

FAMILY MEAL-TIME INTERACTION: UNDERSTANDING THE FAMILY IN ITS NATURAL SETTING

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Abstract

There is growing evidence concerning the value of studying the family in its natural habitat (Kantor and Lehr, 1975) for both understanding and explaining family interaction, as well as facilitating therapeutic intervention (White, 1976). This paper summarizes the existing literature on the importance of the family meal in analyzing family interaction, presents the results of a naturalistic observational study of a normal (non-pathological) family, and identifies the implications of the study for research and therapy.

Résumé

Il devient de plus en plus évident qu'il est très valable d'étudier la famille dans son milieu naturel (Kantor et Lehr, 1975) tant pour comprendre et expliquer l'interaction parmi les membres de la famille que pour faciliter une intervention thérapeutique (White, 1976). Cet article résume la littérature actuelle sur l'importance du repas pris en famille pour analyser la gamme des interactions. De plus, il présente les résultats de l'observation d'une famille normale (non-pathologique) et signale ce que cela peut apporter à la recherche et à la thérapie.

The Issues

Family research has a rich and varied history, both in volume and style. Most data about family relationships are obtained with questionnaires and interviews, typically from "captive" college students, or from wives, as if these family members could provide the most accurate description of their families. Due to sharp criticism of this type of research, more recent studies have obtained survey data from several family members (Larson, 1974; Thomas, Peterson & Rollins, 1977). Social psychiatry, in contrast, has tended to emphasize observational and quasi-experimental studies of family interaction in hospital or laboratory settings (Winter & Ferreira, 1969; Lennard & Bernstein, 1974). The observation of family relationships in its natural setting, however, is less common, even though this form of study has been used in various ways since the turn of the century. It is well known, for example, that Charles Cooley's (1902) work on the development of the self is largely based on the systematic observation of his own family.

The interest in the study of the family in its own environment, however, has been growing steadily. Many researchers have argued that the laboratory or professional office, as well as traditional survey procedures, tend to obtain data on what families *say* they do or what they do in contrived, public

conditions. What families *really* say, do, think, feel and experience, however, can only be understood by observing family interaction in their own home — their *naturalistic setting* (Barker, 1963; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970; Hinde, 1974; Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Jules Henry's (1965) pacesetting study of five families, reported in his book *Pathways to Madness*, involved the participant observation of each family for an average of 100 hours over a span of one week. This early work reflects an uncanny, lucid portrait of the inner workings of the family in the raw. It is his judgment, that the most natural and appropriate data source in the development of science is the "relentless examination of the commonplace". The profuse research of Gerald Patterson, and his colleagues, on family behaviour is perhaps the most contemporary example. Patterson (1969) obtains five baseline observations of families with a problem child in their own home, prior to the use of behaviour modification therapy, and post-therapy observations of an equal number. Although Patterson (1969) has emphasized the importance of naturalistic observation for clinical assessment, much of his research has represented an examination of behavioural sequence and patterns in families (Jones, Reid & Patterson, 1974). Certain family therapists, as well, have emphasized the importance of knowing how

families use private spaces (Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman & Schumer, 1967; Satir, 1967; Zuk, 1971).

The naturalistic observation of families is not without methodological problems. Typically two problems are emphasized: observer bias and the effects of the observer on "natural" family behaviour. Observer bias is the more serious of the two because the observer is sensitized either by his values or his training to certain behaviours, to the neglect of others. Considerable research has demonstrated that there are serious problems, but they can be controlled and significantly minimized. The effect of the observer, except in extreme circumstances, is due, to some extent, to the engrained, habitual nature of family patterns in natural settings. Children, in particular, exert tremendous pressure to behave "normally," the observer notwithstanding. Family researchers, of many perspectives, increasingly favor observational procedures in combination with other techniques, varied designs, and multiple-time measurements, typically referred to as the multi-trait, multi-method, and multi-time approach. Until these are affordable, however, the continued use of differing techniques for differing purposes will remain.

