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Conversations with the Experts

Marial: The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life



Bradd Shore

Bio: Bradd Shore is director of the Emory University's Center on Myth and Ritual in American Life ("MARIAL"). Marial is one of five Sloan enters on Working Families, supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Program on Dual-Career Working Middle Class Families. The Emory Center focuses its research on the functions and significance of ritual and myth in dual-wage earner middle-class families in the American South. The Center has been in existence for one year and has an impressive number of research projects.

Editors Note: In this interview, Dr. Shore places the terms ritual and myth in the context of contemporary working families and introduces a few of the research projects. For more in-depth description of the work of the Center and the meaning of ritual and myth in the context of modern family life, we refer you to the website: <http://www.emory.edu/college/MARIAL/>.

An Interview with Bradd Shore

Sloan Work and Family Research Network: How does the study of ritual and myth relate to middle-class, contemporary working families? Often we associate anthropological studies and rituals/myths with the exotic or traditional societies.

Shore: Initially, it may surprise people to think about the topics of ritual and myths for studying middle-class families, contemporary families. Interestingly, we've discovered that many families in the research projects know instantly what we are studying and why. For them, the word "ritual" does not seem exotic, but as something that "...is really interesting"; "...we're concerned about." It may turn out that the more academically inclined may need more explaining because of their associations with the words "ritual" and "myth." Many of us assume that ritual and myth are not related to lives of contemporary middle-class families.

SWFRN: How would you explain ritual and myths?

Shore: Ritual is fundamental for human beings because it forms structures of social coordination. Rituals are very important for coordination of time and social relations between people. Without ritual in its most basic sense there would be no social life. Second, ritual is a form of social memory, it's how we remember who we are. It may be that when people are thinking back to their family life or to their time as children, it is the existence of ritual events that provide memory points and a lot of things that aren't ritualized are forgotten. People go back to: "When we got together for Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or graduation ceremonies..." Ritual is fundamental because it provides structures of memory. A third part of ritual is meaning-making and updating meaning in people's lives. Living rituals always combine traditional content which is repeated year after year and a forum by which people update meanings in their lives in new distinctive ways. Finally, rituals often are attracted to things that are contradictory in our lives, that are problematical. Ritual has not disappeared in contemporary society as many people think it has. The problem is that many rituals have gone underground into forms that we don't call ritual but in fact are identifiable as ritual.

SWFRN: What about myths, how do they relate to contemporary life?

Shore: Myths are the stories that we have in our lives by which we try to make sense of our experience, to try to update meaning, as ritual does to practice. A characteristic of all myths is that they combine something true with something fictional. Myths come in two varieties. With the classical variety (Bible stories, family histories, fairytales) we recognize that the content may not be historically true. The stories metaphorically convey some deeper truth so that we use fiction to try and understand our contemporary lives. We use them as patterns of meaning.

The other kind of myth is really interesting; I call them myth-conceptions (laughing), a pun -- misconceptions. The myth of the nuclear family, the modern family, are examples of myths that are packaged as if they are true, (newspapers, history books), but they are false. Again, there is a sense of something true and false together. With the classical myths what is false is obvious and what is true is deep.

Myths come in different forms, but they are stories in which we make meaning or deceive ourselves. Even when we deceive ourselves, it's because we want certain kinds of meanings. When advertisers create myths in our society about family life, happiness or sexuality, they are appealing to our desire to make meaning. The myths become manipulative.

SWFRN: Interesting, tell us more about myth in modern family life and the Center's research.

Shore: What is the status of myth in modern family life? We are studying a couple of types of myths in modern family life. We are studying two different kinds of myths: family histories/stories and family stories that circulate publicly. Family histories and stories are used within families by people themselves. Public myths create a foil or create some tension as people try to evaluate their families. People use these public myths as touchstones, either consciously or unconsciously, to understand themselves.

To research the status of family stories, we have projects exploring how parents and children talk to each other, including dinnertime conversations. We are questioning: "Are families still talking together; Are parents passing on family lore and anecdotes to their kids." We have a project on family history: "How much are children learning about family history; How and when is that history created."

