

## IS RACE A FACTOR WHEN MOTHERS DECIDE WHETHER TO WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME?

The decision to stay home and take care of children or work outside the home and let others be the primary caregivers is guided by many factors, including finances, career ambitions, and child-care options available at the time.

MARIAL graduate fellow Riché Daniel Barnes is exploring another possible factor: race. She hopes to discover in her research how African American mothers make the choice and whether they reach it differently from their white counterparts.

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“There are very, very few black women after the slavery period who were able to work at home and keep their kids at home,” said Barnes. “And into the present day, there’s just been a general notion that in order for the black community to move forward, progress, capitalize on increasing opportunities in terms of moving into the middle class, both the men and the women in the household have had to work.”

Because they worked, black women relied on strong family and community support, and even a “fictive kin network” to care for their children. “There were relatives and people just down the street whose kids were all grown who kept bunches of kids,” said Barnes, adding that some women were addressed as “aunt” even though there was no relation. “They would become part of your family, even though they were not family, and would take care of the neighborhood kids.”

Barnes, however, noticed a change was occurring shortly after she had her first child three years ago. “There’s a sizeable number of black women who are choosing to stay home,” she said, adding that she met many of them in a mothers’ support group she had joined.

Talking with them piqued her curiosity. “I want to know what’s changed. What economic factors have changed that have made this a possibility and a reality? What community support has changed that has made it a necessity?”

She will explore those questions in her study of black and white middle-class mothers in metro Atlanta. Her research project is titled “Black Women Have Always Worked: How Race and Class Affect Child-Rearing Strategies of Middle-Class Professional Women.” She plans to interview black and white women in metro Atlanta and try to compare how each group decides whether to stay home with their children or work outside the home.

“I think that decisions are framed by opportunities. So depending on what you have access to, or what opportunities you have, your decision making will take place inside that framework,” she said. “I will focus on how race and class have limited or increased women’s opportunities.”

Mothers stay home for a variety of reasons. Some told Barnes they couldn’t find child care they felt good about, and they did not have relatives or friends who could help watch the children, so they left professional careers—as lawyers and accountants, for example. Others said their companies were downsizing, and they decided to accept a severance package because they were pregnant.

Barnes, who gave birth to twin sons a year ago, said being a mother has helped in her research because she is constantly dealing with the same issues that her informants deal with. “I have a point of connection immediately,” said Barnes, whose husband is a high school math teacher in Atlanta. “It’s a constant struggle” to juggle her graduate work and family life.

She earned a BA in political science from Spelman College and an MA in urban studies from Georgia State University. She is working on a doctorate in anthropology at Emory and has decided to focus on black middle-class women because it is a relatively untapped area. By comparison, there is a dearth of literature on poor blacks and single-parent households, she said.

“My research always has been related to black women’s experience,” said Barnes, adding that before she had children, she focused on choices made by black girls. In time, she became intrigued with parental influences on black girls, so after her daughter was born, she decided to turn her attention to choices made by black mothers. “There have been very, very few studies on how black women have tried to maneuver through this whole work and family balance,” she said. She hopes that her research will add some insight into how blacks and whites approach similar issues, especially when it comes to work and family obligations.