Ethnographic Methods and Work-Family Research (2009)

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Basic Concepts

Ethnography refers both to a description of a specific society, community, or institution and the process by which that description is produced. Often associated with cultural anthropology and sociology, ethnography has entered other professional discourses over the past several decades and is increasingly familiar to both social researchers and the general public. As a product, ethnography refers to a descriptive study (such as a monograph) in which the way of life of a group of people is described. Such descriptions are necessarily partial and incomplete, as they reflect both the data and the ethnographer’s interpretations and use of various writing conventions; ethnographies are often assessed as both science and literature. As we discuss below, ethnography is best understood as a process that includes a variety of data collection methods and techniques as well as strategies for reasoning between data and theory. This methodology, in turn, reflects a perspective on human behavior and how it can be best studied that is distinct in the social sciences and that guides ethnographers in choosing and adapting methods to local conditions and research questions (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Pelto & Pelto, 1978).

Ethnography offers a perspective that differs from other ways of investigating human behavior in the social sciences. First, it is carried out in the settings where people live their lives rather than in a researcher’s office, laboratory, or other contrived setting (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, pp. 2-3). Indeed, it is the very absence of controlled environments that permits the depth and breadth of insight that can emerge through ethnographic fieldwork. Even when interviews are undertaken, they are usually carried out on the interviewee’s “turf” or the site where an activity occurs. Ethnography has historically entailed intimate and prolonged face-to-face contact between the researcher and the members of the group, community, or category of people being studied. Such intimacy results from prolonged personal engagement by the ethnographer in the lives of other people, allowing ethnographers to encounter them in a variety of settings.
A second characteristic is that ethnography involves prolonged fieldwork and immersion in the settings to be understood. Not all ethnographers remain in the field for the calendar year that characterized earlier studies, but fieldwork measured in months is common, and the desirability of lengthier stays is assumed. Extended fieldwork means that even seemingly static “snapshots” of social settings incorporate history. Such fieldwork builds trust so that sensitive topics can be broached and so ethnographers are able to observe people under a variety of conditions; knowledge that seemed certain in the second month may be more contingent and complex by the tenth. An implication of prolonged study in “natural” social settings is that ethnographers encounter myriad ethical issues and dilemmas that cannot be fully anticipated prior to fieldwork (Fuehr-Lobban, 2003; Whiteford & Trotter, 2008). For most ethnographers, sensitivity to such issues and to the realpolitik of social life is an essential skill.

A third characteristic of ethnography is its goal of capturing what people actually do and their explanations for doing it. Ethnography is committed to discovery; therefore, the ethnographer assumes the role of a learner trying to determine the right questions to ask. This contrasts with social science perspectives that emphasize the researcher as an expert who already knows the questions and is only trying to get them answered. Although ethnographers become conversant with relevant literatures about categories of people, contemporary issues, and social theories, they assume that there is something of hidden importance that can only be discovered through systematic fieldwork. Ethnography is inductive and recursive, using multiple forms of quantitative and qualitative data in order to explicate and model local settings and knowledge. Bold generalizing is often eschewed in favor of understanding the conditions under which actions occur and make sense to “insiders.” Anthropologically trained ethnographers, in particular, distinguish between “emic” categories that make sense to the people being studied and the “etic” categories used within a scientific community to describe behavior (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990).

Ethnography as methodology is also embedded within disciplinary traditions that shape its use; it is more than data collection methods or techniques. Data and, ultimately, interpretations, are produced by researchers who participate in scholarly communities. The anthropological context of ethnography is representative; sociologically trained ethnographers draw upon a somewhat different disciplinary tradition. Perry (2003), for example, argues that anthropology has developed around five fundamental concepts that anthropologists simultaneously embrace and debate: evolution, culture, relativism, structure, and function. Positions vis-à-vis these concepts are reflected in the formulation of questions or problems that ethnographers investigate, how they collect data, and the way they typically frame analyses and interpretations. In addition, anthropology also provides specific theories that can stimulate new questions and propositions that inform fieldwork.

