

# Creating Culture in Dual Career Families

C. N. Darrah, J. A. English-Lueck and J. M. Freeman  
Department of Anthropology, San Jose State University

Persons, Processes and Places:  
Research on Families, Workplace and Communities

A Research Conference Sponsored by the Business and Professional Women's Foundation,  
the Center for Families at Purdue University, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation  
February 7-8, 2002 (San Francisco)

## INTRODUCTION

Everyday life in dual career middle class working families is typically described as a matter of “juggling” or “balancing” the demands of work and family. Specific demands reflect the idiosyncratic situations of different families, but work-driven demands have seemingly increased over the past several decades (Schor 1992). The metaphors of juggling and balancing frame the relationship between work and family in a way that makes sense to most Americans. Yet the metaphors we use are not simply descriptive, but they shape how we conceptualize and study social phenomena; these metaphors are no exceptions. Work and family are conceptualized as discrete cultural domains with objective characteristics that are apparent to any observer. They are robustly natural entities we understand and that can be taken for granted. For example, the balancing metaphor suggests solid “blocks of work” and “blocks of family” placed on opposite ends of a teeter-totter; juggling suggests smaller but more numerous blocks that can be grasped and tossed. The imagery is complete when we think of “jugglers” dropping things or “balancers” suddenly finding themselves out of kilter.

Implicit, too, in these metaphors are notions of equilibrium or homeostasis. They draw our attention to the perturbations that upset stasis and compel us to ask what would restore it. The twin dangers of the model are the assumption that the original stasis existed and that a return to it is possible. The practical implication is that the metaphors lead us to view families as struggling to restore a lost state that has been disrupted, typically by the intrusion of work.

In this paper we argue that framing the debate about work and family around a stasis that has been upset is misleading. Instead, we explore the everyday creativity around family and work, and argue that it may portend deeper cultural changes. Ironically, while the locus of cultural creation is often attributed to the nation or ethnic group, we suggest that it may also be grounded in the creative responses to the daily dilemmas of work and family.

## TALES FROM THE FIELD

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted with fourteen families between 1998-2000 [1]. Each family was “shadowed” by one of the authors for approximately 200 hours over the course of a year. Initially we shadowed individual family members during commutes, and at work and school. Later we spent evenings with each family and joined in collective activities ranging from yard work and shopping expeditions to baptisms, business trips, and birthday parties. The fieldwork was the familiar participant-

observation of cultural anthropology. Usually we observed family members and their activities, but when appropriate we joined in by playing with children, sharing meals and helping out with home repairs. We took field jottings using small laptop-like devices (Hewlett Packard Jornada) whenever possible, switching to steno books when appropriate or necessary. Observation of behavior in natural settings was invariably complemented by spontaneous *in situ* interviews with family members, capturing their perspectives on their own and others' activities.

The fieldwork soon challenged some of the tenets of the balancing and juggling metaphors, especially the clarity of work and family as distinct cultural domains. Instead, we were struck by the blurring of these domains so that distinguishing what was work and what was family proved difficult. Consider, for example, Peggy as she works in her cubicle at a high-tech company. After checking her E-mail and responding to several inquiries from coworkers, she clicks a key on her desktop computer and suddenly she is shopping for a gift for a special friend. The search takes an hour and when asked if she does other shopping from her cube, such as ordering groceries from the now-defunct Webvan Internet grocer, she expresses shock at the idea. Peggy explains that it would be a violation of her employer's trust since that purchase is a regular one for what are clearly household goods. Later in the afternoon Peggy suddenly switches from a desktop to laptop computer. She explains that the company's desktop is the one she usually uses. But she is enrolled in a graduate program at a local university and cannot gain access to its library because of the company firewall. She explains that she first connected her personal laptop to the telephone to gain access to the library, but when she did so her customers (all located within her building) could not reach her by phone. She then asked a friend in Facilities to install another phone line. He agreed and so she now has an official and "gray" phone lines. She does not know who receives the bill for the second line. She explains that being accessible and working on her graduate degree whenever she can (including on company time) are both parts of being a conscientious employee with a good reputation. She has thus reworked her infrastructure and her social exchanges to accommodate household and career needs.

