

families that work

Newsletter of the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life

Our understanding of the world is shaped by the great variety of myths that surround us.



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5 Postdoc examines autonomy and commitment in young adults

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Through the telling and sharing of family history stories, children develop a sense of self as connected to previous generations.

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3 Linguist studies private family language

Myth

4 The director's view: The many meanings of myth



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7 Time-use expert explains his research

8 Sloan conference looks at work/life balance worldwide

MARIAL CENTER HOSTS CONFERENCE ON MYTHS OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

One of the more enduring myths of the American family is that it is falling apart. Newspaper and magazine articles have for more than a hundred years decried the decline of the American family and documented societal changes that have placed family life on the verge of extinction.

Many other family myths abound: homes with both parents are better for children, especially when dad is the breadwinner and mom is the homemaker; too much television is bad for kids; honesty and hard work are the keys to prosperity and happiness.

The historical and cultural origins of some prominent American family myths were explored during a recent conference hosted by the MARIAL Center. The two-day meeting brought together distinguished family scholars from such disciplines as psychology, anthropology, history, sociology, business, theology, and communication.

They discussed the origins of these myths in the media, history, popular culture, and religious institutions. They also sought to debunk some of the more prevalent ideas that distort the truth. "There is no such thing as a 'traditional' family" that was close knit

and harmonious, said historian Steven Mintz from the University of Houston. "Families have always been diverse and far from being stable in form and function." He added that while "our actual families" are sometimes dysfunctional, the mythic ones are "strong, intense, stable, harmonious, and self-reliant."

Mintz and other speakers referred to historian John Gillis, who drew a distinction between the family we live with and the family we live by. The latter reflects our longings, expectations, and fantasies of how the ideal family looks and behaves. MARIAL Center Director Bradd Shore said that myths are "a peculiar combination of fact and fiction." (See Director's View on p. 4.)

This mix complicates efforts to analyze their power and influence.

The "self-reliant family" is a myth, according to noted author Stephanie Coontz, who said that families always



Bradd Shore and Stephanie Coontz

have relied on others for help. In the 1950s, she said, families were the recipients of "an incredible, generous array of government and social programs."