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Intensive family observations: A methodological guide

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Abstract

There is a dearth of methodological guidance on how to conduct participant observation in private spaces such as family homes. Yet, participant observations can provide deep and valuable data about family processes. This article draws on two ethnographic studies of family life in which researchers conduct in-depth interviews, recruit families, and ultimately enter the family as a quasi-stranger for daily observations lasting a fixed period (e.g., three weeks). We term this approach "intensive family observations." Here, we provide concrete methodological advice for this method, beginning with guidelines for recruitment and gaining consent. We also discuss logistics of conducting family observation (e.g., scheduling, spatial positionality in the home, role in the field, among other issues). We elaborate on the key challenges, specifically issues of intrusion, power, and positionality. Last, we reflect on how this method provides opportunities for accurately capturing deeply intimate moments as well as unexpected insights.

Keywords: ethnography, participant observation, family, qualitative methods, child-rearing

Using observational methods with families, especially within their homes, presents significant challenges for ethnographers unlike in other spaces where participant observations are more commonly conducted. The family is frequently set apart as a distinctive grouping because members often have a strong expectation of being assured of respite within their own home. Employees expect to be observed at the workplace—if not by researchers, then certainly by supervisors—and students expect their behavior at school to be monitored by teachers. But families—and the home—are idealized as more private. This expectation of privacy and respite is not equally available to all families nor to all members within families. Vulnerable families—such as poor, immigrant, or gender nonconforming families—are more likely to be subject to evaluations of their home and family life and may come to expect this. Intimate partner violence, child abuse, and such phenomena may mean that the home is a site neither of comfort nor particularly of privacy. Yet, normative ideas of the sacrosanct nature of the family and the home—usually vested in the realities and experiences of middle-class families—mean that sociologists have often been reluctant to collect observational data from families.

Some studies of family life have used observational data, but systematic strategies for managing this methodological challenge have not been sufficiently discussed in the literature. Methodological appendices of some observational studies of family life catalog specific concerns arising from family observations (Cooper 2014; Elliott, McKelvy, and Bowen 2016; Lareau 2011; Rao, forthcoming), including the difficulty of gaining access to families, the awkwardness derived from participants' uncertainty about how to treat a researcher in the home, and the extent to which observational fieldwork is uncomfortable, tiring, and stressful. Yet, beyond these methodological appendices, guidelines on how to conduct family observations, and minimize these challenges, have not yet been developed.

In this article, we explicate elements of the method of *intensive family observations.* This approach is one where the fieldworker requests families to permit observations of family life for a high-density, bounded period (e.g., daily for three weeks). Researchers also accompany family members as they move outside of their homes, going along to shopping trips, extended family gatherings, and doctors' visits. The researcher often interviews one or two family members and then makes a request to observe the family. As a result, the researcher enters the family as a quasi-stranger.[1]

This intensive approach offers several advantages. Intensive family observations are especially appropriate for capturing daily interactions—meaningful, routine, and repetitive activities of daily living which are taken for granted and thus hard for family members to articulate.[2] This includes aspects of family life such as how parents talk to children, how parents and children interact with gatekeepers at institutions such as schools and health care, and how families discuss and allocate chores to different members, or any area of life where respondents are prone to being influenced by standards of social desirability. The method permits the systematic comparison of families (e.g., across a dimension of interest such as social class). The bounded time period for the research is clearly advantageous for the researcher and families. The research relationship is much clearer than in long-term classic ethnographies where the ethnographer becomes deeply enmeshed in the lives of the people (Black 2009; Stack 1974; Whyte 1981). Clearly delimiting the family observations in this manner, along with providing honoraria to families, formalizes the relationship between researcher and family members. For the researcher too, bounding the duration of family visits means that an extremely labor-intensive data collection process becomes more manageable. Recruiting families to be part of such studies can be challenging, but once the research begins, although intensive, it is short.

