

POSTDOC STUDIES YOUNG ADULTS' WORK-FAMILY BALANCE PLANS

Young adults think about how they are going to balance work and family obligations years before they find themselves having to do it. A MARIAL postdoctoral fellow is studying how they make decisions about work and family, and the inherent tension between personal development and commitment to family.

Stephanie Byrd, a sociologist, began studying the trajectory of contemporary relationships as a graduate student at New York University. She became interested in the topic after reading academic literature about how modern forces and cultural changes are transforming the family.

“In popular, scholarly, and political debates regarding family change, a recurring theme is the tension between individualism and commitment,” Byrd said. Some people argue that individual selfishness is endangering the family, and they point to high divorce rates, among other

study where people could use their own words to describe how they make their choices,” said Byrd. During a three-year period that began in 2000, she interviewed seventy-five men and women in the New York area between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-five. Half were raised in middle-class homes; half came from working-class households. They were in various stages of relationships, from single to married to divorced. One-quarter of them had children.

She conducted semistructured, life-history interviews with each respondent and then created a timeline that included details about their childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood; their parents' relationship and whether their parents were still married; their educational experiences; friendships and romantic (both casual and more serious) relationships over time; and significant events that had occurred in their lives.

“By acknowledging that individuals' private lives exist in the context of larger institutional, cultural, and personal contexts, I analyzed individual accounts in a much more nuanced manner than is typically available,” Byrd said. “Unlike previous studies, I investigated a wide range of approaches and placed the accounts of men and women as well as the single and married

[people] in a comparative framework.” The average interview took three hours, although individual ones ranged from ninety minutes to six hours.

“I was interested in the patterns that came out in the choices they made,” said Byrd. “So I asked about their current situation, then I went back and asked similar questions about each period of their life. For example, I asked general questions about childhood, then high school, particularly focusing on their relationship ideals, expectations, and

practices. Whether they dated (or wanted to date) and what were they looking to get out of relationships at that time, etc.” If they went to college, she asked about relationships during that time and how they made decisions then. Byrd also asked each person how work fit into their lives. “When people make decisions about relationships, it cannot be divorced from decisions about work, and the two often go hand in hand,” she said.

Her respondents included men and women planning dual-career families who were delaying parenthood until they were established in their work. She also talked to women with children who were preparing to re-enter the workforce after a period of having stayed home to raise children.

Byrd included questions regarding each person's goals and expectations, and this data will be the focus of her MARIAL work. The title of her MARIAL research project is “Reconciling Ideologies of Autonomy and Commitment: How Young Adults Negotiate Work and Families.”

She is particularly interested in how parenthood alters the best-laid plans, especially for women. Many respondents in her study were beginning to face difficult choices about parenthood. “While at MARIAL, I want to focus on how notions of choice, self-development, and self-determination interact with ideals of intimacy, companionship, and family welfare for individuals with dual-earner as well as more traditional family ideals. What tensions, if any, are created by the persistence of competing self-, work-, and family ideologies and what strategies—ideological and practical—help close the gap between an ideal and actual work-family situation. In the future, I want to do a more focused study on how autonomy is managed by young adults with children. I expect that individuals in dual-earner families most acutely experience the tensions and contradictions associated with reconciling autonomy and commitment.” For Byrd, the concepts of myth and ritual “provide an innovative framework with which to explore these issues.” ■



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things, as evidence. Others say traditional gender and family ideologies promote marital dependence and negatively affect women.

“But it's more complicated than either side really presents it,” Byrd continued.

“My primary research interest is how are ideals of autonomy reconciled with ideals of commitment?” Byrd decided to ask her own questions. She wanted to know what today's young adults think about marriage and family, and how they make decisions about their future. “I wanted to have an open-ended