Most family observations in their natural setting are conducted during the family meal-time. Eating together as a family is typically a daily activity where all or most members convene in one location within the house at about the same time every day. As early as 1950, Bossard and Boll (1950) defined the family meal as the most important demonstration of family interaction, among all possible family activities, and one of the more salient family rituals. They emphasized that the family meal represented stabilized patterns of behaviour (such as the division of labour, authority and deference patterns, communication patterns), processes of socializing the young, and that family meal was a basic illustration of and influence on family cohesiveness and adjustment. More recent researchers and theorists agree. Goffman (1961) refers to the family meal as a "focused encounter." Similarly, Henry (1965) argues that "food and meal-times actualize underlying tensions: people use food and meal-times against one another". Sommer (1969), and others suggest that the dinner table defines the family's identity.

It is perhaps for these reasons that family therapists are increasingly utilizing the family meal as both a source of data and a means of intervention. The life space diagram was developed by Bodin and Ferber (1972) to define what it meant for the patient to live in his family. Families are asked to recall a typical family meal in terms of the use of space because they believe that the family meal represents "a rich combina-

tion of family business meeting, social gathering and ritual, didactic session, and orally gratifying time" (Bodin & Ferber, 1972, p. 93). Minuchin (1971) developed the family therapy lunch session as a way of observing family interaction, in its most natural form even though conducted in an artificial setting, and making on-the-spot interventions. Minuchin (1971) believes that the structural and dysfunctional characteristics of the family are most readily apparent when the family eats together, and the family itself through this experience is able to perceive that the illness is in the family as a whole, rather than the "patient" alone (Rosman, Minuchin & Liebman, 1975).

Despite the widespread appeal of the family meal as a source of data, however, only limited research has been done. The only major study of the family meal was conducted by Dreyer and Dreyer (1973). They found that family members tend to sit in the same places at every meal, the mother and father tend to sit opposite each other, and the mother sits nearest to the youngest child. Parents were found to talk significantly more often than children, nearly two thirds as often. Although they didn't identify the largest content area of conversation, discipline was found to be second largest category of meal-time activity. In general, they concluded that dinnertime is a patterned ritual in which age and sex roles are clearly defined, and family rules and values are visualized and demonstrated. Other research has confirmed the significance of space use (seating patterns) in the allocation and demonstration of family authority. Dominant people are found to sit at opposite ends of the table (Strodbeck & Hook, 1961; Hare & Bales, 1963; Sommer, 1969). Although the Patterson (1969) data are a rich source for the analysis of family meal-time behaviour, the research has emphasized the analysis of behavioural pattern and sequence without direct reference to seating pattern or family roles and values.¹ Any therapy approach would benefit greatly from the generation of five meal-time observations of the family behavioural patterns.

It seems apparent from the literature we have reviewed that the naturalistic observation of the family, with a particular focus on the family meal, constitutes a uniquely important data source for family research, theories of family relationships, and family therapy.

METHOD

The major purpose of this study was to observe a *normal* (nonpathological) family to gain some insight into how a family interacts at meal-time,

1. The research being conducted at the Oregon Research Institute is of importance in understanding family interaction in the home. Space does not permit a review of this work in this paper.

and what could be learned about a family by observing their seating patterns, and observing their non-verbal, verbal and intonational communication patterns.

The initial problem in doing a project of this kind was the selection of an appropriate family. In addition to the choice of a normal family, the writers wanted a large family whose members were typically articulate. The family chosen was ideal for the purposes of this analysis. Both the mother and father were previously married and widowed, and brought three children each to their second marriage. They had one child from their second marriage. The family was white, of Scottish origin, upper-middle socio-economic status, and Protestant. The ages of each family member were as follows: father — 46, mother — 44, four girls aged 20, 19, 18, and 17, and three boys aged 17, 14, and 8. The two older girls were no longer living at home at the time of the study and hence were not part of the observation. The junior author, also the observer, was personally acquainted with the family and had considerable knowledge of the family's background. The family resided in a community of about 3,500 people in the Province of Alberta.

Arrangements were made by the observer with the mother to share in a normal evening meal (informal, regular meal without guests). With the exception of the two youngest children, all of the family members were informed of the purposes of the project, the observation, and that the meal-time conversation would be recorded. The tape recorded transcript provided detailed intonational data on interruptions, hesitations, colloquialisms, synonomous conversations, and related expressions, along with a complete sequential record of all conversation. The observer systematically identified the physical details of the setting and space used, and the movements, expressions and gestures of each family member. The observer assumed an unobtrusive role at the dinner table, not speaking unless spoken to, etc. Based on the data obtained and analyzed, it appeared that the observer had little effect on the normal behavioural routines of this family.

