

Opportunity for Interaction? A Naturalistic Observation Study of Dual-Earner Families After Work and School

Belinda Campos
University of California, Irvine

Anthony P. Graesch, Rena Repetti,
Thomas Bradbury, and Elinor Ochs
University of California, Los Angeles

Everyday patterns of interaction can strengthen or undermine bonds between family members. This naturalistic observation study focused on an understudied facet of family life: opportunities for interaction among dual-earner family members after work and family members' responses to these opportunities. Thirty dual-earner couples and their children were observed and video-recorded in their homes throughout two weekday afternoons and evenings. Two interaction opportunities were analyzed: (1) the behavior of family members toward a parent returning home from work and (2) the physical proximity of family members throughout the evening. Three main findings emerged. Women, who tended to return home before men, were greeted with positive behavior and reports of the day's information from family members. Men, in contrast, returned home later in the day and received positive behavior or no acknowledgment from family members distracted by other activities. Throughout the evening, mothers spent more time with children whereas fathers spent more time alone. Couples were seldom together without their children. The implications of observed interaction patterns and the contribution of naturalistic observation methods to the study of family relationships are discussed.

Keywords: family, dual-earner, daily behavior, social interaction, naturalistic observation

Contemporary families strive to build and maintain strong bonds in a context where high expectations for intimacy and emotional fulfillment compete with the demands of work, school, the wider social network, and community affiliations (Coontz, 2005; Mintz, 2004). The concerns of parents who walk this balance were articulated vividly by former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich (1993–1997) in a speech before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council. Referring to his resignation as Secretary of Labor, Reich used the metaphor of clams to illustrate his concern that long working hours harmed his relationship with his sons:

They are exactly like clam shells. They are tightly shut and occasionally, just occasionally, when you least expect it, those clam shells open and you see inside this very soft and beautiful and very vulnerable interior. Then the clam shell shuts tight again and you don't see it and you don't know when, if ever, it will open. But it will open at a very unexpected time and in a very unexpected way, and if you're not there when it opens you might as well be on the moon.

Like former Secretary Reich, many parents worry that work demands diminish their opportunities for interaction with their children and that, over time, reduced opportunities may compromise future relationship quality. At the same time, these fleeting moments have proven difficult to investigate with traditional observational methods, which typically involve instructing families to engage in specific tasks rather than observing them as they manage their daily lives. This article describes a naturalistic observation study of how members of dual-earner families use opportunities for interaction on weekday afternoons and evenings. Our data were derived from a multimethod study that intensively documented daily life in a small sample of dual-earner families. A central goal of this study was to describe the context and pattern of family interaction in situ to help researchers better understand the daily challenges and possible opportunities contemporary dual-earner parents face in their pursuit of strong family bonds. Thus, we focused on two aspects of weekday interaction opportunity: the moment of reunion, when a working parent arrives home to family members who are already there, and physical proximity, the extent to which family members shared home spaces over the course of the evening.

Belinda Campos, Department of Chicano/Latino Studies, University of California, Irvine; Anthony P. Graesch and Elinor Ochs, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles; Rena Repetti and Thomas Bradbury, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Belinda Campos, Department of Chicano/Latino Studies, 3151 Social Science Plaza A, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697-5100. E-mail: bcampos@uci.edu

Family, Children, and Work

Dual-earner households constitute the majority of households consisting of married couples with children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Marriage, children, and work are primary sources of life satisfaction for men and women (Myers & Diener, 1995), but the strong time commitment demanded by each role has also led the three to be characterized as “greedy institutions” (Coser, 1974). Despite the challenges inherent in balancing these multiple roles, most parents view their work–family roles positively and report being satisfied with their parenting quality (e.g., Marshall & Barnett, 1993). In turn, a satisfying family life can positively affect work life and vice versa (Dilworth, 2004; Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, & Kiger, 2007).

For contemporary parents, a satisfying family life is one marked by family cohesion and warmth that is actively created through time spent in positive social interaction (e.g., Coontz, 2005; Mintz, 2004; Stevens et al., 2007). Interaction among family members may not always meet these ideals, but active parent participation in the daily routines and rituals of family life has positive consequences for children. For example, parent participation in family dinners and bedtime have been associated with greater social competence and positive social values in children (e.g., Fiese et al., 2002). Similarly, parent involvement and monitoring are associated with less delinquency in adolescence (e.g., Crouter, MacDermid, McHale, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990). It is no surprise then that many parents express concern that work responsibilities limit their ability to participate in family life and cultivate the affectional bonds that are consistent with their ideals.