For Peggy, work and personal activities are difficult to distinguish. Due to the pressure of family life and limited space at home she has to sometimes complete personal activities at work. Other times she works for her company on her personal laptop placed on the kitchen table. Just what is work and what is personal is difficult to tease apart. When Peggy discusses what she is doing, her tone conveys a sense of self-consciousness about her actions, as if she knows she is doing an experiment that could backfire. It also conveys a deep sense of personal morality: She is not trying to "get away" with anything, but rather is trying to fulfill moral obligations to different people who each have legitimate claims on her. In this way, she is working on a new identity category that integrates Peggy the worker and Peggy the family person.

Peggy's story reveals much more than simply the blurring of cultural categories. It also allows us a glimpse at the everyday creativity that ordinary people display as they patch together identities as workers and family members. It is in these small creative acts that we see the fundamental categories of culture being reworked. In this way, work is not just a threat to family, upsetting the equilibrium, but it provides resources through which its very demands are managed. Stories of such creativity abounded during fieldwork and so we began to focus on the practices and narratives of family member, rather than on work and family as discrete domains. Although some practices were implicit and not accessible to family members, many others were explicit and people identified and reflected upon them. Narratives concerned both the nature of work, jobs, careers and industries, and the definition of the family and the responsibilities of its members. Practices and narratives flowed back and forth between the domains of work and family, and they drew upon the metaphors, activities and artifacts associated with each domain.

Families were not characterized by consensus about “their” practices and narratives. Different family members participated in different ways, and the legitimacy of practices and stories was often challenged. Accordingly, fieldwork did not explicate the practices and narratives of a family, but rather the sometimes-contentious engagement of family members with each other around practices and narratives. It is through this engagement that people creatively tried to mitigate the large and small problems of the day. Consider, for example, the creation and display of Humberto and Suzanne’s family “mission statement.” The statement was the quintessential expression of a family narrative, one intended to convey consensus and to define what the family was about. It was printed on decorative stationery and posted on the refrigerator. It was also stored in Suzanne’s Palm Pilot, along with other information about work and family, such as schedules and telephone numbers. The couple had developed their mission statement 18 months before, largely at Suzanne’s initiative. The very idea of a family mission statement was drawn from Steven Covey’s book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, a publication that she found both inspirational and useful. She was part of an informal network of coworkers who discussed and followed Covey’s advice, and her employer provided support for his seminars and materials. Spouse, coworkers, management guru and employer were thus all involved conceptualizing Suzanne and Humberto’s family as a social entity with a specific mission. The statement was even prepared on a laptop computer purchased by Suzanne for work and then reimbursed by her employer.

Ironically, the process of producing the mission statement also expressed divergent interpretations of family. Suzanne explained that she and her husband disagreed about some principles and the result was a compromise to which neither partner subscribed in full. Although Suzanne took the initiative in this endeavor, Humberto “buys in” to the statement. He also insisted that some of his values for the family be incorporated, such as being “open to living with God.” Suzanne says she is most articulate about those values that she originally inserted and there are others about which she cares less. But because they are now included she says she must *learn* to make them important to her. She also maintains separate personal and life mission statements that further sharpen the boundaries between the different domains of her life. They were updated whenever she connected the Palm Pilot to her personal computer, and she reviewed the various statements for inconsistencies. Suzanne reads the mission statements often and sometimes goes to sleep thinking about them. She insists that doing so has helped her succeed and she credits a previous employer for offering a Covey seminar that taught her the method. Of course, she not only uses the mission statement to work on herself, but she and her husband use it to resolve or debate differences of opinion regarding the family.

For Humberto and Suzanne, practices and narratives are integrated with each other, and they both draw upon and connect the cultural domains of work and family. Seeing them as one or the other distorts their production and use by family members, and directs us away from the important analytical chore of understanding how families create and use them.

At first reading, the couple’s effort to define their family by using the tool of a management guru might sound exotic. Yet Suzanne and Humberto are working with the resources at hand to explicate and externalize their collective identity as a family in a way that allows them to work on both their virtual, idealized identity and their daily interactions.

## **CREATIVITY AND “CHUNKING”**

The inter-penetration of work and family that we saw was striking and it was probably driven by several different factors that have been widely reported. These factors play out in distinct ways in different families, but they affect the perceived availability of time.

