

**Family Time:
Studying Myth and Ritual in Working Families**

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The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life
Working Paper No. 27

May 2003

The essays in this volume represent an attempt to define a new and distinct research trajectory – myth and ritual in American Working Families– by integrating theoretical and empirical threads that have traditionally belonged to quite different discourses in academia. When the Alfred P. Sloan foundation funded the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life back in 1999 as the sixth Sloan Center on Working Families, they effectively brokered an odd marriage between the study of myth and ritual, which traditionally belonged to anthropology, and the study of contemporary working family life, which tended to be the domain of sociologists and scholars in women’s studies. For the past three years scholars at Emory’s Sloan Center, known by its acronym The MARIAL Center, as well as a number of other Sloan funded scholars from other institutions, have been studying middle-class working families in various parts of the United States, focusing on a range of issues dealing with family myth and ritual.

The study of myth and ritual in the context of contemporary families will look a bit different from the studies done of the subjects in more traditional societies, the kinds of places that have conventionally been the fieldwork sites for anthropologists. At first glance myth and ritual might seem like an odd subject matter in the context of an agenda for understanding the challenges of contemporary American dual-earner families. Isn’t it the case that myth and ritual largely irrelevant to the lives of contemporary American families, belonging rather to the world of “traditional” societies? It is certainly true that linking myth and ritual to the lives of contemporary families requires some careful framing of these terms. But the idea that myth and ritual are relatively unimportant in modern life paradoxically is a misleading myth of modernity that covers up the actual importance of myth and ritual in the lives of modern families. Indeed, it is the thesis of this essay that when one examines the structure of the middle-class American family, especially its developmental structure over time, myth and ritual will be shown to play an extraordinarily important part in the constitution of family life.

To effectively outline this new research agenda, we have to step back from the particulars of contemporary life for just a bit and examine closely three important things: (1) “myth” in the context of modern life; (2) “ritual” in the context of modern life; and (3), the distinctive characteristics of the “middle-class American family.”

Myth

Ritual and myth are often associated with one another, as if there were a natural affinity between these two symbolic forms. Generations of anthropologists have debated the connection between ritual and myth, often with the implied issue of which gave birth to which. The assumption has been that myth and ritual were functionally very similar, and that what myth did in words, ritual tended to do through actions. Though this is a bit simplistic, there’s good reason to assume that myth and ritual are deeply linked. They are two of the primary symbolic forms through which humans have always formulated significant conceptions of themselves and their world and through which they have communicated these conceptions. Myth, a projection of the human capacity for storytelling, and ritual, a manifestation of the essentially theatrical nature of human behavior, are both primary forms of meaning making and meaning transmission.

Many thinkers have proposed distinctive functions for myth. For Malinowski, a myth

was a kind of charter for the existence of a group, its sense of its own origins and its *raison d'être*. For other anthropologists a myth was a kind of verbal version of ritual, ritual forms translated into words. Others saw myth as a window onto the human mind. For Freud, myth was a public form of private fantasy having a similar function for communities that dream does for individuals. The logic of myth in the Freudian view was the logic of primary process rather than realistic thinking. In this view myth is the conventionalized form of dreaming (Freud 1978). For Levi-Strauss, myth's functions were largely internal to mind, a kind of privileged subconscious thought, what he called "the mind having a tête-à-tête with itself" (Levi-Strauss 1979, 1983). Carl Jung saw in myth not just individual thinking or even cultural stories, but rather embodiments of universal archetypes that inhabit the human mind (Jung 1959/1980).

In somewhat less grandiose fashion, it is tempting to reduce the idea of myth to the human impulse for narrative or storytelling. Jerome Bruner has pointed to narrative as the most important way that humans make meaning, and he believes that narratives follow conventional forms that allow people to take problematical situations and reformulate them in a way that makes conventional sense (Bruner 1990). Bruner prefers the terms narrative and storytelling to the more exotic word myth.

Those narratives we call "myths" share a distinctive and somewhat paradoxical character as both true and not true. A literal and accurate description of an event would probably not be called a myth by most people. This is why history is not taken to be quite the same thing as myth. Nor is an outright lie a myth. When we call something a myth we never mean that it is simply untrue. What makes a particular narrative a myth is that it combines a significant assumption of truth with an assumption that the story is in some sense a fabrication. Myth is a duet of fact and fiction and not simply the one or the other.

What could be the function of this paradoxical conflation of fact and fiction as a distinctive artifact of culture? The fact that myths are framed in such a way as to distinguish them from literal truth allows us to generalize the truth of the myth beyond particular events and contexts. A myth may be true in general, if not in particular. In this sense myth has function similar to philosophical discourse. The truth of myth is a kind of non-literal or metaphorical truth.

A story which has an overtly fictional framework allows us to accept and hold up for contemplation otherwise unacceptable or disturbing realities. The fictional frame of mythic narrative is what allows children to hear their worst fears realized in the form of fairy tales, or bedtime stories (Bettelheim 1976). The paradoxical "real" but "not for real" quality of myth is also implicated in the fact that it is a form of play (Huizinga 1938; Bateson 1972). The fact that I define myth in terms of the equivocal nature of its truth value suggests that myth is to some extent in the eye of the beholder. One person's "history" (i.e., a veridical and literal account of events) may be another person's "myth," and still another's "lie."

So far the concept of myth we have described accounts for what might be called "*the classic myth*." The classic myth is a story that we assume has fictional elements but whose deeper significance we take to be true. This would include both the great traditional myths that have been passed down in oral and written tradition, folktales, urban legends, and family stories, which we recognize as embroidered by individual tellers, but somehow reflecting important truths for the family. In classic myths a fictional surface is put in the service of deeper truths.

But there is another kind of myth which has become increasingly important in the modern world. We might call this kind of myth a “*myth-conception*” in that it uses rhetorical framing associated with truth to convey a message that is wrong or significantly distorted. These sorts of misleading myths share with their classical cousins a distinctive combination of fact and fiction. But while the means is similar, the end is quite different: the use of the rhetoric of truth to deceive or misrepresent. Examples of myth-conceptions include works of nonfiction, including textbooks and newspapers, that knowingly misrepresent the way things really are or were, the use of documentary or the news formats on television to convey fictionalized accounts of history, and a whole range of advertising techniques such as misleading statistics, testimonials from “experts” or apparent users who turn out to be paid actors, and many other uses of communication devices associated with truth when used to mislead rather than inform people.¹

Whereas the fictional framing of classic myth reinforces a playful or metaphorical attitude towards reality, the use of the rhetoric of truth in myth-conceptions has the opposite effect, encouraging people to suspend doubt and accept the content without question. Though obviously quite different from one another, both classic myths and myth-conceptions have a very important place in relation to contemporary American middle-class families. Some of the specific ways in which both kinds of myth operate in relation to families will be explored below.