Data analysis

A number was assigned to each family member, the observer, and the group. Each statement was then analyzed in terms of direction, sender, receiver, and content. The following lines from the tape transcript were used to illustrate the analysis procedure.

Line 539 Father: (TO MOTHER) Did you see Shirley Temple Movies?

Line 540 Mother: Oh yes dear!

Line 541 Father: Did you like them?

Line 542 Mother: Ohh yes! (EVERYONE

LAUGHS.) I even had a Shirley Temple doll. (SHE LAUGHS.)

These lines were coded as follows:

1 → 2//2 → 1//1 → 2//2 → 1//2 → 9//.

In the above example, subject 1 is the father, subject 2 stands for the mother, and 9 represents the group. The father in this case sent two statements, the mother sent three, both the mother and father each received two statements. Bales Interaction Process Analysis scheme (1950) was used to analyze the content into four categories: *Positive Actions* (shows solidarity, shows tension release, agrees), *Gives Opinion* (gives suggestion, gives opinion, gives orientation), *Asks Opinion* (asks for orientation, asks for opinion, asks for suggestion), and *Negative Actions* (disagrees, shows tension, shows antagonism). Line 539 was recorded as "asks opinion," lines 540 as "gives opinion," line 541 as "asks opinion," and line 542 as "gives opinion." The second statement in line 542, mother to group, was recorded as a "positive action" because it showed solidarity toward the group. Due to the probability of both frequent and articulate interaction between and among the members of this larger family, with older children, the frequency of message initiation, completion, interruption, as well as the duration of a message sequence, was analyzed. It was expected that families of this type would have a relatively equal opportunity for message participation and, in a normal family, would represent a "normal distribution" (e.g., each member would initiate, complete, interrupt, and "carry on" with about the same frequency as another). In addition, five communication themes were discovered in this particular family permitting an analysis of the data by theme.

Validity

Although considerable precautions were taken to insure the absence of both observer bias and observer effect (these effects were deemed minimal) the results of this study cannot be generalized to other families of similar size or social status. The predominant purpose of this analysis was to illustrate the utility of the observation of family meal interaction in describing the family and in deriving insight into the family system. The case study provided essential information on the ways in which a family interacts and provided a baseline and data source for therapeutic intervention, if required.

RESULTS

Space and its utilization

The physical arrangement of the kitchen and dining area had important implications for both the eating habits of the family, as well as the nature of meal-time interaction. The design in this

household permitted the children to gather in the kitchen and converse with their mother and to each other while the meal was being prepared. Three of the children were in or near the kitchen area, helping their mother as opportunities presented themselves. The chairs around the table were upholstered and comfortable. Although the room was clean and reasonably tidy, it was apparent that the decor and manner was one of informality and relaxation.

The meal observed was one of three variations that this family regularly follow. One variation is for the entire family, at least those members interested in doing so, to eat in the family room and watch television. This only occurs when there is "something good on," which according to the mother, is mutually determined. A second variation is for the mother and father to eat separately in the living room, while the other children eat elsewhere, at differing times and household locations. The third variation, the one observed, is for the entire family to eat together at the table in the dining area.

The mother and father occupied opposite ends of the table. The mother and daughters occupied the end of the table closest to the kitchen, while the older sons sat closest to the father. Although there were no prescribed places according to the mother, the family members tended to sit in the same places at each meal.

The mother's location, next to the bar counter, was quite significant. It was the mother who served the meat (and carved it); she who identified the accessories; and she who determined the order and rate of food distribution. Prior to the meal, the accoutrements were placed on the bar counter where the mother could reach them without disturbing herself. Both the mother and father's location seemed to signify a supervisory role, the mother with respect to overseeing the distribution of food, and the father in terms of verbal support. The youngest child, sitting an equal distance from both parents, seemed ideally located for both parents to discipline. This child was frequently corrected on meal-time manners. The seating patterns of the two older girls reflected their interest and systematic participation in meal-time service. Indeed, both discussed where they would sit, prior to the meal, in the interest of being conveniently located to help their mother. It seems apparent that, in this family, the examination of the seating arrangement and physical layout provided accurate predictions of the activities of each member as meal-time responsibilities arose.

