

Fatimah Ahmed

Alice Nicholas

ENG 212002

### Interview with Doctor Peter Fraenkel

**Introduction:** This paper explores the perspectives of Gen Z on dating, mating, and marriage. It delves into the influences of technology, financial stability, mental health, and societal norms on their attitudes towards these topics. The discussion is based on an interview with a seasoned psychologist who has extensive experience working with individuals and couples across different generations.

**Methods:** The interview was conducted in an informal, conversational style, allowing for a free flow of ideas and thoughts. The interviewee was encouraged to share their professional experiences and observations, particularly those related to Gen Z. The conversation touched on various aspects of Gen Z's life, including their views on relationships, the impact of technology on their interpersonal connections, and their attitudes towards marriage and having children.

Dr. Peter Fraenkel, a distinguished psychologist, holds the position of Associate Professor of Psychology in the Clinical Psychology subprogram at The City College of New York. He also leads the Center for Work and Family at the Ackerman Institute for the Family.

With a rich background in psychology, Dr. Fraenkel has made notable contributions, especially in the realm of family and couples therapy. In the context of this interview, he offered valuable insights into the attitudes of Gen Z towards dating, mating, and marriage. He discussed how technology, financial stability, and mental health shape these attitudes and underscored the challenges Gen Z encounters in navigating these life aspects. His observations offer an insightful perspective on the experiences and concerns of Gen Z in these areas. (cited)

### Q&A

**FA:** "So, you've been a licensed psychologist since 1990 and an Associate Professor at CCNY since 1998. You've worked with families and couples for decades. What do you find fulfilling about this role?"

**PF:** "That's a great first question. I believe that I can save lives. Our emotional and physical health heavily depends on the quality of our relationship. Suppose we can help people get along better and prevent couples from engaging in destructive conflict. In that case, we can improve family dynamics and help parents relate better to their kids, and vice versa. We can address various mental health issues through a systemic relational approach. We can save lives, and

prevent suicide, chronic depression, and even the onset of schizophrenia. Research shows that if we can reach young people who are starting to show signs of psychosis, we can help them avert it by teaching their parents to support their at-risk teenagers. In my book, 'Last Chance Couples Therapy', I often refer to my work as open-hearted surgery. I feel like a heart surgeon, opening up communication and helping people treat each other more kindly. My dear mentor and colleague, Kevin Hardy, one of the most prominent family psychologists in the world, and an African-American psychologist, always says that what we do is heal the world in 50-minute segments. I love that. It's true. I've written about this in a 2005 article, which I can email you, and updated it in 2022 on why I became a family psychologist. My undergraduate training was at Boston University, where I double majored in psychology and philosophy. The clinical psychology department at my last university was very psychodynamic at that time. Psychodynamic psychoanalytic work, which started with Freud, has developed in many different ways. One of the key aspects is meeting with one person, hearing about their experience, and helping them develop insight. That's what I learned at my last university. However, I started to feel the limitations of working with a troubled youth without seeing the mother. The rule at the time was to only see the kid and not work with the family. I also had a patient who was schizophrenic and had been hospitalized. Again, the rule was to only see the individual. I was seeing a lot of individuals who had trouble with their marriages or relationships. Again, only seeing the individual didn't make sense.

FA: So, was it more concentrated initially, and then did you expand to cover more areas? What types of changes occurred?

PF: "Well, that's exactly what happened. When I went for my pre-doctoral internship, which is a requirement for a PhD in Clinical Psychology, I was at Bellevue Hospital. It was a great internship. That's where I was formally introduced to family therapy. They had a year-long track in family and couple therapy. Linda Carter was my mentor, and she was a fantastic mentor. I stayed on because I finally felt like I had been exposed to a theoretical perspective that made sense. Instead of just seeing one part of a marriage, I was seeing both partners. Instead of just seeing the child, I was seeing the child with the parents. Yes, that made sense. It was more action-oriented, which answered a lot of theoretical questions. Instead of focusing on just one part of a marriage, I believe in involving both partners. Similarly, when it comes to children, I think it's crucial to include the parents. This approach is more action-oriented and answers many theoretical questions about family systems. That's why I'm so devoted to it. I firmly believe that while individual therapy is beneficial for certain issues, when it comes to relationship problems and matters concerning children and teenagers, family therapy is essential. It might be a combination of individual and family therapy. I completed my pre-doctoral internship at Bellevue and stayed on for a postdoctoral fellowship. I was trained by Salvador Minuchin, one of the pioneers in the field. And here I am today."