Finally, anthropology is predicated upon the value of cross-cultural comparisons. While such comparisons are not incorporated into every ethnographic monograph, anthropologists are sensitive to the possibilities of cultural variation, and they question universal claims based on just one culture. Anthropology’s use of
the comparative method can challenge unexamined notions of causality or necessity in particular ethnographic cases and expand thinking about the range of possible family and work arrangements. Anthropologists have long conducted cross-cultural studies of families (e.g., Harrell, 1997), kinship (e.g., Schweizer & White, 1998), and household economies (e.g., Small & Tannenbaum, 1999), each of which can enrich ethnographies of working families. Comparative studies of childhood (e.g., Olwig & Gullov, 2003), parenting (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1996), and aging (e.g., Sokolovsky, 1997) can help ethnographers of working families frame new questions around the human life course. Specific studies may also incorporate an explicitly cross-cultural perspective, such as Tsuya and Bumpass’s (2003) comparative study of marriage, work, and family in Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

The starting point for ethnography is typically participant observation, which is less a specific method than a strategy for collecting data, especially during the initial stages of fieldwork (Agar, 1996; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, pp. 91-120). It can also become the primary strategy for data collection in an entire project. Participant observation involves living with the people being studied, observing social settings and the activities that occur in them, and participating in people’s lives. Ethnographers perhaps differ in their preferences for active participation and reflective observation, and the conditions of fieldwork limit the opportunities for either. Regardless, participant observation dispels any claims that ethnographers are neutral scientists standing apart from the action. In fact, by positioning oneself in the thick of things and studying the contexts of social life, the ethnographer develops the relationships necessary for fieldwork and sensitivity to cultural rules. The ethnographer’s experiences provide the basis for subsequent interviews and observations, and the trust that encourages the people being studied to deem him or her worthy of their time, attention, and confidences.

Interviews allow ethnographers to capture what people say they are doing and what they say they should be doing. Ethnographic interviewing usually begins with loosely structured, open-ended interviews that sound almost conversational as they proceed (Spradley, 1979). In fact, they do not follow the rules of conversational turn taking and are carefully structured to elicit basic cultural domains. Such interviews can be structured around asking for lists (e.g., "What are the activities you do together as a family?" or "In what ways do you think your job affects your children?") and narratives of experience (e.g., “Tell me about what you did the last time you were ill.”) (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, pp. 137-138).

Semistructured interviews assume the relevance of particular domains (usually established through participant observation and conversations) and allow the ethnographer to explore them. They are used to further elaborate specific cultural domains that are relevant to the goals of the research project and to develop more sensitive variables and instruments for further data collection. They thus lie at the intersection of exploratory and explanatory phases of research. Such interviews are carefully structured, but at the heart of semistructured interviews is the ability to spontaneously probe an interviewee in order to elicit more detailed information and to follow up on emerging themes. Probing is important because it
places the ethnographer in the role of attentive student or learner and helps generate information that is salient to the interviewee.

Structured interviewing converts exploratory data into instruments that define cultural domains and measure the relationships between them. Such instruments take the form of questionnaires and cultural domain analyses, both of which underlie the creation of formal models of culture. Ethnographic surveys are only the final step in an often lengthy process of discovering the categories that are salient to people in a setting. Cultural domain analysis consists of techniques used to rigorously study how people “think about lists of things that somehow go together” (Bernard, 2006, p. 299), as well as their characteristics and the principles of classification (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). Both ethnographic surveys and cultural domain analyses represent the culmination of the ethnographer’s role as learner in those settings, and they allow him or her to get at the emic perspective: categories that make sense to a native of a culture.

Systematic observation complements interviewing as a basis of ethnography and, indeed, getting at what people actually do is a hallmark of ethnography. Observation should not be undertaken lightly, for it is time consuming and drives up the costs of fieldwork. An interview conducted with just the right person can effectively compress weeks or even years of potential observation into minutes or hours. Yet interviews provide a thin and potentially distorted understanding of social life, especially if they focus on the question of what people do or did. Not only can people lie, but memory is selective, and not all behavior can be verbalized. Interview-based accounts of behavior can present it as more rational and predictable than it really is. The contingencies and improvisations that characterize everyday life are revealed through observation. The latter is not paramount, but, rather, it is by exploring how verbalized descriptions intersect with observable actions that ethnography’s potential to deliver insights is realized.