Ritual

While ritual has parallel functions to myth as well as some structural similarities, ritual is somewhat more complex than myth. The study of ritual has been a venerable topic in anthropology, and might be said without too much exaggeration to be one of the central issues in the study of culture. Just why this is the case is not immediately obvious, and in the following pages we shall try to illuminate the central place of ritual in the anthropological imagination.

There are several significant obstacles to a clear understanding of ritual. First is the fact that the term “ritual” has both a broad and narrow usage. In any society, certain highly elaborated performances are explicitly recognized as rituals. We might call these “canonical rituals” in that they are explicitly marked and acknowledged by people to be ritually framed activities. Many canonical rituals are associated with formalized religious practice, but of course there are many canonical rituals that money have a purely secular character including many rites of passage such as weddings, birth rituals, and funerals. Rites of passage often framed as religious events, but fully secular versions of these rituals are common and generally acknowledged as rituals. Weddings, the Catholic Mass, Graduations, Thanksgiving, The Passover Seder are all common American examples of canonical rituals.

While most of us readily knowledge canonical rituals, there are other kinds of behaviors that are generally not thought of as rituals but which psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists identify as ritual forms. The implication is that these unacknowledged rituals share some significant features or functions with canonical rituals. Perhaps the most famous academic use of such noncanonical rituals is Erving Goffman’s notion of “interaction ritual,” where he demonstrates that many of the social patterns that govern ordinary human interaction are constrained by norms of ritual performance more clearly than they are acts of free will (Goffman 1967). Psychoanalysts have used the term “ritual” for purely private and highly idiosyncratic

compulsive actions. Finally, it is a commonplace of cultural anthropology to identify many of the ordinary routines of everyday life such as brushing one's teeth or greeting behavior as cultural rituals. This distinction between canonical and non-canonical rituals is important, and begs explanation. But it is just a significant that the same term is used for both, suggesting that ritual forms are far more pervasive in ordinary life than most people think.

Both kinds of rituals share an important set of characteristics. They are rituals in so far as they represent highly *formalized patterns* of behavior. The distinction between form and content of message is reduced. To some extent the forms of ritual *are* its content. Whereas ordinary language and behavior allows for a high degree of paraphrase, alternative formulations of the same content, ritualized communication employs highly constrained forms and cannot be communicated in another way without significantly changing the message (Rappaport 1979). While linguists have emphasized the arbitrary nature of language signs, ritual symbols tend to be nonarbitrary, often communicating by iconic similarity or by indexical connection (Peirce 1932). Even when ritual symbols are objectively arbitrary, to the extent that they are ritualized they are generally not experienced as arbitrary.

Ritual acts vary dramatically in scale, from simple behavioral routines to highly elaborated cultural performances that may take days to complete. While this variability in the scale of ritual may seem to add to the vagueness of the concept, it actually highlights one of the most characteristic features of ritual: its modularity. Complex rituals tend to be built up from combinations of simpler rituals. This modular character to ritual behavior is not accidental, but is linked to the importance of ritualized behaviors in ordinary social life. Social rituals must be made up of easily recognizable units. But there are so many different occasions that need to be ritualized in social life that having special-purpose rituals for each one would require an enormous stock of particular forms in which any person would have to be competent. It makes more sense to employ a rather more limited stock of ritual forms such as bowing, shaking hands, sitting, standing, in various combinations and permutations to satisfy the complex demands of social encounters (Bruner 1972). This is one reason I suspect that humans evolved ritual forms that have a high degree of modularity.

A notable characteristic of many rituals is that they involve the expression of conflicting impulses or ambiguous or transitional states. Human behavior tends to become formalized when there is a presence of significant ambiguities, ambivalence, transitions between states, or contradictions. This is why rites of passage which mark the transition of individuals from one social status to another are commonly expressed by ritual forms (Van Gennep 1960, Turner 1967, 1969). Rituals often appear to be "compromise formations," in which opposite impulses are fused into a single action pattern. This accounts for the capacity of rituals to effect transformations of understanding or a reframing of perspective by allowing one frame of mind to be converted into another.

Other kinds of transitions that are marked by ritual include entrances and exits, awkward and ambivalent encounters between individuals with potential for conflict, etc. Religions are commonly concerned with making sense of apparently contradictory or paradoxical aspects of life, and helping people to reframe their understandings of experience. Religions often provide ritualized way's to mark significant transitions in life, and to provide transcendent meaning for them. For all of these reasons, ritual forms are particularly useful in promoting religious

experience.

Because of their predictable formats, rituals often promote social coordination. This is true not only for humans but for many other social species of animals as well. Because ritual forms promote a high degree of coordination, the capacity for ritualization of action which is highly developed in humans must be considered a kind of foundational capacity for creating social institutions. This is why the study of family ritual, from everyday routines to elaborate celebrations, is so important in understanding family life in a society in which coordination is becoming increasingly problematical. We shall return to this issue of social coordination below.

While human beings have highly developed capacities for the voluntary creation and control of rituals, it is interesting to consider that in many other animal species rituals are understood to be hardwired rather than voluntaristic behavior (Tinbergen 1961; Lorenz 1952; D'Aquili, McManus and Laughlin 1979). While this biological fixity distinguishes much animal ritual from its human analogs, the association of ritual with relatively fixed and hardwired behavior patterns is important in understanding the evolution and significance of human ritual. Ritualized behavior is behavior which is highly formalized and generally frequently repeated. In this sense it is related to "habit." In fact, the main difference between ritualized and habitual behavior is that ritual behavior is imbued with a high degree of symbolic significance, while habit is not necessarily meaningful. While ritual is subject to consciousness and the voluntary control, it is commonly experienced as relatively stable and automatic behavior, especially by highly socialized individuals. In this sense human ritual mimics some of the characteristics of hardwired animal ritual, while retaining its essentially cultural character as subject to voluntary modification and elaboration. This intermediate status of human ritual as a kind of "pseudo-instinct," exhibiting characteristics of both biologically grounded and culturally learned behavior is the key to the distinctive power and importance of ritual in human life.

Generally, we don't have to think about the rules for social rituals: they appear to come naturally to us. This automaticity in ritual underlies the capacity of ritual to produce the experience of "agency reversal." Much of our conscious behavior is experienced by us as under our control. But as behavior becomes increasingly ritualized, this sense of control reverse is, and in well practiced ritual the behavior many the experienced as controlling the person rather than the other way around. This capacity of ritual to produce agency reversal is one of the more important reasons why ritual is associated with experiencing transcendent authority whether in religious, social, or political contexts. It might be said that culture itself, and the human capacity to share institutional frameworks, are both made possible by the human capacity for ritualized behaviors.