Public myths (or stories) are another type of myth that we are studying. Public stories influence how people come to see themselves, how families see themselves. Part of the way we come to understand ourselves is that we compare our actual families that we live in with the public myths or stories about families that are circulating in our societies. We have researchers investigating media representation, television shows about families; how they are changing. What are the implications of contemporary situation comedies --"Seinfeld" and "Friends?" The hierarchical family has largely disappeared from situation comedies and what we have are loose associations of friends that permeate people's living rooms, without family ties. Not only is hierarchy ambiguous but also gender relations are ambiguous. Are these lovers or are these friends? Over time the public representation of the family changes and generates new myths by which we compare our own lives by.

SWFRN: Please give us an example of a Center project that is looking at rituals in contemporary family life.

Shore: We have a number of projects, I'll tell you about my project which focuses on ritual time. I will look at members of 15 families, at least 10 dual-wage earner families and maybe 5 of those families with one parent that stays at home. I want to see whether there's a difference: "How do you know that what you're seeing is specifically due to dual-earner families unless you target non-dual wage earner families as a comparison? I'm looking at the members of those families individually and the families as a whole and trying to see how much of ritual time is spent within the family itself.

My question is: "What are the changing distributions of ritual time for members of families, and how much of that time is spent with the family coordinating and how much is not." I don't believe ritual has disappeared, I think it's being redistributed in new ways, and it's important to do a distributional analysis of ritual time. If we only studied the classic family rituals we might miss some of the changes going on as ritual takes place in the workplace, around the watercooler, or as ritual takes place on the internet, or ritual may take place among friends, or at Starbucks.

I'm beginning by tracking families over the course of the year. What are family members actually doing with their schedules? And how much of that time is common time, how much time is actually left after all the scheduling demands of lives, how much time is actually left for families to spend time? My guess is that ritual time in families may include time in cars, time on the cell phone with each other, it may include time on the internet, it does not always include face-to-face contact. It is the first time in history that ritual may not require people to physically be together. Time constraints and new technologies have led to the development of "virtual" ritual as a replacement for face-to-face ritual. We are going to do a series of interviews with each member of the family to track their time ask what the significant moments are (as they define them) in their lives over the course of the typical day, the week, a

month, a season and a year.

Dr. George Armelagos is researching "Food, Society and Ritual in Everyday Life." We're interested not just in whether families are having dinner together, which is a hot topic, but when they have dinner together, are they eating the same foods, is it a ritual meal or not. My guess is that we have had a deliberate break-up of the family meal as a common ritual by the trends of the food companies that are targeting families to eat individual microwaveable portions. When everybody eats different foods and there is a vegan and a vegetarian, then a family can eat together without being together. This is like the food dinner of parallel play so there's a distinction between being together.

Another specific project will be focused on the relationship between family life and family rituals and the growth of the family-life centers in the churches. Family-life centers take over the function of the family in providing rituals in every domain of life, from child care, sports, religion. The churches are growing tremendously and trying to get followers and retain followers by essentially protecting families from the corrosive aspects of social life.

SWFRN: What is distinctive about the Marial Center?

Shore: There are a couple of things. Of course there is overlap between what we are doing and Tom Frick is doing because by definition many of us are anthropologists and oriented toward field work and etiology. We are topically more focused, because we question creation and the reproduction of family culture under the conditions of modern working life. Ritual and myth are two of the most powerful social forms that we have for this on-going creation of culture.

Something I think that is very distinctive that we are trying to do is our lecture series. We are also engaged in policy change with grass roots groups who are experimenting in transforming rituals. We find and publicize the work, for example, storytelling and teaching kids how to generate their own family history. We also have an applied side. Dr. Mark Auslander led a collaborative restoration and documentation project involving the local community, Oxford College of Emory University, and the MARIAL Center. (See <http://www.emory.edu/college/MARIAL/exhibitions/index.html#beauty>).

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E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-4033 / 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-1080

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