Bernard (2006, pp. 413-450) distinguishes between direct and indirect strategies for observing. In direct observation, the ethnographer observes behavior as it occurs by using techniques such as continuous monitoring, spot sampling, and time allocation studies. In indirect observation, the ethnographer observes only the traces of previous behavior. Examples include observations of buildings and built landscapes as well as features such as graffiti or outputs like garbage. Archival research, too, constitutes a form of indirect observation because it results from previous behaviors that are not directly observed. Strategies for observing have been most dramatically transformed by new information technologies, and the use of videotaping, digital photography, and pagers is widespread in contemporary ethnography, although such usage alone does not mark a project as ethnographic.

The very subject of ethnography—the social world—is itself dynamic. With new phenomena constantly emerging, the methods of ethnography are necessarily heterogeneous. For example, virtual worlds and online communities have a presence in many homes and workplaces, and what it means to conduct ethnography within them poses new methodological challenges. In fact, precisely which methods make a
research project ethnographic may be debated. The sine qua non of ethnography is not its individual methods, but how they are incorporated into a larger discovery process. An implication is that a researcher may use one or more of the methods of ethnography without “doing ethnography” if we reserve the latter for a larger research methodology.

Analysis in ethnographic research takes a characteristic “funnel” form in which research problems are initially defined, explored, or tested and then transformed; the movement is toward both greater precision in description and conceptualization and inclusion of contextual characteristics that may help explain what is being observed (Agar, 1996, pp. 183-184). Ethnography also proceeds by triangulation, or verifying inferences by using multiple data sources. Analysis is constant throughout fieldwork, and it begins with identifying patterns and developing “sensitizing concepts” that suggest avenues for further exploration (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ethnographers proceed by developing typologies that distinguish between preexisting analytical constructs used in the social sciences and the local categories (i.e., cultural domains) that are recognized and organized by cultural “insiders.” Analytical induction underlies theory building in ethnography, although not all ethnography is concerned with developing or testing theories (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 204).

Ethnography as a process ultimately results in a product--an ethnography--in which writing has a central role. Sometimes the relationship between analysis and writing seems straightforward, such as when ethnography is undertaken for audiences like public policy makers or organizational administrators. However, ethnography is an inherently reflexive affair in which modes of expression are not neutral and cannot be taken for granted (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988). Ethnographies are texts, and, as such, they employ specific organizing principles that are implicated in the very representation of behaviors and settings described; ethnographic writing is far from a simple “writing up” of findings. Hammersley and Atkinson, for example, describe ordering principles for writing ethnography such as the natural history of the fieldwork; chronologies, such as developmental cycles or moral careers; and using micro- and macroscopic “lenses” to shift the writing from particulars to generalities (1983, pp. 215-220).

In summary, ethnography is salient to work-family researchers as both methods and methodology. Viewed as a set of methods, ethnography is useful because it provides research tools that can be used even if a project is not fully ethnographic. Alternatively, work-family researchers can focus on ethnography as a methodology, apart from its specific methods. It provides a systematic way to address research questions while retaining responsiveness to local conditions. Here its value is less in its methods per se than in the way it guides our thinking about how to investigate a phenomenon.
Importance to Work-Family Studies

From one perspective, nearly the entire corpus of ethnographic monographs can be viewed as an important source of cross-cultural information about families and work, as well as the myriad other topics ethnographers typically include when describing a social system. Such ethnographies may seem archaic or exotic to the contemporary work-family researcher, but they document the creative capacity of humans to adapt to different circumstances. Despite the general value of these monographs, we focus the rest of this entry on ethnographic methods as they contribute to understanding the intersection of work and family as it has come to be understood in the past few decades. The challenge goes beyond understanding family and work as separable domains, but realizing that they intersect in complex, unpredictable, and even discomforting ways. In this sense, we may begin by looking at or hearing about work and suddenly find ourselves enmeshed in discussions of family, or vice versa. The following summary is not exhaustive, but it provides a sense of the scope of contemporary research that uses at least some ethnographic methods.