The structure and use of space in this family suggested several family characteristics: flexibility and informality (the structure and decor of the kitchen-dining area, the freedom of movement in and out of the kitchen during meal preparation); an articulate, but mutually satisfying division of

labor (the obvious spacial location of mother and father, the sex-role related space used by the teenage boys and girls); and a supportive, cooperative orientation among the children (the location of the girls close to the bar counter and the refrigerator, by *choice*).

Subjective observations

The meal served was a typical English-Canadian family meal including meat loaf baked with a crust, peas, carrots, scalloped potatoes, salad and dessert. The mother, it was concluded, had taken into account the preferences of the family in preparing the meal. None of the children were forced or even expected to try something of all that was offered. It was entirely a matter of choice. The mother would ask everyone if they desired a given dish and frequently how much they wanted. There was no insistence that the children finish everything on their plate. In keeping with this climate, there was a minimum of fuss when one of the children spilled food. There wasn't any particular insistence on hand-washing prior to the meal, probably due to the age of the children.

Supper was served at 1800 hours and continued for about 40 minutes. No one started eating until everyone was served with salad, which was eaten separately at the beginning of the meal. Throughout the meal there was a conscious effort on the part of the mother and father to improve the table manners of the children, especially with the "please" and "thank you" situations. Typically, however, their table manners were proper: they passed the food; considered their guest; ate with "poise" and were considerate of both younger and older members of the family. Both the male and female children assisted equally in loading the dishwasher and scrubbing the pots. The mother was not involved in clean-up at all. The children "volunteered" (these tasks may well have been learned quite early) their help without pressure. There was no nagging or discipline to get the job done.

It appeared that the children's relationship with their parents was excellent. The parents valued their children's opinions. The key descriptors for this family were informality, independence, and consideration. In addition, the family's sense of humor was well-developed for all the members.

Turning to the non-verbal interaction patterns specifically, there were many open gestures, involving a high frequency of contact and small territoriality (relative closeness to each other allowed before defensive gestures come into play). There was only one apparent example of non-verbal disapproval. The 17 year old boy made what the rest of the family judged to be a remark in poor taste. The family indicated its disapproval by consciously looking away, concentrating on their food, and ignoring him entirely. These are

TABLE 1
Direction and Frequency of Interaction by Family Member
(in percentages)

SOURCE OF MESSAGE	RECEIVER OF MESSAGE								TOTAL MESSAGES SENT	
	F	M	D ₁	S ₁	D ₂	S ₂	S ₃	Group	N	%
Father		7.5	26.9	2.2	10.8	22.6	2.2	28.0	93	20.3
Mother	9.8		17.6	5.9	11.8	11.8	21.6	21.6	51	11.1
Daughter ₁	30.1	13.0		3.2	14.6	5.7	9.8	23.6	123	26.8
Son ₁	31.4	5.7	17.1		11.4	2.8	11.4	20.0	35	7.6
Daughter ₂	28.1	9.4	26.6	1.6		12.5	3.1	18.8	64	13.9
Son ₂	33.3	9.8	19.6	0.0	19.6		0.0	17.6	51	11.1
Son ₃	2.4	47.6	16.7	11.9	14.3	0.0		7.1	42	9.2
TOTAL MESSAGES RECEIVED										
N	89	56	74	15	54	43	31	97	459	
%	19.4	12.2	16.1	3.3	11.8	9.4	6.8	21.1		

typical and normal patterns of social control, and worked quite effectively in this instance.

Direction and frequency of messages

Table 1 provides a detailed account of the messages sent and received by each family member. Of the 459 statements, the father and eldest daughter sent and received the most messages. Nearly one-fifth of the messages were received by the family as a whole. The most apparent evidence is the obvious distribution of messages among most of the family members. The conversation was not dominated by the parents and the children were able to participate equally. Age was not a significant deterrent to participation.

An analysis of messages by sender to receiver revealed that the father received a large number of messages by all four of the oldest children, very few from either the mother or the youngest son. Both the father and mother directed most statements to either the group or the eldest daughter. The mother sent a large number of statements to the youngest son, and the youngest son sent nearly half of all of his statements to his mother. Even so, most of the family members contributed actively to the conversation, and spoke frequently to the family as a group.

In contrast to traditional research on abnormal families, the mother neither dominated the conversation, nor was the mother-son channel over-utilized. Although the youngest son clearly talked most frequently to the mother (normal for an eight year old boy), the mother directed as many statements to the group as she did to the son. Similarly, the father was an active participant in the conversation and, it would seem, very much

a facilitator of interpersonal dialogue among all family members.

