (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995). Cohabitors report more frequent disagreements, less fairness and happiness, and greater instability than their married counterparts. However, a comparison of marrieds to cohabitors who plan to marry their partner (75% of cohabitors plan to formalize their union) reveals that the relationship quality of the two groups does not differ. Cohabitors without plans to marry their partner have especially poor relationship quality and are also in unions of longer duration than their counterparts with marriage plans, suggesting that duration and relationship quality are negatively related. Indeed, relationship duration has a greater negative effect on the relationship quality of cohabitors than of marrieds (Brown & Booth, 1996).

Marriage improves some aspects of cohabitors' relationship quality. For instance, cohabitors are less likely to use violence to solve relationship disputes after they marry (Brown, in press). Marriage also increases cohabiting women's happiness with their relationship. And marriage seems to ameliorate the negative consequences long unions have on perceptions of relationship fairness and happiness. Nevertheless, the strongest predictor of relationship quality at a later point in time is relationship quality at an earlier point in time; cohabitors' relationship quality appears stable. . . .

Taken together, studies of cohabitors' relationship quality and the literature on marital quality suggest potential similarities in union quality patterns for the two groups. For both marrieds and cohabitors, duration is negatively associated with relationship quality, yet relationship quality remains stable over time (Brown & Booth, 1996; Johnson et al., 1992). Consequently, it can be expected that relationship duration

will have similar effects on the relationship quality of both cohabitors and marrieds. The present analysis evaluates whether the dynamics of cohabitors' relationship quality exhibit a pattern analogous to that found for marital quality. . . .

Data and Measures

Data come from the fast wave of the NSFH. The NSFH is a multistage probability sample of 13,007 persons who were interviewed during 1987 to 1988. These data are arguably the best available for studying the cohabiting population because cohabitors were oversampled ($N = 678$), and extensive information was gathered about the quality of their unions. More than 6,800 respondents were married at first interview. Fewer than 5% of cohabiting unions last more than 10 years (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). To maximize comparability with marriages, analyses are restricted to those respondents in cohabiting or marital unions of no more than 10 years' duration.[1] This strategy has been employed in other research on NSFH cohabitors (Brown, 2000; DeMaris & MacDonald, 1993; Nock, 1995; Thomson & Colella, 1992). Also, only Blacks and Whites are examined here due to the small numbers of Hispanic, Asian, and other race cohabitors. These restrictions result in 646 cohabitors and 3,086 marrieds for analysis.[2]

Dependent Variables

Three measures of relationship quality are examined. The relationship happiness variable refers to the respondent's response to the question "Taking all things together, how happy are you with your relationship?" Responses range from 1 = *very unhappy* to 7 = *very happy*. Relationship interaction, a six-category variable, measures the amount of time the respondent spent alone with his or her partner during the past month. . . . Finally, the relationship instability variable gauges the respondent's estimation (on a 5-point scale) of the chance that the relationship will dissolve.

Independent Variables

Relationship duration is measured in months in the NSFH, but for ease of interpretation, this measure has been multiplied by 12 to yield a measure in which the unit is 1 year. The presence of children in the household, prior marital experience, and prior cohabiting experience

are all indicator variables. Plans to many among cohabitors is also a dichotomous measure; it is coded l if the respondent either reports definite plans to marry or thinks that she or he eventually will marry the current cohabiting partner, and 0 otherwise.

Control Variables

Variables associated with cohabitation and relationship quality are included as control variables. A control for race is included in all models because prior research (e.g., Adelmann et al., 1996) demonstrates that Blacks report poorer marital quality than Whites and because there are considerable racial differences in union formation rates (Raley, 1996). Gender, coded 1 for female, is included as a control variable both because women and men typically report unique views of marital quality (Thompson & Walker, 1989) and because cohabitation is more common among women (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Thornton, 1988). Both education and age are associated with cohabitation and relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Glenn, 1990; Nock, 1995) and thus are included as controls. Education measures the number of years of school completed. Age is coded in years. . . .

Results

Table 1, which shows the means and standard deviations of all variables used in the analyses, reveals that although cohabitors report significantly more interaction with their partners than do marrieds, cohabitors are also significantly less happy with their relationships and believe their relationships are more unstable than do their married counterparts. The average duration of a cohabiting relationship is slightly less than 3 years, whereas among marrieds, average marital duration is a little more than 5 years. Marrieds are significantly more likely to have children than are cohabitors (66% vs. 41%, respectively). Although cohabitors are more likely to have prior marital experience, they are less likely to have prior cohabiting experience than marrieds, perhaps because a majority of cohabitors quickly transform their unions into marriages (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). And as expected, about 72% of cohabitors report plans to marry their current partners. . . .

Cohabitors' happiness with their relationships, patterns of interaction, and perceived instability are all duration dependent. . . . Figure l graphically depicts [the] regression results. . . . With the passage of

TABLE 1 Weighted Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Used in the Analyses

Variable	*Cohabiting* M	(SD)	*Married* M	(SD)
Dependent variables				
Relationship interaction	5.09	(1.29)	4.78	(1.44)
Relationship happiness	5.77	(1.33)	5.95	(1.32)
Relationship instability	2.00	(1.06)	1.46	(0.79)
Independent variables				
Duration	2.80	(2.24)	5.16	(2.78)
Children	0.41	(0.50)	0.66	(0.48)
Previously married	0.44	(0.50)	0.32	(0.47)
Previously cohabited	0.22	(0.42)	0.46	(0.50)
Plans to marry	0.72	(0.45)		
Control variables				
Black	0.18	(0.39)	0.10	(0.33)
Female	0.50	(0.50)	0.50	(0.50)
Education	12.36	(2.70)	13.23	(2.71)
Age	30.49	(9.45)	32.97	(10.22)

Source: National Survey of Families and Households.
Note: Mean values on all variables—except female—significantly differ for cohabitators and marrieds at the p = .001 level.

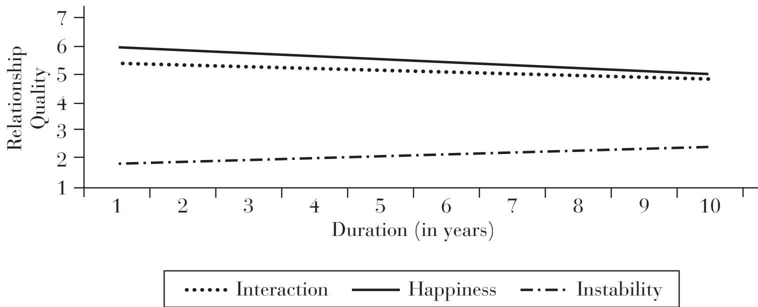


FIGURE 1 Cohabitors' Predicted Relationship Quality

time, happiness and interaction decrease, whereas instability increases. Similar to Glenn's (1998) analysis of marital quality, these results demonstrate that cohabitors also experience a linear decline in relationship quality during the first decade. . . .

