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Family Theory Versus the Theories Families Live By

I argue that there is significant disjunction between the way that families live their lives and the way that we theorize about families. Using the metaphor of positive and negative spaces from the art world, I argue that there are many negative spaces in our theorizing—everyday family activities that take up considerable time, energy, and attention but that are poorly represented in our theorizing about families. Specifically, there are three negative spaces that call out for more attention, including the realm of spirituality, emotions, and myths; activities related to consumption; and time and space.

This paper is about the disjunction between the theories that scholars create to explain families and the *implicit* theories that families live by. Implicit theories are the inherited practices, codes, beliefs, and traditions that shape what families do on a daily basis but that are often hidden from view. When we look at any families, including our own, we see that everyday life is shaped by the complex intersection of many forces. These can be material concerns (having to do with work, spending activities, or managing our things); health concerns (having a cold or depression—or worse, a cold *and* depression); moral and spiritual concerns (raising children to be good, or questions of faith); temporal concerns (being old, being late, scheduling); spatial concerns (commuting, no recreation room for the kids); or relationship concerns (not talking to one's spouse, not having visited one's mother, having fun with one's daughter). Of course there are many other forces, and the way that individual family members experience these interactions with each other makes for complex family processes. Everyday concerns such as these are both mundane and pervasive. In spite of the fact that they are pervasive, however, they are not often apparent in our formal theorizing about families. This has been referred to as the ''elusiveness of family life'' in family theorizing (Marshall, Matthews, & Rosenthal, 1993).

I use the metaphor of *negative spaces* (Edwards, 1999) from the field of art as a means of foregrounding these implicit theories. Theorizing and drawing are parallel processes as both are concerned with representation. One of the most important techniques in learning how to draw is to see negative spaces. Most of the time, our eye is drawn to positive forms. These are objects that dominate our attention. Hence if we look at a man with a hand on his hip, we see the positive form of the arm on the hip. We are unaccustomed to seeing the triangular shape, or the negative space, that is formed inside the arm. Negative spaces are the recessive areas that we are unaccustomed to seeing but that are every bit as important for the representation of the reality at hand.

If our theorizing in family sciences is to continue to grow, then it is important that we look more closely at the composition of our formal theories in order to see more clearly both the positive forms and the negative spaces. There are several galleries for family theory that highlight the dominant and positive forms of our family theorizing. The *Journal of Marriage and Family*, in the 2000 decade review, draws our attention to the theoret-

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Key Words: consumption, culture, emotions, family process, family theory, myths.

ical and empirical developments in areas of critical importance for understanding families. Included are papers on domestic violence, gender, fatherhood, and the consequences of divorce for children. These are *positive forms* in our theorizing activity because we readily see them, they are recognizable in their shape. They are an established part of our research tradition, and as family scientists, we have preconceived, preexisting expectations that enable us to see and comprehend the shapes, edges, data, and models that constitute these theories. I am particularly interested, however, in the negative spaces that are present in these portraits but are not easily perceived.

In everyday family life, there are many activities that take up considerable time, energy, and attention but that are poorly represented in our theorizing about families. In particular, I am interested in exploring three negative spaces: (a) the realm of belief and intuition, consisting of emotions, religious and spiritual matters, and myth and folklore; (b) the world of material things and the activities of consumption; and (c) the coordinates of time and space as a means of understanding ''the here and now'' of everyday family experience.

Where Do Negative Spaces Come From?

There are many possible reasons for the presence of negative spaces in family theorizing. First, all science is selective and is therefore never complete because we can only examine certain aspects of reality at any given time (Siegfried, 1994). As Geertz (1973) and many others have suggested, social science is shaped by the values of the society in which it is contained, and as a result is selective of the questions it asks and the particular problems it chooses to tackle. Our theorizing activity, like our everyday sensory experience, is always a matter of straddling the tensions between perception and imperception and attending to and ignoring (Zerubavel, 1997). As a result, negative spaces are a natural part of the theoretical landscape defined by what we choose to foreground in our theory.

Second, negative spaces are potentially a function of how we theorize and measure in family science. The dominant, positive spaces of our family theory are shaped by a postpositivist paradigm consisting of variables, models, and predictability. The preoccupation with measurement has meant that most of our research focuses on individuals, not families. Although we purport to study families when we use terms such as family theory and family studies, we are in practice studying individual characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors. According to Marshall et al. (1993), our most powerful statistical techniques almost universally require that the units under observation be independent, which precludes the study of actual families. The result is that family life tends to be viewed in terms of averages around measures of central tendency, rather than in the diversity and complexity of shared meanings and interrelated perceptions. Although new techniques, such as multilevel modeling, make it possible to analyze individuals within families, many negative spaces arise from the difficulty of trying to understand how families work, rather than how individuals within families think or behave.