However, researchers adopting this methodological approach also confront important challenges. Researchers intrude into the home and must negotiate a role there. Researchers are likely to face family members who have differential levels of enthusiasm about the study. They also need to attain consent with a range of people including professionals outside the home visited by the family. Studies of vulnerable families, in particular, create a host of ethical difficulties. Because the research lasts for a short "burst" of time, researchers may not have the opportunity to see crucial aspects of life unfold. The phenomenon of interest to researchers may be minimally observable—it may be intermittent, or the dynamic may be too hazy to be "seen" by an observer. As always, the research question should be the guiding factor in methodological decisions (see, among others, Luker 2008). Even with a clear research question, researchers may still be uncertain how it will unfold. In these instances, deciding to conduct family observations may involve a leap of faith, where the researcher trusts that observations can reveal insights that may not be easily detectable through other data collection methods.

In this article, we draw on our own experiences—two separate studies of family life in the United States conducted two decades apart—to provide methodological guidance for how to conduct intensive family observations. After a brief review of the literature, we describe key methodological details of our studies. Our paper has three key sections: the mechanics of recruiting families, logistical challenges in doing the observations (e.g., scheduling visits, negotiating spatial positionality, and writing field notes), and key challenges (e.g., balancing intrusion with data collection, the importance of being deferential, and the issue of intervention). Finally, we reflect on the rewards of intensive family observations. Of course, while the focus is on family life, aspects of the discussion apply to the enterprise of ethnographic research more generally.

Literature Review

There are many valuable works on how to do ethnographic research (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Levi Martin 2017; Lofland et al. 2006; Strauss 1987), including qualitative research in families (LaRossa et al. 2015; Sussman and Gilgan 1996). Despite a call for increased qualitative research on families (LaRossa et al. 2015; Roy et al. 2015), there is less work on the practical, methodological strategies for doing observations within homes. In terms of qualitative research, observational studies of family life within sociology, especially ones in which observations are central to the study design, are far less common than interview-based studies of families (for family observational studies, see Bowen, Elliot, and Brenton

2019; Cooper 2014; Hochschild 1989; Lareau 2011; Ochs et al. 2006; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013; Paik 2016; Pugh 2009; Reich 2005; Stacey 1990; Stack 1974).[3]

Given the relative rarity of observational data in studying family life, qualitative studies of family life overwhelmingly rely on in-depth interviews. These include studies on families in poverty (Edin and Lein 1997; Halpern-Meekin et al. 2014), motherhood (Collins 2019; Descartes and Rudd 2008; Dow 2019; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Garey 1999; Hays 1996; Kaplan 1997), parenting (Garner 2015; Kurz forthcoming; Levey-Friedman 2013; Nelson 2012), marital relationships (Kurz 1995; Rao 2020; Steinbugler 2012; Streib 2015), kinship networks (Hansen 2004), families' experiences in neighborhoods, including that of the Black middle class (Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2013) or work–family relations (Blair-Loy 2003; Clawson and Gerstel 2014; Damaske 2011; Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck 2007; Garey 1999; Pugh 2015; Rao 2017; Stone 2007). Scholars have also used interviews to understand the immigration process for families (Abrego 2014), medical treatment for children (Blum 2015; Reich 2016), and other issues in family life (Gerstel, Clawson, and Zussman 2002). At times, researchers write ethnographic field notes based on their interviews (Levine 2013; Rubin 1976) or interview respondents annually over many years (Seefeldt 2016). In some cases, researchers add a number of observations of family life to the interviews, but the studies remain, at the core, interview studies (DeVault 1991; Edin and Nelson 2013).

Classic ethnographies of communities have also shed light on families. In these works, fieldworkers often lived in the community and "hung out" in a series of gradual trust-building interactional processes (Black 2009; Gans 1982; Howell 1973; Liebow 1967; Stack 1974; Stein 2001, Whyte 1981; Young and Willmott 1957). In relationships that lasted for years, sociologists and anthropologists forged deep ties with the families in the study. Researchers from this tradition have ventured into the home by the way of first embedding themselves in a larger community of interest: those living in trailer parks (Desmond 2016), a poor Black community (Stack 1974), or an Italian immigrant community in 1930s Boston (Whyte 1981). These studies have often traced how families deal with negative events such as evictions or receive social support from their kin network. But, with a few exceptions, Stack (1974) and Young and Wilmott ([1957] 2011), studies have not focused on families specifically, and even in this valuable work, there is not a primary focus on child-rearing, marital interactions, or other topics in sociology of the family.