In Figure 2, the pattern of interaction across duration is essentially the same for cohabitors and marrieds. Average levels of happiness appear slightly higher among marrieds than cohabitors, but happiness

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 330

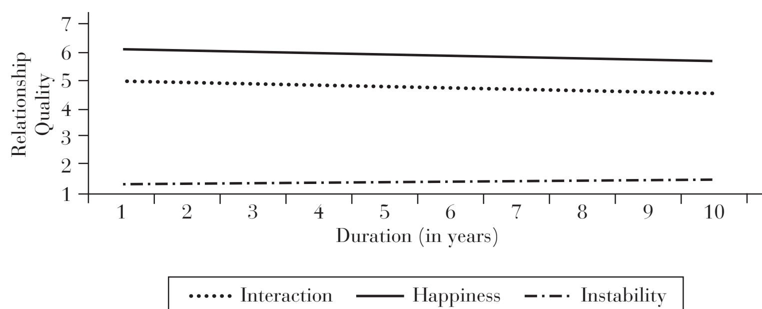


FIGURE 2 Marrieds' Predicted Relationship Quality

declines linearly with the passage of time for both groups. Instability exhibits unique patterns for marrieds and cohabitors. Although cohabitors experience a steady increase in relationship instability over time, marrieds' levels of instability are not related to duration. Rather, marital instability appears static across the first decade of marriage. These findings support the assertion by Johnson et al. (1992) that positive dimensions of marital quality tend to decline with time, whereas negative dimensions, such as instability, remain stable. Among marrieds, race is significantly associated with marital interaction, happiness, and instability. Blacks report lower levels of interaction and happiness and higher levels of instability than Whites, confirming findings from recent research (Adelmann et al., 1996) on racial differences in marital quality. Note that there are no significant racial differences in relationship quality among cohabitors.

Children

The presence of children tends to worsen cohabitors' relationship quality but does not explain the negative association between duration and relationship quality. Children decrease interaction and relationship happiness among cohabitors but do not alter perceptions of the stability of the relationship. Similar effects are observed for marrieds. Additional analyses (results not shown) reveal that differentiating stepchildren from biological children does not alter the pattern of effects. Also, the presence of adult children (i.e., children who are at least 18 years of age) has no significant effects on the three dimensions

of relationship quality. Among cohabitors, children and duration negatively interact in their effects on relationship interaction and happiness (results not shown). In long cohabiting unions, children are associated with especially low levels of interaction and happiness, perhaps because nearly half of these unions involve children from prior unions. Among marrieds, children do not modify the effect of duration on marital quality. Children have similar effects on relationship happiness and instability for both cohabitors and marrieds, but the negative effect of children on interaction is somewhat weaker for cohabitors than for marrieds (results not shown).

Prior Union Experience

Prior union experience has significant consequences for the relationship quality of cohabitors and marrieds, but these effects are independent of duration. Among cohabitors, prior cohabitation experience decreases partner interaction and happiness with the current relationship and increases perceived instability. Among marrieds, prior cohabitation experience decreases relationship interaction and happiness and increases instability. There are no significant effects of prior marital unions. Union type does not modify the effects of prior cohabitation experience on relationship quality, nor does duration (results not shown), meaning that the adverse effects of earlier cohabiting unions persist throughout the duration of the current union.

Plans to Marry

Cohabitors with plans to marry their partner report higher relationship quality, on average, than those without such plans. . . . The plans-to-marry variable modifies the effect of duration on instability such that among those in unions of relatively short duration, plans to marry is associated with lower levels of relationship instability; whereas among those in relatively long unions, the plans-to-marry variable is actually associated with higher levels of instability (results not shown). This finding implies that cohabitors with marriage plans expect that their unions will be transformed quickly into marriages. When these expectations are not met, cohabitors perceive greater instability. In contrast, couples who do not desire marriage gain confidence over time that their relationship will remain intact. Hence, the effect of duration on relationship instability is conditioned by the cohabitor's marital intentions. . . .

Discussion

Cohabiting unions are experienced by a majority of young people today (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Although researchers (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995) have compared the relationship quality of cohabitors and marrieds, little attention has been paid to the dynamics of cohabitors' relationship quality. Does the quality of cohabiting unions vary according to union duration? If so, how similar is the pattern for cohabiting unions to that observed for marriages?

The present study examines the duration dependence of relationship quality for cohabitors and marrieds and evaluates whether the presence of children or prior union experience account for or moderate the effect of duration. Cohabitors and marrieds experience similar declines in interaction with their partners during the first decade of their unions. Both groups also experience lower levels of happiness across time, although happiness is consistently higher among marrieds than cohabitors. Relationship instability increases considerably with the passage of time among cohabitors, but remains stable among marrieds. For cohabitors, long union duration has particularly devastating consequences for levels of happiness and instability. Both the presence of children and prior cohabitation experience are significantly associated with lower levels of relationship quality. The effect of duration on cohabitors' relationship quality is modified by the presence of children. Cohabitors in long unions with children report especially low levels of relationship interaction and happiness, possibly because nearly one half of such unions involve children from previous cohabitations or marriages.

There are important differences among cohabitors in the effects of duration on relationship quality. Among cohabitors without marriage plans, duration has no significant effect on the three dimensions of relationship quality. Among cohabitors with plans to marry, the effects of duration are similar to those observed for marrieds. For both groups, longer unions are associated with poorer relationship quality (except that marrieds experience no significant duration-related changes in instability).

Cohabiting unions are of relatively short duration, yet the dynamics of relationship quality parallel that of marriages in many regards. An important difference in the duration/relationship quality association for cohabitations and marriages is that the instability of cohabiting unions increases over time, whereas among marriages, reported instability

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 333

does not vary with duration. This difference is probably due to the role of cohabitation in the life course. For most cohabitors, cohabitation is a transitory stage, typically a step in the courtship process. Most people enter cohabitation not expecting a long-term union but rather a short-term substitute for marriage. Not surprisingly, half of all cohabiting unions are formalized through marriage or dissolve within 2 years, and more than 90% end within 5 years (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Hence, the longer a cohabiting union persists, the greater the perceived instability, because cohabiting unions that are not formalized through marriage are likely to soon end in separation. Less than 10% of cohabiting unions are maintained for an extended (i.e., 5 or more years) period of time.