Dialogue duration

Table 2 summarizes an analysis of the length of conversations within a dyad by who initiated the dialogue, its completion, and the source of

TABLE 2
Dialogue Duration by Message
Initiation, Completion and
Interruption

MESSAGE CONTROL ²	MESSAGE DURATION ¹				TOTALS	
	N	SHORT %	N	LONG %	N	%
INITIATION						
Father	4	18.2	0	0.0	4	13.3
Mother	2	9.1	1	12.5	3	10.0
Son ³	9	40.9	5	62.5	14	46.7
Daughter ³	7	31.8	2	25.0	9	30.0
COMPLETION						
Father	7	31.8	2	25.0	9	30.0
Mother	2	9.1	1	12.5	3	10.0
Son	6	27.3	2	25.0	8	26.7
Daughter	7	31.8	3	37.5	10	33.3
INTERRUPTION						
Father	3	13.6	0	0.0	3	10.0
Mother	2	9.1	1	12.5	3	10.0
Son	5	22.7	2	25.0	7	23.3
Daughter	12	54.5	5	62.5	17	56.7

¹A short dialogue is defined as 3 or 4 exclusive consecutive exchanges between two family members. A long dialogue consisted of 5 or more exchanges. In this family, the longest dialogue consisted of 9 exchanges.

²The initiator and completer of exchanges simply refers to who started the exchange and who completed the exchange, as distinguished in content and purpose from preceding and following exchanges. The interruptor is defined as the first person who directs a statement away from either dialogue participant.

³"Son" and "Daughter" obscures sibling exchanges because all sons and all daughters are included. Thus, for example, son₁ could have started the exchange, while son₃ finished it. These distinctions are not made.

successful interruptions. Most conversations involved less than three or four sequential exchanges, typically a ratio of about 2 to 1 for most family members. The sons initiated most of the conversations (47%), the daughters not far behind (30%). This evidence was most apparent in dialogues of longer duration. The completion of a given dialogue set was equally divided between the father, the sons and the daughters, without any notable differences by duration. Successful interruptions were indicative of positive interaction, particularly where children were able to interrupt the conversations of parents. Although the latter was not directly tested in Table 2, it was apparent that the daughters interrupted conversations frequently, and that the sons more often than the parents. The father's interruptions involved dialogues of short duration only.

Other analyses of message duration were also conducted, although not presented in Table 2. In general, it was found that the conversation flowed smoothly as there were only five pauses in the entire 40 minute meal. The one with the least power in the family, the youngest son, never interrupted other family members, though he was interrupted four times. The older children interrupted frequently. The oldest daughter in-

terrupted nearly twice as often as the father, and was also interrupted in her own initiated conversations more often than any other. Most of the daughter-led interruptions were of the father's conversations. This pattern was conducted without "fear" of negative consequences, and there were none. It was apparent from the dialogue record, that interruptions were not seen as bad manners, but rather as indicators of accelerated interest in the conversation.

Again, these data demonstrated rather clearly that this family was uniquely responsive to the initiation and completion of conversations by children, as well as open to the "adult-like" interruption of their children in ongoing dialogue. Each family member appears to have had equal access to dialogue participation and interruption. Although the mother appeared to participate at a minimal level in each phase of message duration, her participation was consistent in that she initiated as often as she completed and interrupted.

Communication theme

Five conversational themes were clearly observed in the analysis of the tape transcript. These themes made it possible for the writers to assess

TABLE 3
Messages Sent and Received for Family Dyads by Communication Theme

FAMILY DYAD	COMMUNICATION THEMES ¹										TOTALS	
	I		II		III		IV		V			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Father- Mother	2	1.6	3	5.1	0	0.0	6	18.2	0	0.0	11	3.4
Father- Son	14	11.2	7	11.9	30	35.7	5	15.2	0	0.0	56	17.3
Father- Daughter	15	12.0	29	49.2	23	27.4	8	24.2	1	4.3	76	23.4
Mother- Son	28	22.4	0	0.0	3	3.6	2	6.1	3	13.0	36	11.1
Mother- Daughter	16	12.8	0	0.0	13	15.5	3	9.1	4	17.4	36	11.1
Sister- sister	4	3.2	13	22.0	11	13.1	3	9.1	2	8.7	33	10.2
Sister- brother	37	29.6	7	11.9	4	4.8	6	18.2	8	34.8	62	19.1
Brother- brother	9	7.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	21.7	14	14.3
Totals	125		59		84		33		23		324	