One final a significant characteristic of ritual is that it enters into complex relationships with other, non-ritualized, forms of behavior. Rituals are often hierarchically arranged. They underlie forms of behavior which are much looser and more contingent than the rituals themselves. This is why it is not always the case that ritual appears in contexts characterized by fixity and unpredictability of forms. A good example of the way that ritualized forms may underlie highly contingent forms of behavior can be found in any courtroom, where highly formalized and predictable formats scaffold what are generally contingent and often explosive proceedings. The same relationship between ritual and more playful and unpredictable forms of behavior holds in all games and sports (Shore 1996, Chaps. 3-4). Games and sports are always

framed by highly specified and constraining “rules of engagement” which include norms governing time, space, and interaction. In this sense every game and every sports event has our ritual infrastructure. But unlike pure rituals in which the ritual structure is the primary focus of participants, in sports and games just as in courtroom proceedings, the ritual forms tend to recede into the background as foundational and enabling structures that actually enable the contingent events that occupy attention. In this sense of ritual permits us to “agree to disagree,” providing the kind of social contract of shared norms and expectations that make possible meaningful conflict.

This is why we find ritual not only in situations of apparent harmony, but very commonly in situations of tremendous conflict and disagreement. In this context, it may be said that the successful family or married couple is not the one that can avoid all conflict, since this is an unreasonable goal, but rather the one that is able to negotiate a set of meaningful rituals and stories that enabled them to get through the conflict and eventually resolved it. The creation of successful rituals of conflict and conflict resolution is one of the important goals in the making of meaningful family life.

Ritual in the Making of Family Life

The preceding discussion should make it clear why ritual has such a powerful role in human life, and why this study of ritual in working families provides an extremely sharp lens for which to understand both what is happening with contemporary working families and what families are doing in response to the challenges they face. When a new family is formed, it faces not only the practical challenges of providing food and shelter for its members, but also the less commonly recognized challenge of creating a new miniature society with a distinctive set of traditions and coordinating practices. New parents bring with them a stock of understandings and practices from their own childhood families many of which will be used in part or whole in the making of the new family. But the actual constitution of the ritual life of a new family is highly contingent and will depend upon ongoing negotiations between parents, the gender and role system that is adopted by the new family, the nature of the community in which the family resides, and the particular circumstances of individual families, including work patterns, numbers of children, economic status, and health status of family members. The key point is that families must create a meaningful order of myths and rituals for themselves. No family will simply reproduce the structure of stories and rituals that the parents experienced as children. The production of a family in United States is in great part the particular orchestration of routines and stories that give the family a functional and also distinctive character.

Middle-Class Families

Our focus is not just on the American family, but more specifically middle-class families. But the whole notion of social class is notoriously confused in American discourse. While issues of gender and race are common topics of discussion in the United States, class status remains a far more equivocal and ambiguous issue, particularly for the middle class. The very idea of class presupposes a set of significant social distinctions, but the utility of the concept seems

questionable when about 80% of Americans identify themselves as middle-class (Fussel 1983:44). If we use self-identification as the basis of class, then the vast majority of Americans would seem to fall into “a rather amorphous and hence universalistic and culturally neutral middle” (Kenny 2000:71).

But this notion of the United States as an essentially classless or one-class society is very misleading. It is true that middle-class Americans do not generally speak of themselves in class terms. But as Sherry Ortner has suggested,

... class is central to American social life, but it is rarely spoken in its own right. Rather it is represented through other categories of social difference: gender, ethnicity, race, and so forth.” (Ortner 1991:164)

This muting of class boundaries, and the ubiquitous extension of middle-class identity such that it masks significant differences in actual economic status and social power is built into the culture of consumption. Middle-class identity is deeply intertwined with consumer identity, leading Strathern to call it “the plasti-class,” suggesting the conflation of class status and credit status (Strathern 1992). Because middle-class status is deeply linked with consumption behavior, marketers naturally have an interest in promoting the widest possible extension of middle-class identity, and hence promoting the idea that class-status is a reflection of one’s consumption patterns rather than some sort of social essence.

The fact that a majority of Americans self-identify as middle-class indicates that the media, in addressing and largely representing the middle class, or at least an imagined idea of the middle-class, effectively constitutes its audience regardless of incomes, job status, educational levels, and lifestyles. This is not, in other words, a chicken-and-egg problem, but a media-fabricated social imaginary. (Kenny 2000: 71)

In other words, while it does point to an important American concept, the term “middle-class” also serves to conceal a variety of important social distinctions at the same moment as it appears to be revealing one.

In part this conceptual obfuscation can be traced to the fact that the idea of “middle-class” conflates distinct income groups, labor groups (e.g., wage earners, salaried workers, industrial workers, craft workers, service workers, managers, entrepreneurs) and what Weber called “status groups” (Weber 1978). Despite these inevitable ambiguities, and keeping in mind the important elements of “false consciousness” implied by the notion of middle-class, it is possible I think to distinguish four distinct and hierarchically ordered status groups in the United States that we can use as a baseline model of American class structure. They are not precisely income-groups, however, but are framed by distinct identities, worldviews and social consciousness.

At the upper end of the “class” spectrum are relatively small number of very wealthy “old families” who consider themselves the upper crust of American life. This traditional elite status group in American life is generally white Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. These elites do not

generally consider wealthy or socially and politically prominent non-wasps to be genuine peers. This is because, while most of these families are relatively wealthy, and some are influential, wealth or social achievement are not by themselves the most important criteria for upperclass status. Upperclass status is framed as ascribed and inherited rather than achieved. Upper class status is attributed to birth, “blood,” social connections to the right ancestors, clubs, families, and schools, and a sense of authentic “style” that is held to be largely unattainable and inimitable by outsiders and parvenus.

At the other end of the class spectrum is America’s “underclass,” perennially unemployed or marginally employed, poorly educated and often ethnically marked communities who have little hope of economic advancement and are generally the most vulnerable segment of American society, subject to violence and many kinds of major health risks. This underclass is not populated just by the unemployed. According to Political scientist John Schwartz

. . . more than 12 million full-time year round workers are paid wages beneath those needed to support a minimally decent standard of living for households with children. Two-thirds of workers who start at sub par wages are unable to lift themselves up to a decent wage even after a decade of full-time work.” (Schwartz 1998:21, quoted in Skocpol 2000:5)

Struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads, the American working poor along with the perennially unemployed are not a statistically insignificant part of our population, but they are often ignored by social policy analysts. Their economic vulnerability means that most experience life outside of the aspirations and goals of the American middle-class.

The third status group in the United States are blue-collar workers, what in Britain is called the “working-class” (Newman 1988/1999, Chap. 6). More than a lower-middle range income group, blue-collar communities are defined by a distinctive set of social values, and by relatively flat status aspirations and educational goals. Blue collar workers often assume that what was good for them and their parents is right for their kids, and are thus distinct from the middle-class by the absence of an aspirational class culture. Socially conservative, blue-collar communities tend to be tight knit and marked by a strong and self-conscious identity. Their residential patterns and social networks are also characteristically distinct from those of the middle-class (Bott 1971).

From a purely income perspective there is some overlap between blue-collar workers and the middle class.² In some communities blue-collar workers may have higher incomes than some middle-class workers, as in the case of a community in which factory workers are paid higher wages than the salaries of local schoolteachers. The major differences between blue-collar and middle-class communities are more matters of self-identification and social aspiration.