The concern that work demands can limit a parent’s ability to participate in family life is not unfounded. Highly demanding jobs, aversive interactions with coworkers or supervisors, and other sources of work stress can deplete psychosocial resources and limit a parent’s ability to balance work demands with family relationships. Social withdrawal, a common response to work stress, is a behavioral response characterized by a temporary retreat from interaction after the workday that allows an individual to recover from the strain imposed by work demands during the day (Repetti, 1989; Repetti & Wood, 1997; Story & Repetti, 2006). In a study of air traffic controllers, high workload during the day was associated with fathers’ increased social withdrawal from family later that evening (Repetti, 1989). In another study, mothers were observed to be less behaviorally engaged and emotionally involved when reuniting with their child at the end of more stressful workdays (Repetti & Wood, 1997). In the short-term, social withdrawal may promote emotional and physical recovery for the individual after a difficult day at work. If so, a quick recovery may promote relaxation and increased responsiveness toward family members later in the evening. Slow recovery or repeated withdrawal, however, may decrease participation in daily routines, family rituals, or spontaneous family interaction. Over time, this behavior pattern may negatively impact family interaction, and perhaps relational ties.

The Present Research

Drawing from the literature suggesting that active parent participation in family life is a contemporary ideal that has benefits for children, we focused our study of dual-earner families on opportunities for social interaction that are embedded within daily life and family members’ responses to those opportunities. Rather than using self-reports or brief assessments of behavior, we sought to contribute to the work–family literature by using naturalistic observation methods that allowed for an intensive examination of family members’ behavior as they went about the ordinary tasks and activities of their weekdays.

Our study capitalized on a multimethod ethnographic dataset that was designed to document the daily lives of dual-earner families with young children in Los Angeles, California. Researchers spent two weekdays and one weekend in the homes of participant families, systematically videotaping family members’ behavior and documenting their locations in home spaces via scan sampling, a naturalistic observation technique whereby trained observers record data at 10-min intervals. These naturalistic methods—applied before family members left for work/school in the morning and from the time they returned home from work/school until they went to bed at night—generated data that offer a rare glimpse into the context and behavior of contemporary families and provide a unique opportunity to extend beyond self-report to observable behavior as it unfolded in real time. The trade-off to capturing the natural flow of family life with these methods is that the number of families that could be reasonably sampled was small and data within each family’s day are not independent. Designating units of analysis that captured standardized behavior across families was also a challenge because families have idiosyncratic routines.

We reduced differences associated with idiosyncratic elements of family life by selecting two common indicators of interaction opportunity. *Reunions*, defined as the moment when parents arrived home from work to reunite with their family, were assessed by coding specific behaviors that each parent received from family members upon their return home. *Physical proximity* was defined as the number of scan sampling observation rounds in which family members were recorded in a particular home space in the afternoon and evening. Together, these two indicators offered the advantage of assessing interpersonal behaviors during a socially relevant moment and the trajectory of social contact over the ensuing evening.

Largely descriptive in its orientation, our study of after-work reunions and physical proximity during the weekdays addresses two research questions. First, what social behaviors greet parents on their return home from work? The first reunion upon return home from work is a socially saturated moment that gives family members an opportunity to affirm bonds by positively acknowledging one another, sharing events of the day, and smoothly segueing into their evening routine (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Second, what patterns of physical proximity characterize family members as the evening unfolds? Here we were particularly interested in

examining the degree to which family members either share space in ways that create opportunity for social interaction or disperse themselves throughout the home in separate activities that preclude interaction. In our view, the behavior that family members display in response to the opportunities for interaction embedded throughout the daily life can contribute positively or negatively to the development and maintenance of strong family bonds. Careful study of these fleeting daily behaviors can contribute to the growing literature on the consequences of active parent participation in family life.

Method

Participants

Thirty dual-earner male–female couples—21 with 2 children and 9 with 3 children— took part in the study. Mothers and fathers ranged in age from 28 to 58 years (median = 41 for both). Couples had been together for 3 to 18 years (median = 13). Children ranged in age from 1 to 17, and all families had at least one child between 7 and 12 years of age. The families were from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including European, Asian and South Asian, African American and Latino; 33% of the families had at least one member who identified themselves as having an ethnic background other than European American. The majority of mothers and fathers were born outside the greater Los Angeles area (80%) and had at least a college degree (65%).