Third, negative spaces reflect a disjunction between theory and practice. Ironically, many family scholars have been deliberate about distancing themselves from family life, finding success as scholars in examining families as outsiders looking in, rather than insiders looking out (Marshall et al., 1993). The disjunction between theory and life is most apparent to me when friends or family ask me, as a ''family expert'' (their perception, not mine), very practical questions about a problem or a concern that they are having in their own family life. Whether it be how to deal with an overly assertive adolescent or an adopted child who does not want to talk about adoption, the responses that I give rarely come from theory. In fact, I know that any kind of ''theory'' response of jargon or intellectualized language will be met with a glazed look. Allen (2000) offers an excellent portrayal of the dangers of assuming the ''expert'' role in interactions with friends or family. As a result, I dip into my own experiential bank and offer up what I can. Overall, I tend to feel inadequate about how I respond because I am left with the feeling that as a person who is devoted to studying families, I should be able to provide some ''answers'' to the everyday puzzles of family living. As Sprey (1990) has argued, we in family science continue to delude ourselves that the work that we do has practical importance outside of ourselves. Closer to the truth is that we as academics and educators are the primary consumers of the empirical and theoretical work that we produce. It is as if we are a subsistence community of scholars who consume what we produce and produce to meet our continued consumption needs. Through the development of more sophisticated analysis techniques and abstract language,

we have become rationalist and elitist wordsmiths ''devoted to obscurity . . . subjecting language to a complexity which renders it private'' (Saul, 1992, p. 9).

Finally, negative spaces are present in our family theorizing because of our diverse disciplinary traditions. Family theorists have upheld a pretense that the work that they do is interdisciplinary. I would argue, however, that many of the negative spaces in our family theories are a function of our failure to be integrative in our theorizing activity. Our work is more appropriately thought of as *multi*disciplinary, where we as family scholars from many disciplines do our theorizing activity akin to what Acitelli (1995) referred to as a kind of parallel play. Hence through our emphasis on *frameworks,* in books such as the *Sourcebook of Family Theories,* we have upheld and reinforced traditional boundaries between developmental psychologists, social psychologists, therapists, sociologists, and home economists. In the course of offering specialized views of family reality, the many disciplines that deal with family have offered fragmented, rather than unified, accounts of how families live their lives. For example, home economists provide a window onto resource management within families, social psychologists tend to emphasize adult relationships and identity issues, sociologists have been focused on roles and interactions within families, and gerontologists examine aging parents and their adult children, whereas developmental psychologists are most likely to be interested in the growth and development of children in relation to parents and peers. At the core, all are dealing with the same overlapping subject matter where some configuration of family is living through the experience of roles, relationships, growth, development, and interaction within a household. Negative spaces arise from parallel disciplines seeking to explain a compartmentalized family reality.

What Can Be Gained by Focusing on Negative Spaces?

Attention to negative spaces can enhance family theorizing in a number of ways. First, I argue that our family theories have drifted away from what families actually do. If we pay attention to negative spaces, we will have better theories about families because our theories will be more grounded in experience and thus relevant. If we can do a better job of discovering, articulating, and conceptualizing everyday concerns heretofore not well represented, we may produce a sharper shared edge in our theory that is composed of both positive forms and negative spaces.

Second, by making our theories more relevant and reflective of everyday reality, we are also in a position to make our theories more practical in order to make bridges between theory and practice. By more closely examining the everyday motivations, practices, values, and beliefs of family activity, we can build theories that can better serve to understand the puzzles of everyday living. This is not to suggest, however, that we should examine families in isolation from the structural and cultural systems of which they are a part. Rather, we need to come to a better understanding of the way that personal and family meanings are influenced by, and have an influence on, the organizational structures of which they are a part.

Third, by foregrounding the processes, negotiations, and shared meanings in families, rather than focusing on individuals within families or aggregate patterns in family behavior, we can centralize the dynamics of ''family'' in our family theory. As family scientists, we have expended considerable energy trying to define what a family is by focusing on who is in and who is out. We have examined what it means to live in a family at many levels of analysis from the most micro (individual consciousness and subjectivity) to the most macro (demographic trends in religious affiliation, fertility, or marriage stability). The experience of *being family,* however, is perhaps one of the most elusive challenges. In our everyday lives, we talk and think about our individual roles and responsibilities and read about how we are changing collectively as families, but the experience of being family is often so taken for granted, or so implicit as to be invisible, both experientially and theoretically. When and under what conditions do we invoke a consciousness of being in a family, living a family experience, or *doing* family? To understand family dynamics and process from this perspective is to examine how family members navigate with each other as they are situated in time and place.

Finally, by starting with the ways families live as a complex unity of experience (Bernardes, 1986), rather than through disciplinary predispositions to examine subsets of family reality, we can create explanations of family reality that are more fully interdisciplinary. The negative spaces discussed in this paper have received some attention in other disciplinary literatures; but as I argue, they do not have a strong presence in family

theory. Although family theory has always claimed to be interdisciplinary, I argue that it excludes a wide range of issues important to the way families live. The point is not whether negative spaces exist in any absolute sense (i.e., that we have not paid attention to these issues at all); rather, the point is that attention to these issues may appear in other disciplines but they are not well accounted for in our family theorizing.