While most Americans self-identify as middle-class, the middle-class as a group has been notoriously hard to define or pin down. Perhaps this is because “middle-class” is as much a state of mind as it is an economic status. “Middle class” in America tends to be defined in terms of social and economic aspirations and a distinctive set of attitudes. This is why “middle class” is not easily pigeonholed in terms of income or any neat cluster of ascribed characteristics. Because of the aspirational basis of middle-class identity, Americans from a wide range of

income groups self-identify as middle-class. To be middle class is to aspire to economic and social upward mobility, to see one's life as a self-conscious upward climb.

Middle-class status is characterized by assumptions of generational discontinuity and upward mobility. One's own social and economic status should ideally be higher than one's parents' status and that one's children will aspire to exceed their parents' social and economic status. Middle class status is calculated on a fine gradient of status markers rather than in simple class terms. The status markers from the middle-class are generally framed in terms of consumption patterns with major emphasis given to neighborhood, house, furnishings, and cars. But all kinds of consumption patterns enter into the complex calculus of rising class status. This is why it is so difficult to distinguish status level from income for the middle-class. Unlike the ascribed characteristics that govern upper-class identity, middle-class status inevitably engages the best markers of status that money can buy.

It should be obvious why "middle class" status is so problematical in United States. First whereas other class groups appear to be openly aware of the class structure of the United States and see themselves in conscious relation to one or more other classes, members of the middle-class focus their attention on competitive relations with other members of their own class. This focus on internal competition probably helps mute middle-class individuals' awareness of class relations. The middle class is also structurally different from the other classes. Whereas the other three class statuses are generally defined by fairly fixed or ascribed criteria, and thus approximate what we normally think of as "groups," the middle class is far more amorphous and unstable. Middle-class status engages a dynamic and always relative calculus of comparative mobility as measured by a wide variety of consumption patterns. One may enter the middle class, just as one may fall from it (Newman 1988/1999). In relation to family life, the relatively dynamic and aspirational character of middle-class identity has decisive implications for the structure and developmental trajectory of middle-class families.

Middle-Class Family Structure

Demographic changes in the contemporary American family have been well documented. One does not have to look far in the media to learn about some of these changes: the rise in the divorce rate, the entailed increase in single parent households, the gradual decline in average number of children per household, the increase in the number of people living alone, a growing number of families with same-sex couples, an increase in families with no children, a steady rise of the number of dual wage-earner families, and a growing number of families where the adults work nontraditional hours and complementary rather than parallel schedules.

But to an anthropologist, these important changes are taking place within a distinctive and enduring type of family system that has not generally been recognized and analyzed as an important feature of working families issues. Generally, the literature on working families has simply taken for granted the nature of the American middle-class family system. But the American family is a distinctive type of family system that takes its place among a wide variety of family systems that exist in human societies. Understanding the character of the American family from this comparative perspective provides us with an eye-opening view of some of the key aspects of contemporary family life. Moreover one cannot understand the role of ritual and

myth in the modern families apart from an understanding of the structural and developmental characteristics of this family type over time.

The American middle-class family is often classified as “nuclear family” system. The nuclear family is not a generic or universal type of family system. The most basic unit of family life is generally considered to be the mother and her offspring (what is sometimes called “the elementary family”). Though economic globalization is making it increasingly common throughout the world, it is important to remember that the nuclear family is far from a universal type of social organization.

Nuclear families are units of a couple and their offspring. The normative and idealized form of the nuclear family is that of a monogamous, heterosexual couple and their offspring. While this is still the modal family type in United States, we are experiencing a considerable variation in the constitution of the American nuclear family. The latter third of the twentieth century saw increases in single-parent families, blended families (the union of two single-parent units) and families with two parents of the same-sex.

Despite these important variations in American family structure, the middle-class nuclear family has a number of important characteristics that we generally take for granted but which need to be examined. First, it is a kind of genealogical isolate, a highly atomized family structure that is generally not deeply embedded in any encompassing kin or descent groups. This atomism is implied by our kin terminology, which is classified by anthropologists as “an Eskimo terminology.” This kind of terminology isolates lineal kin (Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Grandparent, Grandchild) from collateral kin (Cousin, Aunt, Uncle, Niece, Nephew), distinguishes relatives by generation but not by maternal or paternal line (i.e., Uncle□Nephew; Mother□Grandmother; Mother’s Brother (uncle) = Father’s Brother (uncle)).

The effect of this isolation is to carve out of the potential universe of kin a relatively isolated unit which is not *structurally* embedded in wide or deep relations with kin beyond three lineal generations defined by grandparents, parents, and children). This is not to say that Americans do not have strong sentimental and even practical attachments with those that they consider their “extended family,” but that there are very few structural links of an enduring nature that tied the nuclear family to a wider universe of kin. Throughout the world most families are embedded in encompassing descent groups which are based upon common economic holding such as land or houses or joint economic enterprises. These encompassing descent groups exercise considerable authority and influence over the lives of their members. By contrast, American middle-class families are adapted to a kind of economic individualism with the parental unit controlling its own household economy and functioning, and exercising primary authority over the welfare and socialization of its offspring.

American middle-class families do not generally have much genealogical depth, which means that most members do not know their relatives beyond the grandparent generation. Nor do they interact with collateral relatives more than one generation out (i.e., beyond the first cousins). There are exceptions to this, and some regional variations. The existence of family circles, cousin clubs, family reunions, and periodic get-togethers with more distant kin, and the growing interest in family genealogy suggest strong interest in overcoming the inherent isolation of this family unit, and such attempts are important objects of study by the scholars at the MARIAL Center. However in this case the exception proves the rule, and only underscores the lack of

explicit *structural links* tying American nuclear families to wider networks of kin and descent units.

The Developmental Cycle of the American Family

Some of the most important characteristics of the middle-class family become clear only when we turn away from the relatively static picture that we have presented thus far of the American family system and focus instead on what anthropologists call its “developmental cycle.” The notion that every type of family system has a distinctive developmental cycle was developed by British social anthropologists and is particularly associated with Jack Goody (Goody 1958). Some of the important variations in family structure evident within any given community at a given time are due not so much to differences in basic family structure as to differences in the developmental phase that different families are in. Every kind of family system has a distinctive developmental trajectory, and goes through characteristic phases.

The nuclear family system that is characteristic of the American middle-class develops in a very distinctive way over time. We can begin, somewhat arbitrarily, with a newly married couple. While American couples may reside at any given time with the parents of either the husband or the wife, this is not the ideal situation, and middle-class parents (whether married or single, straight or gay) strive to establish their own independent residence as soon as possible. Returning “home” to Mom and Dad in this context suggests dependency which implies failure to become an adult. Moving on implies the first stage of moving up.³ The implication is clear and important. The couple does not conceive of itself as continuing the family of either the husband or the wife. Nor is it establishing a branch of any other family. What a couple is doing is beginning a completely new family. This means that the effective life of any given middle-class family is about one-and-one-half generations. This nuclear family lifespan encompasses the raising of young children up until the age when they themselves leave home to establish their own families, as well as a period of involvement of young children with grandparents.