Participating families were recruited from the greater Los Angeles area as part of an interdisciplinary investigation of the everyday lives of middle-class, dual-earner families with children. Families were recruited via newspaper advertisements, bulletins distributed in elementary school public school classrooms, and word of mouth. Potential participants were required to meet three criteria. First, families were required to have at least one elementary school-aged child, termed the “target child.” This provided a point of standardization across families and reduced family differences that could have originated from having children at different stages of development. Second, both parents were required to work at least 30 hours per week outside the home. Most parents reported working between 40 and 49 hours per week (63% of men, 50% of women), whereas a smaller subset reported working over 50 hours per week (30% of men, 13% of women). Parent occupations were varied and included restaurant manager, lawyer, firefighter, and architect. Third, families had to be homeowners paying a monthly mortgage. This last requirement, which situated our families between renters and those whose homes were fully paid off, served as a marker of middle-class socioeconomic status in Los Angeles County.

Procedure

Participating families took part in a study that combined naturalistic observation, self-report, and biological methods, and included ethnographic video-recordings, scan sampling,

semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and salivary cortisol sampling to document daily family life (for details, see Ochs, Graesch, Mittman, Bradbury, & Repetti, 2006; Ochs, Shohet, Campos, & Beck, in press). Each family was recorded during the course of two weekdays and a weekend by three-person research teams operating two professional consumer quality video cameras with wide-angle lenses and a handheld computer. The handheld computer was used by a member of the research team to record scan sampling observations, which included information on the physical location and activities of family members in the home every 10 min. Video recording and scan sampling of families’ interactions and physical presence in home spaces on weekdays occurred in the time between morning wake-up and whenever children and parents left the house for school and work, resumed once children and/or parents returned home, and concluded after children went to bed for the night. The video cameras captured routine family activities, with each camera primarily dedicated to observing one of the two parents. If only one parent was present, then the second camera focused on the children. All observations were conducted during the regular school year. Approximately 35 hours of video footage and 265 scan sampling observations were generated per family during the two weekdays that were filmed. Families were compensated \$1,000 for participation in the study.

Behavioral coding of end of workday reunions. We operationally defined a *reunion* as a returning parent’s first encounter with family members, spouse, or children, who were home at the time of arrival. We focused on the moment of returning home from work because it represents family members’ return to a private setting. To capture behaviors exchanged by reuniting family members, the video segment that documented a parent’s arrival home from work through 2 min after initial arrival was selected for coding. The standardization afforded by this definition did involve tradeoffs. Our study of reunions was constrained to situations in which a parent arrived home directly from work. First encounters with children at school, after working from home, or those that occurred later in the evening (e.g., if a child was busy when parent arrived home and did not interact with parent until after dinner) were excluded.

The 60 weekdays in our sample (2 weekdays \times 30 families) yielded 120 potential occasions for a mother or father to reunite with family members. Of these 120 potential reunions, 44 documented instances of a parent coming home directly from work met our reunion criteria. These 44 videotaped reunions involved 10 mothers and 19 fathers from 25 families. The 10 mothers returned home directly from work in 15 of the 44 reunions. Her partner was home in 9 of the 15 reunions and at least one child was home in 14 of the 15 reunions. Across the two days and 25 families, a total of 27 children were already home when mothers returned from work. The 19 fathers returned home directly from work in 29 of the 44 reunions. His partner and at least one child were already home in all 29 reunions (66 individual children across the two days).

A behavioral coding system, adapted from an earlier system (Ochs et al., 2006), was used to describe the behav-

ior of family members who were present to reunite with the returning parent during the 44 reunions that were videotaped. Two trained undergraduate research assistants, who were not involved in the development of the coding system, coded each 2-min reunion episode for the presence or absence of: *positive behaviors*, defined as salutations, affectionate actions or vocalizations, or physical approach toward the returning adult; *reports of information*, defined as sharing information about the day's events with the returning adult; *logistic behaviors*, defined as requesting help, asking questions, and/or making statements having to do with household activities or business of the returning adult; *distraction*, defined as not showing recognition of an adult's return by completely ignoring the adult or treating the adult in a distracted manner due to primary involvement in another on-going activity; *negative behaviors*, defined as anger, criticism, or whining directed at the returning adult or occurring as part of a situation that began before the adult returned home but continued after arrival. Each code was defined as independent of all other codes to allow for examination of whether the behavior occurred individually or in combination with other behaviors. Examining combinations of behaviors, which we termed *behavioral co-occurrences*, could reveal more complicated reunion interaction, such as the co-occurrence of logistic behavior with positive behavior or initial distraction that segues into an information report as family members turn from other activities to attend to the return of a parent. To assess reliability, the two research assistants each coded one-third of the reunions. Kappa statistics were then computed for each behavior and the behaviors overall. Kappas and behavior examples are presented in Table 1.

