

Family Models, Model Families

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Alex Carlsberg expounds on his family's model for success. There are, he explains, only two strategies for financial security. The first and most common one is that of earning more money, while the second is to search relentlessly for bargains. In both cases, he assumes his family's consumption will remain high. Alex says that most people adopt the first strategy, but he and wife Ann pursue the second. They scour the Internet, visit garage sales and flea markets, and patronize remainder stores and outlet malls. Annual department store sales loom especially large in their annual purchases of personal items and gifts. Alex and Ann have a model or image of themselves as a family defined by principles of efficacy, and that model plays out daily in their sense of obligation and the activities they perform.

Suzanne Mendoza-Jones has never met Alex, yet the family she describes is principled, albeit in quite different ways. She and husband Humberto believe that everything that enters it—goods, services, people, ideas—comes with attached costs of time, money, and grief, and so they zealously patrol the boundary around family. Items no longer needed are immediately discarded in the weekly trash, taken to the local landfill, or donated to a thrift shop; they are never stored, “just in case” they are needed. Suzanne and Humberto live below their means by a principle of simplicity that is explicitly articulated and applied to decisions large and small.

What Alex and Suzanne share is the articulation of models of their families as effective ones. These models permit them to step back from the bustle of their daily lives and adopt, however briefly, a longer term view of their actions and to inquire about the meaning of everyday activities and their place in the larger trajectory of their lives. While these models do not determine every activity, they are frequently invoked, if only in the breach, and it is through them that family members make sense of their current constraints and obligations, and negotiate “proper” courses of action. They thus have consequences for the family's everyday life.

This paper argues that these models of the family are important for what they tell us about the dilemmas families confront, as well as their cultural responses to deeper structural changes in American life [1]. That families create and use models of themselves is not surprising. What is striking is their concern with efficacy and control, both of which are juxtaposed with the contingencies and logistical uncertainty of their daily lives. Unlike the Victorian families described by historian John Gills (1996) that measured progress toward a family reunited in heaven, models of family efficacy are less about transcendence than about establishing control over mundane events and forces. They assume their importance precisely because existing obligations have been changed and new ones created, although how best to meet them is often unclear. They are assembled from bits and pieces of knowledge and skills gleaned from different spheres of life, and are constantly assessed and revised, although families may simultaneously question whether their models work, or even what “work” means.

Busy, Busy, Busy

In 1998, Jim Freeman, Jan English-Lueck and I began ethnographic fieldwork with fourteen dual career middle class families in the Silicon Valley region. The goal of the research [2] was to better understand how such families juggled or balanced the often-competing demands of work and family. As so often happens in fieldwork, this initial conceptualization soon unraveled. First, the metaphors of juggling or balancing connoted a clarity and distinctiveness of basic categories that was usually missing; even determining what constituted work or family frequently proved difficult. Second, even if work and family could be salvaged as meaningful categories, they scarcely captured the complex dilemmas with which families grappled: there was so much more going on. Thus, we reconceptualized our study as one about the busyness of families, or as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, the quality of having “a great deal to do” [3].

Busyness is based upon a constellation of changes in American society that have increased the obligations of daily life and the activities required to meet them. Some of these obligations are driven by various forms of deregulation that have “empowered”—or compelled—ordinary people to investigate, assess and act upon information in domains as diverse as personal finance, air transportation, and health care. Others are created by consumer markets that have proliferated over the past several decades and that offer new choices among goods and services. Technological changes have both enhanced the ease of communication and allowed previously separated spheres of life to be connected. Fear of job loss, corporate desires to respond quickly to rapidly changing markets, and economic globalization have increased the complexity and content of many jobs. Indeed, the logic of the “24/

7” world directly transforms the lives of Americans who live it and it indirectly affects the lives of countless others who provide them with services, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

These drivers of busyness can both make it difficult to meet extant obligations, just as they create myriad new ones. Above all, they create a tacit work of coping with busyness that comes to define so much of everyday life. Such work is manifested in the ubiquitous intelligence gathering and information sharing, planning and scheduling activities, and anticipating surprises that have come to define the prudent, responsible family member. It underlies the purchase of devices that come to form technological infrastructures for buffering the effects of busyness by enhancing “connectedness” (e.g. cellular phones, messaging devices) and the capacity to keep track of and account for people, things and ideas (e.g. personal digital assistants). And it colors myriad social interactions and relationships, such as the constant nurturing of social networks, “outsourcing” essential family services to providers, and colonizing work organizations in ways that bring their resources to bear on family obligations.

