IS THAT A FACT?

Three Brief Reports Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families

Andrew Cherlin
Johns Hopkins University

Philip Cowan and Carolyn Cowan
University of California, Berkeley

Linda Burton
Duke University

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Executive Summary

Americans are bombarded by a constant stream of competing factoids and causal claims about families. Politicians, advocacy groups, pundits, and instant internet “experts” claim that social science “proves” this or that is the impact of divorce, “surveys show” what people think about marriage, or “the facts are clear” about the benefits of one family form or another.

Are some facts more trustworthy than others, and if so, how can we tell the trustworthy from the untrustworthy? What is the difference between a cause, a correlation and a coincidence?

Three brief reports prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families help journalists, students, and general audiences interpret claims of fact and causation about such controversial topics as divorce, marriage, and domestic violence. Written by award-winning researchers at the top of their respective fields, the papers advise when to take research claims with a grain of salt and how to be confident that a study is particularly well done, clear, and reliable. The summary below provides links to each paper in its entirety.

Paper One: The Impact of Divorce and the Benefits of Marriage - Beware of Selective Facts

Andrew Cherlin, Griswold Professor of Public Policy at Johns Hopkins University, highlights how advocacy groups use facts selectively and thereby over-simplify public discussion of important issues. Professor Cherlin offers examples from both the left and the right to illustrate how this selective use of facts impoverishes public debates.

Paper Two: Does Your Height “Cause” Your Weight? Does Marriage “Cause” Good Health? The Thorny Question of Correlation vs. Cause

Philip Cowan, Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, UC-Berkeley, and Carolyn Pape Cowan, Professor of Psychology, Emerita, UC-Berkeley, note that many studies show that children whose parents are married to each other are doing better than children whose parents are not married. This is what researchers call a correlation — and a correlation, they explain, is often confused with a cause.

Such confusion of cause and correlation has deformed debates over child policies issues. One school of thought believes that the only effective way to protect children is to promote marriage. They emphasize that having married parents is correlated with better child health outcomes than having divorced or single parents and conclude we must promote marriage and restrict divorce. But that correlation doesn’t mean that marriage causes health. People’s height is correlated with their weight, yet no one claims that height causes weight. We all know that in the case of the association between height and weight, there are other forces in common—like nutrition and genetics—that influence how tall and how heavy a person becomes.
The same thing goes for marriage and child health. It is equally possible that adults in some single-parent families have traits that make them less likely to get or stay married and ALSO to be more likely to raise children who exhibit behavior problems. If so, the problems seen in children raised by these individuals might still develop even if the parents were able – or were forced – to stay together.

Another school of thought holds that ending poverty is the only way to promote child well-being. They cite research showing that poverty is associated with behavioral problems in children. But here too, the Cowans point out, the cause and context of the poverty, rather than poverty itself, may create the problem behaviors. Alternatively, poverty may increase the risk of poor child outcomes through the way that the parents react to it rather than through the mere absence of income. It may thus be possible to teach parents to handle their economic stresses better.

Yet that leads to still another complication. Many programs claim to save marriages or improve parenting, but these programs have seldom been rigorously evaluated. The Cowans urge journalists and policy-makers to look for systematic studies that include randomized clinical trials with control groups when they are approached with claims that a program is causing a change in people’s lives.

Paper Three: When Interviews, Surveys, and Focus Groups Don’t Tell the Full Story -- the Example of Domestic Violence in the Lives of Impoverished Women

Linda Burton, James B. Duke Professor of Sociology at Duke University, explains what gets lost when researchers or journalists do one-shot surveys or focus groups rather than in-depth interviews that take place over a prolonged period. Burton’s four-year study examined the impact of welfare reform in the lives of low-income African American, Latino, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White families in three different cities.

Had Dr. Burton’s team only done a few interviews, they would have overlooked the centrality of domestic violence and sexual abuse in the experience of economically vulnerable women. Few women volunteered the information that they had experienced significant abuse, yet eventually, researchers found that such abuse was a prominent feature in the lives of more than two-thirds of these women. In most cases, it took more than 6 months of interviews for this information to come out, and in almost 20 percent of the cases, the information emerged only after 10 to 24 months.

The extended interview process enabled researchers to rule out the idea that tales of domestic violence were simply a bid for the interviewer’s sympathy. Astonishingly, domestic violence was so “normalized” in these women’s lives that in the majority of cases the information came out accidentally or incidentally, as an aside, or in some cases when the researcher actually walked in during the aftermath of an abusive episode.

