Consuming Family Dinner Time

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Our study examines whether and how family dinners are embedded in the centrifugal and centripetal dynamics of everyday family life, the diversity of meanings they have for families and the intentions and practices surrounding their enactment. Our ongoing project is comprised of participant observation and depth interviews with a diverse group of North American families. We uncover whether and why families attach importance to this particular use of scarce family time and whether and how family dinner practices coalesce with families’ ideological representations of their social value. In this way we provide a more nuanced conception of the relationships between the enactment of family, time and mundane consumption in daily life.

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SYMPOSIA SUMMARY
Doing Family: The Temporal and Spatial Structuring of Family Consumption
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SESSION OVERVIEW
The purpose of this session was to bridge sociological and family research on the temporal and spatial dynamics of the ideologically laden enterprise of “doing family” with family consumption research. The session broadly contributed to our understanding of family consumption, a neglected and vital topic for consumer research. In addition, we enhanced understanding of how consumption, time and space interplay and are constitutive of the structures of domestic life. Relatively little consumer research addresses this interplay. The session was of broad interest to consumer researchers interested in family, identity, mundane consumption, time and technology. The presentations confronted challenges of doing family in contemporary consumer culture, challenges many of us encounter in our own family lives.

The family is a fundamental building block of society that impacts numerous areas of life and represents an important consumption unit intermediate between individuals and society (Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984). Despite its importance, compared to the vast array of studies focused on individuals, there is still relatively little work on families in consumer research and important research questions remain (Commuri and Gentry 2000). One important yet neglected aspect of family consumption is the micro spatial and temporal dynamics of everyday family life—the coming together and moving apart in time and space that characterizes doing family (Daly 1996, 2001; Devault 2003). Consumer researchers have focused on transitional episodes such as divorce, moving and aging on family consumption and have also explored the structural life cycle of families. However, the micromovements of family members together and apart in space and time have been almost wholly neglected in consumer research.

A burgeoning array of social science research is dedicated to examining family time as “the central organizing feature of family activities” (Presser 1989, p. 536; Daly 1996; Folbre and Bittman 2004; Zvonkovic, Manoogian and McGraw 2001). Nevertheless, “the meaning of time for families has been insufficiently problematized,” generally residing in the recesses of discussions about caregiving, work-family balance and socialization (Daly 1996, p. 2). One area deserving of more attention is how space and time interplay in the material and symbolic organization of family experience (Silverstone 1993: 287). Family time might even be theorized as “transsituational or spatially dislodged,” with family activities mobilized over cell phones, computers and on-line environments (Daly 1996, p. 221; Gillis 2001).

Family activities in space and time are heavily freighted ideologically. Key tensions among family members and between families and broader ideological currents are often played out over family dinners and family vacations. Yet, there is little appreciation for nontraditional and conflictual aspects of family time and space (Winton 1995). For example, family meal times are traditionally cast as positive experiences central to family preservation and reproduction, but research shows that dinners are a site for conflict (Vuchinich 1987). Similarly, Larson and Richards (1994) discovered that tired and hungry adolescents and parents together struggle with “the 6 o’clock crash.” Likewise, family vacations intended as a temporal oasis, may instead become a conflictual performance of irreconcilable individual and relational goals (Daly 1996).

Discussions of family activities and “quality-time,” almost always implicate consumption (Daly 1996; English-Lueck 2002; Schor 2005). However, with few exceptions, sociological research shows little understanding of how consumption and family identity interplay across a spectrum of possibilities—sometimes contributing to fragmentation of family life but other times facilitating family togetherness (Daly 1996; English-Lueck 2002). Family problems are attributed to a lack of “family time” driven by consumption desires (Schor 2005), but there is little information about consumption strategies families employ to contend with barriers to spending time together.

Previous research has shown an explosion of technology into family space. Some argue consumer technology from televisions to computers and cell phones challenges the traditional temporal and spatial boundaries between work life, home life and leisure in myriad ways (Jackson 2002). But research is needed to examine whether and how families experience technologies as threats and resources in relationship to family time and space (Daly 1996; English-Lueck 2002).