The developmental goal of the American middle-class family is thus to produce viable offspring who will be capable of eventually leaving their natal households and setting up families of their own.⁴ Families whose children cannot do this are considered in the popular parlance “dysfunctional” or at least relatively unsuccessful by middle-class standards. The implications are hard to miss. The American middle-class family is one of the few family systems in the world whose developmental trajectory is, in an important sense, to self-destruct. In this context, maintenance of ties of kin dependency outside the context of the nuclear family becomes problematical and a source of considerable ambivalence for family members.

As a family matures, consider how the meaning of “my family” changes. In the early stages of creating a family, and particularly before children enter the picture, a couple is likely to retain their close ties with their natal families (what scholars sometimes call “the family of orientation”). In this case “my family” would be referred to their own parents and siblings. Following the birth or adoption of a child, Americans consider the couple now as its own “family.” Indeed the old euphemism for pregnancy, which represented the woman as being “in a family way,” suggests the importance for Americans of children in the creation of a family. In this context it is interesting to note that single parenthood does not seriously compromise a unit

as a family in the same way that childlessness does.⁵

Both in terms of the socialization of children and the development of the family as a unit, the ideal for the middle-class family is a high degree of autonomy. Separation occurs not only by the new family unit in relation to its parental units, but also within the new family, as children come into the picture. Though many families are not able to afford a big enough town to give each child its own room, this remains an ideal for middle-class families. This separation of children from their parents is modeled in a number of ways in the American middle-class family. Perhaps most obvious is the ideal of providing infants with their own room as soon as possible.

This ideal of “a space of their own” for children is a key theme of middle-class family life throughout its development. In my interviews with middle-class families the privileged space in the house from many kids was not the public in which they actually spend much of their time, but rather their private, often secret spaces that are uniquely theirs. Every child I interviewed reported having some kind of private hideout either inside the house in an attic, basement or closet, or in some kind of constructed space outside the house such as “a fort,” a “tree-house,” a “playhouse” or other hideout. Parents I have interviewed also remember having such spaces in their childhood homes. Such secret spaces continue to be important for American middle-class children until they can claim their own room as a private and inviolable space. So long as parents and older siblings have free access to their bedrooms, children often create a separate space of privacy.

Providing or creating private space within family space is not the only way that Americans prepare their children to leave the nest. Rituals of detachment are commonplace in American middle-class family life. The aspirational mobility of the middle-class family means that moving from one place to another (hopefully, but not necessarily, “moving up”) is a common experience of middle-class family life. Thus perpetual displacement is tied paradoxically to nostalgic notions of “home” as twin aspirations of the “American dream.” For adults, this ever-present possibility of having to move means balancing defenses against attaching oneself too strongly to a community with learning how to quickly “become involved” in community life.

For kids, this displacement involves managing the uncomfortable status of “the new kid on the block,” and “the new kid in the class.” In *Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence*, Katherine Newman describes this quintessentially middle-class experience of moving to a new community:

Like many other executive families, they were newcomers to suburban New York. Only two years before, David’s firm had transferred him from its California branch to its New York headquarters. The move east held the promise of a more important executive job for David and the taste of real affluence. The transition had not been easy, since the social barriers of suburban society were hard to penetrate. Making new friends was no small accomplishment, and after two years there were only a few they could count as close. But they weren’t the kind of old friends one could lean on in the crisis, and this surely was a crisis.

Their two teenage children were equally disoriented. Like most kids, they had opposed moving away from the place where they had grown up. They made

no secret of their fury at being disrupted in the middle of high school, exiled to a new state where they knew no one. The girl had become rather withdrawn. The boy had worked hard to make new friends, leaning on his father's prestige as a company executive as an avenue into the status-conscious cliques of the local high school. When his son first arrived, as David put it, "No one would even talk to him. He was looked upon as a transient. Everyone else in his school had been in the same area since grammar school." The son's efforts to break into the networks met only with mild success, and even then it took nearly the entire two years before he felt on solid social ground. He had finally reached the comfortable plateau when David lost his job. The whole family was thrown into turmoil, and the prospect of moving surfaced once again. (Newman 1988/1999)

In addition to the major pattern of recurrent home displacement, middle-class family life is filled with smaller rites of detachment. Middle-class Americans are prepared for separation early, starting with their being placed in their own cribs, preferable in their own rooms, as soon as practically possible after birth. These rites of detachment continue throughout the life-course in the form of sleep-away parties, childhood traditions of "running away from home," going away to camp during the summer (where learning to overcome "homesickness," is an important goal) and, finally, the going to a college at least far enough away from home not to have to live with one's parents (a feared dependency status probably associated with both a failure to achieve adulthood and with blue-collar rather than middle-class values). Though children sometimes do live at home during college years, or during the early years of work, this is an awkward status of that may satisfy poorly articulated or understood needs for attachment to family, but which is nonetheless understood by middle-class society as a sign that one has failed to achieve adult status.

The recognition by children that their natal house is not going to be their permanent home may be communicated early on by parents and children alike in these "detachment rituals." It is also perpetuated by a variety of American "popular myths" about family, such as adolescents complaining (but actually bragging) about how dysfunctional their family is to friends, or competing to see who has the worst parents, and (for parents) lamenting to peers about the terrible teens and how they can't wait to get them out of the house. Of course like all myths these tales may contain some truth, but they also provide a set of shared cultural reference points for both parents and children that actually scaffold the difficult job of detaching from one another.

Most young families seem to be relatively unaware of the implications of these practices and beliefs until the children reach their teenage years and "the empty nest" scenario looms. These years in the life of a maturing family are sometimes characterized as the "terrible teens" and are often the site of difficult negotiations between parents and growing children concerning issues of autonomy. Parents are often conflicted. Their genuine concerns for the safety and welfare of their teenage children, and their often inarticulate desires to hold onto their children are in tension with their recognition that they have to prepare their children to be on their own. Everyone has to learn to "let go," and family rituals and myths are geared to helping them through this difficult process. Though teenagers are generally not so open about their own

ambivalence, I would expect that similar mixed feelings about autonomy and dependency are present in many of the children as well.

Whether they are headed to college or directly to the working world, eventually middle-class children are propelled out of their natal houses and into increasingly “independent living.” More than one informant has described for me their traumatic moment of realization that they no longer had a home. For children who go away to college, that realization often occurs in their third or fourth year of school, when they return home for vacation to discover that their bedroom has been turned into a guest room and that their childhood “stuff” has been put away in the attic.