¹The communication themes represent conversations dominated by one particular foci: I - talk associated with food and food service, II - making proper judgment in sharing things with non-family members, III - a discussion of the school and its activities, IV - an evaluation of movies and what one should learn from them, and V - involved responsibility and cooperation associated with family chores.

whether messages were linked to certain topics and whether certain dyads were more likely to participate. Table 3 indicated that the mother-son channel was most active relative to food and food service. The father-daughter channel was most prevalent with respect to making wise judgments. This particular theme concerned sharing a poem the eldest daughter had written with non-family members. School issues were discussed most actively by the father with his sons, and somewhat less with his daughters. It is of expected interest that the brother-sister communication channel was most apparent with respect to family chores (the fifth theme). The only area of conversation discussed in any detail by the mother and father with each other involved the educational virtues of movies. Even so, every communication theme involved the participation of most of the family members. The relative de-emphasis on mother-father communication, in overall perspective, seemed more indicative of opportunity and need (teenagers keep the conversation lively), than an indicator of an underutilized channel. It was, of course, apparent that the father was a conversational leader, while the mother chose to speak when she believed she had something to offer. Evidence reviewed to this point, seemed to clearly indicate that her contributions were valued and were well received when they were provided.

Table 4 provides an assessment of the message content for each basic family dyad. In this particular study the responses were classified according to Bale's (1950) interaction process analysis scheme (see Methods section). The most typical message content in this family involved giving suggestions, opinions or orientations (113 statements, or 34%). Positive statements constituted 30%, soliciting opinion, 22%, and negative statements represent less than 13% of all the exchanges. The negative exchanges occurred between the father and his sons with respect to food service and school, and among siblings with respect to proper judgment and family chores. The father-mother exchanges were distinctly positive in nature, or oriented to obtaining information, regardless of communication theme. Reviewing the data by communication theme, the sons appeared to react positively to each other and sought each other's opinion on food service. The focus of the father-daughter conversation on food emphasized giving opinion. With respect to the discussion of making proper judgments, the father-son and daughter dyads reacted positively, the first also emphasizing the giving of opinion. The mixed sibling dyads appeared to mix negative reactions with giving opinion. These were approximately equal. The most apparent evidence with respect to the discussion of school, was that the content was heavy on opinion-giving. The mother-son communications were particularly

TABLE 4
Message Content by Communication
Theme by Family Dyad
(in percentages)

MESSAGE CONTENT	COMMUNICATION THEME BY DYAD								Totals	
	F-M	F-S	F-D	M-S	M-D	D-D	D-S	S-S	N	%
THEME I FOOD SERVICE										
POSITIVE	-	28.6	20.0	25.0	35.3	*	27.8	44.4	(36)	28.8
ASKS OPINION	*	14.3	26.7	35.7	17.6	-	22.2	33.3	(31)	24.8
GIVES OPINION	*	28.6	46.7	28.6	41.2	*	33.3	22.2	(43)	34.4
NEGATIVE	-	28.6	6.7	10.7	5.9	-	16.7	-	(15)	12.0
TOTALS N	(2)	(14)	(15)	(28)	(17)	(4)	(36)	(9)	(125)	
THEME II PROPER JUDGMENT										
POSITIVE	66.7	42.8	20.7	-	* 53.8	-	-	-	(19)	31.7
ASKS OPINION	33.3	14.3	24.1	-	-	15.4	14.3	-	(12)	20.0
GIVES OPINION	-	42.8	34.5	-	-	15.4	42.8	-	(18)	30.0
NEGATIVE	-	-	20.7	-	-	15.4	42.8	-	(11)	18.3
TOTALS N	(3)	(7)	(29)	-	(1)	(13)	(7)	-	(60)	
THEME III SCHOOL ACTIVITIES										
POSITIVE	-	20.0	11.5	66.7	30.8	18.2	75.0	-	(20)	23.0
ASKS OPINION	-	23.3	30.8	33.3	7.7	18.2	25.0	-	(20)	23.0
GIVES OPINION	-	30.0	50.0	-	61.5	63.6	-	-	(37)	42.5
NEGATIVE	-	26.7	7.7	-	-	-	-	-	(10)	11.5
TOTALS N	-	(30)	(26)	(3)	(13)	(11)	(4)	-	(87)	
THEME IV MOVIE EVALUATION										
POSITIVE	66.7	20.0	22.2	*	*	* 50.0	-	-	(16)	48.5
ASKS OPINION	33.3	20.0	33.3	*	*	* 33.3	-	-	(9)	27.3
GIVES OPINION	-	60.0	33.3	-	-	16.7	-	-	(7)	21.2
NEGATIVE	-	-	*	-	-	-	-	-	(1)	3.0
TOTALS N	(6)	(5)	(9)	(2)	(2)	(3)	(6)	-	(33)	
THEME V FAMILY CHORES										
POSITIVE	-	-	-	-	-	50.0	54.5	-	(8)	34.8
ASKS OPINION	-	-	-	*	-	-	*	-	(2)	8.7
GIVES OPINION	-	-	*	* 100.0	-	-	* 9.1	-	(8)	34.8
NEGATIVE	-	-	-	*	-	-	36.4	-	(5)	21.7
TOTALS N	-	-	(1)	(3)	(4)	-	(4)	(11)	(23)	