Scan sampling of physical proximity. Physical proximity in household space during the post-reunion evening was assessed with scan sampling, a data collection technique that entailed the systematic documentation of all family members' locations at 10-min intervals during the course of filmed visits in the home (Broege, Owens, Graesch, Arnold, & Schneider, 2007; Graesch, in press; Ochs et al., 2006).

Scan sampling began when one or more family members returned home. In families where children were transported or met at home by childcare workers (e.g., nannies) or non-parent relatives (e.g., a father's sister), children arrived home before either parent by as many as one or two hours. Thus, the first rounds of scan sampling could have documented the child's behavior within the home space before either parent returned home and may or may not have captured reunion behavior. Every 10 min, the researcher followed a defined route through the home and used a handheld computer to record family members' location within the home, their focal activities, and objects incorporated in these activities at the instant of assessment. Each *observation round* typically took 2 to 3 min to complete (Ochs et al., 2006).

The key similarities and differences of scan sampling to other methods of standardized observation have been discussed by Ochs et al. (2006). In this study, scan sampling provided a unique lens for examining patterns of physical proximity within residential space throughout the weekday evening. To obtain standardized assessments of home locations, the interior spaces of family houses were defined as areas bounded by fixed architectural features (e.g., walls, doors) and/or major furnishings or appliances. These spaces were measured, mapped, and digitized, and all homes spaces were assigned numerical and descriptive labels to facilitate the on-site coding process before scan sampling began (Ochs et al., 2006).

Results

The findings of our study of after-work reunions and physical proximity in the evening are reported in percentages to facilitate comparison across unequal samples of parents, children, and behaviors.

Reuniting at the End the Workday

We first focused on end of day reunions because they represent a socially saturated moment that presents a key

Table 1
Examples and Coder Reliabilities for Behaviors Displayed by Family Members Upon Mother and Father Return Home From Work

Coded behaviors	Behavior examples	κ	Description of agreements ^a
Positive behaviors	"Hello, how are you?" in warm voice tone "Daddy!" in warm voice tone Hugs, physical approach toward parent	.84	62 agreements of 77 instances
Information reports	"Guess who lost a tooth today?" "I got an A on my test today!"	.79	16 agreements of 21 instances
Logistic behaviors	"Could you pick up Child X from soccer?" "The bill came in the mail"	.65	6 agreements of 11 instances
Distraction	Not acknowledging returning adult, otherwise engaged in activity (e.g., watching TV, playing video game, phone)	.57	10 agreements of 19 instances
Negative behaviors	"You're home late AGAIN"	.49	1 agreement of 3 instances
All behaviors together		.78	95 agreements out of 131 instances

^a Number of times coders agreed out of all instances when either judge coded a behavior occurrence.

opportunity for family interaction as family members transition from work or school to home. To see how early in the reunion the different behaviors were observed, we divided the 2-min reunion episodes into four consecutive 30-s intervals and examined behavior frequencies within each interval. We found that 74% of the coded behaviors occurred in the first 30-s interval after parent arrival. Thereafter, a steep drop in behavior frequency occurred until fewer than 7% of behaviors occurred in the fourth interval. Thus, the opportunity for interaction presented by reunion is brief and tends to take place immediately after the opportunity arises. In the following paragraphs, we present data for the entire 2-min interval to describe a complete picture of reunion behavior. The denominators of the percentages reported are based on the number of mothers, fathers, or children present in the home to potentially enact a reunion behavior unless otherwise noted.

Couples. Behavioral coding revealed that husbands and wives engaged primarily in positive behaviors when reuniting with each other after work. Out of the nine reunion episodes in which a wife returned home from work to a husband already in the home, husbands displayed positive behaviors in 5 episodes (56%), information reports in 4 episodes (44%), and distraction behaviors in 3 episodes (33%). Only one instance of negative behavior (11%) and no logistic behaviors (0%) from husbands toward their returning wives were observed. Of the 29 reunion episodes in which a husband returned home from work to a wife already in the home, wives displayed positive behaviors in 19 episodes (66%), information reports in 17 episodes (59%), and distraction behaviors in 13 episodes (45%) toward their returning husbands. There was only one instance of negative behavior (3%), but 8 instances of logistic behavior (28%) displayed by wives to returning husbands. In summary, couples reuniting at the end of the day were most frequently observed engaging in positive behaviors and information reports but distraction was observed in over one-third of couple reunions. Logistic behaviors were only displayed by wives toward returning husbands, not vice versa. Negative behavior was infrequent.