The first paper by Kelli, Linda and Eric examined family dinner as a mundane but problematized spatial and temporal juncture for “doing family.” The second paper, presented by Amber investigated coming together as a family on family vacations and the dynamic interplay of individual and relational identities enacted in this idealized “temporal oasis.” The third paper by Fleura, Robin and Meera considered the problematic challenges of enlisted military families confronting centripetal and centrifugal movements associated with military deployment. Each of the three papers incorporated the passive and strategic roles of marketplace resources in the movement of families apart and together and examined the role of consumption in family activities. All the projects are ongoing multi-year endeavors and presentations were based on substantial data. Our discussion leader, Robert Kleine who has research interests in identity and mundane consumption engaged our audience in a thoughtful discussion that complemented the composite of papers in the session as well as added a different perspective.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Consuming Family Dinner Time”
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What do families do together? According to recent research, family members still predominantly use their limited time resources during shared meals (with TV a close second on weekdays, and travel a close second on Saturdays) (Robinson and Godbey 2000). However, the amount of time spent on family meals, especially weekday family dinners, has declined significantly during the past thirty years (Mestdag and Vandeweyer 2005; Jones 2001; Schor 2005). Simultaneously, this particular kind of family time, time spent over family dinner, is positively correlated with benefits such as reduced childhood obesity, aiding literacy development and reduced speech impairments, language socialization, lower levels of behavioral problems, higher academic achievement and reduced drug and alcohol use among teens (Califano 2005b; Fiese, Foley, and Spagnola 2006; Hoffarth and Sandberg 2001; Neumark-Sztainer 2006; Ochs and Shohet 2006; Snow and Beals 2006). However, as with time-use diaries, these correlational data based on self-reports provide little insight into whether and why family dinner is actually important to families and how it is
experienced by them (Daly 1996; 2001). For example, in these studies, “weekly dinners together” may be the only measured indicator of family time, leaving unanswered the question of whether other kinds of family time (hiking, playing games or even watching TV together) would have equivalent benefits. Moreover, this measure may map more closely to what families believe they should do rather than what they actually do.

By contrast with the rosy portrait of family meals in some research, others argue that dinner time is an experience when parents and children come together with all the stress and fatigue induced by their participation in the outside world. Hence, energies are low, needs for nutrient and emotional energy high making reentry into the cohesive ideal of family life precarious. Family members may exert pressure on others to perform family roles in conformance with ideals provoking a backlash or may fail to perform as they themselves would wish, provoking dissonance and regret (Daly 2001, 207).

Our study examined whether and how family dinners are embedded in the centrifugal and centripetal dynamics of everyday family life, the diversity of meanings they have for families and the intentions and practices surrounding their enactment. We uncovered whether and why families attach importance to this particular use of scarce family time and whether and how family dinner practices coalesce with their ideological representations of their social value. In this way we provide a more nuanced conception of the relationships between the enactment of family, time and consumption.

Our ongoing project is comprised of participant observation and depth interviews with a diverse group of North American families including dual-income households with multiple children, blended families, single parent families, and dual-income couples without children. We sampled a diversity of informant families in order to uncover commonalities and differences in the meanings and experience of family time and family dinner. The project is conducted in the homes of informants before, during and after weekday evening meals and consists of approximately six hours of participant observation with each family including an average 60-90 minute depth interview with one or both parents, with follow-up interviews as needed. Using a modified time-diary approach, care was taken to situate a particular observed family meal within a weekly time-frame of family meals and time. Projective were also employed to explicitly inform understanding of policy initiatives such as the “Family Day” campaign.

Findings reveal that family dinner is viewed as a priority family project fundamental to the identity of the family, but often at odds with individual and other relational identity projects. Informant families believe that they should have dinner together and intend to do so. Nevertheless, we uncovered substantial variance in what constitutes a family dinner as well as a diversity of meanings and enactments. Negative cases of families that favor other uses of scarce family time provide interesting points of contrast.

Why is family dinner a preferred way to spend scarce family time? Our findings suggest that as compared with other family time, the proxemic conventions of the family dinner table, norms for behavior, and the structured consumption sequence are viewed as facilitating and enforcing disclosure, intimacy and collective identity. In addition, the time of the weekday evening meal as compared to other times represents a symbolic coming together and cleansing of the family consistent with a nostalgic rendering of family time as a refuge from the outside world.

Paradoxically, while gathering for dinner seems responsible for most of the benefits (some home-cooked nutritional appeals aside), the problem of “what’s for dinner,” afternoon energy deple-

“Idealized Family Time: Collective Identity Interplay in Vacations”
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Contemporary families face diverse challenges to engaging in collective identity projects. Families such as blended, divorced, single-parent, and co-parenting from separate households sometimes result in family separation in both time and space (Daly 1996; Smart and Neale 1999). In addition, to some extent, the privatization of family possessions—evidenced in family members having their own televisions, computers, cell phones, and other personal technologies—may encourage individual interaction at the expense of collective interaction. Technology presents a paradox that leads both to assimilation and isolation effects (Mick and Fournier 1998), transforming family interaction in ways that reconstitute family relationships while simultaneously limiting time spent as a collectivity. Further, overbooked families spend much time engaging in separate activities such as work, after-school activities, music lessons, or sports, leaving less time for families to spend together (Elkins 2003).