One woman revealed her history of abuse only when the researcher asked how she had met her husband. “Liza” stated that this was a “funny story,” because she had met her
husband just after ending a relationship with a man who had broken her nose. In another instance, the researcher only discovered the abuse when she arrived at the house while the police were still responding to an incident. Burton cautions people to recognize that “absence of evidence” is not the same thing as “evidence of absence.”

Stephanie Coontz
Director of Research and Public Education
Council on Contemporary Families
One Thousand and Forty-Nine Reasons Why It’s Hard to Know When a Fact is a Fact

Andrew Cherlin
Johns Hopkins University
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When is a fact a fact? As many “postmodern” critics of standard social science point out, that is a harder question than it might appear. Research may be contaminated in several ways. First, the questions we ask and the point of view we take often reflect our values, whether those are an enthusiasm for feminist or civil-rights inspired activism or a belief in the importance of marriage and premarital chastity.

Even the categories and labels we use often reflect values-based assumptions. Here is an example from my field, family demography: In 1941, Paul Glick, the Bureau of the Census demographer who virtually created the field, wrote a pioneering article entitled “Types of Families: An Analysis of Census data.” Glick divided American families into three groups: (1) normal families, a category that consisted of all two-parent families; (2) other male-headed families; and (3) other female-headed families. The implication, of course, was that all single-parent families were abnormal.

Or consider contemporary debates over immigration, which may be shaped by whether one uses the term “illegal alien” or “undocumented immigrant.” The first conjures up an image of a law-breaking invader from outer space; the second conveys an image of a striving newcomer who merely lacks the right papers.

Recognizing that most researchers draw upon particular values when they choose what categories to use and what questions to ask does not mean that all data is suspect or that all interpretations of data are equally valid. But they do drive home the importance of treating so-called facts critically and of questioning their origins and purposes. When we read facts, we should ask ourselves a few key questions: Who produced this fact? Was it a person or an organization that promotes a particular point of view? What was the purpose of making this fact known? What do we know about the relationship of this fact to other facts or trends?

Consider familyfacts.org, a website operated by the Heritage Foundation. It publicizes findings from social scientific research on family life. On its home page (www.familyfacts.org), familyfacts.org presents itself as a neutral clearinghouse for family research: “The Heritage Foundation’s familyfacts.org catalogs social science findings on the family, society and religion gleaned from peer-reviewed journals, books and government surveys. Serving policymakers, journalists, scholars and the general public, familyfacts.org makes social science research easily accessible to the non-specialist.”
In 2008, this site featured a “top ten” list of findings about how children in different kinds of families fare in school. According to each finding, children living with two parents were doing better than children living with one parent or with stepparents. Here are two of the findings: “Kindergartners in intact families have higher average reading scores than peers in stepfamilies or cohabiting families;” and “First-graders whose mothers were married when they were born are less likely to engage in disruptive behavior with peers and teachers than those whose mothers were single or cohabiting.” In fact, virtually all of the thousands of findings on the site support the view that marriage is best for children and that religion improves family outcomes.

These findings are not falsified. They are taken from reputable studies published in well-regarded journals such as the Journal of Marriage and Family and, by and large, are described accurately. A naïve user might think that this is all social scientists know. But the facts reported on this site have been selected to support a particular conclusion, while facts that modify, complicate, or challenge that conclusion are not reported.

For example, the site quotes a 1998 article by me, which reports on a study showing that children whose parents had divorced had a higher risk of emotional problems in adulthood. Yet that same article also showed that some of the emotional problems had been visible in childhood before the parents even divorced, and this additional finding is not mentioned. Nor does the site mention a 1991 article of mine suggesting that some of the problems experienced by children from divorced families might have occurred even had the parents stayed together. This is not a fact that familyfacts.org thinks you need to know.

Which findings are included and which are excluded make sense if one knows that the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, promotes the values of institutions such as “traditional” marriage and religion. This is not to say that one should disregard the findings on familyfacts.org; in fact, much evidence does suggest that growing up with two parents is beneficial to children. But the informed reader will know that it is necessary to go elsewhere to see whether the kinds of findings that are cataloged at familyfacts.org tell the whole story.

