

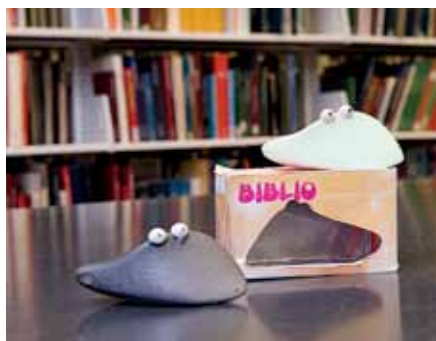
a “rapid prototyping studio” at the GSD. During the semester, students designed, built, and deployed novel devices and objects in an attempt to model the library of the future; Schnapp’s co-instructors were Jeff Goldenson of the Harvard Library Lab (which fosters innovation in library services), GSD library director Ann Whiteside, and GSD student Ben Brady, who’d taken the fall class.



Visit [www.harvardmag.com/extras](http://www.harvardmag.com/extras) to view videos of student projects including a WiFi “cold spot” and a sleeping chair.

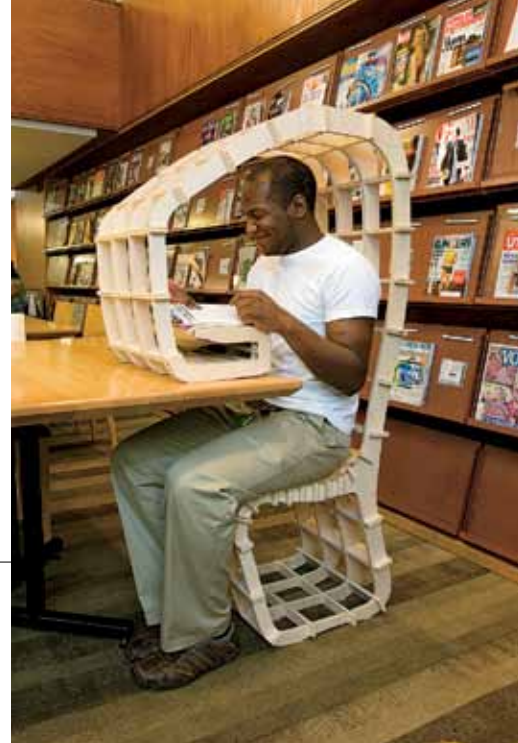
In the seminar’s free-wheeling atmosphere, ideas flew like cream pies at a food fight. What if behind-the-scenes work could take place in the open instead, suggested Matthew Battles, a fellow at the Berkman Center. “What if you set up somebody processing medieval manuscripts in Widener or Lamont—a processing station in a public space?” Battles had just come from a used-furniture depository, where he’d been scavenging for shelves that could be repurposed for use as curator stations, places where faculty members or librarians could be asked to curate small collections of books. “What about a mobile, inflatable library?” suggested Goldenson. “What would that do?” Or how about an “Artist in Reference,” he continued. “We could bring in experts in a particular subject to serve as guest reference librarians in their area of expertise.” Schnapp, running with the idea, noted that “Widener contains collections in fields that haven’t been taught at Harvard in a hundred years, where we have the best collections of materials.”

By semester’s end, the brainstorming sessions had generated dozens of good ideas, and a few had become student projects: Biblio, a conceptualization of a handheld device for scanning books that tracks and shares research and even makes bibliographic recommendations for further study (see the online video); Timeslice, a “graphical electronic bulletin board” that lets library users post event announcements to a community calendar that incorporates digital graphics; Neo-Carrel, a study chair with a raised platform in front that doubles as a laptop stand and a comfortable place to rest one’s head for a nap (now installed in Lamont library); and a WiFi cold spot, a radically designed room (opposite) for reflection or refuge from an increasingly connected world.



**Biblio, a handheld book scanner (above), helps users track, share, and expand their research. The Neo-carrel (right) does triple duty as chair, laptop stand, and comfortable napping station.**

“We think this is an opportunity to be real catalysts for thoughtful change that can’t easily come from other quarters,” explains Schnapp. “Because we’re not librarians, but instead a community of artists, scholars, engineers—people interested in knowledge—we come at the questions a little bit differently. So we think we can be innovative and breathe some fresh air into a conversation that often is about how many jobs are going to be cut, or what will happen to all the space that is freed up once the stacks move out to the Harvard Depository. That’s a conversation that may



have to happen, but it would be a tragedy if that were the only framework in which we thought about the possibilities for enhancing the mission of libraries.”

—JONATHAN SHAW

LIBRARY TEST KITCHEN WEBSITE:  
[www.librarytestkitchen.org](http://www.librarytestkitchen.org)

#### CHILDBIRTH AND STATUS

## When Having Babies Beats Marriage

**I**N FEBRUARY *The New York Times* ran a story under the provocative headline, “For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside of Marriage.” The article suggested childbearing outside of marriage was the “new normal”—that recently released data signaled a “coming generational change” in Americans’ attitudes toward family formation. It was a dramatic story, but sociologist Kathryn Edin says it obscured the truth about how childbearing is changing in the United States.