FA: "That's truly impressive. Your accomplishments speak volumes about your dedication to your work"

PF: “It’s important to recognize the advantages we have in life, Yes, I’m a white male, and I was raised in a lower-middle-class, then middle-class family. I acknowledge that I’ve had a lot of privilege as a cisgender, heterosexual, and educated individual. I’ve worked hard, but I also recognize the advantages I’ve had. I take this privilege very seriously and understand its implications. I have more privileges than you do so, you know, and are you Muslim? Yeah. So, you know, I have more, I mean, a lot of privileges. My perspective is that if you have privilege, you need to use it for the benefit of people who have less. Being a professor in college allows me to be a white ladder and a white stepping stone for my students of color, my first-generation immigrant students, and those in the GLBTQ+ community who have less privilege than I do. This gives my life meaning. You have to have a mission. That’s my mission. And I have fun with it. I’m not a super righteous, good white man. I’m just using what I’ve got.”

FA: How and why have my thoughts on marriage, dating, and mating changed?

PF: “That’s a broad topic. I recently had a conversation with a graduate student who identifies as a millennial because she was born in '96, which technically makes her Gen Z. When asked what it means to be Gen Z, the first thing she mentioned was their reliance on communicating via text on their phones. This is the issue we’re discussing. One of the problems I see is Gen Z’s dependence on text without sound. Before I became a psychologist, I trained to be a professional musician. I started playing drums at age 10 and attended a prestigious Conservatory of Music in Boston. I understand the importance of music and its impact on us. When we talk, we tend to focus on the content and the words, but there’s also music being played as we talk. You notice it when I slow down, for example. Our brains process this, and research shows that the music of the voice, the rhythm, the pitch, the timbre, and the volume have a significant effect on meaning and connection. I sense that one reason Gen Z folks have a hard time connecting on a deep level is that they’re trying to do it through texting and not through music, through actual voice-to-voice communication. The music, the nonverbal aspects, the sound, and even the gestures are all missing when you’re texting. All this meaning-making is stripped away by technology. It’s all scriptable and very limited. That’s why there’s so much confusion, and why we have to use these emojis, which I dislike for many reasons. First of all, they’re a corporate product. I use them because if you don’t, people feel like I’m not being genuine.”

FA: Do you feel like the use of emojis are ingenuine?

PF: “Emojis can indeed be genuine, but their interpretation largely depends on how they’re used. For instance, you could send a message that might seem upset, but then add a smiley face emoji. This can lead to confusion. Is the person genuinely upset and trying to lighten the mood, or are they just being sarcastic? It can be quite a task to decipher. Interestingly, technology, which is often touted for its efficiency, may not always be the most efficient when it comes to emotional communication. Research shows that some aspects of communication may be more efficient,

while others, like conveying emotions, may not be. For instance, resolving an issue within an organization might be more efficiently done through a meeting rather than through texts. When it comes to relationships, texting or even voice messaging, as my student suggested, might be better. However, what's still missing is the dialogue, the back-and-forth of a conversation. This is more of an interview topic, but if you and I were having a conversation and I was asking you about Ghana, I'd be listening and responding accordingly. That's something that's often missing in our fast-paced, technology-driven communications."

"Meeting people nowadays often happens through websites, dating apps, and social media platforms like Instagram. You're swiping right, swiping left, and potentially meeting thousands of people in one night. This is a stark contrast to the old days. For instance, when I met my first wife, who was from Germany, we were set up. This was back in 1988-89, before the advent of social media and smartphones. Back then, it was more organic. I was studying at NYU, Bellevue, and trying to meet women. You used to rely on your social network and meet someone in your world to date and perhaps fall in love with. Now, you're picking potential partners based on the package they present to you. I've worked with a lot of women who end up meeting guys who seem like Prince Charming. These men engage in 'love bombing', showering their dates with gifts, trips to Paris, and other grand gestures, only to disappear soon after. I believe that this is a challenge. It's difficult to meet people this way, and I think it's better to meet people in your world. As a Muslim woman, I would guess that one of the good things about Muslim culture is that it seems to resist some of these modern dating practices. I really appreciate this aspect of the culture. There are so many wonderful things about Islam. Every time I walk by the first floor and see the young men doing their prayer, I find it wonderful. There's something about Islam that is very grounded. People who don't understand that it's a religion of peace are missing out."

FA: You're correct, and I'd like to add that Islam is resistant to many different ideas and ideologies, particularly when it comes to change. There are individuals who convert to Islam and then encounter certain practices or beliefs. This sometimes leads them to think about reformulating the Quran. However, they often don't realize that these practices and beliefs are intended to remain unchanged. They aren't meant to be altered or adjusted according to personal desires.