Giving Attention to Negative Spaces: Using Culture As a Lens

To focus on the theories that families live by is to consider family experience as it is embedded in culture. Culture is a dynamic and changing system of meanings and symbols that provides a means for examining the flow of family experience in context. In lived experience, culture is usually hidden from view, but manifested in what we wear, how we speak, and what we believe. We make culture intelligible by breaking it down into meaningful categories such as time, status, and age, which provide guidelines and understandings for how to act. Cultural categories provide us with the ''fundamental coordinates of meaning'' (McCracken, 1988, p. 73). Because complex cultures contain diverse and often conflicting symbols, rituals, and guides to action, culture is not a straightforward blueprint for how to act, but is better viewed as a ''tool kit'' for constructing strategies of action (Swidler, 1986). It is in this regard that people can be seen to *use* culture or to treat culture as a pool of resources (Swidler, 2001). The relation between actions and culture is a recursive one insofar as members of a community culture are constantly playing out cultural distinctions while at the same time they are constantly engaged in the meaningful construction and redefinition of the culture in which they live. This is ''culture of the moment'' that changes with new ideas, words, and ways (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996, p. 37).

Much of our traditional theorizing in family studies has endeavored to understand families as if they are suspended in time, space, and culture. Positivistic forms of theorizing look for enduring patterns of explanation that represent persistent patterns in family experience. Examination of families as a cultural form is all about understanding families as they change. It is also about understanding families as they perform in relation to perceived collective codes and beliefs. Family members draw on the rituals, practices, and expectations that are available in the cultural tool kit, and in the process they create themselves as a cultural form that expresses systemic beliefs and ideals. They draw meaning from the cultural matrix of which they are a part and express meanings about the kind of family they wish to appear as, all in the service of creating a definition of who they are as a family. Families do this in a variety of ways: for example, they choose to mask or pronounce their racial or ethnic traditions and practices; they choose to follow or rebuke trends in the material world; or they create impressions about who they are as a family that either support or challenge dominant notions of family stability or *normalcy*. Examining families as a cultural form allows us to look at the varied and unique ways that families construct these changing definitions.

Some of the key constituents of culture are the ones that have been least visible in family theorizing. Specifically, theories of culture have emphasized the role of myth, folklore, and the sacred for understanding the evolution of human communities; material goods have always been a primary category of culture and serve a preformative function insofar as goods are a vital and visible record of cultural meaning; and finally, culture as an organic and changeable process is firmly embedded in time and space. These key elements of culture are the negative spaces of our family theorizing: the realm of belief and intuition, the world of material things, and the meaning of time and space.

Negative Space 1: The Realm of Belief, Feeling, and Intuition

One of the central paradoxes of family science is that we have adopted the principles of rationalism to understand a complex, changeable, and largely unpredictable social form that we call family. As Allen (2000) has suggested, much of what appears in our mainstream journals is still rooted in the 19th century orthodoxy of positivist science. This tradition, which has shaped our way of seeing and theorizing, has resulted in a set of theoretical explanations that assume that families act in rational and predictable ways. Sprey (2000) has argued that we have fallen prey to scientism with its emphasis on certitude, determinism, and mechanism. Questionnaires and interview protocols, which we use to test our theories, are thoughtful, rational documents that call out for reasoned and consistent answers. They are shaped by the subtle and

pervasive law of coherence that is ''a heuristic rule, a procedural obligation, and a moral constraint in research,'' which brings pressure to bear on incompatible propositions, clashing meanings, or concepts that cannot be systematized together (Foucault, 1972, p. 149). Through our traditions and methods, we have co-opted families into a rational mode. The effect is that

> reason [begins] to separate itself from and to outdistance the other more or less recognized human characteristics—spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, but also intuition, will, and most important, experience. The gradual encroachment on the foreground continues today. It has reached a degree of imbalance so extreme that the mythological importance of reason obscures all else and has driven the other elements into the marginal frontiers of doubtful respectability. (Saul, 1992, p. 15)

The unpredictable flow of daily events and the inconsistencies of family behavior have not been well accounted for in our theorizing. As Swidler (2001, p. 189) has observed, people who are asked to talk about everyday experience are ''little constrained by logic.'' This is the ''wild card'' of personal meaning when talking about family experience that is difficult to capture in fixed-response categories (Marshall et al., 1993, p. 58). The negative spaces of our theorizing harbor such phenomena. Shifting away from logical consistency and rationality brings attention to three key issues in the realm of belief and intuition that are not well addressed in family theory: emotions, religion and spirituality, and myth and folklore.

Emotions. Emotions are rarely foregrounded in our theories about families, and yet much of the everyday rhetoric of living in families is about love, jealousy, anger, disappointment, hurt, tolerance, or care. Emotions have been overshadowed by the rationalization of the family realm. In contrast with our efforts to catalogue the attitudes and activities of families, we need to examine the charged language and experience of emotions as they are expressed in the experience of living in families. Emotions are often difficult to track in families because they often involve wild swings or expressions that are inconsistent with other attitudes and behavior. Yet in all families there are cycles of emotional contagion where individuals within families or events external to families precipitate changes in a family's emotional climate. A stressful day at work or school can create a family tone of tension or blame; the death of a parent can create an atmosphere of sadness, anger, or relief; an impending wedding brings collective anxiety and hopefulness.