Conservatives are not the only ones who use facts in ways that reflect their values. In the 1980s, when homelessness was first being recognized as a social problem, many news stories included the information that two to three million Americans were homeless. Soon this figure became an accepted fact. Yet it subsequently came to light that this fact had been provided by a leading advocate for the homeless, Mitch Snyder, who basically made a guess. He said in a television interview: Everybody demanded it. Everybody said we want a number...We got on the phone, we made a lot of calls, we talked to a lot of people, and we said, “Okay, here are some numbers.”

Snyder was just doing what advocates usually do: providing the largest credible estimate of how many people are affected by the problem they want to alleviate or by the disease they would like to cure or by the injustice they want to remedy. In counting the homeless, as in estimating the number of women who have been raped or who experience eating
disorders, advocates often take the most expansive definition of the problem and adjust for under-reporting. But such estimates are especially susceptible to manipulation for dramatic effect.

More recently, we have heard much in debates over same-sex partnerships about the 1,049 federal benefits and rights that marriage supposedly confers on husbands and wives. This number appeared in the late 1990s and was soon cited everywhere as a fact about the legal benefits of marriage. In 2000, advocates of same-sex marriage, while welcoming the Vermont legislation which created the nation’s first civil unions, noted that state-level recognition of gay unions would not provide the partners with the federal benefits of marriage. The Washington Post reported:

The plaintiffs in the Vermont case documented a long list of benefits granted to married couples but denied to gay ones… The 300 state and 1,049 federal laws cover such matters as… the right to pay taxes jointly, and social security benefits.

Ever since, reputable newspapers around the country and politicians on both sides of the political spectrum have accepted this claim as fact, derived from a federal study conducted by the General Accounting Office. The precision of this fact – not 1,048 or 1,050 but exactly 1,049 – gave it such verisimilitude that no one challenged it. And its magnitude suggested an overwhelming bias in favor of marriage, making it an attractive “fact” for proponents of same-sex marriage, just as the people who constructed the Heritage website were attracted to only some of the “facts” reported by family researchers on divorce. But in hindsight, its precision and size are the very factors that should have suggested caution in using this fact.

The source of this “fact” was indeed a federal study, but the study did not establish what these and many other news reports have since claimed. In 1996, when Congress enacted the Defense of Marriage Act, Rep. Henry Hyde requested that the General Accounting Office identify all federal laws which involved benefits, rights, and privileges that depend on being married. As the GAO staff discussed this request with Hyde’s staff, they agreed to broaden the scope of the study to include “all those laws in the United States Code in which marital status is a factor, even though some of those laws may not directly create benefits, rights, or privileges.” In other words, the GAO counted all laws that involve marriage, including those that penalize married couples.

One of the 1,049 laws, for example, is a statute that limits the amount of certain crop support payments that one person can receive. For this purpose, a married couple is considered to be one person. But an unmarried couple can apparently escape this restriction and each receive the maximum amount. Another law mandates that a candidate may not spend more than $50,000 of his or her own money, or the money of his or her immediate family, on a political campaign and still be eligible for federal funding. So a wife cannot contribute, but there’s nothing to prevent the candidate’s unmarried partner from kicking in additional funds.

Many of the so-called benefits of marriage, furthermore, are trivial. It is true that one law discriminates against cohabiting couples by making it a federal crime to try to influence United States officials by threatening to kill their spouses, whereas it seems not to be a
It did not take weeks of research in dusty government archives to get to the bottom of this; rather, I found the information on the internet in less than an hour. That so many people had quoted the number without checking it shows how easily a “fact” can become part the dialog about social and political issues.

What happens to a fact of this kind is that it becomes a symbol of the issue in dispute. Clearly, marriage does provide some important federal benefits. Only married couples can file their federal tax returns jointly; and only married people can continue to receive part of their partner’s social security benefits after the partner dies. But the figure of 1,049 benefits became a dramatic, and at first glance convincing, stand-in for the general privilege of being married in American society. It was this general privilege that really was the point of the debate. This was the reasoning of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in ruling that restricting marriage to heterosexuals was unacceptable even if same-sex partners were given the same legal status. Marriage, the judges wrote, is more than a collection of benefits; rather, it is a “status that is specially recognized in society.” Denying same-sex couples that special status, the justices argued, would create a “stigma of exclusion.”