PF: "Indeed, I understand that certain principles remain constant, and people relate to them in different ways. For instance, I have many Turkish colleagues who, while not overly religious, still adhere to certain practices. Personally, I approve of the emphasis on modesty in dress, such as women wearing the hijab. I believe that one of the issues with the non-Muslim world, in general, is the over-sexualization of everything. This has a significant impact on relationships.

Speaking candidly, I've observed the effects of pornography, particularly on men and women. It horrifies me when I hear young women express that they felt compelled to perform oral sex to

gain a man's respect. Even girls as young as 12 are engaging in such acts in schools, feeling obligated to do so. It makes me question what has gone wrong.

"The pornography industry is a multi-billion dollar business, and young boys, in particular, are learning how to treat women and understand sex through this industry. I know this because of my clients who are in their 20s. They can be nice guys, but then they run into problems with their girlfriends because they want to perform acts they've seen in pornography. The girlfriend might refuse, and the guy doesn't understand why. For example, one of my clients, a graduate student in his late 20s, wanted to perform a pornographic act. His girlfriend refused, and he didn't understand, saying, 'It's the ultimate act of love.' To be honest, I have to express my genuine reaction. Are you kidding? Doing that to your girlfriend? Is that his expression of love? In what world are we living? That's not love. It's disrespecting her. It's not nice. He said, 'Oh, I never thought of it that way.' This is scary to me. There are multiple media influences and industries that affect young men and women. I'm primarily talking about cisgender heterosexual culture because, in some ways, I think gay, lesbian, and trans communities stand apart from the majority culture, which can be quite messed up. I know I've been talking a lot, but that's what you wanted. I'm open to answering your questions. You're actually prompting me to answer some of the questions that I haven't even asked, which is interesting. We've discussed some readings related to dating, meeting, and marriage."

FA : Are there any new studies or findings that you're currently working on?

PF: "Well, I'm currently working on a variety of projects. For instance, I recently published a new book titled 'Last Chance Couples Therapy: Bringing Relationships Back from the Brink.' It was released by Norton in January and has been receiving considerable attention. It's even been translated and has inspired related articles.

Did you know that 47% of couples who seek therapy do so because at least one partner is questioning whether to continue the relationship? However, many of the techniques used in couples therapy are not adequate for working with these 'last chance' couples. I won't delve into a full lecture on this right now, but over my 30 years of specializing in this area, I've developed specific methods for setting up the therapeutic contract and more.

This is one area of clinical research that I've been deeply involved with. I'm not conducting hardcore, randomized clinical trials at the moment, but it's important to note that my work extends beyond that. Now, let's circle back to the topic of dating."

"Indeed, many researchers echo my sentiments about the negative impact of technology and the shift towards text-only communication. While I can't cite a specific study at the moment, I can mention the work of Sherry Turkle, a psychology professor at MIT. She has written influential books on the impact of technology, such as 'Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other.' Her findings are particularly relevant to this generation.

Turkle also wrote 'Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.' In an era where our methods of communication and connection are changing, often not for the better, Turkle offers a voice of caution and reason to help us understand what's happening. Her work is especially pertinent given how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected our relationships.

As for the divorce rate among Gen Z couples, it's been between 40 and 50% for decades. However, it's actually decreased recently, with the millennials' divorce rate dropping by 30% over the last few years. So, while the divorce rate may not be as high as it once was, this could also be due to a decrease in the marriage rate. In fact, only 7% of Gen Z and single millennials are likely to get married.

Another interesting finding is that more than half (59%) of Gen Z are open to polyamorous relationships. Personally, I don't have an ethical, philosophical, or religious issue with polyamory. I'm Jewish, but not religious, and I'm socially and politically liberal. If you want to try polyamory, I say go for it. However, I believe it's challenging.

Psychologists often discuss a concept called 'attachment.' It starts when we're infants, attaching to our parents, which is a fundamental part of being a human. In adult attachment, we form deep connections with our loved ones or partners. The problem arises when we're deeply attached to one person, and then we try to form a relationship with someone else. We may become attached to that person, and then the first person we're attached to tells us not to get attached. That's usually what people say, like, 'Don't fall in love.' But we do fall in love."

FA: I just wanted to affirm your point because you're absolutely right.