Other observational studies involve a hybrid of community and family observations. For example, in *Brave New Families* (1990), Judith Stacey collected data by embedding herself in the lives and kinship networks of two focal women contacts in Silicon Valley in the 1980s. She retained a friendship as well as a research relationship over the course of several years. Stacey's embeddedness was characterized by intense interactions at times and absences in others, allowing her to trace the lives of these women and their communities through key junctures and transitions. Stacey's access to these broader family networks was time-consuming and emotionally draining (Stacey 1990). As a researcher, she was privy to intensely private information—infidelity, questions of paternity—which some of the subjects kept from one another, raising painful and ethical dilemmas. Her study offered a longer arc by examining how families respond to economic shifts that unfold over years. But when it comes to gathering observational data on families, deep embeddedness may not always be possible.[4] Many studies may not lend themselves to being community studies or to offering such a long arc of understanding. Neither may this always be necessary, depending on the goals of the study.

Through our method of intensive family observations, we offer a distinctive possibility for qualitative data collection, especially of family life. Intensive family observations enable the collection of deep data on family life without requiring community embeddedness and the ability to go beyond interview data, although interview data too are extremely important. Intensive family observations also allow for more researchers of family life to be able to collect valuable observational data.

Overview of the Two Source Studies

We refer to the two studies we draw on here as the "childhood study," conducted by Lareau (2011) with research assistants who were also fieldworkers, and the "unemployment study," conducted solely by Rao (Forthcoming). Family observations were an integral part of each study. Generally, Lareau and Rao followed relatively similar strategies in the beginning by carrying out participant observation in an institutional setting, recruiting interviewees who were parents involved in the setting, carrying out a second interview with the partner of the original interviewee, conceptually selecting families for observation, broaching the topic with parents, and securing permission for the research. But the substantive focus was different, and the studies recruited different samples.

The childhood study examined class and race differences in child-rearing in families of children who were 9 and 10 years of age. In the observational component, Lareau, with the help of research assistants, studied 12 families; specifically, she studied middle-class, working-class, and poor families who were Black and white. The study took a team-based approach in which two fieldworkers usually assisted Lareau in the collection of observational data from each participating family. The visits usually occurred daily, generally for a period of three weeks. The observations were conducted in the early 1990s; for most of the data collection period, Lareau was an advanced assistant professor.

Rao examined how men's and women's unemployment shaped family dynamics, focusing primarily on spousal interactions. The observational component of this study included four white families from the professional middle class (e.g., college educated and in professional occupations) and was evenly divided between two families where women were unemployed and two where men were unemployed. All of the families in the unemployment study had at least one child who was aged 15 or younger. Visits were usually conducted daily, on average for four hours per visit, for a period of two weeks. All of the family observations for the unemployment study were conducted in 2014 and 2015 by Rao who was a doctoral student at the time.

While both studies are substantially different, Lareau and Rao nonetheless faced similar, key, methodological challenges when it came to conducting observations.[5] As a team-based study, the childhood study included a larger sample of families that were observed, while the unemployment study, led by a solo researcher, had a smaller sample. As we explain below, this method is extremely labor intensive which means that this approach is particularly suited to conducting observations with a small sample. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere, the appropriate evaluation of qualitative studies should focus on depth, rather than breadth, of data collection (Lareau and Rao 2016).

Guidelines for Recruitment and Consent

Gaining access to any site for participant observation can be difficult. The method of intensive family observations brings challenges in the areas of recruitment and consent because there are multiple members of a family.

Recruiting Families for Observations

Unlike many other settings, families often have a thick "membrane" which is difficult to pass through. Therefore, in both studies, we took a number of steps to gain access to the families. Most importantly, we first carried out in-depth interviews with parents. Conducting interviews provided valuable background information and was a way to build rapport before requesting families to allow researchers to conduct observations in their homes.