Debating the abstract notion of social status is, however, more difficult than debating legal benefits. Advocates therefore focused on the 1,049 benefits as a way of building support for their more general position. Many debates over social and political issues revolve around symbols such as this one, and it is in the interest of each side to define the symbol in the largest or the smallest terms possible to bolster their case.

Whether everyone knows where the supposed facts come from, as is the case with the findings displayed on the familyfacts.org website, or whether no one seems to know, as with the apocryphal 1,049 benefits, the careful user of facts will not take them at face value. At the least, the user must examine (or uncover) the source and determine its position on the issues. Even your most trusted friends probably care about the social and political issues they discuss, which makes it difficult for them to be truly balanced in the facts they tell you about. And as a rule, no organization that takes sides in a public debate will issue facts that should be considered fully objective and balanced. To be sure, some organizations may be more transparent and balanced, and others more opaque and one-sided, in their use of facts. But even the fairest will have made choices about what questions to ask, what counts as good research, and on what basis one draws conclusions. Unless you understand where the source is coming from, it’s hard to evaluate the information it provides. And that’s a fact.
When is a Relationship Between Facts a Causal One?

Philip Cowan and Carolyn Cowan
University of California, Berkeley

Even when we can check the accuracy of facts, as Cherlin’s paper urges us to do, the next step is to examine critically the way that people interpret the relationship of one fact to another. It is a fact, for example, that substantial numbers of children are growing up in single parent families. Or, more precisely, it is a fact that many children are growing up in households that do not contain two parents who are married to each other. (Some of these families have only one parent in the home; others may have two parents who are cohabiting.) It is also a fact that, in general, children and couples in non-married families are not faring as well as those in married families. Members of such families have less income and lower levels of physical and mental health, and the children have more emotional problems and behavior problems (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). It is tempting to conclude from these facts that living in a single parent household is the cause of these difficulties.

But when we look at all people who live in single parent households, we find a larger number of people with pre-existing financial, health, or emotional disadvantages than we find in the married-couple population. It may be these characteristics of the adults in the family, rather than single-parenthood per se, that make them less likely to get or stay married and more likely to raise children who exhibit behavior problems. If so, it would be inaccurate to say that divorce or unwed behavior causes child problems. In many cases, the problems seen in children raised by these individuals might still develop even if the parents were able – or were forced – to stay together.

The problem of overstating causal conclusions from correlational data is not the sole property of the political left or political right. Both sides are too quick to draw support from social science research when correlations support their cherished conclusions. Supporters of the political right tend to select studies that show correlations between divorce and negative outcomes for children. Supporters of the political left select studies that show correlations between poverty and negative outcomes for children. The point here is not that these claims are wrong, but that most studies do not provide evidence for the causal assertions and policy conclusions that are made on both sides of the political spectrum.

We need to make a slight digression here. It is always legitimate and possible to make policy arguments on moral or value grounds. That is, if one’s values lead to the conclusion that cohabitation is a sin, and that having children compounds that sin, it is part of the bedrock of democracy that one can argue strongly on moral grounds that laws should be made to prevent cohabitation and foster marriage. What we’re concerned with here are cases in which individuals claim that conclusions based on their values are “proven” by social science research.

Basic problems in the interpretation of research facts
1. Causal facts always imply a direction of effects – the cause, A, comes before the effect, B. But statements based on statistical correlations can never tell us about the direction of effects. For example, it is a fact that there is a correlation between being married and having better-functioning lives and between non-marriage and financial or emotional difficulties. However, we do not know whether marriage produces the partners’ better functioning or whether better-functioning partners get married. That is, selection effects guiding who gets married may influence the results.

2. An important corollary of point 1 is that when two social trends vary together, it is not possible to conclude that one causes the other. Increases in the proportion of mothers of young children in the workforce occurred in the mid-20th century around the same time that the divorce rate went up. On the basis of these two facts alone we cannot point to women working as as a cause of the increase in divorce. Why not? First, we don’t know from these two statistics whether the divorces occurred more often in the families of women who went to work. And second, we do not know whether these two trends are associated with other factors that may plausibly have caused the increase in divorce.