Children. We examined children's behavior in two ways to account for the varying number of children (0–3) present in the home when a parent returned from work. First, we computed percentages in which the unit of analysis was the individual child present in a videotaped reunion

with a parent. Second, we computed percentages based on whether a reunion behavior was coded for any of the children present on video at the time of the parent's arrival. The latter provided an indicator of the behavior that parents received from at least one of their children upon returning home from work.

We first examined the behavior of the 27 individual children who were present in the home during the 15 reunion episodes when a mother returned from work. These children displayed positive behaviors in 16 of the 27 mother-child reunion episodes (59%), information reports in 13 reunion episodes (48%), and distraction in 6 reunion episodes (22%). In the 29 episodes in which a father returned home from work and children were present in the home, 66 children were already in the home. These children displayed positive behaviors in 29 of the 66 individual child-father reunion episodes (44%), distraction in 25 of the reunion episodes (38%), and information reports in 19 of the reunion episodes (29%). It is notable that children displayed some behaviors more frequently toward their mothers than toward their fathers: positive behavior (59% vs. 44%), information reports (48% vs. 29%), and logistic behavior (22% vs. 11%). However, children were more frequently coded as distracted during reunions with fathers (38%) than during reunions with mothers (22%). Lastly, children displayed few negative behaviors toward either parent (mothers: 4% vs. fathers: 2%).

We next examined the behavior displayed by any child present toward a returning parent. We found that all parents received positive behavior (100%) from at least one child upon their return home from work. Mothers were more likely to be the recipients of information reports from at least one child in the family (93%) than were fathers (66%). In contrast, fathers were more likely to be the recipients of distraction from at least one child in the family (86%) than were mothers (44%). No differences in negative behavior were observed.

Behavioral co-occurrence. We next examined the degree of co-occurrence of different types of behavior during a single reunion episode. For example, a wife might display positive and logistic behavior or a child might display distraction before segueing into an information report. Behavior co-occurrence frequencies are reported in Table 2 and the combination patterns of behaviors observed are described below.

Table 2
Behavior Co-occurrences at Reunion

	Single behavior category coded	Two behavior categories coded	Three behavior categories coded	Four behavior categories coded
Behavior displayed to returning wife/mother				
Husbands	6 (67)	2 (22)	1 (11)	0 (0)
Children	8 (35)	10 (43)	5 (22)	0 (0)
Behavior displayed to returning husband/father				
Wives	13 (46)	5 (18)	5 (18)	5 (18)
Children	26 (53)	19 (39)	4 (8)	0 (0)

Note. $N = 60$ weekdays; 44 instances of adult returning home from work. Percentages are based on the total behavior combinations observed during reunions episodes toward returning adult from family members already at home at time of arrival.

Couple reunions tended to be characterized by one type of behavior. Husbands displayed one behavior type to returning wives in 6 of the 9 reunion episodes (67%), and wives displayed one behavior type to returning husbands in 13 of the 29 reunion episodes (46%). Positive behavior predominated in reunions characterized by a single behavioral code (67% of the reunions in which husbands received a single behavior from their wives and 53% of the reunions in which wives' received a single behavior from their husbands). Parent-child reunions, in contrast, were generally characterized by either one behavior type or two co-occurring behaviors. As Table 2 shows, children usually displayed one behavior type (35%) or two co-occurring behavior types (43%) toward returning mothers. Positive behaviors were again prominent. Four of the 8 instances in which children displayed one behavior type toward returning mothers and 9 of the 10 instances in which children displayed two co-occurring behavior types toward returning mothers contained positive behavior. In contrast, children's behavior toward fathers was less likely to include positive behavior. Children were most likely to display one behavior type (53%) toward fathers and distraction was observed more frequently in these cases than positive behavior (58% vs. 31%). This is consistent with our finding that distraction was displayed by at least one child in the family in over two-thirds of the 29 father-child reunions.

Physical Proximity in Home Spaces Throughout the Evening

We next turned to the scan sampling data to examine the degree to which family members who were present in the home throughout the evening shared space with other family members or dispersed themselves in separate spaces throughout the home. To provide temporal context for the patterns observed in the proximity data, the trajectory of family members' return home across the two weekday afternoons and evenings is described first. As Figure 1 shows, children typically returned home

before parents and were the family members most likely to be home all afternoon and evening. For example, the target child was always in the house in the eight families for whom scan sampling observations were recorded between 3:00 and 3:50 p.m. In contrast, mothers and fathers were at home in only 63% and 50%, respectively of the families with children at home during this time period. Parent returns steadily increased after 4 p.m. By 6 to 7 p.m., mothers in over 90% of the families represented by scan sampling observations for this hour had arrived home. By 7 to 8 p.m., fathers in 90% of the families had arrived home. After the father's arrival, members of the majority of families stayed home until retiring to their beds for the night. Children were typically put to bed between 8 and 9 p.m., leaving 3 or fewer hours of opportunity for family members to interact as a group.

