

THE FELLOWS' FORUM

## GLOBALIZING THE MODERN FAMILY IDEAL

**Families in the U.S. have undergone dramatic change. In the past three decades, the average size of households declined among whites and African Americans and increased among Hispanic Americans. The percentage of households headed by married couples declined from 78 percent to 53 percent in the period from 1950 to 1998 and declined from 93 percent to 73 percent among families with children. Among married working couples with children, the share of dual-earning couples rose from 59 percent to 68 percent in the period from 1986 to 1998, while the share of families with only a working husband declined and the share of at-home dads increased.**

Notable changes in family life around the world include rising ages at marriage, increasing autonomy in the selection of a spouse, smaller completed family sizes, declining rates of intergenerational coresidence, and increasing education and labor-force participation among women. Various groups have interpreted these changes as evidence of “progress” and “decline” in the quality of family life.

Questions about the root causes of changing family life around the world have preoccupied prominent family scholars of our time. One theory holds that certain ideals about modern family life have dominated the historical record and have been pervasive and powerful forces of family change. Sociologist Arland Thornton argues that “developmental ideals” have influenced deeply the views and behaviors of people around the world. The four propositions of developmental idealism are that: (1) modern society is good and attainable; (2) the modern family is good and attainable; (3) the modern family is a cause and an effect of modern society; and (4) individuals are free and equal, and social relationships are based on consent.

Modern societies have been called developed because they are characterized by high levels of industrialization, urbanization, education, wealth, and gender equality in public life. Modern families have been called non-traditional because they are characterized by individualism, nuclear living arrangements,

consensual marriage preceded by courtship, youthful autonomy, and a high valuation of women.

Thornton has argued that these beliefs have been disseminated in European colonialism; in schools in non-Western societies; in the training of non-Westerners at institutions in Northwestern Europe and its diasporas; in channels of communication, transportation, and mass media; in national, international, and nongovernmental family-planning programs; in revolutionary social movements and the international women’s movement(s). The endorsement of developmental idealism by key actors (such as the United Nations) has motivated the founding of other mediums through which these ideals have been communicated.

Education also has been a mechanism by which individuals—especially women—have encountered and accepted modern family ideals. Western education has been associated



Kathryn M. Yount

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with the fact that teenage males in Nigeria seem to favor gender equality. Women’s secular education has been associated with their approval of activities signaling women’s autonomy in Bangladesh, Egypt, and Taiwan; with having higher professional aspirations for sons and daughters in Mexico; and with favoring gender equality in public and private life in the U.S. and Sweden. Parental education has been associated with the preference that adolescents select their own spouse in urban China and Shiraz City, Iran. Occupation, exposure to the media, and access to family-planning programs also have been associated with the acceptance of modern family ideals.

Working for cash in Egypt has been linked with women’s approval of having a say in decisions related to children, and watching television has been associated with women’s approval of influencing other family-related matters.

Thornton has argued that a person’s acceptance or rejection of developmental ideals can influence an array of human behaviors, including choices about work and family life. Among urban and semiurban male residents in Nigeria, for example, those believing that men should be dominant in family decisions had an average of 0.26 more children than those believing that women should be dominant in such decisions. In Kentucky, “traditional-modern” value orientations also have mediated the relationship between a husband’s occupation and education and the proportion of planned pregnancies. Across varied contexts, parental values about sons versus daughters have influenced parental investments in them, and these invest-

ments have been associated with various indicators of child well-being. In Kenya, maternal perceptions that the labor market favors men have been negatively associated with levels of schooling enrollment for girls.

The record suggests that remote corners of the world are connected through an array of institutions and mediums of communication. If abilities to transmit normative models of family

life remain unequal, selected models may continue to dominate global discourses about the family. A question of consequence is whether acceptance of dominant ideals about modern family life influences family change around the world. And finally, understanding how ordinary people reconcile “local” and “foreign” ideals about family may expose the logic behind profound changes and continuities in family life around the world.

**Kathryn M. Yount**  
**Professor of sociology and global health**  
**MARIAL core faculty member**