The present study demonstrates that despite their short length, the quality of cohabiting unions varies with time. Cohabitors experience declines in relationship interaction and happiness that are similar to those experienced by marrieds. But unlike marriages, the stability of cohabiting unions is related to duration. This unique effect is indicative of the meaning of cohabitation as well as its role in the family life course. The higher levels of instability characterizing long cohabitations probably result from unrealized marital intentions. Most cohabitors expect to marry their partners, and provided that they do so within a few years of initiating the cohabiting union, perceived instability remains low. Instability levels are extremely high for cohabitors in relatively long unions who intend to marry their partner. The longer cohabitors' intentions remain unmet, the less confident they are that the relationship will remain intact. Factors hindering marriage entry may include relationship stressors such as children or prior union experience, but ultimately, at least one partner is hesitant to marry. Without a commitment to marriage, the union is likely to fail. Thus, these analyses suggest that cohabitations serving as a prelude to marriage are characterized by low levels of instability, whereas cohabitations that are not readily transformed into marriages are hindered not only by high levels of instability but also especially low levels of relationship interaction and happiness.

NOTES

1. There is the potential for bias in the estimates of duration effects using cross-sectional models, but this potential is minimized by restricting the analyses to individuals in unions of no more than 10 years' duration.
2. A very small number of cases have missing data on some variables. For respondents with missing data on independent and control variables, the overall mean was substituted.

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 334

However, for respondents with missing data on the dependent variables (i.e., the three dimensions of relationship quality), mean substitutions were not made. Consequently, the sample sizes used in each of the relationship quality models vary slightly.

REFERENCES

Adelmann, P. K., Chadwick, K., & Baerger, D. R. (1996). Marital quality of Black and White adults over the life course. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 13,* 361–384.

Bachrach, C. (1987). Cohabitation and reproductive behavior in the U.S. *Demography, 24,* 623–647.

Bennett, N. G., Blanc, A. K., & Bloom, D. E. (1988). Commitment and the modern union: Assessing the link between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital stability. *American Sociological Review, 53,* 127–138.

Booth, A., & Johnson, D. R. (1988). Premarital cohabitation and marital success. *Journal of Family Issues, 9,* 255–272.

Brown, S. L. (in press). Moving from cohabitation to marriage. Effects on relationship quality. *Social Science Research.*

Brown, S. L. (2000). The effect of union type on psychological well-being: Depression among cohabitors versus marrieds. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 41,* 241–255.

Brown, S. L., & Booth, A. (1996). Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58,* 668–678.

Bumpass, L. L., & Sweet, J. A. (1989). National estimates of cohabitation. *Demography, 26,* 615–625.

Bumpass, L. L., Sweet, J. A., & Cherlin, A. J. (1991). The role of cohabitation in declining rates of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53,* 913–927.

DeMaris, A., & MacDonald, W. (1993). Premarital cohabitation and marital instability: A test of the unconventionality hypothesis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 55,* 399–407.

DeMaris, A., & Rao, K. V. (1992). Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital stability in the United States: A reassessment. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54,* 178–190.

Glenn, N. D. (1990). Quantitative research on marital quality in the 1980s. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52,* 818–831.

Glenn, N. D. (1998). The course of marital success and failure in five American ten-year marriage cohorts. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 60,* 569–576.

Johnson, D. R., Amoloza, T. O., & Booth, A. (1992). Stability and developmental change in marital quality: A three-wave panel analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54,* 582–594.

Landale, N. S., & Fennelly, K. (1992). Informal unions among mainland Puerto Ricans: Cohabitation or an alternative to legal marriage? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54,* 269–280.

Lillard, L. A., Brien, M., & Waite, L. J. (1995). Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dissolution: Is it self-selection? *Demography, 32,* 437–458.

Loomis. L. S., & Landale, N. S. (1994). Nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing among Black and White American women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 56,* 949–962.

Manning, W. D. (1993). Marriage and cohabitation following premarital conception. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 55,* 839–850.

Manning, W. D. (1995). Cohabitation, marriage, and entry into motherhood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57,* 191–200.

Manning, W. D., & Landale, N. S. (1996). Racial and ethnic differences in the role of cohabitation in premarital childbearing. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58,* 63–77.

Nock, S. L. (1995). A comparison of marriages and cohabiting relationships. *Journal of Family Issues, 16,* 53–76.

Raley, R. K. (1996). A shortage of marriageable men? A note on the role of cohabitation in Black-White differences in marriage rates. *American Sociological Review, 61,* 973–983.

Rindfuss, R. R., & VandenHeuvel, A. (1990). Cohabitation: A precursor to marriage or an alternative to being single? *Population and Development Review,* 16, 703–726.

Schoen, R. (1992). First unions and the stability of first marriages. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54,* 281–284.

Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1989). Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 51,* 845–871.

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 335

Thomson, E., & Colella, U. (1992). Cohabitation and marital stability: Quality or commitment? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54,* 259–267.
Thornton, A. (1988). Cohabitation and marriage in the 1980s. *Demography, 25,* 497–508.
U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1999). *Unmarried-couple households, by presence of children: 1960 to present, AD-2.* Retrieved June 13, 2000, from http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/ms-la/tabad-2.txt

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the differences between cohabiting and married couples as the author discusses them?
2. What are the main variables, as presented in Brown's study, that affect the quality of the cohabiting union?

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 336

32 READING

PEPPER SCHWARTZ

Peer Marriage

How Love Between Equals Really Works

In 1983 Philip Blumstein and I published the results of a large study on the nature of American relationships; it was called *American Couples*. The study, which received an enormous amount of notice from the press and the public, was composed of over 12,000 questionnaires and 600 interviews from married, cohabiting, lesbian, and gay members of couples.[1] During the course of what turned out to be a decade-long effort, I noticed that there were many same-sex couples with an egalitarian relationship but very few such heterosexual couples. Because the homosexual couples did not have to surmount the traditions of sex differences, they more often worked out relationships that both partners felt were fair and supportive to each other. My curiosity about their success at this aspect of their relationship, plus my admiration for the few egalitarian heterosexual couples in the study, made me want to know more about how married couples could get past traditions of gender and construct a relationship built on equality. Previous sociological studies on marriage made chances for egalitarian marriage seem grim, but since my own marriage was successfully egalitarian, I had both scientific and personal motivation to see why some couples reconstructed gender roles and others did not. To that end, I reexamined some of the egalitarian marriages in the *American Couples* study, used them as an archetype, and then sought more of these couples to talk to and learn from.