Of course family ties do not disappear when the kids leave home. The dissolution of the natal family is a gradual process that has many phases. But the meaning of “family” is forever changed when the kids move out. In a sense, the parents are left with the same kind of ambiguity they experienced before the birth of their children. Is a couple with no children in their empty nest still “a family?” Once their children establish families of their own, just what and where is that original family? Are they now members of their children’s “extended family?” Who will visit whom and what does it mean for the complex negotiations that at stake? For women these issues often revolve around control of food production and other nurturant acts. For men the issue becomes: Who is the head of what family and how do we know?

Families with adult children are not simply affected by the fact that the unit no longer resides together under one roof. The very existence and meaning of the old family unit is put into question by the fact that the children are beginning the process by which the primary meaning of family will shift from their natal family to that which they are about to make.

Just what happens to the old family in this developmental process? From the point of view of the parental generation, their family still exists, though in a dispersed state. Family ties are maintained by telephone and e-mail communication, by periodic visits, and, significantly, by a cycle of ritual celebrations such as holidays and family life events like funerals and birthdays which bring dispersed family members together. Gradually, however, the get-togethers are reframed, and what was once considered as “the kids coming home” gradually becomes “the children coming for a visit,” and eventually “going to visit the grandchildren.” We might call this gradual displacement and reversal of roles “The King Lear Scenario.”

From the perspective of the children, their focus gradually shifts to thinking about reestablishing themselves as independent adults. This process began in the teenage years when many of them sought increasing freedom to be away from home and with peers rather than parents. It culminates eventually in the establishment of a fully autonomous residence. At this stage of their lives, the locus of “family” and “home” begin to diverge. While the “family” will continue to mean parents and siblings until they have their own children, the term “home” becomes crucially ambiguous and can refer either to the natal family setting or to their new residence. This shift in the meaning of “my home” portends a future shift in the meaning of “my family.” The family has been successful in its mission. It not been continued, extended or reproduced. It has been, for the most part, replaced.

The Growing Importance of Ritual and Myth

These distinctive characteristics of middle-class families have important implications for

the place that ritual and myth have in American family life. In this context we might well ask what it is that holds families together. What exactly are the ties that bind? The oldest answer is sex and childcare. In evolutionary terms, the human family was initially tied together by erotic attraction. With the loss of the estrus cycle of seasonal mating, and the possibility of year-around sexual access, hominids had the biologically grounded basis of a perpetual bond between mates which allowed a functional and stable family unit to develop for the socialization and protection of offspring. Families are also held together by sentimental bonds, guaranteed by the elaboration of what psychologists call “attachment,” though family life also produces a wide range of negative and ambivalent emotions in addition to attachment.

In addition to these emotional bases of family life, families are functional units held together by ties of practical interdependence. The family is the most basic instance of a group integrated by what Durkheim termed “organic solidarity” (Durkheim 1933), a division of labor in which individuals with specialized roles exchange labor and come to depend on one another for that each can contribute to the whole. Most families have a relatively elementary division of labor, by gender and age. Sharing common interests in producing and raising children, protecting them from harm, and provisioning the household with food, shelter and other necessities, all families are to some extent pragmatic units with common material interests. This is of course the case for American middle-class families, whose existence rests as much on shared practical and economic interests as it does on sentiments.

In most family systems, these pragmatic interests transcend the life of a single household, and members (often sets of brothers or - in matrilineal societies- sisters) share enduring common interests in a wide variety of practical resources including land, houses, animals, seeds, tools, forms of secret knowledge, ritual magic, and offspring. The continuity of the descent group beyond the life of a single family rests on these enduring pragmatic interests. In addition to these pragmatic interests, the continuity and solidarity of families is maintained by its rituals and myths, which provide the basis for the symbolic continuity of the group. Human communities are constituted as both pragmatic and symbolic orders, and generally the two dimensions reinforce one another.

The same is true for American middle-class families. But the relative importance of the pragmatic and the symbolic ties changes over the developmental life of any given family. Modern middle-class families are notable for their relative absence of enduring joint property or economic interests. Modern families are organized on the basis of economic individualism, private rather than communal ownership of property, and the commodification of land, houses, etc. These resources may well be inherited (passed down) by family members, but property is rarely jointly owned by a sibling set, unless the family legally incorporates. Unless the family establishes a joint family business (whether a large and complex enterprise or a small family-run business), siblings share few or no enduring pragmatic ties after they leave home. Family interdependence remains only as a set of diffuse and not always reliable expectations about helping out family members with financial, emotional or labor support in times of need.

As the family matures and children prepare to leave the nest, its pragmatic life weakens. Though adult children may continue to count on parental economic help from time to time, the practical ties that reinforced the unity of the family unit gradually lose force as the constituting basis of the family. In the absence of strong pragmatic ties, joint ownership of property and co-

residence, what guarantees the continuity of any family unit? To a surprising degree, the answer is myth and ritual.

Family continuity is maintained in part by narratives of various kinds: family talk, family stories, and family gossip become the life blood of an essentially dispersed family group. The family comes to be linked through its flow of words as much as anything else. “Keeping in touch” by phone, email, letters and periodic visits becomes increasingly important as the practical interests of the group are diminished. Moreover, American families become increasingly dependent on their ritual traditions to keep them going. Birthdays, anniversaries, deaths, and weddings as well as the important “homecoming” rituals of families (most notably Thanksgiving, Christmas, and, for Jews, Passover) become the life-blood of family continuity. But rather than serving to symbolically reinforce the pragmatic interests that constitute the material basis for the family, rituals come to be the constituting condition for the continued existence of the family. Over the course of their developmental histories, *American families shift from being a basically pragmatic order to being an almost exclusively ritual and mythic order.* The work that parents (largely mothers) do in establishing family ritual and memory traditions early in the life of the family will not only serve the children as an important framework for their childhood memories, but will establish the basis for whatever enduring joint life this family will have once the children leave home.

The somewhat surprising conclusion is that ritual and myth are not just important for middle-class families but crucial factors in its very constitution. The structure and developmental trajectory of middle-class families give ritual and narrative a particularly important role in underwriting the continuity of the family, especially in its mature form, when the children leave home. ⁶As the pragmatic basis of family life for any middle-class family weakens, the slack is largely taken up by talk, stories and celebrations. Beginning as a mix of sentimental attachments and practical interests, the family ends up as almost entirely a product of its ritual performances.

So far we have been concerned with the general significance of ritual in American middle-class families. But our research is focused more specifically on the lives of “working families,” families where there is no full-time stay-at-home parent. Our research program presupposes that modern work-life has important implications for family life that can be profitably approached by looking from a number of angles at how myth and ritual function in working families.