The Importance of Talk. Because ethnography is conducted in situ, it provides opportunities to observe the role of discourse in mediating between work and family. All ethnographers are hopefully sensitive to the importance of talk, but those trained in discourse and conversation analysis are especially sensitive to its role in identity formation and negotiation, relationships of power, and socialization. Ethnographers have documented the talk, as well as the material and social contexts in which it occurs, thereby providing insights into work-family connections that might be invisible to the people studied. In effect, there is a tacit effort of connecting and disconnecting work and family that is manifested in ordinary conversations around dinner tables and television sets as well as photocopiers and water coolers.

The importance of talk characterizes much of the research conducted by scholars at the Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELF) at UCLA. Elinor Ochs et al. (2006, p. 388) explain, “In many ways, linguistic anthropologists are like visual anthropologists, but rather than filming events to produce an edited film narrative, the linguistic anthropologist tends to video-record events to collect a corpus of data that can be broken down and analyzed as situations, activities, interactions, or behaviors of the same type.” Video captures verbal and nonverbal behavior, allowing the researcher to document much more than he or she would be able to with handwritten notes alone.

Paugh (2002) looked at how children are socialized using the “language socialization paradigm” developed by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), which involves participant observation, interview, elicitation of family genealogies and social networks, and historical research. Ochs and Shohet (2006) examined mealtimes as sites for socializing children into commensality and communicative expectations and how mealtime comportment is relevant to children’s competency in their families and communities. Klein (2003) investigated how families construct ideologies of work in households while also managing
professional, scholastic, and family activities. The study took an ethnographic approach and found that, although household chores are an area of conflict and tension, they provide settings for developing children’s domestic skills and knowledge about moral and economic systems in society.

**Family Stories.** Ethnographic methods have been used to document the narratives, constructed at work or home, that help people understand and cope with stressful conditions. These narratives may evoke a nostalgic longing for better or more comprehensible times in the past as well as providing guidance for the uncharted territory of the future. Ethnographic fieldwork can document the origins of the stories, as well as changes to them, and how they are used by people in different contexts to render experiences sensible. In doing so, they express assumptions and values and further contribute to socialization. Above all, under conditions of a “time bind” (Hochschild, 1997), they contribute to the master narratives that give individual lives direction and meaning.

Richardson’s (2001) fieldwork in a sawmill allowed him to document stories about work, especially horseplay that had been forbidden and discrepancies between shop floor rules and worker-valued activity. Stories allowed individual memories to be compared between and situated in the family relationships that pervaded the mill. Fivush, Bohanek, Robertson, and Duke (2004) focus on how working families create shared stories; the authors link shared narratives to psychological well-being. The research describes different styles of parental reminiscing that are, in turn, linked to the developing abilities of children to tell stories of their own lives.

Not surprisingly, narratives are often constructed to make sense of time allocation. Ethnography has revealed the extent to which the pervasive sense of busyness and fast pacing permeates family life, simultaneously leaving scant time to address larger questions about the meaning of activities in people’s lives and creating the conditions under which doing so is critical. Dunn, Kinney, and Hofferth (2003) conducted interviews and observations with parents and children in their community, looking at parents’ perspectives on their children’s future and their relationship with the children’s activities. The children’s perspectives were also included, and the research demonstrated the complex functions served by seemingly simple obvious activities. Dunn (2002) also examined how children’s after-school activities and parents’ involvement in them reflected an “ideology of involvement” built out of volunteerism and participation that permeated family life.