The couples, I discovered, based their marriages on a mix of equity (each person gives in proportion to what he or she receives) and equality (each person has equal status and is equally responsible for emotional, economic, and household duties). But these couples were distinguished by more than their dedication to fairness and collaboration; the most happy and durable among them also had refocused their relationship on *intense companionship.* To be sure, they shared child raising, chores, and decision making more or less equally and almost always equitably, but for most of them, this was just part of a plan for a true companionship marriage. The point of the marriage was not to share everything fifty-fifty. Rather, the shared decisions, responsibility, and household labor were in the service of an intimate and deeply collaborative marriage. I call this kind of marriage peer marriage; it is a marriage of equal companions, a collaboration of love and labor in order to produce profound intimacy and mutual respect.

The people in peer marriage for the most part are not ideologues. They construct and maintain a peer marriage because they find it rewarding. If they are without the means to hire the services of a homemaker, they seek work that allows both spouses to share child care and housework. These couples do not strike acquaintances as odd; they look just like their friends and co-workers, except that they have vigilantly preserved their commitment to equality. Additionally, they see peer marriage as salvation from instability. Many of them have witnessed the deterioration of their own previous marriage, or that of friends, and they believe that the only way to maintain a lifetime together is to create an irreplaceable, and interdependent, union of equals. . . .

In general, four characteristics of peer couples emerged. First, the partners did not generally have more than a sixty-forty traditional split of household duties and child raising. (An exception was made for the early periods of infancy, and even then, there had to be significant paternal involvement.) Second, each partner believed that each person in the couple had equal influence over important and disputed decisions. Third, partners felt that they had equal control over the family economy and reasonably equal access to discretionary funds. Most research has indicated that money confers power and relative income influences decision making.[2] These couples either had to earn similar amounts, or share power over family resources (such as having similar ability to undertake nonmonitored private spending). Fourth, each person's work was given equal weight in the couple's life plans. The person

with the less glamorous and remunerative job could not always be the person with the most housework or child care. The requirement of sharing money, influence, decision making, child care and homemaking applied even for couples in which one person had a salaried job and the other stayed home. Among older couples, a history of traditional role division that no longer existed was allowable as long as it had not been true for the previous three years. The point was not to define these characteristics as the only way to reach a just, rewarding, and durable relationship but to use them to define the new, and spreading, phenomenon of marriages in which traditional roles were absent and there was no hidden hierarchy. . . .

My snowball sample (the term sociologists use for a sample whereby one person recommends the next) makes any statistical conclusions about peer couples seriously suspect. Nonetheless, certain attributes appeared again and again and are at least worth mentioning, if only as a guide for future research. These couples tended to be dual income; only three couples contained women who did not work at all. They were in their late twenties to mid-forties. There was only one much older couple (in their mid-sixties) and only a few in their mid-fifties. The age similarity was partially an artifact of the snowball sample but also probably a cohort effect. It was the baby boom generation who came of age at a time when feminist ideology was having its rebirth. This generation, born between 1945 and 1957, and its younger followers had to evaluate whether to embrace the new tenets and criticisms of marriage, or opt for the traditional model. The baby boom and post-baby boom women who endorsed feminist philosophy—or at least wanted to shuck old gender roles and constraints—have had to consider consciously the role of marriage in determining their life. Some had to think about *if* they wanted to be married, and all have examined *how* they wanted to be married. More of these women might be expected to want a relationship that gives them equal standing in marriage. Oddly, younger women among this group sometimes assumed a certain amount of equality and equity and thereby unconsciously settled for less.

This cohort explanation may also explain why almost half of these marriages contain a previously divorced partner. People in this age group have a higher divorce rate than the cohorts ahead of them. Also, the older women of the baby boom generation were more likely to have started marriage under one set of norms and reexamined it under a new, more feminist consciousness. Most of these women who were

previously divorced said they left their first marriage because of inequitable treatment. Peer men were far more likely to recite a great number of reasons for the breakup of their marriage but were also likely to say it was either the end of their marriage or the difficult period after the marriage was over, a devastating period of fighting over property and support, that made them seek a peer relationship. Accusations of betrayal or continued emotional and financial dependence of the ex-spouse made these men much more interested in a different kind of marriage the next time: an independent, working spouse who could hold her own in a partnership.

The last, and rather unexpected, commonality among the peer couples was that they tended to be more middle class than working or upper middle class. As we shall see, egalitarian couples seem more likely when male income is not so grand that it encourages a nonworking wife or makes the wife's income unimportant. When a peer marriage had a high-earning male, it was likely there was also a high-earning female (or, as in a couple of cases, a female with a prestigious job such as an elected politician or a successful artist). But generally, most male occupations were *not* high pressure and high profile. It seems to be easier to create an egalitarian relationship if the man has a job (or creates one) that has some flexibility and controllable hours, and if both partners make similar amounts of money (for example, if both partners are teachers). Still, these kinds of background data do not provide the answers to the most intriguing commonalities of all: How did these people come to be in an egalitarian marriage? Why did they want to be peers?. . . .

Why Peer Marriage?

To any woman who was or is part of the women's movement, the answer to this question is clear. Women in the recent history of the United States, Canada, and most of Western European have experienced a rise in personal freedom that can be expected to extend to their family and personal life. This is particularly true for the women of the baby boom generation who grew up indulged by a kind economy and relatively permissive parents and who, along with the males in their cohort, rebelled against traditional social expectations: what it meant to be a woman, a man, a partner, a spouse.

Their critique of traditional marriage included the perception that it was unacceptably anti-individualistic. Traditionally, marriage is a

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 340

corporate entity in which the self is supposed to be transformed to fulfill, depending on one's gender, the demands of supporter and provider, or father and mother. Both men and women, but especially a number of women, defied that loss of individuality and rigid description of duties. Women, for example, decided, either rationally or de facto, that virginity was no longer required in order to be a desirable spouse or a good wife. The institutionalization of premarital sex was just part of the questioning of gender requirements. Young people proclaimed that individual happiness was more important than familial duty. There was a general rejection of capitulation to traditional expectations. A number of women wrote about new ways to be female. Theories of male oppression and patriarchal culture flourished. And although the number of women who directly participated in these forums may have been statistically small, the reach of their thoughts and feelings was deep and broad. Women left marriage—or were left—in extraordinary numbers; the divorce rate has more than doubled since the early 1960s. Both women who stayed in marriages and women who left them learned a new language of anger and inequity. The appetite for equality and equity grew nationally and internationally, and even those who held onto traditional values about roles and relationships found themselves more aware and critical of some of the bargains of male and female relations. . . .