The physical proximity of family members in home spaces throughout the evening are reported as percentages, in which the denominator is based on the number of observation rounds in which both parents and one or more children were in the home. Scan sampling data indicated that family members rarely congregated as a group in the same home space after they all returned to the home on weekday afternoons and evenings. In eight of the 30 families (27%), scan sampling data do not reflect a single instance in which all family members came together in the same home space. In 23 of the 30 families (77%), all family members shared a home space in less than 25% of the scan sampling observations. Figure 2 presents box plots of scan sampling observations made when members of the 30 families were recorded as alone or together (in various combinations) in their houses. On average, all family members in the 30 families came together in a home space in only 14.5% of the observation rounds. It contrast, individual family members were observed alone in a home space with far greater frequency—averaging 30% to 39% of the observation rounds.

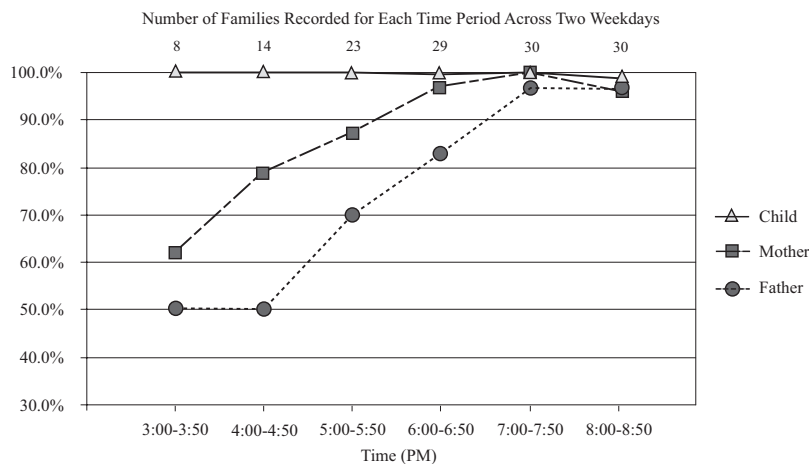


Figure 1. Percentage of target child, mother, and father occurrences at home per 50-min interval (6 observation round in each interval).

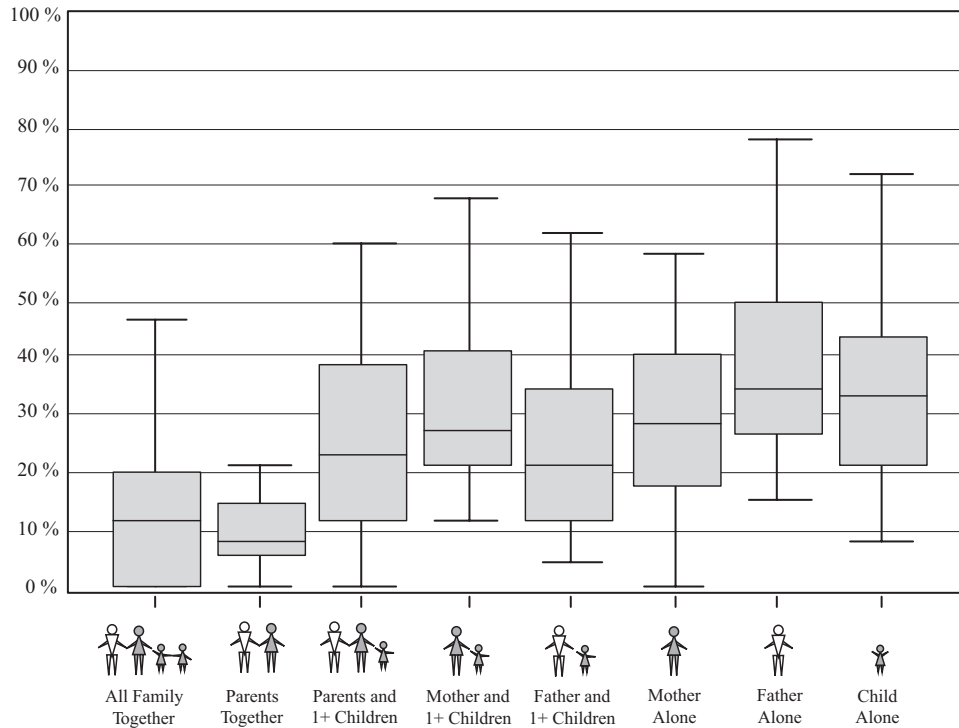


Figure 2. Percentage of observation rounds where members of 30 families shared space or were alone on weekday afternoons and evenings after 3:00 p.m. when both parents and at least one child were at home. These boxplots report observation data in quartiles, and the line running through each gray box indicates the median value for the 30-family dataset. Note that the cumulative frequency across people-space combinations is greater than 100% because, other than instances when all family members were together in one space, a single observation round in a home resulted in more than one code (e.g., father alone in one room, mother and children together in another room).