**Space and Movement.** Participant observation and structured observation take the researcher into the everyday settings where family and work intersect. Interviews inadequately capture the importance of material constraints on action, the ways that artifacts and spaces are configured to reflect and support the intersection of work and family, and the ways that mobility shapes daily life. Ethnography demonstrates the brute physicality of work and family and their often competing demands.
Anthony Graesch (2008) used an ethnoarchaeological approach that included family-made narrated video house tours, questionnaires, and timed observations of activities to analyze how and by whom space at home is used. Architecture, organization of interior and activity spaces, artifact use, household economy, and diet all figured into the analysis, going far beyond what would be accessible through interviews. Ochs, Graesch, Mittmann, Bradbury, and Repetti (2006) used ethnoarchaeological tracking in tandem with video ethnography to learn how families spatially situate themselves in the home. Tracking was integrated into a broader set of ethnoarchaeological data-collection techniques. The team first documented physical attributes of the family home (with a floor plan), documented the material contents of each family home (with digital images), and conducted observations of activities (Ochs et al., 2006, p. 395). Montgomery (2006) used observation, questionnaires, interviews, census data, school data, and mapping to compare “time binds” across neighborhoods of Los Angeles and how they are influenced by political, economic, and social developments. Grosswald’s (2002) interview-based project examined effects of public transit shift work on family health and welfare, exploring both the incompatibilities of jobs and raising small children as well as the coping strategies workers used. Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck’s study of dual-career families examined how they used spaces and artifacts to buffer the effects of busyness (2007). Hoey (2005), in contrast, explored migration as a means of making radical changes to lifestyle in order to reestablish control, balance, and integration in work, family, and personal life.

Real Bodies. Just as ethnography brings spaces into the foreground, people emerge as corporeal bodies and not simply disembodied actors. Physical bodies cannot be in two places at once, although the capacity to do so would certainly alleviate many of the scheduling conflicts that fieldwork identifies. The resulting “tradeoffs” provide a language for describing how family members negotiate the inevitable conflicts that characterize their days and compel them to “be in touch” via information technologies throughout the day. Ethnography shifts the focus from rational, well-laid plans to continual adjustments made to commitments and responsibilities throughout the day. It is a shift from scripts to improvisation, albeit one built upon building blocks of familiar, habitual schedules, frequent communication, and networks of friends, family members, coworkers, and acquaintances. Stress is often the result, and health consequences are a recurring theme among many families.

Byrd (2006) conducted life history interviews with women making the transition between different work-family arrangements. They were asked about work and leisure and the impact of having children on jobs and careers. The research elucidates processes of decision-making at different junctures in the life course and how expectations correspond to actual events. DeCaro and Worthman (2004) used iterative self-reporting and interviews to analyze the “time bind” and cultural ecology of stress in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. They describe children’s needs and activities that reverberate through their parents’ lives as the latter try to provide “safe” social and physical environments and order and stability in their sons’ and daughters’ lives. Upton and Han (2003) examined how pregnancy challenges a woman’s sense of self as a woman, professional, and wife. In particular, they looked at the relationship of the pregnant
body to clothing and the sense of “business as usual” within a web of symbols that define gender and the body. Rudd, Root, and Young (2002) used semistructured interviews and participant and structured observation in their study of overtime and workers’ beliefs about life outside work. Their study considers workers’ motivations for taking on certain jobs at certain hours and the relationship of overtime to the good life, dignity and pride, and consumption and status. Izquierdo and Paugh (2003) looked at how definitions of healthy bodies and minds correspond with the realities of busy working family life. Although parents discuss the importance of modeling good health practices that establish “balance” in everyday life, those practices are difficult to enact. Guilty feelings and moral judgments were reflected in families’ gendered health ideologies. Paxton (2002) conducted interviews and participant observation in order to understand the motivations for women to participate in ballet, an activity associated with their children. While some women went to ballet for an escape, contradictions were found across narratives: talk about ballet as freedom from pressure accompanied descriptions of it as a locus of stress and surveillance. In fact, some women felt worse about their bodies after class, so that while ballet was an escape from work, it was not an escape from working.

Management. Ethnographic methods that have been used to explore the “time bind” (Hochschild, 1997), in which there is insufficient time for family members to meet all their commitments, have also explicated management as a dominant metaphor by which family life and running a household are organized. Using this metaphor, we see that life is not simply lived, but managed using techniques often first encountered in the workplace. Many of the previously cited studies exemplify this attention to management.