“What the article essentially got wrong is that this is an *education* story, not an *age* story,” explains Edin, professor of public policy and management at Harvard Kennedy School and a prominent scholar of

the American family. She points out that 94 percent of births to college-educated women today occur within marriage (a rate virtually unchanged from a generation ago), whereas the *real* change has taken place at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. In 1960 it didn’t matter whether you were rich or poor, college-educated or a high-school dropout—almost all American women waited until they were married to have kids. Now 57 percent of women with high-school degrees or less education are unmarried when they bear their first child.

The decoupling of marriage from childbearing among lower-income Americans is arguably the most profound social trend

in American life today and has sparked intense political debate. But as Edin's ethnographic research demonstrates, many of the basic assumptions about why this decoupling is occurring are wrong.

Consider, first, the explanation that conservative political scientist Charles Murray '65 advances in his recent book *Coming Apart*: that poor Americans value marriage less than the middle class does. In the late 1990s, Edin spent two years living in Camden, New Jersey, the nation's poorest city, where she got to know several hundred poor, unmarried mothers and fathers. Her conversations with them—and five years of follow-up interviews—served as the basis for *Promises I Can Keep* (2005), about unmarried low-income mothers, and *Doing the Best I Can* (written with Timothy Nelson, a lecturer in social policy at the Kennedy School), a forthcoming book about unmarried low-income fathers. In both books, Edin argues that the poor place tremendous value on marriage—but often see it as unobtainable.

"The poor all say they want marriages like middle-class people have, marriages that will last," Edin says. "Middle-class people are searching longer for their partners, they're marrying people more like themselves, and as a result marriages have gotten happier and more stable."

The poor may share middle-class attitudes toward marriage, but the fit with their circumstances isn't nearly as good, she argues. Her 2005 paper "Why Don't They Just Get Married?" cites a range of obstacles that prevent the poor from realizing their marital aspirations, including the low quality of many of their existing relationships; norms they hold about the standard of living necessary to support a marriage; the challenges of integrating kids from past relationships into new ones; and an aversion to divorce. People told her that "marriage is a big thing which they respect and don't think they're up to." A mother quoted in that paper said, "I don't believe in divorce. That's why none of the women in my family are married."

But even as low-income Americans view marriage as out of reach, Edin asserts, they continue to see bearing and raising children as the most meaningful activity in their lives. "One theme of *Doing The Best I Can* is that poor men really want to be dads and they really value fatherhood," she says. "Both

women and men at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder see having kids as the ultimate form of fulfillment": given their bleak economic prospects and minimal hope of upward mobility, being a parent is one of the few positive identities available to them. Middle-class women have substantial economic incentives to delay childbearing (a woman who gives birth right after college earns half as much in her lifetime as the classmate who waits until her mid-thirties), but those incentives don't exist for poor women. As Edin writes in *Promises I Can Keep*, "Early childbearing is highly selective of girls whose characteristics—family background, cognitive ability, school performance, mental-health status, and so on—have already diminished their life chances so much that an early birth does little to reduce them further."

pering his baby and learning how to twist her hair. Given the incredible trauma in André's life, the condition of his neighborhood, what the real counterfactuals to having a baby might actually be, is taking a risk on a pregnancy and then embracing the child a mistake? Probably not." Nevertheless, André's genuine excitement about becoming a father doesn't change the long odds his daughter faces. Children born to unmarried parents, Edin points out, are at higher risk of dropping out, getting pregnant as teenagers, struggling to find employment, and going to jail.

As Edin sees it, reestablishing the link between childbearing and marriage in low-income communities requires giving residents reasons to wait to have children—to better align their childbearing and marriage timetables. The only way disadvantaged Americans will delay childbearing, she argues, is if they see other, equally posi-



**This teenager regularly hurries from his job to a local day-care center to spend time with his son in his new role as a father.**

*Doing the Best I Can* includes the story of 15-year-old André, who rejoiced to learn his ex-girlfriend was pregnant. Edin was initially perplexed by a reaction so different from a middle-class teen's—but she began to understand his behavior after a year in his Camden neighborhood. "He was embracing life and rejecting death," she explains. "He could have been out there dealing drugs but instead he's dia-

tive, paths available. "There's either guns or babies, and if people have to make that choice, they're going to choose babies," she says. "As long as we sustain such high rates of inequality, it's going to be really hard to get youth at the bottom to buy into a system that's unavailable to them. If they have nothing to give them meaning in life and then we try to tell them they shouldn't have a child, either, we're asking the impossible of them."

—KEVIN HARTNETT

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