



Kathryn Yount

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Emory University



"Developmental Idealism and Family Life in Egypt"

Monday, February 13, 2006
12:00 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120



Kathryn Yount, Assistant Professor in the Departments of International Health and Sociology at Emory University, presented her current research on how norms are globalized, specifically on how this globalization effects demographic change in family life.

Yount explained that she joins other scholars in challenging the myth of "the great family transformation," as proposed by modernization theory. The transformation that modernization theory expected, and scholars claimed to observe, in the 1950s was a move from extended to nuclear families, from marriage at younger ages to older marriages, and from relationships of parental authoritative dominance to more youthful autonomy. As scholars observed in the 1960s and 1970s, however, the changes that modernization theory proposed had *followed* industrialization, urbanization, increases in education, and other features of modernity had actually *preceded* them.

Moreover, the original proponents of what Yount denoted as the "developmental paradigm" – the assumption that demographics will progress positively alongside other societal developments – were studying primarily Northwest European families, yielding conclusions that were unlikely to apply globally. Studies supporting developmental idealism often also sought to understand a particular population's past by looking at the contemporaneous circumstances of another society believed to be in an earlier stage of development. This is known as reading history "sideways" and is an inherently biased methodology, assuming that social change is uniform and inevitable, which it is not.

Yount said she based her work on Arland Thornton's theories of idea dissemination, which argue that the conclusions borne by the developmental paradigm have promoted an ideational schema with a number of normative propositions, including the ideas that both modern society and modern family are good and attainable, and that the two are cause and effect of one another. Thornton also argues that these propositions are generally thought to be disseminated throughout the world via numerous mechanisms, including colonialist or missionary projects, educational institutions, the mass media, urbanization, and even developmental programs (e.g. those organized by the United Nations).

Yount said that she and her research colleagues seek to test how salient these normative developmental paradigms are in people's minds, in order to evaluate if globalization – by the variety of mechanisms – affects their behavior and in turn demographics. Yount noted initial studies in Nepal and Argentina, adding that the project has expanded to include China, Egypt, and the United States.

Yount then described her field work in Egypt. She said that Egypt is an excellent site in which to study the dissemination of ideas, because the country has a history of both British and French colonialism, is religiously and ethnically diverse, and has a recent history with the expansion and contraction of civil society, all of which is expected to affect developmental ideals.

Yount said that her research in Egypt has used focus group discussions, in which one group of very well educated women and a second group of less well educated men were posed questions that were designed to elicit responses about types of families (modern vs. tradition and Arab vs. foreign), to explore how they had been exposed to developmental ideas. She found that both groups made spontaneous and unprompted links between societal and family change, such as urbanization and more modern families, and that they did not consider all modern attributes to be positive ones. Modern clothing was thought to be immodest, for example, and connoted lax religious observance.

Yount said her longer term goal is to administer surveys in Egypt, to seek specifically an understanding of how educational institutions help develop certain typologies of families.

Kathryn Yount is Assistant Professor in the Departments of International Health and Sociology at Emory University. Currently, her research is on-going in Egypt and focuses on the following areas: female circumcision, gender differentials in public provider treatment of children presenting with diarrheal disease, and the changing effects of gender preference on reproductive behavior in rural Egypt.

Following the completion of her doctoral work, Dr. Yount worked as a scientist in the Department of Reproductive Health and Research at the World Health Organization. While posted at WHO, she developed research protocols to study the acceptability of hormonal contraception among male subjects of single- and multi-center clinical trials and was involved in the management of a small grants program aimed to build developing-country capacity in social science research. Her most recent article is titled "Provider bias in the treatment of diarrhea among boys and girls attending public facilities in Minia, Egypt."

Dr. Yount received her M.H.S. and Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.