LeVeen (2002) conducted interviews with a sample of working women in order to understand their health-care choices. Such choices were shown to be shaped by a perceived time deficit and the need to somehow gain control over how they allocate their time. Montgomery (2008) used interviewing and observation to document how time is divided between work and home, and she looked at the strategies people used to cope with economic uncertainty. Observations revealed that, although coping with such uncertainty was common, not everyone admitted to it in interviews. Marchena (2004) explored “quality time” among dual-earner families by conducting a survey and semistructured interviews; the results revealed how parents discussed and used the concept within their families. “Quality time” made sense only in contrast with “work time” and “family time.” Both Gullestad’s Kitchen-Table Society (1984) and Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck’s Busier Than Ever! (2007) highlight the importance of management. The latter book, for example, is based on 2 years of fieldwork with 14 families and documents the drivers of work and family busyness, the coping strategies individuals and families adopted, and the ways they sought to create environments that would help them buffer busyness in the future by making coping easier.

Behind the Numbers. Finally, semistructured interviewing about work and family has fulfilled one of ethnography’s traditional functions: revealing how quantitative data, often collected at high levels of
aggregation, play out in everyday life. In this way, ethnographers are able to link public policy and macro-
level economic, religious, social, and political trends to the homes and workplaces of a society. Katherine
Newman’s Falling From Grace (1988) and Declining Fortunes (1994) used such interviews to trace the
effects of economic dislocation on middle-class families and the long-term implications for the American
Dream. Kathryn Dudley used interviews to explore the impacts of plant closings on workers (1994) and
debt in farming families (2002). Each of these books uses a familiar ethnographic method to get behind
the numbers and both humanize them and demonstrate the pervasive consequences of economic
hardship on different facets of families and communities. Ann Bookman’s Starting in Our Own Backyards
(2004) followed a sample of biotechnology workers and their families as they juggled work-family
obligations and as they created new forms of community to help them cope.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Ethnographies of work-family are done in societies where it is assumed that we separately understand
work and family; therefore, intensive observational studies of behavior and ordinary communities—the
staple of earlier ethnography—are presumably unnecessary and uninteresting. The ethnographic projects
undertaken are generally problem oriented: They take a broader theoretical concern or macro-level
phenomenon and explore how it is locally manifested. This approach means that ethnographic methods
may be combined with other kinds of research to help frame the ethnography. Whitelegg’s (2007) study of
flight attendants, for example, includes a history of the airline industry. Just as Newman’s pioneering
ethnography of downward mobility relied on economic and demographic data (1988), Hochschild’s (1997)
research in a Fortune 500 company makes sense within a similar literature on the economics of families
and the proliferation of work/life balance programs. Townsend’s (2002) study of fathers is grounded in the
scholarship of gender, and, in particular, of feminist studies. Bookman’s (2004) work on the connections
between families and communities was a spin-off from a larger Massachusetts Institute of Technology
project on biotechnology. Ethnographic methods are, then, often combined with historical, demographic,
psychological, economic, and policy data that allow local lives and communities to be placed in
larger contexts.

The complexity of problem-oriented projects is also relevant to the professional identifications of
ethnographers. Ethnography may well be conducted primarily by anthropologists and sociologists, but
some of its methods are also used by other scholars, such as geographers (e.g., Jarvis, 2005; Whitelegg,
2007) and specialists in fields such as organizational behavior (e.g., Perlow, 1997). In addition, scholars
from other disciplines and research traditions may be part of larger project teams with anthropologists and
sociologists, and they may participate in both data collection and analysis. Generating ethnographic data
and producing writings based on those data may be connected by complex lineages. On the one hand,
this disciplinary diversity may broaden and deepen understandings of work and family, but it may also
shift ethnographers from their traditional role as learner being taught by the people they study to that of data gatherer whose questions—and assumptions—have been provided by other researchers.

Just as professional identities come into play during ethnography, so too do personal ones. It is difficult to read about ethnographers conducting specific projects and not be impressed by their intellectual, political, and personal commitments. Bookman (2004) shifts the focus from families and workplaces to the communities of which they are a part and the contexts they provide for political action to better support working families; her personal background includes the roles of activist and policy maker. Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck (2007) struggled individually to integrate family responsibilities with heavy teaching loads; the lessons they learned about others were directly pertinent to their own lives. Dudley’s ethnographies of Rust Belt and farming communities (1994) were embedded in her own family’s history.