positive in this area of discussion. The educational value of movies, particularly in the father-son dyad, was also most oriented to opinion-giving. As can be seen, the number of comments concerning family chores was limited. Even so, it is of interest that all of the four comments between the mother and her daughters involved the sharing of opinion, and the remaining comments were among the siblings.

In general, the analysis of communication content again revealed a normal distribution among most of the family dyads. The emphasis was on giving one's point of view, rather than asking for advice or orientation. Similarly, positive statements were more than twice as frequent as negative statements. With only modest exceptions, most of the family dyads participated in the full range of these expressions.

Reviewing the message sequence and content within each communication theme, also provided useful insights (data were not reported in tabular form). The initial interaction in the second theme occurred between the two oldest girls. On hearing the discussion, the father took an immediate interest. It was obvious from his conversational tone and his questions that he was intent on

extracting all of the pertinent information from his eldest daughter, and that he did not really approve of her decision to pass a poem she had written to others. The daughter gave a lengthy explanation. Even so, the father was not deterred in his questioning and persisted until the mother intervened. The latter's word seemed to "swing" the father's opinion toward approval. It was obvious from the dialogue that the father placed a high value on his wife's opinions, as his continued discussion with his daughter emphasized lightness and a technical interest.

The third theme involved the father's exchange with his 14 year old son concerning school. All four of the older children showed great interest in the father's explanations. The fifth theme, related to work/cooperation relations, revealed the scrupulous fairness and the desire to cooperate and share the work load. The father played no role in decisions with respect to family chores, but the mother clearly acted as a mediator and final authority in this arena.

In summary, sharing of information, ideas, and activities appeared to play a major and highly significant part in this family's life. Dinner time seemed to be a vehicle for convenient exchange of information. There was little to no evidence of dogmatism, nor of heavily authoritarian, disciplinarian, or subservient patterns. Similarly, there was no evidence of boredom or disinterest. The father was an important figure in this family, not merely because he was perceived as having authority, but because he was perceived as interesting and his opinions were highly valued. The mother played more of a background, traditional role during the meal, but other data (observed during pre-meal and post-meal times) showed that her opinions were also valued. The key emphasis in this family appeared to be on responsibility and forming good judgments, combined with cohesiveness, concern and empathy.

IMPLICATIONS

In this paper three different procedures were used to understand family interaction at meal-time: the structure and use of space; general observations on family image and style; and a tape recording of all verbal communication. None of these procedures were definitive in technique or comprehensiveness, but had instead been utilized to illustrate their potential in family case studies. Space use, for example, could also include an examination of bedroom location, their occupants by age and sex relative to other occupants; bathroom locations, the time budget patterns of the family during the typical 24-hour period; the patterns of open and closed spaces as in "closed bedroom or bathroom doors," and related space matters. The family culture (image, style,

background) could also be expanded historically. The tape record might include other meals during the day, the various meal-time variations, as in the case of the family observed, or alternative procedures such as video-tape records.