Finding families

Of course, researchers will need to recruit interviewees—and ultimately recruit families—for the intensive family observations. One way to gain access to families is to hang out in spaces where family members are present. Hence, researchers should consider whether there is a setting where families are present (e.g., an extracurricular activity, favorite local restaurant, church, neighborhood group, political group, workplace, or childcare center). Researchers can do observations there, or, at the very least, go there to meet parents face-to-face to recruit them for interviews. Face-to-face contact is vastly preferable to contacting families via a "cold call."

Schools are also an excellent recruitment site for families with young children; here, researchers can begin to build relationships and trust with families. For example, Lareau initially spent months observing in third-grade elementary school classrooms. The school observations were connected to Lareau's original research question, and the information she learned in the observations helped her to guide for conceptual selection of families. Lareau got to know the children, and she met parents at school events such as "back-to-school night" where she introduced herself face-to-face. To recruit parents for interviews, she grouped the families into the requisite categories (e.g., white, middle-class girl) based on the teacher's knowledge and then she selected every *n*th family name in each of the race/class/gender groups in each classroom. The schools released the names and addresses of the parents, and Lareau wrote them a letter to request their participation in the interview portion of the study. She followed up with a phone call to the families. Due to limited resources, she interviewed about one half of the children in the class; over 90 percent of the families she contacted from the classrooms she observed agreed to the interview.[6] It was helpful that the school "vouched" for Lareau but, since some parents had difficult relationships with the school, this sponsorship was also problematic. It also takes time and energy to gain access to schools (or any organization serving children), and this phase of the research can be very time-consuming. Given their research goals, some researchers will prefer simply to recruit parents and interview them directly to gain access to intensive family observations.

Another recruitment site for parents can be an organization which is central to the research question. For example, for the unemployment study, Rao became immersed in the world of career coaches and free support groups for unemployed professionals. At the height of recruitment, she attended about two to three such meetings per week, with each meeting lasting for about two to three hours. These events were organized in different locations and were attended by a mix of people—some of whom Rao had met in other venues and others of whom she had not. She was also active on LinkedIn and Meetup boards for the unemployed. Rao recruited unemployed professionals primarily from these networking and support groups, including online, for the unemployed. The families who participated in observations were drawn out of the pool of couples where both partners had agreed to participate in the interview (about half the sample), and most were recruited individually through these spaces.[7]

One advantage of these approaches is that neither Lareau nor Rao relied primarily on a snowball sample. Thus, the issue of information sharing among participants which may arise from a snowball sampling, as in Stacey's (1990) study, was not a high-level concern given these sampling methods for either of us. Still, some of the parents in Lareau's study had children in the same classroom, and it was possible for families to recognize other families in publications. Since the families had been told that their identities would be held in confidence, Lareau began warning families as the process unfolded that it was possible that other families might recognize them in any future book.

Beginning with interviews provided a way for family members to get to know us. Lareau began by interviewing each mother and subsequently interviewed the father (including nonresidential fathers). Rao started with the unemployed person and later interviewed the spouse. Interviews sometimes had to be rescheduled at the request of the interviewee; this provided additional moments of interaction. Interviews provided moments of contact with family members and introduced us to their homes. Family members were interested in the research and most asked general questions about our work, the project, and about our university; our answers possibly reassured them of the legitimacy of the enterprise.[8] Lareau generally did not mention the observational study in these interviews but recruited families at a later date. Rao mentioned the observational study to families at the end of the in-depth interview ("to warm them up") but she did not ask them to be in the study.