Recent theoretical efforts have begun to chart the underlying conceptualizations of emotion, with particular attention given to the moral (Knapp & Olson, 2001) and the regulatory (Bell, Montoya, & Patek, 2001; Knapp & Olson) dimensions of emotions. Bahr (2002) has begun to respecify the concept of emotion work within the context of families so that it can be seen as activity or a type of effort that is visible in the daily processes of family experience. Families are conditioned by unspoken *feeling rules* (Hochschild, 1983) that are passed through the generations and that influence whether, how, or when family members can express anger, joy, or sadness. Larson and Almeida (1999) have developed new approaches for understanding emotional transmission in families by examining the way that emotions in one family member affect emotions in another family member. These are recent but important initiatives that begin to focus attention on the different ways that we can conceptualize emotions as part of family experience. Although emotions are embodied and expressed in individual family members, they are profoundly influenced by family rules and the collective family atmosphere.

Although our culture dictates that families should be filled with positive emotions, our research and theorizing activity has tended to focus on negative emotions. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a concerted effort to understand emotions related to violence and abuse. Recent research on emotions in families focuses on the work-to-family spillover of negative emotions such as stress and conflict (e.g., Repetti & Wood, 1997). Other studies also focus on the transmission of negative emotions from parents to children, including anger, distress, depressed mood, and anxiety (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999; Downey, Purdie, & Schaffer-Neitz, 1999; Larson & Gillman, 1999; Thompson & Bolger, 1999). In their review of the literature on emotions in families, Larson and Almeida (1999) suggest that negative emotions are *more contagious* than positive ones and that negative emotions appear to *trump* positive ones. Even in the gerontology literature where affectional solidarity (Bengston & Harootyan, 1994) has a positive valence, it is typically measured as an outcome in terms of the degree of presence or absence, which says little about how family members are experiencing these emotions, either positively or negatively (Conni-

dis & McMullin, 2002). More importantly, terms such as *care* or *caregiving* in the gerontology literature are more often associated with *burden* than with mutuality, relationship, and reciprocity. Similarly, when care is used in the context of childcare, it is often described as a form of work that is functional and demanding. In the gender literature, the emphasis has been on emotion work in families (DeVault, 1999; Erickson, 1993) that was often rendered invisible because of its *private* nature (Daniels, 1987). This observation highlights a negative valence within a negative space: Not only do we have a limited understanding of emotional processes within families, we have a very limited understanding of positive emotions within this realm. Our theories would be more complete if we were to examine happiness, joy, leisure satisfaction, balance, gratification, marriage and parenting successes, and the positive dimensions of care.

Furthermore, we have few models that direct us to examine emotional contradictions where love coexists with hatred, competition with cooperation, and nurturance with self-interest (Collier, Rosaldo, & Yanagisako, 1982). In a study of family care, Dressel and Clark (1990) conclude that family members hold to idealized notions of family care while at the same time reporting situations of care that include negative thought or affect and ambiguity. In this vein, recent theoretical efforts by Connidis and McMullin (2002) on the concept of ambivalence open pathways for developing theories of emotion that take into account process, power, and the embeddedness of feelings in structurally created contradictions.

Perhaps our greatest irony in family theory is our reluctance to talk about love. A review of the *Sourcebook of Family Theories* pointed out that references to the presence of love in contemporary family processes is virtually absent (Bahr & Bahr, 2001). The decade review from the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (Milardo, 2000) is not much interested in love or any of the related emotions that lie at the root of family connection. Even the chapters on marital interaction or sexuality exclude any discussion of love. Here the irony of our theory-life split is most glaringly apparent: Families are formed and broken in the name of love; family members live their everyday lives according to an ethic of love where parents are expected to show love to their children and siblings to each other; and people live their lives longing for love to come or in an effort to recapture love that is lost. Love permeates everyday family experience (even irrationally in the face of inequity and violence) and is a salient motivating feature underlying care and cohesion in families.

Given the pervasiveness of love in the everyday experience of family life, it is surprising that love is so recessed in our theoretical portrayals of families. There are some recent examinations of love in parallel disciplines that offer some direction for development of our family theories. Swidler's (2001) ethnography of middle-aged adults endeavored to find out what love actually means to people by focusing on their vocabularies and repertoires. This analysis provides a window on ''culture in action'' because love lies at the root of so many of our cultural practices including our music, art, folklore, and popular beliefs. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have tackled the complexities and contradictions of love in families as they relate to a broad array of cultural processes including industrialization, gender dynamics at home and in the workplace, parenting, individuation, and loneliness. Empirical studies of love have appeared in journals such as the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, but have traditionally focused on undergraduate samples of young adults in nonmarital romantic relationships and only occasionally explore the meaning of love in marriage relationships (e.g., Grote & Frieze, 1998). Although these works provide an important ground for incorporating love into our family theories, there is very little attention to the more complex dynamics of love that are present in parent-child or intergenerational relationships. Like the analysis of family care (Dressel & Clark, 1990), focusing on love would provide insight into complex motives for family behavior or contradictions and irrational conduct in family relationships.