A number of observational coding systems are available, each of which are appropriate for differing purposes. The Patterson instrument (Patterson, Ray, Shaw & Cobb, 1969), for example, provides an elaborate coding scheme for aversive and coercive stimuli and responses including command negative, hit, yell, disapproval, argue, whine, cry, etc. The code also measures various forms of non-response and positive behaviours. The coding technology during the observation of family behaviour is highly advanced. Similar procedures have also been developed for the measurement of marital behaviour (Weiss, Hops & Patterson, 1975). Less elaborate schemes may also be used (Haley, 1959 — disqualification and disaffirmation; Lennard & Bernstein, 1974 — self-evaluative and other evaluative statements). These measures, as well as numerous others, represent important options in the observation of family meals.

The writers believe that the observational procedures employed in this study provided informative, definitive and accurate indicators of the family system and process. Although this family was clearly healthy at the time of the study, the procedures utilized were readily able to discriminate communication problems and ritualized imagery and styles which are degrading and inequitable. The data obtained through these procedures may be used in several different ways.

As suggested earlier, family research has suffered from an over-emphasis on survey procedures, acquiring data from only one family member, and observing the family in artificial laboratories. The naturalistic observation of family interaction "in the raw" is an important data source for understanding how the family unit "really" operates in its own habitat, and in constructing explanations (theories) of family interaction which are less simplistic. Although the procedures used herein were primitive, and limited to the study of one family, the writers are convinced that the technique provided a rich source of baseline data.

Data of this form, secondly, provided a rich resource for the family therapist. Depending on the interview data acquired from a single family member (the patient) or the data acquired conjointly, or in the conduct of therapy with the entire family group, limitations are evident in at least two respects. First, laboratory data are tempered and constrained by *public* structure. It is inaccurate to assume that *public* family meals or lunches (as in the case of Minuchin's (1971) approach) are the same as private family meals or

lunches (Martin, Johnson, Johansson & Wahl, 1976). Even though public activity can be structured to approximate the conditions of private activity, the essential uncertainty of what the mother of the target child "would really do" remains unanswered. Second, the therapist, in contrast to the researcher (independent, data-oriented observer) represents an intrusive participant in the family system. The family is variously in a situation of "demonstrating" the problem (e.g., the "presenting complaint") or "hiding" the supposed problem. In other words, the natural condition does not prevail.

These considerations are not intended to justify one procedure rather than another. Indeed, there are essential benefits in laboratory data collection, as Minuchin (1971) and others have ably demonstrated. "Natural family behaviour" can be partially induced in public settings by lunch bag sessions because of the significant correlation between family meal-time behaviour and interactional rituals, long established in the family system. Similarly, White (1976) has successfully utilized the family dinner time event in therapy by asking the patient to recall a typical family meal. He rightly argues that the meal is the fundamental mode of family interaction, representing in crystallized form, what it means to live in, or to have lived in, one's family.

The *additional* merits of obtaining naturalistic meal-time interactional data, even so, seems apparent.¹ The writers would recommend at least three possibilities.

1. Wherever possible, the typical clinic should employ a well-trained observer, who is not a therapist, to conduct baseline and post-therapy naturalistic observations of family meal-time interaction. This procedure will provide essential data for intervention purposes and also an attractive means for assessing the effectiveness of one's counselling procedures.

2. Families seeking therapeutic assistance might be instructed to provide a cassette recording of a typical family meal-time conversation. The tape transcript may be somewhat time-consuming for the support staff to prepare, but its benefits are self-evident. Various automated procedures may be developed to minimize the complexity of this task.

3. As an alternative to the laboratory lunch-bag intervention, serious consideration might be given to similar interventions in the family's private habitat. The home visit has little appeal to the helping professional, but it may have profound

"data at the source" value, let alone unique healing potential. If caustic relationships are associated with space and privacy, then why not correct them where they occur.

These suggestions are not presented in sufficient detail to demonstrate their utility. Nor is it assumed that they represent preferable options to meal-time recall or laboratory lunch bag therapy. In the writers' judgment, however, these possibilities are viable alternatives which invite the serious consideration of the therapeutic community.

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1. Actually, from a research perspective, a study of family interaction might well compare naturalistic observation of a family meal, with laboratory lunch bag behaviour, and the self-report descriptions of the meal-time event obtained in the therapist's office.

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