First, family members, sometimes even children, commented on how busy they were. We watched for example, while a couple ticked off the future weekends trying to reschedule a child's birthday party; business commitments, previous social commitments and the commitments of potential guests pushed it until months later. The ultimate source of the "busyness" was often difficult to discern and we watched as people assumed more and more burdens even as they complained about the pressures a nebulous "They" were putting on them. Other manifestations of "busyness" were part of the theater of Silicon Valley work ethos which rewards being busy and especially, looking busy. This contrasts to Chinese etiquette, for example, where one must never answer that one is too busy or risk being impolite.

Second, the nature of the jobs held by many of these middle class family members allow them to work at home. Much work is ambiguous and transportable, so it can be completed away from the workplace. Even if the work itself remains locked in the briefcase or the laptop, discussions about difficult decisions or social relationships permeate the household. There were always limits on what tasks could and should be performed at work and home, but we were struck by the extent of penetration of the home. While specific tasks were often brought home to complete, a wide variety of techniques and skills learned and used at work were also imported. Humberto, for example, was not a follower of Covey, but he organized his household activities around a procedure for establishing command and control at an "incident." The procedure had originally been developed for use with California wildfires and was a widely used model in the field; Humberto had imported it for "household command and control."

Third, the tasks of householding and the obligations of family made considerable demands on time. We were repeatedly struck by the impact of consumption activities on some households, ranging from researching potential purchases on the Internet to shopping on-line, by catalog, or at retail outlets. Many households had considerable information technology infrastructures that had to be maintained and updated, as well as repaired when the inevitable crises occurred. Decision making in increasingly deregulated markets, too, simultaneously "empowered" family members as consumers and burdened them with more choices and responsibilities, many of which they did not welcome. Hours spent helping children with homework or other school-related activities were considerable, and in most families, care for aged parents, relatives, or friends was recurrent.

Collectively, these three factors contribute to a "time bind" (Hochschild 1997) that is central to understanding culture change. Studies performed by cultural ecologists demonstrate the importance of time allocation in effecting significant adaptive changes. A recurring pattern is that people will often attempt to simultaneously maintain elements of two or more adaptive patterns such as foraging and horticulture, until the competition for time forces them to commit to one strategy or another: They abandon one and intensify the other. However, the period of mixed strategies can be lengthy and change extremely gradual, until a threshold is crossed and then a new cultural form can appear suddenly.

We suggest that this model helps make sense of some of the creative activity we saw within the families as they developed strategies for managing time. As family members struggled to complete activities, prioritization, planning and negotiation were often observed. In fact, they often became important activities that defined the family. These activities typically entailed taking longer sequences of activities and decomposing them into smaller segments that could then be enacted when convenient. We call this practice "chunking," since larger units of activity or roles become broken into smaller "chunks" that can be fit into the shorter time slots available. These smaller chunks are then recombined opportunistically so that ultimately the larger activity gets done, but often with a difference. Sometimes the chunks are combined in a different sequence that depends upon the immediate availability of relevant resources, such as time and personnel. Alternatively, chunks may inadvertently be omitted. Even if the chunks are completed according to script, the effects of decomposition can be significant, since familiar benchmarks of progress in performing the activity might be ambiguous.

An example of such chunking will illustrate the point. Ann, a married woman with two young children, reported that she was required to meet with her supervisor for one hour a week. The supervisor was single and did not care when he left the office, but the woman had to leave home by 4:30 p.m. to beat the traffic and provide childcare. The supervisor was unsympathetic, so the meeting was shortened to 30 minutes. Ann said she would memorize the full agenda for an hour-long meeting, but only raise the most important items during it. She would raise the remaining issues with him at the water cooler, before still other meetings, or in the hallway. She claimed that she was thus still able to cover everything, but the items were now distributed opportunistically over the week and combined with other, unrelated issues. Some issues became blurred with others and others were overlooked. The familiar rituals that mark the stages of a formal meeting were absent, and so, as Ann reflected, “things fall between the cracks.”

Chunking is culturally significant for two reasons. First, it indicates that there is insufficient time to complete culturally scripted activities. This at least suggests that an empirically established prerequisite for culture change is present. Second, it demonstrates the sort of “bottom up” creativity of people in their everyday lives which anthropology has found to be so significant. Change here is not effected by fiat from on high, but within families, which are often conceptualized as bastions of cultural social conservatism.