The connection between ethnographer and subject suggests the challenges of ethnography. Taking on an ethnographic project requires a significant commitment of time as well as exposure or vulnerability to what is being studied. The personal motivations for undertaking ethnography, although irrelevant to judging the ultimate quality of the work performed, nonetheless suggests that it should not be taken lightly. Precisely because ethnography is not conducted at a distance, there may be relationships between researcher and subject that are not made in other traditions such as survey research. Under such conditions, methods assume a distinct role, for we must document our claims to knowledge.

Ethnographies that are relevant to work-family studies also vary in their unit of study. Some focus on communities of co-residence, such as Dudley’s studies (1994, 2002) of Kenosha and of a Midwestern farming community or Descartes and Kottak’s (2009) study of a Michigan suburban community. Other studies look at individuals who are marked by one or more common characteristics. For example, Townsend’s (2002) ethnography was of a sample of male graduates from one high school, and Whitelegg (2007) used ethnographic methods to study flight attendants as a profession comprising dispersed members.

Both the CELF and 500 Family studies use the family as their unit of analysis as they examine where and how dual-career families spend time at home. In the analysis phase of research, Broege, Owens, Graesch, Arnold, and Schneider (2008) address the issue of sample selection and size by merging the studies. By combining data sets, they validate each study and attempt to make up for each one’s potential methodological weaknesses. The 500 Family Study is a sociological approach and uses self-reported time diary data from a national sample. The CELF study comes from an anthropological approach and examines 32 families from a regional sample using observational scan sampling.

Even in community studies, the emphasis may be on individuals and families because the ethnographer starts with macro-level phenomena and traces how they play out in quotidian life. Darrah, Freeman, and
English-Lueck (2007) begin with macro-level trends—such as increasing time spent at work, rising nonstandard work hours, deregulation of industries, and growth of information technologies—and trace relationships to individual and family strategies of managing everyday life. Descartes and Kottak (2009) explore the relationship between mass media and family life. Virtually all work-family ethnographies follow this pattern of connecting macro-level phenomena or issues to local manifestations.

Samples are not randomly chosen but rather reflect both theoretical and personal interests and the difficulties of access. Ethnographic studies of the work-family interface delve deeply into personal lives and family affairs and are not just looking at public life. The barrier to entry can be high. For example, Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck (2007) had successfully conducted repeated interviews with 175 individuals in Silicon Valley, but none participated in a subsequent year-long project in which dual-career family members were shadowed at home, work, and school. Instead, participants in that study were recruited through newspaper advertisements, public presentations, and the incentive of a $1,500 honorarium (Darrah, 2006). In some cases, access is obtained from larger projects that permitted rapport to be gradually built (e.g., Bookman, 2004; Perlow, 1997), and in other cases, it is family ties that provide the crucial legitimacy for the ethnographer (Dudley, 2002). Regardless, the challenge of gaining access only adds to the already considerable time commitment ethnography demands. Lengthy fieldwork, months spent analyzing notes, and the complex process of “writing it all up” can make ethnography as a methodology a costly and significant personal and professional commitment.

Although some studies primarily use participant observation, most combine it with interviews; indeed, interviewing is the primary method in most ethnographies of work and family. Interviewing can be preferred for several reasons. One reason is that it can be difficult to gain access to the necessary settings for work-family fieldwork: Both homes and workplaces are private spaces, and lengthy stays by ethnographers may be unwelcome. Second, observation is time consuming, and interviews are quicker to produce useful data. Third, the research questions asked relate to meaning and interpretation, and interviewing provides textual data that is both necessary to answer some questions and also consistent with the view that social life is a text to be interpreted (Geertz, 1973). A conclusion, then, is that the very nature of work-family ethnography can vary significantly depending on the methods selected.