Meaning-making

One of the consequences of being culture-bearing and culture-creating animals is that humans are compelled to seek meaning in their lives (Geertz 1973, Bruner 1990, Shore 1996). Finding the significance of our actions in some grander scheme of things is second nature for humans. Ritual and myth are basic to the way humans update meaning in their lives. What exactly is “meaning?” While it appears to be a somewhat elusive concept, “meaning” is not impossible to define. To experience something as *meaningful* is to experience it as a kind of remembering (Shore 1996, Chap. 13). When something becomes meaningful for us, it is perceived as a kind of repetition or near-repetition of something already known. Something alien becomes familiar. This happens by a process of reframing,. Something gains an expanded

context in relation to which it is knowable. Rather than being an isolated experience, a *meaningful event* becomes more than itself. It becomes an instance of something more general, a distinct *kind* of experience, something like (though not always exactly like) what we have already been through.

Ritual and myth provide the basis for this kind of reframing of experience. Rituals and myths are not simply specific actions and stories. They are also generalized templates for action and story, the framework for *canonical events*. In this sense myths and rituals have a crucial ambiguity. They are halfway between specific events and general forms: human speech and activity on the way to becoming shared *institutions*. This distinctive formalized character of ritual and myth sets them apart from ordinary action and speech as marked action frames. Myth and ritual are *foundational* modes of narrative and action, which are relevant to a whole range of specific events. They provide many of the general models humans use to interpret the ongoing events of their lives, the general forms that help us make sense of the particular moments of our lives.

This special character of ritual and myth means that they play an important role in memory, and in the complex relationship between personal memory and social memory (Shore n.d., 1996). Human memory works in relation to pre-stored mental schemas that serve both to frame and sometimes to distort how we remember specific events (Bartlett 1932). These schemas may be highly idiosyncratic, but often they are conventional mental models derived from a shared environment. Rituals and conventional stories are two of the most important ways in which such shared schemas get produced and transmitted within a community. The highly formalized character of rituals and myths means that they take on considerable power of framing how events be recalled by people. In this sense, the complex fabric of family routines, rituals and stories which helps make up a “family culture” provides much of the framework for what family members will remember of their family life.

When adults look back on their childhood, two kinds of memories will be salient in what psychologists term “autobiographical memory” (Conway and Bekerian 1987, Conway 1992, Schacter 1996). On the one hand, there are the unique memories of emotionally salient events, such as deaths, births, accidents, major storms and any other incidents that stand out from the normal flow of life’s experiences.⁷ On the other hand memories of family life will often be framed in more general terms than particular events, and expressed as habitual forms of action such as “When I was young we used to . . .” These are not actually part of event memory but rather what Connerton has called “habit memory” (Connerton 1989). This kind of generalized memories of one’s earlier life are a product of two important kinds of activity: routines (rituals), and canonical stories (myths) (Bruner 1990; Fivush, Bohanek, Robertson, and Duke, in press).

To the extent that family life is always becoming memory, thus family history, it rests inevitably on the routines and stories which are the foundation of its enduring character. As we have seen, this is especially true in American middle-class families, in which these structured memories gradually become the sole basis of the continuity of a family as its members move on.

Myth, Ritual and the Challenges of Work-Family Life

This special place of myth and ritual in the constitution of autobiographical memory and

in meaning-making more generally has important implications for the study of modern family life. Myth and ritual are key resources that families deploy in meeting the challenges of constructing a coherent set of stories and practices in the making of a modern family. The traditional work of myth and ritual are seriously affected by the significant changes contemporary families have experienced in the allocation of their time to work, family and civic life, by new trends in scheduling patterns at home, at work, and at school, by the effects of mass media, and by changing communication technologies.

At the heart of ritual and myth are issues of social coordination. Ritual promotes coordination in activities (Rappaport 1968), and both ritual and myth promote coordination of perspective. Coordination does not imply perfect overlap of exact replication, but only a significant degree of joint attention and mutuality of reference to important aspects of experience. But coordination is also at the heart of the juggling problem and the time bind that have come to define the life of the modern working family (Hochschild 1997, Schor 1991).

A majority of American middle-class families have two working parents, and an even larger percentage, including single parent families, have no parent whose primary job is running the household and looking after the children. Increasingly, the traditional 9-5 work schedule is giving way to a whole variety of non-traditional schedules including night work, shift work, flex-time work and part-time work. Increasingly couples are working very different work schedules in large part because of childcare concerns (Presser 1998, 2000).

Family members may be seen increasingly to be segregated into distinct experiential *niches*, even though they may appear to live in the same place. People sitting together in a room but tuned into different media or engaged in phone conversations or chat-room discussions are in an important sense not really *together*. The extreme market segmentation of television and movies means that parents and children are not actually living in the same world so far as media messages are concerned. Even norms of accepted activity scheduling separate the generations, with teen-agers increasingly comfortable with a social life that begins after midnight. Once upon a time, some degree of family coordination was guaranteed by an implicit social contract that acknowledged periods set aside for family activities: mainly dinner time, and weekends. But it is now common for kids' sports activities or office meetings to run into dinner time, or take up much of the weekend, so that "family time" is transformed into serial eating, with parents juggling the multiple and conflicting obligations of their workplaces and their children's activities. Increasingly everyone seems to have a highly individualized schedule, oriented towards the coordination of the team, the workplace, or the club, but not the family. The implications of these transformations for not simply pragmatic coordination of activities but for the equally important work of coordinated meaning-making need a whole range of good empirical studies.

Equally pressing is the need to understand the effect of changes in communication. Modern information technology has had an enormous impact on the very meaning of "being together." Computers, cell phones, voice mail and pagers have all made it possible for be to be "in touch" without actually being in the same place or even in the same time frame. Virtual togetherness is real and has increased our ability to keep in almost constant "touch" with family members and friends to a degree not possible in a purely flesh-and-blood world. But virtual connection is a far cry from the ordinary sense of being together. Linked together in dense

networks of electronic channels, providing a world of powerful shared media messages as well as interpersonal communication links, people are experiencing radically new ways of “sharing” experiences and information. How these changes have affecting people’s view of their world and their relationships have yet to be adequately studied.

The Social Distribution of Ritual

While it is probably not the case that ritual is less important in contemporary American life than in other times and places,⁸ it is undoubtedly true that the social distribution of ritual has undergone significant change. Putnam (2000) has stressed the dramatic contraction over the past fifty years of the third arena of American life (after home and work): civic life and voluntary associations. In his famous community study of Newberryport, Massachusetts prior to World War II, W. Lloyd Warner documents in detail the large number of civic events and rituals that the average citizen of “Yankee City” attended in the course of a year (Warner 1963), confirming the durability of De Tocqueville’s early observation about the special importance of voluntary organizations in American life (De Tocqueville 1841).

Contributing to this contraction of civic life in contemporary America are two important factors. First is the post-war growth of the suburbs, which replaced small towns and cities as the communities of choice for middle-class families. Suburbs are generally designed as self-contained communities, often with their own governance structure and social institutions. While they may try to mimic traditional communities, they are actually private rather than civic communities, and do not provide any genuinely public or civic space where a larger community can form. Suburbs tend to be zoned for cars rather than pedestrians, and do not provide casual access to public physical spaces or commercial areas for people to congregate beyond their immediate communities (Oldenburg 1989, Kunstler 1993). The spatial layout implies a kind of protective privatization as opposed civic congregation.⁹ The simultaneously growth of shopping malls replacing the “downtown” of a town or city represents a parallel privatization of space and the loss of a sense of being part of a civic community.