As one result of these challenges, family identity practices spill out of the household as families find ways to interact purposefully in time set aside just for family. Specifically, idealized family vacations are “culturally viewed as a temporal oasis away from rigid demands and schedules” (Daly 1996, p. 74). Vacations represent an increasingly relevant activity to both families and service providers. “Travel and tourism generates $1.3 trillion in economic activity in the U.S. every year” (TIAA 2006). In addition, families indicate that traveling with their families has become more important over recent years and gives time-poor families much needed time to bond (Gardyn 2001). Family vacations also offer a theoretically enlightening context. Staging collective experiences, particularly family leisure activities, helps families develop a sense of family identity (DeVault 2000; Shaw and Dawson 2001). Further, within this consumption milieu bounded in a particular time-space, families manage multiple identity projects and highlight the complexity of collective goals, choices, and actions that occur in families.

Family identity represents a co-constructed, collective identity that exists in action (Blumer 1969) and may diverge from the individual and relational-unit identities of its members. These relational units such as parent-child, couple, or siblings construct unique identities, discourses, rituals, symbols, and experiences that they enact as complementary, overlapping and competing consumption practices. Consumer studies reveal that marketplace resources offer solutions for managing identity tensions within individuals (c.f. Ahuvia 2005; Murray 2002; Oswald 1999; Schau and Gilly 2003; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Thompson and Tambiyah 1999; Tian and Belk 2005). Despite the noteworthy contributions of these studies, we have virtually no understanding of how collectivities manage the bundles of identities that coexist.
in families. As co-producers of family experiences, service providers would benefit from such an understanding by indicating potential roles of firm resources in identity-constituting practices. The following research question guided my study: How do families use marketplace resources as they constitute and manage interplay among family, relational, and individual identities?

Based on semi-structured, group interviews with 22 families representing diverse family forms, this study uncovers a range of families’ identity goals and practices that draw on marketplace resources. The interviews took place in families’ homes to facilitate auto-driving techniques using vacation photos, videos, and artifacts and were designed to expose and discriminate among aspects of individual, relational, and family identity as enacted in this context.

Study findings revealed that despite idealized notions of vacations as strictly family time, families highlight not only collective practices involving the entire family, but also emphasize multiple relational bundles in their vacation experiences. Families used vacations as a bounded time-space context to construct, revise, and manage multiple identities. Among the participants in this study, families fell along a continuum of synergy and discord among displayed collective, relational, and individual identity projects. For instance, in some families, each combination of relational units (the whole family, subsets of family, and individuals) employed marketplace resources similarly and selected comparable activities to define themselves—demonstrating synergistic identity projects across groupings.

In the case of managing discord across groupings, voluntary displacement of one identity project for another was a common theme. Examples include a husband known as the family chef relinquishing the kitchen in a shared condo to his wife and her sisters to revitalize sibling identities; a grandfather supporting his wife and grandchild in their quest to explore gendered relational identity by having tea at American Girl Place; and an extended family encouraging a couple with multiple children to go out and do something they used to enjoy together. One contribution of this study is that it shifts the focus of group decisions away from relative influence (as most frequently studied—c.f. Filiatrault and Ritchie 1980; Litvin, Xu, and Kang 2004; Su, Fern, and Ye 2003) and instead considers the interplay of collective identity projects by examining identity goals, enactments, and discourses that might shape sub-decisions in the vacation context.

Prevalent across families, I observed an array of identity construction practices. In several families, participants’ explicit purpose of taking the vacation was to establish new collective or relational identities. One newly-formed stepfamily indicated they took the trip as a bonding experience for their two daughters and stepfather, and all agreed that the vacation was a turning point: “we were able to accept him into our lives” (daughter). For a widowed, single father with two boys, the family vacation offered a shared time-space to “get out and build some light memories” together and establish a new family identity following this difficult transition.

In some cases, families draw on vacation experiences to revise boundaries around relational units. The most recurrent strategy families demonstrated involved integrating additional family members into existing subgroup identity practices. In many cases, parents established vacation traditions, such as visiting the same special place year after year or going out to breakfast every morning, which they extended to their children or to new members that joined the family. For one family, defined internally and by others as heavily involved in community service, a mother invited her son to join her on a “volunteer vacation” to build a recreational center for a poor village, an experience the mother participated in regularly.

“Domesticating Technology to Build Army Family Identity”
Fleura Bardhi, Northeastern University
Robin Coulter, University of Connecticut
Meera Venkatraman, Suffolk University

Recently researchers have examined family identity practices (Commuri and Gentry 2000; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). A related stream of research has suggested that new technology impacts physical and socio-cultural spaces in the home, and is changing popular conceptions of home and family (Venkatesh, Stolzkoﬁf, Shih, and Mazumdar 2001). In this research, we focused on military families, nested within US Army subculture and confronted with the centrifugal-centripetal stressor of episodic deployment of family members into harm’s way. Our work contributes to literatures on family, family roles and life projects and their associated conﬂicts, and the interplay of technology and family identity.