3. Reasoning backwards about causality produces backward thinking. Most newspaper and magazine articles on family issues rely on research that starts with outcomes of interest right now and looks backwards for potential explanations, because that’s what most research does. For example, we take two groups of couples, one in which there are high levels of domestic violence, and another in which there has never been any domestic violence. We look at their histories, and find that the couples with domestic violence are much more likely to have been abused by their parents than the harmonious couples. Does this demonstrate that early abuse is a cause of domestic violence? No. What’s missing from the picture is information from studies that follow families forward. These studies usually find that even if some of the abused children grow up to form violent relationships with a spouse, the majority of children who experience early abuse do not wind up in violent relationships. In this example, even if early abuse were found to be a cause of domestic violence, we might try to change each partner’s understanding of the past through psychotherapy, but we cannot reverse the early abuse.

Other examples, though, seem to suggest that if we can identify the cause, a quick fix is possible. We know, for example, that there is a correlation between cohabitation and higher rates of domestic violence, but it would be dangerous to conclude that a causal relation exists and recommend that cohabitators should marry. Rather than their failure to marry producing domestic violence, it may have been their stormy relationship that led them not to marry in the first place. If this were the case, a policy that created incentives to marry could result in increased harm to both the couple and their children.

4. Correlations can result from a third variable that produces the association between them. It is a fact that children whose parents are divorced, or who live with a single parent who never married, tend to have more emotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties than children whose parents are married. It is possible, though, that some of the negative
effects of divorce and single parenthood come from the fact that these households have lower income, and that the consequences of low income in terms of reduced resources are responsible, at least in part, for children's difficulties.

5. Many studies of families focus on status and not on process or relationship quality. Most studies of marriage and divorce, especially in Sociology and Social Welfare, attempt to link couple status (married, cohabiting, divorced, single) with child and family outcomes. For example, in Waite and Gallagher's “The Case for Marriage,” almost all of the studies they cite contrast married couples with cohabiting couples or single adults. In each chapter, they present evidence that the strongest positive findings occur for happily married couples. But in the policy summary at the end, the authors revert to the argument that “married is better,” ignoring the issue of quality altogether.

What the advocates for marriage ignore, or dismiss, are the hundreds of studies showing that high unresolved marital conflict erodes couple relationships and affects children negatively (Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Emery, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Unless we are talking about “good” marriages, getting couples married will not provide a solution either to social problems of poverty or to individual problems of child behavior.

The importance of systematic studies that include randomized clinical trials with control groups

Every day, the popular press, TV, government websites, and self-help books make new claims that a particular program proposed for families, or one already in operation, is effective. What is surprising is that most of these programs have no systematic evaluations at all. In order to assert that individuals, couples, and families are better off BECAUSE of a program than they were before, what do we need?

First, we need to be able to determine that whoever is providing the information does not have an interest in consciously or unconsciously skewing the results. For example, if the intervention staff is providing the data, it is easy to see how they might be motivated, or self-deluded, to make higher ratings of the participants on the post-intervention assessments. When program evaluations include data from outside observers, as well as therapists and clients, the inclusion of multiple perspectives makes statements about improvement more credible.

Second, even with a study that contains the most objective, unbiased assessments of outcome, a control group is still needed. You can't just claim that the program is a success if the participants show positive changes. What if the average participant in a job-training program has a statistically significantly higher income a year after the program ends? How can we rule out the possibility that these results come from an economic boom in which most families have higher incomes a year later? That is, the fact of increased income does not support a causal interpretation about the impact of the intervention until we know what happens to a comparable untreated group.
Similarly, what if a group of children become less aggressive with their peers after their parents take a class on managing children’s aggression? Again, we need to know whether children whose parents did not take such a class also decreased in aggression as they grew older or whether we can show that the declines in aggression are associated with parents’ more effective parenting strategies.

We know that it is not always possible to do controlled experiments. To test the hypothesis that married parents provide a better environment for children’s development, we cannot assign some single parents to the “get married” group and others to the “remain single” controls. In this case, there are responsible ways of gathering data to rule out alternative hypotheses so that we can come to a more informed decision about the impact of marriage on children’s adaptation. One method is to measure a number of variables that could possibly influence A and B groups differently and “subtract them” from the outcome to see if any effect of the intervention remains. This method is only as powerful as the thoughtfulness of the investigator in thinking about what else, outside of the intervention could have created the obtained results.

A second, more powerful method is do a longitudinal study (e.g., of the same children before and after divorce) and determine whether, on the average, any change in the children can be identified from the period before their parents divorce to the period after. Often these studies use a fixed effect method. For a good example of such a study, which came to quite different findings about the impact of divorce than did earlier studies, see CCF Briefing Report, “The Impact of Divorce on Children’s Behavior Problems,” (Li, 2008).