PF: "Yea , Love can indeed be an unexpected and powerful emotion. Sometimes, people don't necessarily feel that they love each other; it's merely a physical attraction or a friendship. However, there are instances when people fall in love unintentionally. I believe that people often underestimate the power of their brains. For instance, have you ever taken a neuropsychology course?"

FA: Yes is am and the professors name is Doctor Patricia Broderick

PF: "Yes, Patricia Broderick is indeed a notable figure in the field of neuroscience. When you delve into this subject, you begin to understand that the part of our brain that contemplates and discusses concepts like polyamory is a thin section of the cortex known as the prefrontal cortex. This is where we do our reasoning and thinking. However, a significant portion of our brain is dedicated to primitive emotions, such as those governed by the limbic system. These parts will react, even when we consciously decide to explore ideas like polyamory. In essence, different parts of our brain are in competition.

Freud was one of the first to discuss this, particularly in relation to our sexual and aggressive drives. He spoke of the superego, which represents our ethics and is associated with the higher cortical functions. Then there's the ego, also cortical, which tries to negotiate between our desires and our ethics. This is still a relevant issue today.

You might argue that your ethics are open, and question why we should be limited to one person. That's a valid point. However, based on my experience with clients so far, I would say that it's often a challenge. This might be due to the fact that I usually see people who are struggling. It's another challenge for Gen Z, as we see more of them exploring open or polyamorous relationships."

FA: You also wrote about how technology, as a means of communication, affects our understanding of sex in your book 'In Deeper in the Bedroom.' Yes, you've already discussed this. Yes, indeed, you did.

PF: "I would say that I know a bit more than most. In fact, I wrote the first article on the impact of technology on couples before even Sherry Turkle did. It was called 'The Beeper in the Bedroom.' This was before mobile phones were prevalent. I noticed people going to restaurants and sitting there, staring at their phones instead of talking. The same thing happens in the bedroom. People might be lying there, looking at their phones, which interrupts the opportunity for intimacy. The moment they finish having sex, someone picks up their phone, and the other person is left wondering, 'What are you doing? Can't we just relax?'

Then there's the impact of pornography. I can't tell you the number of couples that come to see me where one partner is upset because the other one is watching porn. They question, 'Don't you find me attractive? Why are you looking at that?' They're upset with the type of content that their partner is watching. They say, 'I didn't know you were into that stuff.' So, all these technological influences affect what goes on in the bedroom. Another way technology affects relationships is through the pressures of time. We live in an era where time is always booked, and couples have different rhythms and paces. The pace of life has generally increased. We want to get things done quicker. We're always under pressure, and we're distracted by a million things. We live in an age of distractions, and technology is a part of that. There's too much to pay attention to and too many choices to make. So, people often feel like they don't have time for sex. They've got so many things to do, and they're so distracted by the stuff they see on the internet. So, when I work with couples on sex issues, I always say, 'Put the phones away, especially at dinner or whenever you're trying to have an intimate talk. Just be there in the moment, body to body, not with your phones.' And then, one more question. Yes?"

FA : So, this is regarding Gen Z. Nowadays, they seem to feel that having children is not a priority. Where do you see this trend heading? What do you think influenced this shift in their mindset?

PF: "I believe that people, especially since the 70s, have become increasingly self-involved. This was a time when several books, such as 'The Culture of Narcissism' by Christopher Lasch, began to highlight this issue. The problem seems to have escalated since then. People are more interested in what they can gain from a relationship. I often write about how people form relationships based on a 'you plus me equals us' template. However, they don't understand that over time, they need to develop a sense of shared connection that affects both individuals. It doesn't eliminate individuality, but it does influence the decisions you make. For instance, if you only think about yourself, you're less likely to want to have a child because having a child means changing your life and going out less. It's a significant life change and one of the major transitions in family therapy lifecycle.

FA : In class, my group and I discussed why Gen Z, in particular, doesn't want to have kids. We came up with several reasons, and I feel that financial instability is a major factor. A lot of Gen Z individuals prioritize financial stability, and they don't want to have kids until they achieve it.

PF; "Indeed, having children isn't as expensive as some people believe. It's a myth that you need to have a lot of money to raise a child. What's crucial is being careful with your finances. For instance, you can opt for public schools if private education is too costly. If money is tight, thrift shops are a great place to find affordable items. You can also exchange clothes with friends. We did that and formed a small network for sharing clothes. So, raising a child doesn't have to be exorbitantly expensive.

Another concern I've noticed is that many people are worried about the state of our planet. They're concerned about global warming and the disruptive climate events we're witnessing. I'm deeply involved with this issue and have explored the impact of global warming and increasing biodiversity disruption on families and couples.