The second factor contributing to the shrinking of American civic life has been the transformation of the culture of work in American life, and the return of mothers to the workplace. With families struggling to juggle the demands of children, home and work, little time or energy are left for civic involvements beyond the family (Schor 1991, Hochschild 1989, 1996, Putnam 2000). How much time is left for family activities is currently under study at the MARIAL Center. Of particular interest is the fate of the family dinner. This is particularly salient both because of the general symbolic significance of eating together, but also because family mealtime is one of the few times when families can talk as families. Several of our researchers are studying family conversations at dinnertime, both to understand how much family communication is going on in working families around the dinner table, and because the amount and specific type of family talk is hypothesized to be a key variable in the emotional resilience of children (Fivush, Bohanek, Robertson, and Duke, in press).

Ritual has not disappeared from American life but it appears to have shifted significantly in its social distribution. Civic ritual has in great part contracted and been replaced by increasingly privatized routines and rituals. Our research at the MARIAL Center is just beginning to uncover some of these shifts in the distribution of our ritual lives. Many questions remain to be answered. With the blurring of the boundaries between home and work

(Hochschild 1997), how much of our ritual life has shifted from the family to the workplace (Jandreau 2002)? Modern media and communication devices make possible new forms of “virtual ritual,” experiences that we “share” with others such as watching the same television shows, that do not require us to actually be together. What ritual functions are served by sitcoms or football games or movies which may be watched alone but which serve to provide a common framework for ritualized encounters around the water cooler the day after.¹⁰

Finally, there is the generally unrecognized importance of purely personal rituals. These include all those small habitual activities that each of us takes for granted as part of a normal day, or week, and which we notice only when they are disrupted. “Having my morning coffee,” or “reading my paper,” or “watching my favorite TV show” may sound petty when compared to the major social events that normally go under the label of “ritual,” but such minor personal rituals are far more important to an individual’s sense of having a coherent life than we normally acknowledge. The interesting question is whether such personal rituals take on increasing importance as civic rituals have contracted. This privatization of ritual would be consistent with the privatization of our community lives.¹¹

Conclusion

We have seen that there are a number of compelling reasons why the study of ritual and myth needs to be recognized as a central aspect of the study of modern families. The particular structure of American middle-class families, as revealed by their developmental cycle, suggests that family rituals are not just accidental aspects of family life but over time come to be the constituting condition of the continuity of the family. American families are not structural appendages of larger family systems or simply a new generation of an old family. Each family unit must constitute itself anew. The building blocks of this new family unit include its stories and its routines.

Other than its material basis (shelter, food, transportation) ritual and myth are the most important resources that parents must produce in making a viable new family. We have seen how important ritual and myth are as resources for meaning-making and for producing a coherent set of family memories. And we have identified numerous ways in which changes in contemporary family and work life, as well as changes in mass media and communication technology have affected the content and distribution of ritual and myth.

From a practical point of view focusing on the importance of myth and ritual in the constitution of meaningful family life has a number of advantages. Many of the social, economic and demographic forces which are shaping modern work-family life are remote and elusive for affected families. Most of us do not feel that we have the power to significantly affect government labor laws or company policies. Faced with an increasingly onerous “time bind” people may feel out of control, with little sense that there is much they can do to make their lives easier. But this is not true when it comes to shaping the rituals and myths in our lives. We all have considerable control over the rituals we enact together and some control over the stories by which we make sense of our lives. Though ritual and myth may seem a bit abstract as resources, understanding their importance in our family lives gives us perhaps the single most powerful tool for helping us to reshape our lives together in a constructive way.

At first glance it might well appear that bringing the study of ritual and myth into the arena of work-family research represents an odd marriage. But it should be clear by now that the real puzzle is why the important relation between the study of ritual and myth and the study working families was not recognized long ago.

Notes

¹ This usage of the term of “myth” is frequently used in books or articles that purport to expose common misunderstandings. Examples are Thomas Szasz’s *The Myth of Mental Illness*, Eileen Kugler’s *Debunking the Middle-class Myth : Why Diverse Schools Are Good for All Kids*, and Jean Gadrey’s *New Economy, New Myth*.

² Interestingly, blue-collar status is generally limited to white people of various ethnic affiliations. It would appear that African-Americans who might otherwise be counted as blue-collar in terms of work status, social values or residential status consider themselves to be middle class. (Riche Barnes Daniel, personal communication)

³ In anthropological jargon this pattern of establishing new and independent households at marriage is known as “neolocal residence.”

⁴ Interestingly, this is close to the definition that socio-biologists have given to the notion of genetic “fitness” which they propose as an actual motivation underlying human social organization and individual competitive reproductive strategies (Trivers 2002, Dawkins 1986)

⁵ While the single-parent family has been much discussed and studied, and the same cannot be said for the childless family which remains in both understudied and seriously anomalous in our culture despite the increase in number of couples who are choosing not to have children.

⁶ This idea that ritual and myth are not of just symbolic value but can actually constitute the basis of a social group’s existence may seem counter-intuitive. But there are other important examples of this constitutive role for ritual. Clifford Geertz once argued that the Nineteenth Century Balinese polity was actually a “Theater State” and that its court rituals were an important *basis* of political power and not just an expression of power (Geertz 1980). A similar argument has been made by Steven Mullaney for the fundamental political function of the ritual circuits that Queen Elizabeth I made around her kingdom. The implicit recognition of the importance of ritual performance to political power underlay Elizabeth’s fascination with and her fear of the stage (Mullaney 1988).

⁷ Although such event-memories often make a deep and ineradicable impression, they are also subject to various kinds of memory distortion (Schacter 1996).

⁸ So important is ritual for humans that it probably does not make sense to assume that ritual per se is more important for one community than another.

⁹ This trend towards privatization has intensified in recent years in the proliferation of

“private gated communities.”

¹⁰It appears that much of the appeal of the hit television sitcom *Seinfeld* has to do with the recounting by groups of friends of famous episodes. Knowledge of *Seinfeld* episodes constitutes a kind of virtual ritual object with the same effects on promoting coordination of perspective as more traditional kinds of ritual objects. Indeed the content of many of *Seinfeld's* funniest episodes emphasizes apparently trivial experiences that are not normally mentioned by people, but which are immediately recognizable as shared private experiences. This odd mix of highly private yet highly shared and recognizable experiences reproduces at the level of content the odd but potent synthesis of private and public ritual that is represented by media-based social rituals.

¹¹The limiting case of highly personalized ritual is the pathological role of private ritualization in obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The 50 fold increase in diagnosis of OCD during the same period that civic ritual was contracting opens to question whether one form of ritual may act as a compensation for another (Smay 2001)

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