

SOCIOLOGIST STUDIES FAMILY LIFE IDEALS THAT HAVE SURFACED IN EGYPT

Modern family life is not an exclusively American ideal. The extent to which this ideal has been exported, and the effect of exposure to this ideal on middle-class families in Egypt, is being studied by one of the new faculty members at MARIAL.

Kathryn Yount, a professor of sociology and global health at Emory University, is working with colleagues at the University of Michigan and the American University in Cairo. The goal of the collaboration is to compare aspects of family life in the United States with what is going on in families in Egypt, China, and Argentina. Yount, who has lived and worked in Egypt, will focus on that country. She travels to Egypt two to three times a year to continue her research.

Yount and her colleagues will look at specific ideals about family life that have been dominant in global discussions. These ideals include gender relations, generational relations, age at marriage and choice of marriage partner, the way in which decisions are made about work, and the way that time is allocated in families.

“This research is informed by a broader framework known as developmental idealism,” a formulation of Arland Thornton, a sociologist at the University of Michigan who is working with Yount. Thornton also is director of the Population Studies Center, which is part of the university’s Institute for Social Research.

There are four components to developmental idealism: modern society is a good thing; modern families are good things (and both are attainable); modern families breed modern societies, and vice versa; and individuals are free and equal, with relationships based on consent.

Thornton argues that these ideals have been around for several hundred years and have been disseminated globally through international organizations such as the United Nations, which emphasizes human rights and coordinates family planning programs that support small families worldwide. Migration, education, mass media, mass transit, and organized social movements such as the women’s rights movement also have roles in the export of these ideals. “There are a whole range of mechanisms by which these ideals have been disseminated,” Yount said. “The argument is that people in fairly remote settings such as rural Nepal, Argentina, and Egypt have been exposed to these ideas. We want to learn the extent to which people believe in them and buy into them. We also want to see how the behavior of the family is influenced by these ideas.”

Yount and her colleagues plan to gather data through community-based interviews done by ethnographers and survey researchers who live and work in each country. They hope to talk with men and women in three age groups (ranging from fifteen to fifty-four), and they would like to see whether opinions vary according to a person’s occupation. “We will try to determine if women doing piece-work at

home have opinions that differ from women who work in the service sector, for instance,” Yount said.

“The idea is to conduct a fair amount of comparative work,” said Yount, who teaches population dynamics and a course on gender, health, and development in the departments of global health and sociology. “Part of what I’m interested in understanding is whether or not, and the extent to which, ordinary people in communities in Egypt know about ideals of the modern family and the extent to which they embrace these ideals.”

Yount said she enjoys studying stereotypes about women who live in the Middle East. Common ones include assumptions that they are “secluded, powerless, that they do not participate in activities of public consequence,” she said. “In fact, there have been a number of terrific ethnographic studies showing that women are indeed



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organized, that they do indeed contribute substantially, and economically, to the household and to the extended family. The challenge is that their contributions are not always made in ways that are easily documented.”

Yount’s MARIAL research is relevant to people in the United States because if American ideals about family life are being widely shared around the world, they may affect decisions about work and family life among immigrants who move to America. “We could do a better job of understanding how immigrant communities might react to some of these ideals,” she said.

Joining MARIAL has offered Yount, in her words, “a terrific opportunity” to see that family life is not bound by borders. “One of the many wonderful characteristics about the MARIAL group is that, even though the research is really diverse in its focus and scope, the central focus on myths and rituals in working-family life is a coherent theme,” Yount said. “Many of the questions that people are asking in their own research are questions that I care about in mine. It will be interesting to see how my own research evolves as I continue to share ideas and research findings with the group.”