

MAKING MARRIAGE WORK: POSTDOC DISCOVERS THE HARD WORK OF A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE

First comes love, then comes marriage—and then, apparently, a lot of work for a couple to stay together. So says Kristin Celello, the newest postdoctoral fellow at MARIAL, who is completing her manuscript, “Making Marriage Work: Marital Success and Failure in the Twentieth-Century United States,” for publication. It is under contract with the University of North Carolina Press. Celello, who has a PhD in history from the University of Virginia, says her research focuses on “how and why Americans—particularly wives—came to think of marriage as something you had to work at to succeed.”

Her book explores marriage and divorce from 1920 through the 1990s. She argues that concerns about the growing divorce rate and a persistent fear of a breakdown of the family have haunted Americans throughout the twentieth century. “I demonstrate how family-life experts—most notably through the professionalization and the popularization of marriage counseling—continuously redefined the character of marital work and the meaning of marital success,” she said.

Marriage counselors first emerged in the 1930s and became increasingly popular in the 1950s, she said. Licensing requirements were lax at that point, she noted, and many professionals—including doctors, lawyers, and social workers—fit the bill. Until the late 1960s, marriage counseling was an individual commitment, primarily on the part of wives. Couples did not go together until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By the 1950s, a successful marriage was one that did not end in divorce. The result, Celello says, is that “a lot of women stayed in physically abusive relationships, relationships with alcohol problems, relationships in which there was chronic infidelity because they felt that it was their responsibility to keep the marriage together at all costs.”

As marital problems became more openly expressed, advice columns in newspapers and magazines suggested ways that women could fix them. One of the most-popular advice columns is also the oldest: *Ladies Home Journal* started “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” in 1953. It is still published today. “I’ve read every one of them,” said Celello, noting that every marriage was saved during the first five years of the column. A constant theme from the early days to today is that you had to work hard to have a successful marriage. In the course of time, the column reflected the idea that men and women had to work together to resolve issues.

Cecllo analyzed articles from a variety of magazines, including *Redbook*, *McCall’s*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Parents*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *The Nation*, *National Review*, *Ebony*, and *Essence*. The primary newspapers she studied were the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Her archival research centered on the papers of marriage counselors such as Paul Popenoe (father of “Can This Marriage Be Saved?”) and Emily Hartshorne Mudd. Celello examined family sociology and popular advice books and journals on marriage and divorce, and she watched such movies as *The Divorcee* (1930), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), and *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

Cecllo documents how the language about divorce changed through the decades. The nineteenth-century debate about whether divorce should be legal was over by the twentieth century, when it was “a fact of middle-class life,” she said. As time passed, the moral indignation about divorce also disappeared. Divorced people, who were once viewed as morally wrong or sinful, were eventually regarded as psychologically damaged. By the 1970s, divorce was seen by some as a learning or growth experience.

The United States has one of the world’s higher divorce rates, which has led to persistent fears about what this means for family life and society as a whole. In the 1920s, one in seven marriages ended in divorce. In the 1950s, it was one in four. Today, it is one in two, although that statistic includes people who have been divorced twice, Celello said.

Through it all, the idea that people have to work hard to have a happy marriage has been ingrained into the minds and lives of Americans through newspapers, magazines, books, films, and TV. “If you go to Amazon.com and search for the phrase ‘making marriage work,’ you will find hundreds of books with that in the title,” she said. *Making Marriage Work for Dummies* is one. Celello has been intrigued by how hard people will work to save their marriages. “They are more willing today to end them if they don’t work, certainly. But the more the divorce rates goes up, the more strategies people try to find to stay together.” She is hopeful that her research will help people understand and question the everyday maxims of marriage. “What does it mean to say ‘I’m working on my marriage’? There are also implications for ‘who’ is doing the work.” ■



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