

THE DIRECTOR'S VIEW

OUR EXPANDED HORIZONS

When the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation began to fund the Centers on Working Families almost a decade ago, the goal was to focus attention on a relatively poorly understood population, the so-called American mainstream. Our research target was the middle-class working family. Although the latter might be the mainstream as far as the media are concerned, for some of us social scientists, the American middle-class family is something of an exotic species. Particularly for anthropologists, studying the American middle-class was just about the last thing that most anthropologists imagined when they thought about fieldwork.

Sloan was gambling that we would find swimming in the mainstream exhilarating and that we had more to learn about ourselves than we once might have thought. Five years after setting up shop at Emory, we have come to appreciate Sloan's prescience. We have begun to learn a lot about how middle-class Americans use myth and ritual in making family cultures over the lifespan of the family. And some of what we have learned is surprising and far from obvious. We had a lot to learn about ourselves.

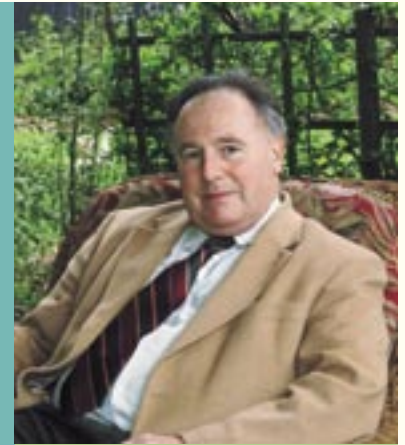
Still, anthropologists are compulsive comparativists. It was probably inevitable that a center run by an anthropologist eventually would begin to look out beyond its own borders for comparative perspectives on contemporary middle-class family life. Our sister center at UCLA (directed by anthropologist Elinor Ochs) has initiated several comparative projects in Europe on the everyday lives of middle-class families in Sweden and Italy.

Here at MARIAL, we had funded a few early projects involving transnational families. This year, however, we have taken a major step in complementing MARIAL's local research with comparative research that has a more international focus. This issue of the newsletter highlights this new research outlook. Two of our new core faculty were recruited to help us internationalize our perspective on American middle-class family life.

Kathryn Yount, a sociologist who divides her time between the Rollins School of Public Health and Emory's sociology department, has been studying the global spread of the American family model to societies whose traditional family systems are quite different from ours. Originally her work focused on the influence of the ideal of the "modern family" on middle-class Egyptian families. Her MARIAL project (in conjunction with fellow sociologist Arland Thornton from the University of Michigan) will expand this research to compare the effects of "family modernization" in a number of different countries. Yount is particularly interested in changing gender roles, attitudes toward work, and authority relations in the household.

Carla Freeman comes to MARIAL via the anthropology department and the program in women's studies. Her research interests have focused on women in the workplace in Barbados, particularly those in jobs with transnational companies. Her MARIAL project is a study of the meaning of *middle class* in Barbados, with an emphasis on notions of respectability. Rather than simply

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assuming that we know middle-class values when we see them, Freeman believes that there will be both global and local meanings to middle-class status and that notions of middle-class status have distinctive historical and cultural significance in the Caribbean.

Donna Mote joined MARIAL in the fall as a first-year graduate student in the Institute of Liberal Arts. A native of Georgia, she recently returned from Japan, where she taught English to high school and university students for many years. Struck by both significant similarities and differences between the camp meeting reunion tradition in which she grew up and the Japanese annual celebration of Obon—in which living and dead family members return home—she has proposed a comparative study of these two reunions, which combine spiritual renewal and family togetherness. Her comparative project will extend dramatically the reach of my own research on the camp meeting tradition as we try to understand family-reunion traditions in middle-class families outside the United States.

We are committed to expanding our vision of working family life beyond the United States because it

is inherently interesting to see how middle-class families around the world cope with the work-life balance. In addition, such comparative research helps us to contextualize our American data. To understand American middle-class working families implies understanding how much of what we are observing is essentially a worldwide middle-class phenomenon, how much is explained by the distinctively American family system, and how much is due to the demands of the modern workplace. The only way to sort out these multiple factors in our work is to target comparative research to get a sense of the themes and variations.

What we expect to find is that globalization and local differences are both significant factors in shaping how families respond to the changing work-life balance. Still, we don't know just how variable middle-class family life is. The international projects supported by various Sloan centers should help us sort out the global from the local factors influencing contemporary, middle-class family life. We're very excited about our expanded horizons.

Bradd Shore