Spirituality, religion, and the sacred realm. Although organized religion has declined, the majority of North Americans identify themselves as religious (Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999; Mahoney et al., 1999). Belief, spirituality, and superstition have played an important role in how families make decisions, but this is largely unaccounted for in family theorizing. Decade reviews of the literature in the 1980s (Thomas & Cornwall, 1990) and in the 1990s (Pankhurst & Houseknecht, 2000) have echoed a concern about the neglect of the study of the link between religion and family. Due in large part to the politicization of religion and family values (Stacey, 1996) and the devaluation of religion in modernization the-

orizing that emphasizes rationality and the primacy of social, political, and economic forces in the process of change (Pankhurst & Houseknecht), theories having to do with the spiritual or religious realm are often recessed in family theorizing. In spite of the cautious distancing that many family scientists maintain in relation to religion, many family members live their lives in and through some kind of religious or spiritual belief. Religion is often woven into the critical family junctures of birth, marriage, and death, and yet somehow we are reticent to fully include it in our portrait of what it is to be a family. The dominance of religious beliefs and practices in many of our key family rituals is brought into sharp relief when their marginalizing effects have been examined among, for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people attending heterosexual marriages (Oswald, 2000).

In spite of the reticence to pay attention to religion, religious belief can play an important role in shaping both the ideological frameworks that families live by and the everyday practices that they exhibit in their behavior. For example, religion can be important for the socialization of values with mothers, playing a key role in passing on religious beliefs and orientations to their children (Christiano, 2000). In the development of a conceptual model between religion and family, Dollahite (2001) examines the linkages between spirituality and generativity. A number of empirical studies have drawn links among religious beliefs, parenting styles, and discipline approaches (e.g., Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999; Gunnoe et al., 1999). Religiosity also has had a tradition of being associated with marital satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 1999). Other research has examined the way that religious ideology affects the negotiation of gender in marriage (Gallagher & Smith, 1999). Although these empirical studies highlight some of the ways that religion shapes family experience, they have stayed in the background of our family theorizing.

Myth and folklore. Many family decisions are based on inherited traditions, practices, and beliefs. When family members live their lives in the taken-for-granted uninterrupted mode, they are typically ''guided both emotionally and intellectually in their judgments and activities by unexamined prejudices'' (Geertz, 1973, p. 218). These unexamined prejudices not only reflect the degree to which culture is embedded in actions and beliefs, but also highlight the relative immunity of culture from routine scrutiny. As a result, many family behaviors or beliefs that constitute proud family traditions continue unchecked until there is a conflict or crisis that calls them into question. For example, family beliefs about the importance of spanking *so that kids will turn out right* will continue until these beliefs and associated behaviors are challenged or confronted from outside a family's belief system. When faced with new challenges and crises, families renew their awareness of family myths and ideologies. It is when the cultural guidelines for family behaviors are weak or absent that there is a call to rearticulate, from the gunny sack of inherited beliefs, the standards and solutions for the path forward. As Geertz (p. 218) has suggested, ''It is in country unfamiliar emotionally or topographically that one needs poems or road maps.'' Road maps serve as an important source for symbolic guideposts about ''how things have been done in the past'' and ''the way things should be done'' and yet, they can still leave individuals floundering when faced with new terrain. Adopting a child or facing the world alone after a marriage breakup come with some guideposts. Nevertheless, they call out for new cartography—or in the language of action, beliefs, and values, a renewed articulation of what a family is to be within the new circumstances at hand.

Family stories are one of the chief mechanisms a family uses for defining who they are as a family, including what they believe, what they value, and how they should act. As Patton (1999) has argued, ''myths that have survived and have been passed from generation to generation are inherently normative. . . [and] provide a basis for interpreting highly particularistic life events, experiences and histories'' (p. 339). Although usually cloaked as historical, factual accounts of lives lived, family stories, as social constructions, are always partly mythical with some degree of manipulation—so crafted ''to favorably situate themselves in the topography of social life'' (LaRossa, 1995, p. 553). Family stories mediate culture in an immediate and concrete way. Stories serve as a way to weave meaningful plots that foreground family characters, events, and relationships against the galaxy of cultural processes, values, and experiences. Stories also serve as standards by which people evaluate their family relationships (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). Furthermore, stories are not only constructed to distinguish meaningful family experience, they also are constructed to *privilege* self and others in a

way that is consistent not only with past events, but also with how we wish to appear in the future. It is in this regard that storytelling must be seen as a *political process* that shapes and controls relationships (LaRossa, 1995).

It is easy to accept storytelling as a central and, in some ways, ''natural'' process in the experience of being a family. We all have our stories. It is more challenging, however, within the context of family science, to account for the way that stories can show blatant disregard for some of the values of scientific explanation that we hold so dear. Whereas stories are selective, manipulative, and political, our scientific explanations rest on precise measurement through variables, controls, and prediction. Or to put it more precisely, scientific approaches of objectivity depend on ''the truth''; family stories, however, are bound by a different ethic, which is pride, preservation, and the face work of being a good family.