Of course, even if we wanted to, we could not erase all the differences between men and women that make them attracted and attached to each other, emotionally, erotically, and pragmatically. But now that we offer a real possibility of equality, many people get cold feet. They do not seek true equality because they are scared that all they will get is trouble for their effort. In some ways, the most dangerous impact of well-meaning books like *The Second Shift* is that they confirm readers' worst fears about the changing nature of male and female roles: that liberated women will only be liberated for more work, less love, less protection, and more exploitation. Men and women are worried about who they will have to be if they give up their traditional gender territories and remap their personal and family life. They are worried as well that the opening up of roles to personal choice rather than by sex will obliterate sexual differences and the interdependence of the sexes. Men and women know how to enjoy gender and marriage by the old ways, they feel lost when it comes to egalitarian marriage, have trouble believing the rewards of peer marriage would be worth the sacrifice it takes to get there, and they feel they are good enough where they are,

having made significant strides from their parents' marriages and moving as close to egalitarian as they will ever get. They don't believe they can take the next step, so they stop short of it. They have a false sense of how far they have come and how far it is possible to go; they do not realize that the path they are on is not actually leading them to the place they want to go.

Then why peer marriage? Why have some couples moved through this considerable gauntlet to create an egalitarian partnership? Most simply, it is because they want to love each other as much as possible. They want a marriage that has intensity and partnership and does not create the distance between men and women that is inevitable between people of unequal status and power. These men and women looked at the lack of intimacy, and even at the anger and resentment between their parents or in previous relationships of their own, and wanted to avoid replication. Women who were consciously feminist did not want to be angry about inequity; men in love did not want to have an accusatory and resentful partner. Men and women who began as friends became deeply committed to maintaining that friendship, and took steps to preserve the relationship from the impact of traditional marriage. The common theme among these peer couples is the preservation of intimacy, the desire to be neither oppressor nor oppressed, the commitment to a relationship that creates a shared universe rather than parallel lives. When they designed their relationship to ensure those goals, the rewards of peer marriage became self-reinforcing.

But Who Would Be a Peer Man?

The common perception is that men do not want a peer marriage. Why should they give up all the privileges conferred by traditional marriage? And even if we can imagine that a man would like to share the burden of supporting a family or would like a career woman with whom to share his life, we know that most men have been loath to take on the burdens that women carry. It is hard to imagine as well that men who have the opportunity for high earnings and a prestigious job would sacrifice either for a more participatory family life. Because of these and similar observations, many women feel that peer men are born, not made, and so few of them exist that they are not worth looking for.

That is a misconception. Peer men often *are* made, *not* born. Many men came to peer values after they tried a fairly traditional relationship

and found it didn't work for them. They enjoyed having service, support and household management from a traditional wife or a girlfriend—up to a point. Then they reported being either bored or overwhelmed with responsibility. Some fell in love with a "new woman"—an independent peer who was exactly the sort of woman they avoided or felt insecure around when they were younger. Many of the first wives of these men were furious at losing husbands after they had fulfilled the contract they both had signed. And when these women dated or remarried, they no longer presented themselves as they had as younger, more traditional women.

Others of these men had had traditional relationships that they liked just the way they were, until they went sour for a variety of reasons. It was the aftermath of the separation, divorce, custody, and alimony battles that changed their mind about what they wanted in their next relationship. Many of these men were very attached to their children and vowed never again to be the minor parent. Others had ex-wives who were lost without them, and the responsibility and guilt of that situation made them look for someone stronger.

Nevertheless, some of these men *were* "born peer." They came from homes where they got along with and respected an impressive mother or sister. Some had grown up doing their fair share of chores and babysitting. Quite a few of them were men who never felt comfortable with macho standards of masculinity. They liked female company; they liked to talk; they liked being in a family environment. One common distinguishing factor is that they liked children, looked forward to having their own, and wanted to be involved in the day-to-day upbringing of their family.

Some of these men were ambitious in their work; others were clear from the beginning that their work would come second to their marriage and family. But what they usually shared in common was the idea that they wanted an in-depth personal relationship that would not be sacrificed to work. They wanted a best friend.

It was this goal of deeper friendship that helped to "make" peer men. Much of what evolved between these men and women happened because of their strong desire to stay emotionally connected to one another. They saw each other as individuals rather than as roles and wanted the same things for each other that they sought for themselves. More often than not, the women in these relationships were good communicators and were clear about how they wanted and needed to be treated; they had a strong sense of what was a fair deal. The men had

the ability to understand and support their partner's wishes. Most of these couples had to negotiate early in the relationship—and keep negotiating throughout it—to keep it a partnership rather than watching it slip into more traditional roles. One of the interesting things about peer men, is that they too had an investment in keeping that from happening. They were looking for an equal, a partner and a friend. They didn't want to lose that person to pressures to live a more conventional relationship. . . .

Rewards of Peer Marriage

Primacy of the Relationship

Egalitarian couples give priority to their relationship over their work and over all other relationships—with friends, extended family, even their children. Their mutual friendship is the most satisfying part of their lives. The point of equality and equity in these relationships is to create a marriage that makes each partner feel secure in the other person's regard and support.

Intimacy

Peer couples experience much more of each other's lives than do traditional or near peers. Because they share housework, children, and economic responsibility, they empathize as well as sympathize. They experience the world in a more similar way, understand the other partner's personality more accurately, and communicate better because they know each other and each other's world better and because equal power in the relationship changes interaction style. They negotiate more than other couples, they share conversational time, and they are less often high-handed, dismissive, or disrespectful than other couples. They choose to spend a lot of time together.

Commitment

These couples are more likely than traditional couples to find each other irreplaceable. They are likely to describe their relationship as "unique." Their interdependence becomes so deep (unlike near-peer dual-career couples) and so utterly customized that the costs of splitting up become prohibitive.

Costs of Peer Marriage

So if the rewards are so great, how come there are near peers? Why would anyone who believed in equality back off? The following problems will be discussed throughout the chapters.