At issue here is not whether people are working *more or harder*; for long and burdensome workdays are nothing new. Busyness, however, does not simply refer to hours on the job or calories expended, but rather to a kind of work that consumes more and more time and attention. The distinction is important, for it gets at what is distinctive about the lives of many families. In order to illustrate the point, we may reflect upon the labor saving consumer goods of the late 19th and the 20th Centuries, such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners and power lawnmowers. Such devices promised to free up time that could be used for personal avocations, and family and community activities. The modern digital infrastructure offers a different promise: If properly deployed, devices allow us to keep up or at least not fall too far behind. The promise of leisure is strangely absent, instead replaced by that of improved efficiency and productivity.

The Quest for Efficacy

How we individually and collectively cope with busyness can only be understood in the larger context of our lives. Life course scholars, for example, use concepts such as types of transitions that are embedded in life trajectories that give them meaning (Heinz & Marshall 2003). The idea of such trajectories sensitizes us to the larger frames of meaning by which we assess the seemingly discrete events of our lives. Philosopher Charles Taylor (1989; Abbey 2000) amplifies the point, arguing that we interpret our lives in terms of narratives that give meaning to our pasts and direction to our futures. Taylor claims that these narratives are necessarily moral in nature, guided as they are by ideas about and choices among moral goods. He thus reminds us that our task is not just one of

tracing the transitions and trajectories of the life course, but also of explicating the visions of the good life that give them form.

Trajectories and narratives are useful concepts through which we can understand the consequences of busyness, but their very clarity belies the complex and ambiguous dilemmas faced by actual families. Busyness constrains notions of possible futures to which families may realistically aspire. If, as Anthony Giddens (1991) argues, modernity presents individuals with a plethora of lifestyles from which to choose, then families are sites where potentially divergent lifestyles intersect. These lifestyles and the resources that make them possible may change, sometimes frequently, resulting in shifting ideas about moral goods and the future. Collective family identities and practices may shift or be contested as a result.

The very dynamic nature of the drivers of busyness and the practices for coping with it further challenge efficacy. A practice that worked well under certain conditions may not do so again. Likewise, new and potentially better practices may be discovered, although they may well be accompanied by unintended consequences that can solve one problem only to create new ones. What counts as a desirable moral good can change as families question whether particular educational, financial, career, or health strategies are really best. What to aspire to and how best to accomplish it may not be completely contingent or in flux, but such goals and practices were the object of monitoring, discussion and assessment among our families. Collectively, they increase the salience of efficacy precisely when achieving it seems more elusive than ever.

Busyness further exacerbates efficacy for families by making it more difficult to plan and execute daily logistics. Despite the ubiquitous cell phones, Palm Pilots, and messaging devices with their promise of the virtual, Newtonian space and time still loom large in daily affairs: Sally really must get to soccer by 4:30 on Tuesday and Thursday, and someone has to get John to clarinet lessons at 5:35 each Wednesday. Longer-term trajectories can seem pointless due to the limits of attention, for busyness keeps considerable attention focused on the here and now, severing ties to both past and future. Models of efficacy can be constant reminders of family identity and purpose, or they can be more episodic eruptions in which members reminded themselves of their orientation to larger contexts. The models of different families may share common features, but they are preeminently about defining the family as a distinct one with particular constraints and trajectories.

Despite difficulties, family members *do* think about the longer-term, and not all such thinking is focused on busyness. Nonetheless, controlling the context in which the latter is experienced and dealt with can affect current

family practices. The enculturation of children is especially indicative of the longer-term consequences—and responses to—busyness. Educational choices may be guided by assumptions about skills and jobs that afford greater control over time. Children may be made aware of the implications of different careers for controlling time through conversations at dinner or during the drive to school or music lessons. Developing skills in forming social networks that are so necessary for coping with surprises can be encouraged. Parents may talk through their assessments of new acquaintances as potential helpmates, thus modeling for their children the instrumentality of friendship. Likewise, they may admonish their children to develop qualities of pleasantness or “niceness,” or the ability to engage in entertaining repartee with adults that facilitate useful networks. This can be part of a larger effort to “work on” the self so that it can meet the latest social requirements. Corporate reorganizations provide a template for creating such selves, and children learn to recognize and respond to the different realities of parents, nannies and schools.