## **BUFFERS THROUGH CONNECTIONS**

Focusing on chunking and everyday creativity allows us to better understand seemingly disparate activities that we observed. Specifically, families were sites of technological infrastructure building that consumed considerable attention, money and time. Second, considerable activity in the families was directed at connecting to social institutions and other individuals to buffer the effects of chunking. “Managing” social relationships became a ubiquitous practice, one with unintended consequences for family members. We conclude this section with a brief note on the affirmations of family identity that often punctuated family life. We briefly discuss each set of activities below.

Family members developed and used a material infrastructure that bound together people and their activities across time. Elements of this infrastructure could be physically located in the home, automobile, workplace, public places and on the person. Like other infrastructures, elements of this one are both visible and invisible to participants. For example, family members were much more likely to talk about their use of personal digital assistants (or PDAs, such as the Palm Pilot), pagers and cellular phones than conventional wire phones, even if they used the latter extensively. Likewise, they seldom discussed their automobiles: phones and cars are such obvious and taken for granted devices that using them becomes unconscious. Some elements of infrastructure were consciously created, as when a family member purchased a device and used only specific functions. Other elements were the result of colonization of other systems, such as workplace E-mail and voicemail systems, or the knowledge that a friend’s cellular phone can be borrowed to keep everyone “in touch.”

The information technology infrastructure was especially striking, since it was used to coordinate the physical activities of family members and establish episodes of “connectedness” throughout the day. In this way, it was assembled to bind together the chunks of activities that often seemed propelled by centripetal forces.

Most of these *de facto* communication systems provided redundant messaging. Family members often E-mailed, paged and called (on one of several phones) in order to be sure the message got through. The need for redundancy reflected both the flakiness of some devices (e.g. dead batteries) and the unpredictability of others’ schedules.

Technological devices other than pagers and cell phones were also used. Some people used personal digital assistants, like the Palm Pilot to manage their calendars and to integrate them with those of other family members. Indeed, decisions about what information to so integrate and what to keep separate reflected idiosyncratic models of the relationship of work and family. One person might never enter a reminder about a family event into a Palm Pilot that is used primarily for work, while another would think nothing of it

There are several consequences of the information technology infrastructure for the dual career families we observed. The people we observed did not make decisions about all elements of their information systems because some were determined by circumstances beyond their control, such as employer policies. Changes in employers could, of course, force changes in the infrastructure used to connect home and work. Decisions were often shaped by gaps in the *de facto* information system so what they bought can be easily integrated. The most obvious example is purchasing a home computer compatible with the workplace one.

The technology infrastructure was the object of considerable expenditure and research. People either learned about it or they recruited knowledgeable friends, co-workers or even subordinates to assist. Simply establishing the infrastructure and maintaining it could be a major family activity, and some members even specialized to provide technical assistance. Yet this infrastructure was largely invisible to family members. Creating, maintaining and trouble shooting were typically conceptualized as instrumental activities that supported other specifically “family” activities. However, these infrastructure-related activities can be analyzed as constitutive family activities. Infrastructure decisions were expressive of family decisions about practices and even a family’s identity. These decisions also frequently thrust the family into relationships with other people who help out when the limits of family members’ technical expertise are reached.

Families were also embedded in larger networks of social relationships that buffered the effects of chunking. Sometimes these larger connections are created when families purchase services that tied them to strangers. At other times the ties were with friends and co-workers, and their networks of acquaintances. Ties of reciprocity were especially salient here. Connections to institutions such as churches, schools, camps, workplaces etc. were often important. Finally, the use of family ties was ubiquitous. People either used their extended families or they used family as a template through which to incorporate people into their network of helpers.

Families made numerous decisions about which activities they would perform and which they would export or “outsource” to various providers. Eating meals at restaurants or cooking by picking up a roasted chicken at the supermarket deli on the way home are familiar examples. Hiring gardeners, housekeepers, mechanics, and nannies are nothing new, but somewhat more exotic services are increasingly used. Internet grocery delivery, taxi services that specialize in the timely delivery of children at activities, and even personal assistants who purchase gifts and entertain visiting relatives indicate the range of activities that were outsourced. On the one hand, outsourcing is synonymous with purchasing services, but on the other, it incorporates a business strategy into the household and reflects the view that the family is a productive unit.