Treason Against Tradition

One of the costs of defining gender and marriage differently is that many people feel that the nature and purpose of marriage and sex roles have been betrayed. Far from enabling a man to stay home with his children or a woman to take her role as equally responsible breadwinner seriously, co-workers and managers and friends will often question the couple's philosophy and deny modifications of work or schedules that could help the couple share family life more easily. Parents of the man may feel he has been emasculated; parents of the woman may feel she is setting herself up for a fall. Validation and support are rare and have to be consciously sought.

Career Costs

Peer couples need jobs that allow them to coparent. Sometimes they wait long enough to get enough clout in their careers to be able to modify their schedules so that they can share parenting. But more often they have to be lucky enough to be in jobs that naturally support child raising (for example, both working at home work stations), or they have to modify their career ambitions in favor of their family aspirations. This means avoiding or changing jobs that require extensive travel, changing venues in quick succession, and jobs that are all consuming (for example, a high-powered litigator in lengthy trials). Many couples have experienced one or both partners' having to forgo career opportunities. Sometimes it is painful to watch others who have dedicated themselves more singlemindedly to careers do financially better or achieve more prestigious positions.

Identity Costs

By downplaying work and emphasizing family, peer couples go against the prevailing standards of male and female role success. Marriages have traditionally defined themselves as a success if the man made

money and created a good life-style for the family and the wife created good children and a satisfied husband. Peer couples have to define success differently. Except for "power couples" who can afford the help that allows them to have high-voltage careers and family time, economic success may have to be modified. Neither sex can assess their success according to traditional roles. It is hard to know how to evaluate oneself.

Sexual Dynamism

Peer partners get so close that some complain that an "incest taboo" sets in. They are each other's best friends, and if they aren't careful, that is exactly what they will start acting like in bed. Many find ways to get around this overfamiliarization problem, but the fact is that their absolute integration in each other's lives has to be leavened with some artifice to put romance back into the relationship.

Exclusion of Others

These couples become each other's best friend, and that can make everyone else feel a bit excluded. Kin and close friends stop getting the kind of attention they used to have and may be resentful. Although these couples tend to be child centered and have in fact organized their lives so that they can parent better, they are also dedicated to their adult relationship. This means they have to be careful not to make their own children feel excluded.

Calibrating the Right Mix of Equity and Equality

It is not always clear how to maintain a peer relationship. Sometimes it requires *equality,* with both partners supporting each other in the home and with the children. This prevents the relationship from being divided into low and high prestige worlds, and undermining deep friendship. But other times the best answer is *equity.* Each partner can and should give in different coin, and that is the best way to be loving and collaborative and supportive to the marriage. Figuring out the right thing to do all the time is tiring and inexact. Sometimes couples just want to retreat to doing the "boy thing" and the "girl thing"—not because it works—but because it is much clearer what each person should do to do his or her part for the relationship.

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 346

The Balance of Costs and Rewards

In spite of the costs, the peer couples described in this book believe that they have created an extremely rewarding marriage and family. Many of the costs I have outlined are not costs they feel they have suffered—or if they have, they feel those costs are a manageable part of an otherwise terrific arrangement. Many of them have varied and effective coping strategies that they believe solve or minimize these issues in their relationship.

NOTES

1. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples* (New York: William Morrow, 1983).
2. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples.* See also Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, "Money and Ideology: Their Impact on Power and the Division of Household Labor," and Judith Treas, "The Common Pot or Separate Purses? A Transactional Analysis," both in Rae Lesser Blumber, Ed., *Gender, Family and Economy* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the positive and negative attributes of peer marriages? Would you ever want to be in this sort of marriage? Why or why not?
2. Please answer the question raised in the article, "But who would be a peer man?" If a man becomes a "peer," what does he give up?

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 347

READING 33

DALTON CONLEY

Inequality Starts at Home

An Introduction to the Pecking Order

Let me start with a story.

Once upon a time a future president was born. William Jefferson Blythe IV entered the world one month premature but at a healthy six pounds and eight ounces. At twenty-three, his mother, Virginia, was young by today's standards, but perhaps a touch old for Arkansas in the 1940s. She was a widow, so times were tight during Bill's early years. In fact, times would be tough during all of Bill's childhood. Nonetheless, he seemed destined for great things. According to family lore, in second grade Bill's teacher "predicted that he would be President someday."[1]

His mother eventually married Roger Clinton, but that didn't make life any easier for Bill. Roger was a bitterly jealous alcoholic who often became physically abusive to his wife. Bill cites the day that he stood up to his stepfather as the most important marker in his transition to adulthood and perhaps in his entire life. In 1962, when Bill was sixteen, Virginia finally divorced Roger, but by then there was another Roger Clinton in the family, Bill's younger half brother.

Though Bill despised his stepfather, he still went to the Garland County courthouse and changed his last name to Clinton after his mother's divorce from the man—not for the old man's sake, but so that he would have the same last name as the younger brother he cherished. Though they were separated by ten years, were only half siblings, and ran in very different circles, the brothers were close. The younger Roger

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 348

probably hated his father more than Bill did, but he nonetheless started to manifest many of the same traits as he came of age. He was a fabulous salesman: at age thirteen, he sold twice as many magazines as any of his classmates for a school project, winning a Polaroid camera and a turkey for his superior effort. He also had an affinity for substance abuse: by eighteen, he was heavily into marijuana. During Bill's first (unsuccessful) congressional campaign in 1974, Roger spent much of his time stenciling signs while smoking joints in the basement of campaign headquarters.

As Bill's political fortunes rose, Roger's prospects first stagnated and then sank. He tried his hand at a musical career, worked odd jobs, and eventually got into dealing drugs. And it was not just pot; in 1984, then-governor Bill Clinton was informed that his brother was a cocaine dealer under investigation by the Arkansas state police. The governor did not stand in the way of a sting operation, and Roger was caught on tape boasting how untouchable he was as the brother of the state's chief executive. Then the axe fell. After his arrest, Roger was beside himself in tears, threatening suicide for the shame he had brought upon his family—in particular, his famous brother. Upon hearing this threat Bill shook Roger violently. (He, in truth, felt responsible for his brother's slide.)