Gillis (1996) has argued that everyone lives in two families: one they live with (in everyday reality) and one they *live by*. The families that we live by are imagined families drawn from the past and constituted through myth and ritual. These are families of legendary proportions who serve as a kind of moral anchor for the way things are supposed to be. These are families who were simpler, less problematic, better integrated, untroubled by generational divisions, close to kin, respectful of the old, and honored the dead. In spite of the evidence that family life since the middle ages has been characterized by both some stability in family relationships (Pollock, 1987) and ''fragmentation, instability, and discontinuity'' (Gillis, p. 7), the tendency has been to hold onto an image of past family life that is romanticized and idealized. The persistence and tenacity of these images suggests that they play a very important role in shaping how families live through the messiness and disorder of their everyday routines. This nostalgic construction of family stability, strength, and cohesiveness plays a very important role in managing the tensions, conflicts, and disappointments that arise in the course of living *with* a family. For example, family stories from previous generations often have a sanitized feel to them, whereby the bad and the ugly are filtered out because they are considered unfit for consumption among younger generations. Motivated by pride and protection, secrets of alcoholism, marital violence, or abuse are not carried forward into the public record. As a result, families create and maintain their own myths by what is included and excluded from the shared public chronicles of who they are as a family. The way that families construct and manage their inherited myths warrants more attention in our family theories.

Negative Space 2: Consumption, the Meaning of Things, and Family Life

In our family theorizing, we have done a reasonable job of understanding the materialist underpinnings of family life through the examination of productive work outside the home. The literature on work and family has proliferated and is currently a highly rated topic (Milardo, 2000). In spite of the historical linkages between family science and consumer studies, however, we have given less attention to understanding how spending behaviors and consumer goods are the basis for the construction of meaning in the everyday experience of family life. The lack of attention to families as consumers is part of a broader marginalization of consumption from the research agenda in favor of a greater emphasis on the productionist orientation of the public realm of paid work (du Gay, 2000).

Given the proliferation of goods in the marketplace, our almost constant exposure to commercial messages, and the energy we invest in acquiring consumer goods, one could argue that consumption-related meanings and activities dominate much of our everyday lives. Globalization and the increased pace of life have given rise to the quest for intense experience and a corresponding attachment to ''the new,'' which has fueled consumption activity (Cross, 1993). Nevertheless, family theory seems to treat family dynamics as if they were unmediated by material things. Things shape values and beliefs in families, mediate family relationships, create conflicts in families, and are part of the process of identity work and dream management in families.

Of central importance for understanding consumption as a force that shapes how families live their everyday lives is to examine how the acquisition of goods reflects the way families participate in a cultural system of values. In the Western world, dominant cultural values still coalesce around an external reward system of money and status. Through measures of conformity and demand, most parents still endeavor to cajole their children onto a path of social success guided by the cultural supply of external rewards. This is the *homo economicus* model that involves the allotment of differential rewards to individuals and the

maintenance of a complex social and economic hierarchy at the structural level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Although it would be folly to claim that all family behavior is guided by external, materialist rewards, it is also folly to ignore the power that these rewards have for shaping family interactions.

Things play a critical role in shaping both what families do and who they are. The things that a family possesses have a preformative function insofar as they are part of a process of family identity construction whereby families create fences and establish boundaries through their material goods (McCracken, 1988). Houses, neighborhoods, cars, clothes, and household effects are all ways of setting markers and divisions in the broader matrix of cultural meaning. As Veblen (1899) argued more than a century ago, the consumption of goods is *conspicuous* and communicates in a very public way the organization of social class in our culture. The activities of conspicuous consumption serve to reinforce the boundaries of social class, communicate ''reputability,'' and set the leisure ideals of ''pecuniary ability'' (Veblen, pp. 63–64). This display of possessions is a way for families to have their possessions ranked; evaluated (McCracken, 1988); and used to portray their hard-earned final composite identity (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Things have the dual function in families of creating both solidarity and a set of ''keep out'' signs (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996).

Things are also the basis for creating division and positions within a home. Because individuals cultivate different objects within families, conflict over material objects is a central dynamic in family experience. Individual preferences, priorities, and goals for what goods to bring into the home can result in conflict and dissension. Hence the material acquisition of a nose ring by an adolescent is both a statement of cultural positioning and an opportunity for a family discussion about boundaries. Separation and divorce bring into sharp focus the attachment that members have to things in the home when they must be divided into separate ownership. Goods are expressed through age, sex, ethnicity, class, and occupation, and as a result, the order of goods in the home reflects both the order of the person and the order of the culture. This is an order that reflects not only categories of meaning, but processes of negotiation, conflict, and boundary vigilance within families. For example, consumption activity within families has a long history of being gendered with an emphasis placed on the woman's role as the primary consumer. Recent research indicates that shopping is still a highly gendered activity: Not only do women spend more time than men shopping, they also have different shopping styles, ideologies, and habits (Campbell, 1997). Although the dominant tendency is to see possessions as communicators of meaning for the individual, Douglas and Isherwood (1996) argue that goods are central to managing relationships and can serve as an important lens for understanding conflict and division in families.