Although family members seldom came together as a group, box plots in Figure 2 show that some family members frequently gathered in dyadic or triadic combinations. On average, mothers were observed in home spaces with children somewhat more often than they were alone (34% in shared spaces vs. 30% alone) whereas fathers, on average, were observed alone more often than in space with their children (39% alone vs. 25% in shared spaces). Indeed, a father alone in a home space was the person-space configuration observed most frequently, followed by mothers with children and children alone. The least frequently observed configuration was the couple together without children (<10% of scan sampling rounds). As Figure 2 shows, the couple together without children was also the category that showed the least variability across families. All other configurations—including the whole family together at once—showed wide variability across observation rounds. In summary, mothers spent more time with children than fathers, fathers were most often alone, and couples were rarely observed without children.

Discussion

The use of two naturalistic observation methods to study weekday afternoons and evenings in the lives of a small

sample of dual-earner families yielded a number of insights about daily opportunities for interaction and family members' responses to these opportunities. The coding of reunion behavior revealed that mothers, who tended to arrive home earlier in the day than fathers, were mostly welcomed with positive behavior and information reports from their husbands and children. Fathers, who tended to return home later in the day than mothers, were also the recipients of positive behavior from at least one family member but, unlike their wives, they were also immediately immersed into logistical details of the household and their children were more likely to treat them in a distracted manner. As the evening unfolded, scan sampling data revealed that mothers were frequently observed with children whereas fathers were more frequently observed alone within the home space. Although both parents were observed to be together with at least one child in approximately 25% of the scan sampling records, husbands and wives were, on average, observed together without children about 10% of the time.

The present study indicates that opportunities for interaction that affirms and strengthen family bonds are embedded within the weekday routines of dual-earner families. Reunion upon return home from work appeared to provide

one key opportunity during the week to initiate family interaction, exchange information, and reconnect after work and school. During this brief moment, family members frequently showed positive behavior and disclosed information about their day. Indeed, all mothers and fathers received positive behavior from at least one family member upon their return home from work. Mothers received proportionately more positive behavior and information reports than fathers, but negative behavior was rarely observed toward either parent. Positive behavior affirms relationships and information reports characterized by self-disclosures and event sharing provide an opportunity to show interest and responsiveness toward another—behaviors that have been empirically associated with high relationship quality (e.g., Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). As such, this fleeting but salient moment may be a building block for the high quality family relationships that contemporary parents idealize.

Not all family members, however, used the opportunity presented by reunion to interact positively with one another. Positive behaviors occurred in most reunions, but reunions in which a parent returning home was *not* welcomed with positive behavior and instead encountered family members who were distracted and inattentive to their return home comprised a substantial percentage of observed behavior. The high level of distraction encountered by fathers when they reunited with their children was particularly striking. From a cross-cultural perspective on how children normatively greet their elders, these latter results are particularly noteworthy. Social scientists have long documented the near universality of positive behavior in the form of greetings when two or more people reunite after being apart for a period of time (Duranti, 1997; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1977; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Kendon & Ferber 1973). Greetings recognize a person's arrival, status, and display positive intentions that universally facilitate the transition into social interaction with another (Schegloff, 1968). Yet, our observations resonate with what many middle-class U.S. parents and spouses know from personal experience and disparage about contemporary family life in U.S. society. On a more optimistic note, our findings do suggest that parents are welcomed positively most of time, even if they cannot command the full attention of their partner or offspring.

The patterns observed for mothers and fathers throughout the weekday afternoon and evening suggest that work and gender continue to shape U.S. family life. Returning home first and earlier afforded mothers the opportunity to reunite with family members while the day's events were salient and before the others had transitioned into evening routines. In contrast to fathers, mother's reunions were more positive and mothers were more likely to share space with children throughout the evening. In a culture that views intensive mothering positively (Hays, 1996), being able to come home early and spend time with children in the evening may provide personal and social satisfaction and contribute to well-being. The pattern for fathers suggests that fathers are not as well positioned as mothers to generate comparable rewards. The patterns observed, however, are also consistent with research showing that many mothers maintain a

double shift of paid employment followed by household and childcare responsibilities (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Moen & Roehling, 2005). The toll that the double shift takes on employed mothers may be a sense of "always feeling rushed" (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). These data raise the question of whether social withdrawal in the evening in response to job stress is a strategy that is more available to men than to women. Future research should examine this possibility to better understand how work and gender shape social withdrawal behaviors and closeness among family members.