Other services were not purchased, but rather they were exchanged through informal networks of helpers. These exchanges were often so casual as to be hidden to the exchange partners. Coworkers often knew each others’ schedules and served as biological Palm Pilots, reminding each other of appointments and even their family members’ schedules. Arranging transportation for children took on the feel of serious negotiations, and keeping the *quid pro quos* straight was typically difficult. Webs of exchange were ubiquitous and without them families were left without the resources needed to get through a day.

Ironically then, extended family ties were common in Silicon Valley, a place celebrated as the land of the new, the virtual and the transient. Such ties were often created where they otherwise did not exist, and the realm of fictive kin was diverse and important. Couples provided services not only for their own parents, but for friends of the latter, thereby binding everyone together in a single web of helpers. While sentiments of love and duty were often expressed, such assistance simultaneously created helpers who could be called upon if necessary. Nannies and other childcare providers, too, often found that they and *their* families were assimilated into the fictive kin of the employer.

The creation of social relationships that buffered nurtured a seemingly benign instrumentality. Sometimes this was blatant, as when someone did something solely for the purpose of demanding a favor later. More often, instrumentality was simply a pervasive accompaniment to social interaction. Families were generally searching for contacts or connections that might be useful in meeting family or work obligations. Indeed, several people joked that they were always looking for new connections. Many occasions provided such opportunities and because it was difficult to predict when a valuable connection would emerge instrumentalism was ubiquitous. Many people thus tried to accomplish several goals with one activity, while simultaneously building a web of reciprocal ties that could be operationalized in the future.

Finally, family activities often included interludes in which the identity of the family as a social entity was questioned or challenged, interpreted and then negotiated. Consensus did not always follow. Sometimes these identities were externalized and then formalized, as in the case of Suzanne and Humberto's mission statement. Other times the identity was expressed in strings of stories, myths or jokes that only insiders could comprehend. Regardless, the attention to the family as a contested object of creation was striking. The very fact that the issue was so often raised suggests that the families that did so were reaffirming that this was the family they were or wanted to be. Of course, such affirmations are most likely to arise precisely when the bases of affiliation are under threat, whether real or imagined, direct or indirect.

## CONCLUSION

The research described in this paper began by exploring the consequences of understanding work and family as matters of juggling or balancing. It moved beyond those metaphors to offer an alternative model, one that seeks to explicate the processes within family-work interaction that might ultimately result in broader cultural change. Like any perspective this one must be partially judged by whether it allows us to frame interesting questions that extend our knowledge, in this case of working families. We believe it does in several ways.

First, it suggests that work is neither clearly separable from family, nor is it simply a source of family stress. It is simultaneously a source for the very resources people use to manage complex lives. The question might be less one of getting work out of the family than of selectively incorporating those elements that are useful in buffering the effects of chunking. In no way do we intend to minimize the burdens of work for many Americans; they are very real and we observed them closely during fieldwork. But ordinary people are also creatively synthesizing work and family into something that is neither, but partakes of both. As work-family researchers we cannot ignore such an important phenomenon.

Second, the extent of chunking and the strategies used to buffer it are indicative of the complex and multi-layered constraints under which families operate. We were especially struck by the time and energy spent on building infrastructure, social relationships that can be used instrumentally, and identity negotiations. Each plunges the family into activities that are both necessary and seemingly imposed externally, and that simply add to the time bind. The role of consumption-related activities was especially prominent and their importance as family activities often seemed equal to that of work.

Third, the creative activity we saw suggests policy responses that build upon the strategies people have already identified as useful. Rather than creating top-down policies based on assumptions about how people should act, the alternative here is to find ways to support those strategies already in use.

In summary, the family can be viewed as an engine of variation, as people within them articulate with other social entities in the workplace and in the community. The infrastructural “chunks,” both technological and social, are reconfigured into new designs. The social obligations and reciprocal exchanges shift to accommodate the novel social structures. These social structural changes, so evident in family practices, are accompanied by a shift in narrative as well. The narrative is directly linked to establishing the identity of the family under conditions of the time bind. Accordingly, rather than a return to a perhaps illusory state of equilibrium, the emergence of new social and cultural patterns is also likely, and may in fact already be happening.

### **Endnote**

[1] We thank the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and Kathleen Christensen for their support of the research on which this paper is based.

### **References**

Hochschild, Arlie 1997. *The time bind*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Schor, Juliet B. 1992. *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York: Basic Books.