Finally, ethnographies as written products differ in important ways. Some ethnographies are solo projects in which research and writing are linked into a single process performed (typically) by a single author (e.g., Dudley, 1994, 2002; Townsend, 2002); it can be difficult to even imagine separating data collection from writing or author from text. In other cases, the writing is embedded in a larger project that may incorporate ethnographic and nonethnographic methods and questions (e.g., Bookman, 2004). Alternatively, the ethnographic writing may be based on dissertation research that was perhaps conducted for different purposes. For example, many of the chapters in Children’s Places (Olwig & Gullov, 2003) examine children as they are socially distinguished and “placed” in communities for various
purposes and with various consequences. Most of the chapters are based on the author’s dissertation research, which, in turn, may have been part of a different or larger research agenda.

Work-family ethnographies reflect varying degrees of faithfulness to the spoken word. As noted above, the emphasis in many ethnographies is on interviews as sources of accurate data that can be subjected to careful analysis. Townsend (2002), for example, provides detailed description of the conventions he uses for quoting his interviewees, and approaches such as conversation analysis, even if not faithfully followed, inspire sensitivity to dialogue. Quotations put human faces on macro-level trends and their impact on lives, arguably one of ethnography’s most important contributions. Such precision, of course, is about what people say. Other approaches, such as adopted in Busier Than Ever! (Darrah, Freeman, & English-Lueck, 2007), emphasize observation in everyday settings where the challenges of audio or video recording were overwhelming. The resulting ethnography has fewer quotations and an emphasis on the ethnographer as storyteller as well as description of what people do and how they account for it.

Implications

The conditions for continued productivity of work-family ethnography are present. Ethnography permits flexible inquiry during rapid change, especially when new phenomena and questions may be emerging. The field of work-family scholarship emerged during a period of general economic growth and the rise of dual-income households accompanied by deregulation of markets and reduced government services; today (2009), those conditions are rapidly changing. As noted throughout this paper, ethnography is especially valuable for tracing how macro-level trends are locally manifested and for relaying stories that contribute to civic discourse about social issues and policies. Its attention to the relationship between what people say and what they do is invaluable when the relationships between workplace and home and between public and private goods are being renegotiated.

Perhaps the most important methodological characteristic of work-family ethnography is the time it demands. Many studies are conducted as dissertation theses, and an implication is that many researchers may conduct their most thorough work early in their careers. They may never again have the luxury of time and support to undertake lengthy fieldwork, and, instead, they may be constrained to use a selected method of ethnography rather than the larger methodology. Unlike survey researchers, who may conduct dozens or even hundreds of projects in a career, ethnographers may perform only a few. A central question, then, is where and how does ethnography fit into careers when it is a struggle to get into the field? This is not to argue that work-family ethnography is irrelevant; far from it. But it suggests that it may be useful to examine the ways mastery of a particular research methodology becomes integrated into disciplines, professional fields, and personal careers.
A related issue is how ethnographers can and do participate as members of heterogeneous research teams. Such teams have both the potential to address broader social issues through policy and the ability to attract resources. Indeed, such projects already help support ethnographic projects that, in turn, complement the work of other researchers. While it may be easy to accept the resources and celebrate the capacity of ethnographers to reach a potentially receptive audience of other researchers, it is harder to see how such participation may shift some core attributes of ethnography. Are ethnographers in such roles compelled to take on the questions and assumptions of other disciplines, while simultaneously deemphasizing the role of learner among the people studied? Do opportunities for theory building remain, or do ethnographers simply become the providers of interesting anecdotes that illustrate the findings of other scholars?

Finally, working within teams on complex projects also opens doors, whether welcome or not, to effecting change in public or private realms. Well-funded projects are often expected to produce results that ameliorate rather than just illuminate problems. They may be based on the proposition that changing the world is both desirable and facilitated by accumulating data. This proposition is consistent with social critique, but only as prelude to actions that may not fully please everyone. The challenges to ethnographers, whose ethical obligations and even identifications are with the people they study, are significant, for ethnography would be explicitly shifting from documentation of what is and what it means to what could be. This, in turn, demands additional skills and knowledge of ethnographers.

References


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix...)

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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. Key Informants: The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. Literature review: Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. Peer review: On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver/caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, “Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study,” on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a “work in progress.” We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:
1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
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- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
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- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see
Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
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- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
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**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
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- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
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