

Continued from cover

Other myths are “the self-made man” and the “opt-out mom,” said Coontz, who has written five books on family history, including the award-winning bestseller *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Both myths, according to Coontz, contain a kernel of truth but then get “puffed beyond recognition into a comforting lie.”

“The myth of the self-made man ignores the hidden labor that was done by his wife,” she said. “And like most myths, the myth of the opt-out mom is leading to widespread anxiety—legitimate anxiety—about the tension between autonomy and dependency” and who will meet the obligations to sustain a household.

It is true that “mothers of young children are less likely to be continuously employed than fathers. They are more likely to take time off or quit a job for a few years to spend time at home with young children,” Coontz said. Yet despite a little dip in the 1990s, she said, highly educated mothers are more likely to be in the workforce than any other group, and the real story is that the other groups are catching up.



The reality is that today’s families “are being asked to rely on their own resources more than in the past, while the tasks they are expected to perform have grown more ambitious,” she said. In the past two decades, parents are spending more hours at work outside the home. At the

same time, “the erosion of the social safety net makes families more responsible than they were thirty years ago for buying medical insurance, for caring for ill and disabled people who once would have been in hospitals, and for financing their children’s education by taking loans rather than grants.”

The good news is that things are not as bad as they sometimes appear in the media. And many speakers expressed a sense of optimism about the ability of most families to find balance between the forces that pull them apart and those that bring them back together. “We are always destined to exist in that space between the myth of the family falling apart and the myth of the family as a cohesive unit,” said Marshall Duke, psychology professor and core faculty member of MARIAL. “There is no resolution. Many families are moving in a direction of being scattered to a point, and when they feel that loss of one another, something happens and they begin to move back.” ■

Common myths about the American family

- The traditional family: breadwinner dad, homemaker mom
- The nuclear family: dad, mom, kids close knit and in harmony
- Self-reliant family
- Self-made man
- Golden age of family life
- Decline of the family
- Moms can have it all
- Stay-at-home moms
- Opt-out moms
- The family is a harbor of comfort and peace
- Honesty and hard work lead to prosperity