Things also serve as a medium of play and leisure in families. This is an area that has been largely neglected in family science (Walker, 2000). Although there is considerable research in the child development literature on the meaning of toys and their role in the socialization and development of children, little attention has been given to the way that families purchase and use things for their pleasure and enjoyment. Even in the leisure studies literature, the emphasis has been almost entirely on the individual as the unit of analysis (Harrington, 2001). One of the major costs in this pursuit of goods for their own sake has been the loss of free time and the failed promise of leisure time. Earning money, planning for purchases, reviewing advertisements, shopping for goods, transporting goods home, and managing items once acquired demand copious amounts of time. For many families, the current malaise is an ''ironic sense of scarcity in the midst of plenty'' because ''goods create scarcities of time'' (Cross, 1993, p. 1). It is in this regard that consumption, work, and time are braided tightly into the spine of everyday family life.

This brief overview of the meaning of consumption for families highlights many possibilities for understanding the theories that families live by. The dominant view of consumption in our culture tends to focus on the hedonistic individual, motivated by greed. A theoretical focus on consumption and families would lead to a better understanding of the process of family identity construction through the internal dynamics of power, gender, and conflict that are played out in the pursuit of goods.

Negative Space 3: The Location of Family Members in Time and Space

In the same way that material goods serve as a basis for creating categories of culture, time and space also serve as a basis for delineating every-

day family experience. At a very basic level, home and work are *territories of self* that show how we use time, space, and artifacts to manage our existential boundaries in everyday life (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Time and space serve as multidimensional axes that involve both structural boundaries and processual movements and transitions. Distance between the sites of home and work has a direct effect on time (how much is required to get to work); resources (the need for a car, energy costs); and emotional well-being (stress, anxiety, proximity to children during the day). Whereas those who commute are more likely to encounter ''experiential discontinuity between realms'' (Nippert-Eng, p. 223), those who work at home face the challenge of creating and maintaining boundaries between space for work-related activities and materials and space for family routines and relationships. With regard to the latter, the physical layout of space in the home shapes and constrains the presence and visibility of work artifacts (i.e., on the kitchen table versus in the office), which in turn determines interruptability—the probability of being interrupted due to location of work-related activity or artifacts. Families socially create spaces that are meaningful to them, and in turn, these spaces constrain, mediate, and reflect family identities and relationships (Allen, 2001).

The relation between home and community has changed over time with profound implications for the organization of space and time. In the 18th century, for example, households were much more public places, with families having boarders and a much heavier flow of visitor traffic. Houses were busy, noisy, and cluttered, and had yet to become the kind of private spaces we associate with nuclear families. The constant traffic of people precluded the kind of cozy home life we typically imagine of days gone by (Gillis, 1996). It was not until the middle of the 19th century that people began to think of *home* as something families could make for themselves (Gillis). During this time, home came to be defined as a kind of sacred space, with parlors and dining rooms created for the enactment of family rituals of togetherness (Gillis). In the postwar years of the 20th century, the suburban lifestyle led to an increasingly private dwelling with sections of the home (such as a second floor of bedrooms) increasingly guarded or screened from public view (Seeley, Sim, & Loosley, 1959). Nevertheless, women were for the most part at home with their young children, serving as a kind of spatial family anchor. For men, home was a place of coming and going as they were supposed to be ''in the world,'' thereby maintaining distance from home as a part of ritually defining their manhood (Gillis). More recently, with most women now in the paid labor force, the everyday family routine is a ritual of dispersion that leaves the house, and the neighborhood of which it is a part, empty and devoid of traffic (Daly, 1996). The pattern of everyday experience for many families is that members are independently positioned on their own coordinates of time and space for much of the day. Of particular interest in this regard is the way that families manage these transitions of dispersion and reconvergence. Larson (2001) has begun to explore this daily reconvergence in dual earner families and has called it the ''5 o'clock crash.''

The amount and organization of space in family homes has also changed dramatically in recent years. Schor (1998) points out that the average size of houses in the United States has doubled in less than 50 years. When considered in relation to shrinking family size, one can only begin to wonder about the changing meanings of family space within the home. Our current theorizing activity has done an inadequate job of examining the relation between the changing size and organization of space in the home and standards of privacy, entitlements for the use of space within the home by family members, the specialization of family space, and the management and upkeep of that space.

The changing organization of space in the home has direct repercussions for the organization of time in families. Space that is increasingly specialized within the home results in a predisposition to time devoted to individual pursuits as opposed to communal ones. Larger homes mean more time devoted to physical upkeep, routine housecleaning, or the purchase of services to address these growing maintenance demands. Greater privacy within the neighborhood means more insularity and less time given to the nurturance of community ties. Whereas the togetherness of family time is longed for, individual demands and interests often take precedence (Daly, 2001).

Technology has also had a major impact on the organization of family time and space. Technology gives rise to a contradiction between the breaking down of time and space boundaries on the one hand, and on the other hand the growing need by families to protect and reinforce these boundaries. For example, pagers and cell phones are increasingly used for family purposes as a way to main-

tain contact in time when family members are spread out over different spaces. E-mail is increasingly replacing letters and long distance phone calls as a way to maintain ties with extended family. In both of these examples, technology serves as a bridge across the boundaries of space and time. At the same time, however, these communication technologies increase the degree to which family members are accessible and able to be interrupted by the demands of work. Sitting down quietly to send a personal e-mail to a sister across the country means looking at the work e-mails sitting in your mailbox. Being vigilant about boundaries is all about whether to spend 45 minutes responding to work e-mails during family or leisure time or resisting the temptation to do so, thereby drawing firmly the boundary between personal and work time. Although this example is but one simple illustration of this boundary paradox, communication technologies present us with this dilemma on a routine basis.