Conclusions
Both the political left and the political right have jumped to conclusions in the debate about marriage, based on the erroneous assumption that correlations support causal inferences. From the right we hear: “Married families do better; let’s get those single moms married or make it harder for couples to divorce.” From the left we hear: “Unmarried mothers are poor, and poor families have difficulty; let’s give them money and jobs.”

What we need to remember is that explanations of how two facts are connected seem simple but are often exceedingly complex. Unpacking the causal connection requires very thoughtful systematic research, accompanied by interventions, if possible, that test hypotheses about the direction of effects. We are aware that this kind of rigorous exploration takes time, and that policy decisions must often be made in the absence of scientific proof that the proposed action will have the desired effects. What we want to convey to social service providers and policy makers is that causality is extremely difficult to nail down. Everyone must read press releases and summaries of social science with a critical eye. The kind of complexity hidden within a “simple” correlation cannot normally be communicated or understood in simple sound bites about cause and effect.
References


When Does an Interview Dig Deep Enough?
Uncovering Hidden Facts: An Ethnographic Lens

Linda Burton
Duke University

Ethnographic research is a method of gathering data about individual’s thoughts, behaviors, and experiences in the context of their everyday life. In ethnography, researchers engage systematically with those they are studying, participating in their lives and asking in-depth questions about the information they are learning.

Ethnographic research differs from surveys of human behaviors in several important ways. While surveys typically ask an individual a series of questions with fixed-option responses at one point in time, ethnographers record over time both what individuals say about their own behaviors and what they actually do. In the process, ethnographers build trusting relationships by listening without judgment and keeping promises of confidentiality. They may also get at hidden data by being there when research participants are ready to reveal previously concealed information, on their own terms. Sincere promises of confidentiality and anonymity can often convince participants to share sensitive data, but these measures are sometimes not enough. In settings where those studied have much to hide, it is not until some long-term relationship has been established that research participants will come relatively “clean” with fieldworkers about data that could potentially harm them or important others in their social worlds.

In addition to uncovering hidden information, ethnography can also offer a check against exaggerations of such information. In the course of doing participant-observation and informal questioning, ethnographic fieldworkers are able to supplement – and, hence, provide a check on – statements made by informants. Occasions can arise where ethnographers experience contradictions between what people tell them and what ethnographers actually observe them doing or hear reported from others. By being there over time and participating in the social world being studied, fieldworkers gain opportunities to uncover new, contradictory, and potentially illuminating forms of data.

As a result, ethnographers’ assessments of respondents usually go well beyond the “public face” and socially–appropriate facades individuals tend to put on their responses to general questions. They may also uncover patterns of behavior or experience that informants are either ashamed to admit or that they may not even initially regard as relevant to the relationship. Such was the case in our Three-City Study of economically disadvantaged families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. This four-year study, designed to examine the impact of welfare reform in the lives of low-income African American, Latino, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White families, revealed that domestic violence and sexual abuse are more central to women’s economic vulnerability than researchers have commonly recognized.
More than two-thirds of the mothers who participated in this survey eventually disclosed that they had been sexually abused or had experienced domestic violence as children and/or as adults. Yet in most cases, it took more than 6 months of interviews for this information to come out, and in almost 20 percent of the cases, the information emerged only after 10-24 months. Three patterns of disclosure were identified in the ethnographic data: “trigger topics” disclosure, “crisis” or recent event disclosure, and “ethnographer prompted” disclosure.

The trigger topics disclosure pattern involved mothers unexpectedly revealing sexual abuse and domestic violence histories to ethnographers when they were asked about topics such as health, intimate relationships, transportation, work history, and intergenerational caregiving. For example, during an interview about her general health, a 37-year-old African American mother of three commented that “My pregnancy with Dante was hard because I was sick.” The ethnographer asked neutrally for more information: “You were sick?”

Yeah, he had been sleeping around and gave me gonorrhea. I’m still embarrassed talking about it. Sometimes I didn’t want to sleep with him but he’d rape me. I told him I was gonna’ call the police and he said, ‘Go ahead. Ain’t nobody gonna’ arrest me for wanting to be with my woman.’

A different informant revealed experiences with abuse when the ethnographer asked how she had met her husband. Liza stated that this was a “funny story” and noted that she had met her husband just after ending a relationship with a man who had broken her nose.