One of the strongest forces in contemporary family life is the increased striving by both genders towards the ideal of a family life characterized by parents and children who enjoy high quality relationships marked by closeness, responsiveness, and shared activity (Coontz, 2005; Daly, 2001; Mintz, 2004; Tubbs, Roy, & Burton, 2005). To balance their concerns that work interferes with participation in family life, many parents specifically set aside "family time" to promote positive and memorable family experiences. Unfortunately, "family time" seldom rises to idealistic expectations (Tubbs et al., 2005). Pursuing the ideal of "family time" may lead parents to overlook opportunities for building strong bonds that are embedded within the noise and bustle of daily life. The moment of first reunion, for example, with its potential for positive event sharing is an opportunity for warmth and intimacy. Information sharing during first reunions can also set the tone for parental monitoring and increased knowledge about a child that can help a parent to be more responsive to their child's needs (Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2004). Over time, these small moments of smooth and emotionally positive social interaction may help individuals recover depleted resources through rewarding interaction with family members (Finkel et al., 2006).

In terms of the pursuit of high-quality family relationships, our data find little positive news for spouses who would like opportunities to maintain their relationship by spending time together as a couple. Scan sampling data presented here indicate that weekdays afford little opportunity for spouses to invest in marital relationship maintenance via one-on-one interactions. Weekday afternoon and evenings at home were dominated by interactions with children and household tasks. On average, spouses were observed together without children present in fewer than 10% of the scan sampling observation rounds. This is consistent with other work showing that couples faced with a shortage of time and energy prioritize their children's needs over their own needs or that of their spouse (Daly, 2001). Exclusive couple interaction may have occurred in our sample during moments that our units of analysis did not capture—after children were put to bed or throughout the workday by phone, e-mail, or instant messaging between spouses. These possibilities merit future investigation. Strong time pressures, however, are typical for dual-earner couples with young children, and the limited time available for intimacy may be detrimental to spouses who expect intimacy and fulfillment from their relationship. Although clinicians and media encour-

age couples with young children to set aside time couple time via such activities as “date night” our data indicate that this may be easier said than done. A better understanding of how spouses maintain their intimate connection may help couples develop more accurate expectations about the daily realities of family life and favorably influence the adjustment to dual-earner parenthood. For example, a few select dual-earner couples may be able to maintain their relationship through affectionate statements and physical closeness as they follow their evening family routine. However, a more successful strategy for relationship maintenance may involve spouses’ recognizing that sustained mutual investment in the mundane tasks of managing a family is a potent, albeit indirect, means of expressing care and compassion.

The current research has unique strengths and limitations. A key strength is that the naturalistic observation methodology allowed for a novel examination of family interaction. Naturalistic observation is time-consuming and laborious but the costs are balanced by the richness of the data and the ecological validity of the resulting findings. This intensive look at two types of behavior, social interaction behavior at reunion, and physical proximity throughout the evening, involved the trade-off of a small sample size with limited statistical power and definitions constrained by idiosyncratic family variability. For instance, the after-work reunions that met our operational criteria for coding represented 37% of potential reunions across the two days and we cannot be sure that other types of reunions that occurred at school or in the context of other childcare arrangements would be characterized by the same behavior patterns. Another limitation emerged from the scan sampling method, which does not mark emotional behaviors or guarantee that individuals remained in the same location or engaged in the same activity in the 10 min between observation rounds (Broege et al., 2007; Ochs et al., 2006). Finally, our focus on spontaneous moments and opportunities for interaction precluded examination of more scripted family routines like dinner or bedtime (see Ochs et al., in press, and Sirota, 2006 for treatment of these two practices within this dataset). We are mindful that these limitations restrict the generalizability of our findings but hasten to note that the rich behavioral data yielded by this work brings attention to aspects of dual-earner family life that might otherwise not be studied.

Dual-earner parents with children worry about the effect of work hours on children and family relationships and strive to cope by focusing on ritual family interactions like dinners or organized leisure (Daly, 2001; Ochs et al., in press; Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh, 2007). Many report that they would choose to work fewer hours if given the opportunity (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). We hope our work brings attention to the small moments embedded in everyday life when family members may briefly open up like clams to engage in positive social interaction that builds and maintains strong family bonds.

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