The next January, Roger was sentenced to a two-year prison term in a federal corrections facility in Fort Worth, Texas. Bill describes the whole ordeal as the most difficult episode of his life. David Maraniss—the author of *First in His Class,* the most comprehensive biography of Clinton to date—summarizes the family situation as follows:

> *How could two brothers be so different: the governor and the coke dealer, the Rhodes scholar and the college dropout, one who tried to read three hundred books in three months and another who at his most addicted snorted cocaine sixteen times a day, one who could spend hours explaining economic theories and another whose economic interests centered on getting a new Porsche? In the case of the Clinton brothers, the contrasts become more understandable when considered within the context of their family history and environment. They grew up in a town of contrast and hypocrisy, in a family of duality and conflict. Bill and Roger were not so much opposites as two sides of the same coin.*[2]

If asked to explain why Bill succeeded where Roger failed, most people will immediately point to genetic differences. After all, they

were only half siblings to begin with. Others will pin it on birth order, claiming that firstborns are more driven and successful. But both of these accounts rely on individual explanations—ones particular to the unique biology or psychology of Bill and Roger—and both are incomplete. Was Bill more favored and more driven because he was a firstborn? My research shows that in families with two kids, birth order does not really matter that much. In fact, just under one-fourth of U.S. presidents were firstborns—about what we would expect from chance. The fact is that birth position only comes into play in larger families. But what about genes: was Bill simply luckier in the family gene pool? That may be so, but it still does not explain why sibling disparities are much more common in poor families and broken homes than they are in rich, intact families. In fact, when families have limited resources, the success of one sibling often generates a negative backlash among the others.

Sure, if one kid is born a mathematical genius and the other with no talents whatsoever, their respective dice may be cast at birth. But for most of us, how genes matter depends on the social circumstances around us. A child in one family may be born with innate athletic talent that is never nurtured because the parents in that family value reading ability over all else. Yet in another family, the fit between the individual talents of a particular child—say spatial reasoning—and the values of the parents may be perfect, and those abilities are realized. Finally, what kind of rewards talent brings depends entirely on the socioeconomic structure of the time. Fifty years ago, musical talent might have led to a decent living. Today—in an economy that rewards the most popular musicians handsomely at the expense of everyone else—innate musical ability is more often a route to financial struggle.

In Bill Clinton's case, he obviously had good genes—which contributed to his sharp mind, quick wit, tall stature, and verbal charisma—but there was not much advantage to being the firstborn. What really made a difference in his life was the good fit between his particular talents, the aspirations of those around him, and the political opportunities in a small state like Arkansas. This good fit combined with his family's lack of economic resources to generate an enormous sibling difference in success. However, had Virginia had money, she might not have had to put all her eggs—all her hopes and dreams—in Bill's basket. She might have been able to actively compensate for Bill's success by giving Roger extra financial and nonfinancial support—sending him, for example, to an elite private school when he started to veer off

track. Instead, Bill's success seemed to come at the expense of Roger's—particularly when it led Roger to a false sense of invincibility.

On the surface, it may seem that the case of the Clintons is atypical. And, of course, a pair of brothers who are, respectively, the president and an ex-con is a bit extreme. But the basic phenomenon of sibling differences in success that the Clintons represent is not all that unusual. In fact, in explaining economic inequality in America, sibling differences represent about *three-quarters* of all the differences between individuals. Put another way, only one-quarter of all income inequality is between families. The remaining 75 percent is *within* families.[3] Sibling differences in accumulated wealth (i.e., net worth) are even greater, reaching 90-plus percent.[4] What this means is that if we lined everyone in America up in rank order of how much money they have—from the poorest homeless person to Bill Gates himself—and tried to predict where any particular individual might fall on that long line, then knowing about what family they came from would narrow down our uncertainty by about 25 percent (in the case of income). In other words, the dice are weighted by which family you come from, but you and your siblings still have to roll them. For example, if you come from a family that ranks in the bottom 5 percent of the income hierarchy, then you have a 40 percent chance of finding yourself in the lowest 10 percent, a 21 percent chance of making it to somewhere between the 30th and 70th percentile, and only a one in a thousand chance of making it to the top 10 percent. If you come from the richest 5 percent of families in America, then your odds are flipped. And if you start at the dead middle of the American income ladder, then you are about 63 percent likely to end up somewhere in that 30th- to 70th-percentile range, with a 4 percent chance of ending up either in the top or the bottom 10 percent.[5] A similar pattern holds for educational differences. For example, if you attended college there is almost a 50 percent chance that one of your siblings did not (and vice versa).[6]

What do sibling disparities as large as these indicate? They imply an American landscape where class identity is ever changing and not necessarily shared between brothers and sisters. Taken as a whole, the above statistics present a starkly darker portrait of American family life than we are used to. We want to think that the home is a haven in a heartless world. The truth is that inequality starts at home. These statistics also pose problems for those concerned with what seems to be a marked erosion of the idealized nuclear family. In fact, they hint at a trade-off between economic opportunity and stable, cohesive families.

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 351

While it may be surprising to realize how common sibling inequality is on the whole, my analysis of national data shows that Americans are quite aware of sibling disparities within their own families. For instance, when given a choice of fourteen categories of kin ranging from parents to grandparents to spouses to uncles, a whopping 34 percent of respondents claimed that a sibling was their most economically successful relative. When the question is flipped, 46 percent of respondents report a sibling being their least successful relative. Both these figures dwarf those for any other category.[7] When respondents were asked to elaborate about why their most successful relative got that way, their most common answer was a good work ethic (24.5 percent); when we add in other, related categories like "responsible, disciplined," "perseverance, motivation," or "set goals, had a plan," the total is well over half of all responses. Contrast that with the 22.6 percent that covers all categories of what might be called socioeconomic influences, such as "inheritance," "coming from a family with money," "marrying money," and so on. When accounting for the success of our kin, individual characterological explanations win out.

The pattern becomes even more striking when we flip the question to ask about the misfortune of the *least* successful relative. Only 9.6 percent of respondents cite social forces like poverty, lack of opportunity, or the pitfalls of a particular field as an explanation. Meanwhile, a whopping 82.4 percent cite individualistic reasons—having a "bad attitude" or "poor emotional or mental health." The single largest category was "lack of determination."[8]

That shows us how harsh we are on our brothers and sisters. Are we fair when we pass this kind of judgment, or terribly biased? I think the latter. In this book I challenge the perceived split between individual personality-based explanations for success and failure, and sociological ones. I argue that in each American family there exists a pecking order between siblings—a status hierarchy, if you will. This hierarchy emerges over the course of childhood and both reflects and determines the siblings' positions in the overall status ordering in society. It is not just the will of the parents or the "natural" abilities of the children themselves that determines who is on top in the family pecking order; the pecking order is conditioned by the swirling winds of society, which envelop the family. Gender expectations, the economic cost of schooling in America, a rising divorce rate, geographic mobility, religious and sexual orientations—all of these societal issues weigh in heavily on the pecking order between siblings. In other words, in order

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 352

to truly understand the pecking orders within American families, you cannot view them in isolation from the larger economy and social structures in which we live. The family is, in short, no shelter from the cold winds of capitalism; rather it is part and parcel of that system. What I hope you end up with is a nuanced understanding of how social sorting works—in America writ large, and in your family writ small. And just maybe—along the way—we will all have a little more sympathy for our less fortunate brothers and sisters.