What these strategies have in common is the attempt to establish control by shaping the context within which the everyday lives of family members will be lived. They are not about daily logistics per se, but about controlling the conditions under which particular obligations and activities are engaged.

From Dream to Technique

This paper has argued that models of efficacy are grounded in the issues of uncertainty and control that characterize busy families. In effect, they mediate between longer-term goals and trajectories and daily logistics. Their formal properties as models matter less than the processes by which they are used in actual families; they are neither simply recounted nor applied. Instead, they are used in a social process that includes elements of data collection, sense making, negotiation, decision making, and political theatre. Models of efficacy do not simply articulate underlying values, nor are their applications to specific situations straightforward. They are contested and often result from compromise. Models of efficacy sometimes do serve to define actions, but more often they condense tensions, ambiguities, and conflicts into the ongoing discourse within the family. Thus, they reflect the very dynamic nature of the lives into which they hopefully can inject a modicum of control. And while they can seem comic or tragic, or simply irrelevant to quotidian experience, they do tell us something important about American life.

First, they reveal the extent to which technique—and its mastery—has come to define the good life. Yet they define this life in terms of means by which to achieve something and not on ultimate ends. The mastery of techniques for coping with busyness in all its manifestations can, in effect, become the new moral good. It indeed offers a peculiar transcendence, one that proceeds by relentlessly searching every sphere of life for “best practices” and then mobilizing them to cope with busyness.

Second, busy lives are defined by activities and not states of being; they exist in a world of verbs and doing, not of nouns and being. Such activities range from the commonplace, such as washing dishes or folding laundry, to the awkwardly exotic, such as “doing family.” Activities, or “doings,” take time and despite talk about life speeding up, it is more typically experienced as being increasingly crowded with things to do. Management becomes the metaphor for the life well lived, and talk about enhancing family efficiency and productivity is increasingly common. The importance of introducing these industrial logics into the family should not be underestimated, for they represent a conversion of one sphere of life by another. Here domestic life is harnessed to the demands of an increasingly globalized and unpredictable economy. Parents’ cultural beliefs about how to best prepare their children for this world (Harkness & Super 1996) may be less consequential than their exhortations to “be efficient, be productive.”

Finally, issues of efficacy can help us understand the loci of constraints and choices faced by families. The American Dream is based on ideas about individual effort and responsibility in the context of choice opportunities. Yet busyness makes it difficult to differentiate agency from the seemingly inexorable forces that shape lives. If there is a lesson from field studies of busyness it is that coping is not just an individual matter, regardless of how people accept responsibility for juggling or balancing their lives. Many apparent “family” decisions reflect the realities of neighborhoods and communities that constrain family options. The juggling or balancing act so many Americans take for granted tells us more about the society being created, than about the character of individuals. Yet fieldwork also reveals that simple choices often established constraints that then reverberated through different spheres of life; not all busyness is imposed and much is chosen. In this way, the consequence of family choices became situated as inexorable external forces against which individuals feel powerless.

What the models of efficacy thus reveal is a possible transformation to the American Dream and its role in the lives of middle class Americans. Opportunities to realize that dream may have been more or less available to everyone, but it nonetheless connected people to a larger universe of meaning and ultimately to the idea of a nation. It was a *public* dream, and the very fact that it was not universally accessible has continued to affect public policy. Significantly, the concern with efficacy represents a shift toward individual concerns and idiosyncratic dreams that fail to connect to that larger universe. Ironically, the result may be to effectively privatize our moral goods and the trajectories of our lives precisely when public, collective solutions to the problems of individual families are most urgent.

Notes

[1] Parts of the argument in this paper will be further developed in *Busy-Bodies*, a book manuscript being prepared with J. A. English-Lueck and J. M. Freeman. The author acknowledges their contributions to his own thinking.

[2] The research on which this paper is based was supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The author thanks the Foundation and program officer Kathleen Christensen for their generous support.

[3] The critique of work-family “balancing” or “juggling” is developed in Darrah, English-Lueck and Freeman 2001; Darrah and English-Lueck 2001; and English-Lueck and Darrah 2001. The concept of busyness is introduced and developed in Darrah 2002a, 2002b; Darrah, English-Lueck and Freeman 2003; Darrah 2003a; and Darrah 2003b. Busyness and its implications will be elaborated in Darrah, English-Lueck and Freeman (no date) and explored in the book, *Busy-Bodies: How Busyness is Affecting American Families and What They are Doing About It*.

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