Of Matriarchs and Men  
Kelsey Linnell, Class of 2014  

This summer, with the help of the Riley Fellowship, Kelsey Linnell was able to explore marriage from the perspective of women from Maine. Her own family had been in Maine for several generations, and as she grew older she realized that marriages in her family were different from other marriages, and wondered if this was somehow connected to her families deep roots in Maine. Thus, she set out to interview women from the Western Mountains of Maine and discover what their marriages were like and how power was shared in their families.  

She interviewed seven women whose families had resided in Maine for at least three generations (mostly women who’s parents were from Maine, and who had raised their own families in Maine). These women, she hypothesized, because of their Maine roots, would be more likely to show “Maine cultural trends” in their marriages than women from away.  

She used a semi-structured interview method in which she asked participants about their parent’s marriage, and their own marriage. She sought to discover how power was shared, and whether or not power was displayed differently outside of the home than within it. However, what she found was more confusing. While she discovered that all the women in her study spoke of holding at least equal power (and in some cases, more than equal power) with their spouses, they all had different approaches to interacting with their spouses in public. While some believed that marital concerns and issues between spouses should only be brought up in the privacy of the home, others stated that if they had a problem with their spouse they would bring it up as it occurred, regardless of who was around. A few of the women also discussed the futility of trying to keep up appearances in a small community where most events were public and child rearing was communal.  

There were a few other trends as well. The younger women (aged approx. 40 to 55) seemed more eager to speak about their parent’s marriage, and while they gave in general deeper answers regarding their marriages, were more likely to believe in a greater sense of privacy in their own lives. This may be due to greater cultural changes between generations in which the generation before spoke of communal child rearing and a general lack of privacy, while the younger generation did not mention either as an obstacle to their ability to keep their marriages private. The younger generation also appeared to have more power within their marriages, and claimed to compromise at most 50% of the time; as compared to the amount of time that they got what they wanted.  

It was also discovered that children played a significant role in marriages. Most women spoke of getting married because they wanted either “a family,” or children, and one even spoke of needing a father for the children they already had. Another woman who had children prior to their marriage spoke of the importance of family, and how necessary it was for her children to be involved in the decision to marry, while another confessed that if not for her children she would have left her husband long ago. Thus, it seemed as though, for most of the women interviewed, the well being of their children was pivotal to their marital decisions.  

Faculty Mentor: Sara Dickey  

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