Time and space are both tethered to the cultural process insofar as the way that we conceptualize and categorize them is laden with meaning. We take for granted fundamental terms such as *family time* and *home,* but they are complex cultural phenomena that reflect changing ideals and realities. They reflect theories that families live by, but theories we have not adequately addressed in our family theorizing activity.

Conclusion

Theories are not ends in themselves, but rather are aids to understanding or a lens meant to magnify some things and minimize others (Bahr & Bahr, 2001). Although the negative space topics identified in this paper may appear in other disciplines—even as positive spaces (for example, consumption activity in home economics or consumer studies)—they are not prominent in our theorizing activity about families. I argue that we need to do a better job of bringing these salient activities into our family theories. The articulation of negative spaces in our theorizing can serve as a basis for seeing more clearly some of the hidden but pervasive dimensions of everyday family life.

In order to bring the negative spaces into our family theories, we may need to give some thought to the form that our theories take. If it is to provide sophisticated explanation in a separate language that only we as researchers and theorists can understand, then the path of positivist theorizing is the path on which we should continue. If, however, our goal is to create theory that comes closer to understanding what goes on in families, then our goal must be to create theories that capture how families live their everyday lives—their values, operating assumptions, guiding philosophies, and decision-making processes about even the most mundane activities. As Swidler (2001) argues, when you talk to ordinary people about ordinary experiences in life that matter to them, their responses are often ''disjointed, self-contradictory, or fragmentary'' (p. 181). Theories that endeavor to represent these kinds of accounts cannot possibly explain the greatest amount of variance with the fewest variables. Rather, we may need to think about theories that reflect the contradictions of everyday living, that are incomplete and yet provide portraits of culture in action, and that use vocabularies that are recognizable in the worlds out of which the theories are fashioned.

Central to any effort to develop theory that says something about families, rather than about individuals in families, we must confront the challenge of how to understand *family* processes. If we wish to hold onto the claim that we can have *family* theory, then we need to be convinced that there is something about family that we can theorize about. In spite of the variation in attitudes and beliefs within families and the enormous diversity that exists when we look across families, there is still something that draws us to understand how families work. We need to articulate a logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990), whereby the experience of everyday family life can be examined in terms of regularities, irregularities, and even incoherences. In order to take into account the competing and myriad meanings of *family* in contemporary life, it is necessary to conceptualize family as a socially constructed, situationally contingent cluster of meanings that present family activity as a constellation of ideas, images, and terminology (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). To understand families in action is to get beyond an emphasis on rational and logical coherence in families in order to understand the logic of practice whereby families must make instantaneous judgments, assessments, and urgent decisions that often preclude the orderly logic that comes with the luxuries of detachment and reflection (Swidler, 2001).

By examining the shared edge between positive forms and negative spaces, it is possible to see different research agendas—ones that deepen our understanding of the everyday practices in which families are engaged. Many questions arise: How do family practices, shaped by stories and

myths and handed down through the generations, influence decision making? What are the charged and contradictory currents of emotions that characterize everyday living? How do patterns of spending and acquisition help us to understand family interactions, positions, and beliefs? Similarly, many of our explanations of family experience are cast in a timeless present as if the historical moment had no relevance at all. We need to pay greater attention to change and transformation through the use of a ''multiplicity of accumulated glimpses'' in order to create complex composites of emerging reality (Bahr, 1994, p. 57). Our accounts of family reality are often divorced from space and place. Instead of presenting our results as near universal experiences that have no spatial roots, we need to attend to the nuances and idiosyncrasies that accompany a family's place-based reality. By grounding our theoretical accounts more directly in experience, we are also in a position to make our theories more pragmatic and useful (Burr, Dollahite, & Draper, 1995).

Negative spaces pose a challenge to how we think about interdisciplinarity in our field. Although family science has always thought of itself as being an interdisciplinary field, it is quite narrow. We have not paid much attention to geography and the symbolic importance of place and space; we have not been particularly attentive to some of the important work taking place in anthropology regarding the creation of culture and the role of myth and folklore; and the spiritual and religious realm has been marginalized. If we wish to hold to the claim of interdisciplinarity, we need to graduate beyond the parallel activities of multidisciplinarity and become much bolder in the incorporation of issues that matter to families as they live everyday life.

Our efforts to understand negative spaces have implications for how we think about family theory. If we are to pay closer attention to the theories that families live by, then we not only need to change what our scholarly eyes are capable of seeing, but we need to refit and create more sophisticated social scientific tools that we can use to understand what may be inconsistent, paradoxical, irrational, or contradictory family phenomena.

Note

This paper was presented at the 31st Theory Construction and Research Methodology (TCRM) Workshop, National Council on Family Relations, November, 2001, in Rochester, New York. Thanks to Howard Bahr and Jetse Sprey who offered careful and thoughtful reviews of this paper at TCRM.

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