Yet another example of such unprompted disclosure was one that occurred during the twenty-third visit to the home of Delilah, a 40-year-old European American divorcée and mother of four children. The ethnographer was conducting a follow-up interview concerning Delilah’s past and current work experiences because Delilah had failed to mention particulars about her work history over the previous two years of interviews. At this point, Delilah finally told the ethnographer that she had once worked at a bank as a switchboard operator, but quit when her former husband physically injured her. Delilah stated: “I went to work with a black eye. People at the bank noticed. When it happened a second time, I felt embarrassed coming to work, so I quit like cold turkey.”

Seventy-one percent of disclosures conformed to this trigger topics pattern. The second most common pattern of disclosure, accounting for almost 20 percent of the accounts, was the “crisis” or recent event disclosure pattern. This occurred when the ethnographer unexpectedly “walked in” on a domestic violence situation when she was visiting the participant, or when the participant experienced a sexual abuse or domestic violence episode a few days or weeks prior to the ethnographer’s regularly scheduled visit. In both instances, the abuse situation was “fresh” in the minds of mothers and they chose to discuss it with their ethnographers in great detail. In most of these cases, the ethnographers had suspected abuse (as indicated in ethnographers’ field notes and in discussions with their supervisors and team members), but hadn’t felt that they could directly ask the participant about it. For example, Janine, the ethnographer for Patrice, a
28-year-old European American mother of two, describes the circumstances that led to Patrice’s crisis-prompted disclosure:

I arrived at Patrice’s house 10 minutes before the interview only to find the streets covered with cops, patrol cars, and an ambulance... Patrice was on the porch screaming, her face bloody and cut. The kids were running around everywhere screaming and crying.... I feared that my worst suspicions about the prevalence of domestic violence in Patrice’s life were about to be confirmed.... When I visited Patrice three weeks later the flood gates opened without me asking. I listened as she told me everything about the incident and about other incidents of physical and sexual abuse that she had experienced since childhood.

The third pattern, “ethnographer-prompted” disclosure, occurred when ethnographers directly asked mothers about their past and current experiences with sexual abuse or domestic violence. Ethnographers usually asked direct but open-ended questions about these topics in an interview if they noticed a behavioral reaction from mothers when discussing their intimate relationships with their partners. Only 9 percent of all disclosures came from such prompts.

It is also important to note that only 12 percent of the mothers who revealed sexual abuse and domestic violence experiences to the ethnographers did so during visits or participant observations that occurred in the first 3 months of their involvement in the study. Twenty-nine percent disclosed sexual abuse and domestic violence experiences during the 4 to 6 monthly visits with the ethnographers, 40% during the 7 to 9 month visits, and 19% after 10 to 24 visits.

The prolonged wait before most informants revealed their history of sexual abuse and/or domestic violence reveals the importance of investing enough time and participation in the mother’s lives to reach a “turning point” in the relationship between mothers and ethnographers – a moment when the participant trusts the ethnographer enough to share intimate, sensitive, and sometimes highly painful information. And the fact that such revelations often occurred almost accidentally or unintentionally suggests that such ethnographic studies capture much more of the actual incidence of violence in poor women’s lives than official police reports or surveys.


About the Authors

Andrew Cherlin, PhD
Griswold Professor of Public Policy and Sociology, Johns Hopkins University
Senior Research Fellow, Council on Contemporary Families
410-516-2370; cherlin@jhu.edu

Philip A. Cowan, PhD
Professor of the Graduate School and
Professor of Psychology, Emeritus
University of California at Berkeley
Board Member and Senior Research Fellow,
Council on Contemporary Families
510-643-5608; pcowan@berkeley.edu

Carolyn Pape Cowan, PhD
Professor of Psychology Emerita, University
of California at Berkeley
Board Member and Senior Research Fellow,
Council on Contemporary Families
510-643-5608; ccowan@berkeley.edu

Linda Burton, PhD
James B. Duke Professor of Sociology, Duke University
Board Member and Senior Research Fellow, Council on Contemporary Families
919-660-5609; lburton@soc.duke.edu

Media Contact
Stephanie Coontz, Professor of History and Family Studies
The Evergreen State College and Director of Research and Public Education
Council on Contemporary Families
Email: coontzs@msn.com
Phone: 360-352-8117

About CCF
The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council’s mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

Access our publications and learn more about CCF membership at www.contemporaryfamilies.org