We conducted depth interviews with 18 wives (aged 24-44) of Army enlisted men, with children, living in on-post housing at two deployment Army posts. The interview was focused around two topics, home and technology, but the flow of the interview emerged in relation to characteristics of informants’ experiences, and meanings (Thompson 1997). We then visited the homes of 14 informants to better appreciate their personal circumstances, their living space, and understand how the family locates technologies in their home space. Interviews were transcribed and scrutinized by hand and with the aid of a computer-based text analysis package, NVIVO. A narrative analysis enabled us to better understand technology’s facilitating role in the creation and maintenance of family identity (McCracken 1988).

Army families experience special centrifugal-conflicting contexts. Although in principle the Army enlists soldiers, in fact it enlists families; and Army spouses (94 percent of whom are wives) are expected to fully integrate into Army culture (Houppert 2005; Leyva 2003). Army families of enlisted men face many challenges—they are of low socio-economic status, are typically blended families, they relocate Army posts every two to three years, and for the past four years, they have contended with a spouse’s deployment to military danger zones overseas. When their husbands are on post, Army wives fulfill traditional familial roles of wife and mother. When their husbands are deployed, the wives facilitate and sustain “family togetherness” over time and space. In some ways, these women become single moms, responsible for all household activities, and dual parental roles. Yet, they must determine how and when to involve their husbands in the family’s daily life. They are cautious and think carefully about whether something is worth “burdening” or “distracting” their husband from his assigned duty—the war (see also Houppert 2005). These wives increasingly utilize information and communication technologies (ICTs) during husband deployment to sustain the family as well as manage their everyday household duties.

Recent work has considered the domestication of technology, the process by which public and pre-formed technology narratives are appropriated into the family, inscribed with private meaning and transformed into acceptable symbolic objects (Berker, et al. 2006), ultimately articulating particular family values (Silverstone 2006). The metaphor of domestication suggests that technology is a wild animal that is tamed through household agency which exerts control of domestic space and time and through which both the family and technology are altered (Morley 2006).

Consistent with previous research, we find technology has a multi-faceted impact on the family (Hoffman, Novak, and Venkatesh 2004, Mick and Fournier 1998). Our findings substantiate the domestication of technology—“the co-production of the social and
the technical” (Sørensen 2006, p. 46). Herein, we focus on two aspects of domestication—objectification which is concerned with the spatial aspects and incorporation which deals with the temporal aspects of domestication (Silverstone et al. 2006). An overarching theme that emerges from our data is “control,” related to the space and time needed to create family identity and cohesion.

With regard to objectification, our informants deliberately and strategically locate technology in the home to facilitate family togetherness. In many homes, computers, webcams, and other information and communication technologies are placed in the public space of the living area and often serving as a center for family togetherness (e.g., a family movie or game night). In some instances, placement of technology is an artifact of the lack of space in “old” on-post housing units. However, in “new” on-post housing units with extra space, families make conscious decisions to locate ICTs and orchestrate space around ICTs. Consistent with other work (e.g., Mick and Fournier 1998), our informants acknowledge that ICTs have the ability to disrupt family identity if they are not carefully monitored and managed, a factor which partially drives the integration of ICTs into central spaces.

Our findings also document incorporation of technology into daily life. ICTs induce changes in the management of temporal patterns in domestic life. Family unity is particularly relevant when the family’s soldier is deployed, and ICTs offer a metaphorical bridge between the physical space of home and the front, and family’s “control.” Through ICTs, informants make their husbands “present” for the birth of babies, birthday parties, and other family events. ICTs are an important tool for building not only the immediate Army family (see also Kosova 2007), but also constitute a social, bonding space for extended kin relationships. Family photo websites, emails and other computer-mediated communication constitute an important relationship maintenance infrastructure not only for the immediate family but also for neighbors, other military wives, and Army support staff who, on occasion, or with some regularity, become part of the family unit. Despite the positive aspects of ICTs in sustaining and building family, informants are mindful of the evils of technology that have the potential to degrade the family unit. Army mothers monitor not only the content of, but also the time allocated to computers, XBox, television, and other technologies. Many set a timer, others keep written records. A key concern is having their children “get lost” in the technology.

Consistent with domestication research, we find that meanings of technology in the home are neither positive nor negative, but rather are negotiated by the family (Bakardjieva 2006). Indeed, the family, its rituals, scripts and dynamics, as well as values and goals impact not only the acquisition of technology, but also the nature of the objectification and incorporation of ICTs within the household.

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