Who Gets Ahead?

Books about siblings debate why children raised by the same parents in the same house under the same circumstances turn out differently—sometimes very differently. They offer genetic explanations, or focus on birth order or the quality of parenting. *The Pecking Order* takes all these issues into account, but, based on years of research with three separate studies, it now moves us beyond those factors. Why is there a pecking order in American families, and how does it work? The reasons go way beyond relationships between family members. Americans like to think that their behavior and their destiny are solely in their own hands. But the pecking order, like other aspects of the social fabric, ends up being shaped by how society works.

In fact, siblings serve merely as a tool by which I hope to shed light on why some of us are rich and others poor; on why some are famous and others in America are anonymous. However, in figuring this all out, we do not gain much traction by comparing Bill Clinton with Joe Q. Public, Bill Gates with the average reader of this book, or any pair of randomly associated people. Some books tell you that the best way to understand why one person succeeds and another does not is to examine big amorphous categories like class or economics or race. I say the best way to do it is to examine differences within families, specifically to compare siblings with one another. Only by focusing in on the variety of outcomes that arise within a given family can we gain a real understanding of the underlying forces, of the invisible hands of the marketplace, that push each of us onto our chosen (or assigned) path in life. Siblings provide a natural experiment of sorts. They share much of their genetic endowment.[9] They also share much of the same environment. So it's logical to ask: how and why is it that some siblings end up

MATSMC11_0205524648.QXD 7/27/07 3:37 PM Page 353

in radically different positions in life? If we find an answer to that question, I think we will understand something very fundamental to American life.

NOTES

1. David Maraniss, *First in His Class: The Biography of Bill Clinton* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 424.
2. Ibid.
3. This is represented by $1 - R^2_s$ (where R^2 is the square of the sibling correlation coefficient in log-income). Mary Corcoran, Roger Gordon, Deborah Laren, and Gary Solon estimate a brother-brother correlation in *permanent* income of .45 using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. See page 364 of their "Effects of Family and Community Background on Economic Status," *American Economic Review* 80 (1990): 362–66. Their estimates for women's sibling correlations in family income is .276 and .534 for men's log-earnings. (Gary Solon, Mary Corcoran, Roger Gordon, and Deborah Laren, "A Longitudinal Analysis of Sibling Correlation in Economic Status," *Journal of Human Resources* 26 [1992]: 509–34.) Sibling resemblance for other outcomes like welfare usage, education, and occupation follow similar patterns and are sensitive to the specification deployed—particularly for nonlinear measures. For example, if a woman's sister has received welfare, she is over three times more likely to use it herself (.66 versus .20 probability in their PSID sample). Differences for "persistent participation" in welfare programs by sibling welfare status are even greater. When I reanalyze more recent waves of PSID data—in which the siblings are on average older and more stable economically—I find that the sibling correlation has not changed much overall, but notably for sisters (see Dalton Conley, "Sibling Correlations in Socio-Economic Status: Results on Education, Occupation, Income and Wealth," working paper, Center for Advanced Social Science Research, New York University, 2003). The sibling correlation is .449 for the natural logarithm of brothers' income-to-needs ratio (slightly lower for log-income); for sisters the correlation in log-income-to-needs is .555. (It is .517 for all siblings.) For sisters the total (logged) family income correlation (as contrasted to the logged income-to-needs ratio) is .508, significantly higher than the figure of .276 reported by Solon, Corcoran, Gordon, and Laren in their "A Longitudinal Analysis."
4. For the natural logarithm of total net worth (i.e., accumulated wealth minus debts), sibling correlations are .224 for all siblings, .239 for brothers, and .271 for sisters (Conley, "Sibling Correlations"). In this analysis, those with negative or zero net worth are set to zero on the log scale. This approach yields the *highest* sibling correlation between randomly selected adult siblings in the 2001 wave of the PSID. Correlations are not much different for other recent waves.
5. These probabilities come from table 4 in Solon, Corcoran, Gordon, and Laren, "A Longitudinal Analysis," 526.
6. The actual figure is a .48 probability that a randomly selected sibling of an individual who graduated from a four-year college will not have graduated. This result comes from analysis of the 2001 wave of the Panel of Income Dynamics (see Conley, "Sibling Correlations"). Daphne Kuo and Robert Hauser analyze the Occupational Changes in a Generation (OCG) survey data and find that for education, sibling differences (within-family variance components) for various age groups of black and white brothers range between 38 percent and 52 percent. (See Kuo and Hauser, "Trends in the Family Effects on the Education of Black and White Brothers," *Sociology of Education* 68 [1995]: 136–60.) In the PSID, I find a lower degree of sibling resemblance in education level (measured as a continuous variable from 1 to 17 years of schooling). The correlation coefficient for siblings in the 2001 wave is .429. For brothers it is .529, and for sisters it is .400. These correlations, when squared, imply a less robust within-family component than found by Kuo and Hauser. Likewise, one-quarter of sibling pairs in the Study of American Families diverge substantially in terms of the prestige of their jobs. ("Substantial" means the difference between a professional such as a lawyer or businessman, on the one hand, and a salesclerk or blue-collar worker on the other.) In the PSID, the sibling correlation in 2001 occupational prestige is only .225 for sisters, .302 for brothers, and .233 for all siblings (Conley, "Sibling Correlations").

7. These results come from analysis of the Study of American Families.
8. These data come from the GSS-SAF survey. People may be more likely to explain others' relative success with outside social factors than individual attributes in order to lessen the taste of the sour grapes.
9. It is generally said that siblings (other than identical twins) share 50 percent of their genes (the same degree of similarly as with their respective parents); however, this is only true if parents were randomly assigned to mate with each other. The reality is that there is a process called assortative mating where reproductive mates select each other based on traits that have some sort of genetic basis. This assortative mating can result in a lower than 50 percent genetic similarity among OSC than 50 percent similarity since parents are positively matched on attributes and thus are contributing some of the "same" genes to OSC their children (and themselves). These issues will be discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the family pecking order influence adult success when comparing siblings?
2. According to Conley, which is a larger determinant of adult success: the family or the social class of the family?