Yes, I have written a book on the subject of climate change. I've also written an article that discusses how to cope during a pandemic. I can send that to you if you're interested. Currently, I'm working with a student, McCauley, who is pursuing her BA and MA. She's doing her honors thesis with me, conducting a study on college students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors around climate change. I'm looking forward to gaining some valuable data from this study."

FA: Regarding Gen Z, some of them don't want to have children due to their mental state. They might feel that they're not ready, or they want to prioritize their mental health and wellbeing before deciding to have children.

PF: "Indeed, I believe that people across generations have often felt the same way. However, you're correct that Gen Z, in particular, seems to be facing a lot of stressors. While I don't have specific data, my impression is that financial concerns are a significant factor. Many Gen Z individuals are going to college and accumulating student loans. They're looking at the economic situation and wondering if they'll be able to secure a job. These financial worries are legitimate.



They're also concerned about the environment and whether they'll have the resources to provide a safe environment for their children.

Before having kids, many people, from Baby Boomers to Millennials to Gen X, often wonder, 'Am I ready? Do I have enough money? Am I emotionally ready?' There's been an increased focus on wellness, which is generally a good thing. However, it can have a downside. It can lead to an overemphasis on personal happiness. The standard for personal happiness, I believe, is set too high.

I'm currently writing a book that challenges many of the ideas that psychology, and broader cultural narratives, have promoted. The first one I'm addressing is the concept of happiness. There are many books and podcasts on how to be happy. But the truth is, life isn't always happy. I think your generation, in general, tends to believe that they should always be happy, whether it's at work or school. As a generation, they're a bit like snowflakes, easily upset by the smallest things and quick to label them as traumas. I deal with real trauma, such as sexual abuse. I've written a book about family-based treatment and have worked with victims of political violence and homelessness. These are real traumas. To say that having a bad day at school, or whatever, is a trauma, is not accurate.

In other words, if your standard is 'I always have to be happy,' you're going to be unhappy a lot because you won't meet that standard. Then you'll feel like something's wrong with you because you're not happy. So the standard itself creates unhappiness. Instead, I think what we need to aspire to is having a meaningful life. That includes sadness, upset, happiness, joy, and love. It's all meaningful. I think we have to wrap up, but I hope that gives you enough to ponder."

Discussion :The interview revealed that Gen Z's approach to dating, mating, and marriage is significantly influenced by various factors. Technology, for instance, has reshaped how they form and maintain relationships. However, it has also introduced challenges, such as the overemphasis on personal happiness and the pressure to always be connected.

Financial stability is another major concern for Gen Z. Many are delaying marriage and parenthood until they feel financially secure. Mental health is also a priority, with many Gen Z individuals choosing to focus on their mental wellbeing before considering starting a family.

Interestingly, the interviewee noted a shift in societal norms and expectations. The traditional trajectory of dating, marriage, and then children is no longer seen as the only path. More Gen Z individuals are open to non-traditional relationship structures, such as polyamorous relationships.

However, the interviewee cautioned that these trends might present new challenges. For instance, the emphasis on personal happiness could lead to unrealistic expectations, and the acceptance of non-traditional relationships could complicate emotional attachments.

In conclusion, Gen Z's perspectives on dating, mating, and marriage are complex and multifaceted, shaped by technological, economic, and societal shifts. As they navigate these challenges, it's crucial for psychologists, educators, and society at large to understand and support them.

1. **Influence of Technology:** Gen Z's approach to dating has been significantly shaped by technology. Dating apps and social media platforms have become the primary means of meeting potential partners. However, this shift has also introduced challenges, such as the overemphasis on personal happiness and the pressure to always be connected.
2. **Financial Stability:** Many Gen Z individuals are delaying marriage and parenthood until they feel financially secure. The burden of student loans and concerns about job security are major factors influencing this decision.
3. **Mental Health:** Mental health and wellbeing are a priority for Gen Z. Many individuals are choosing to focus on their mental health before considering starting a family.
4. **Non-traditional Relationship Structures:** More Gen Z individuals are open to non-traditional relationship structures, such as polyamorous relationships. However, these trends might present new challenges, such as complicated emotional attachments.
5. **Environmental Concerns:** Many Gen Z individuals are concerned about the state of the planet, including global warming and disruptive climate events. These concerns influence their decisions about marriage and parenthood.
6. **Changing Societal Norms:** The traditional trajectory of dating, marriage, and then children is no longer seen as the only path. Gen Z is redefining these norms based on their unique experiences and perspectives.