Choosing families to observe

Conceptual questions should guide the selection of the families for intensive observation as much as possible. Put differently, researchers should think about the research questions and then consider the ways in which families might vary. Thus, in choosing families for the observations, we went through the key research question and looked for variation on families' experiences on critical conceptual issues (see also Small 2009). For example, Lareau was interested in children's organized activities. Lareau and her assistants interviewed a pool of around 40 families in a northeastern metropolitan area from which Lareau selected 12 families for observation.[9] For each social class and race group, she sought families where the children either had a lot of organized activities or relatively few. Rao interviewed unemployed workers from 48 families. Out of this, Rao had a potential sample of 24 families in which both spouses had participated in the interviews. For Rao, this meant including families where the unemployed person was aggressively seeking work or had a more relaxed approach to job hunting. After selecting the families who were "high" and "low" on the key area of interest of the study (e.g., a family with many organized activities or few organized activities), we sought to choose families who were roughly comparable on other factors. For example, Lareau sought families where the mothers worked outside the home as well as families who had more than one child. As type much as possible, she wanted the participating families to be relatively comparable in size and in the age of the children. As it turned out, a number of children in the fourth grade had an older sibling in seventh grade. This was unexpected, but, as a result, the age of the sibling turned out to be a helpful deciding factor in choosing between two otherwise similar families since it meant that the families often had two children of roughly similar ages.

In the end, all researchers have to make hard choices in designing a study, but the unusually labor-intensive nature of family observations necessarily restricts their sample size. As we explain below, family observations are best when there is "density" of observation by visiting frequently (often daily), and this labor intensity necessarily limits sample size. Since it takes many hours for researchers to write field notes, the process is extremely labor intensive. Indeed, if an ethnographer is working alone during the family observations, the family observations normally dominate the researcher's life (e.g., for around 12–14 hours per day) and leave little time for other activities. Furthermore, in both studies, the observational component was just one aspect of the study since we carried out interviews with many parents (e.g., 137 interviews from 88 families for Lareau and Rao conducted over 110 interviews from 48 families, some of whom she followed longitudinally). All of these factors limit the number of families who can participate and the researchers' ability to complete the study in a reasonable time period. For example, Rao settled on studying four families who were selected to represent different conceptual categories that had emerged from the interview phase of the study; she studied each of the four families for approximately two weeks. Since Rao was comparing men and women who had different unemployment experiences, she restricted the sample to professional middle-class families who were white (although she had nonwhite families in the interview portion of the study).

The ask

Recruiting families was a sensitive endeavor. In both studies, we asked families—one at a time—if they would participate in the observational dimension of our study. In the childhood study, Lareau often sent a letter ahead of time and then telephoned to have a conversation, but, in some cases, she simply called or dropped by. She explained that she had completed the interviews and now was inviting a small number of families to be in a select part of the study (where they would be given a payment for their participation). She stressed that social scientists had an overly romanticized picture of family life, and she was conducting family observations to create a more realistic picture, inviting these families to participate in her book project. In the unemployment study, unemployment itself is already a somewhat stigmatized identity. A request to observe the family during a difficult time risked seeming callous. We both tried to reassure families that the participant observation in no way entailed judging the families. We did this early and throughout the process. Following Hochschild (1989), both Lareau and Rao stressed that they should be treated like "the family dog" meaning that the family members should feel free to "ignore us" and that they certainly shouldn't feel the need to talk to us or entertain us. Although an unusual situation, as much as possible, they should just "be themselves."

In qualitative studies of these kinds, there is always some selection bias. For example, what types of people are more likely to agree to be interviewed, and what kinds to be observed? From our part, we sought to minimize this issue by asking across a range of people who met our study criterion to participate in the interview component. People often ask us why the families agreed to participate; this question raises the issue of selection bias in our samples. In both studies, we felt it was important to ask families even if we thought they would most likely say no. We wanted to avoid "selecting" only those families who we were sure would agree, and we wanted to have families with a range of behaviors in order to reduce, as much as possible, selecting families who were extremely similar. Rather, we sought conceptual variation (see Luker 2008). One mother, for example, had been quite grumpy in the childhood study interview. The research assistant was incredulous that Lareau would ask her to participate in the observational aspect. But, the son had many organized activities and was a good conceptual case; in the end, the family agreed.

We suspected that the families who agreed to participate in family observations were more confident about their family life and possibly had less alcoholism, family violence, and other such challenges. These families may have seen their own families as being particularly normative—part of the mainstream. However, what families consider to be normative behavior is also data for social scientists. We do think that our multiple modes of data collection, particularly the fact that our observations occurred after we had already collected one round of interview data from adult family members, were important in allowing us to triangulate what people said in their interviews with how they behaved in their daily lives. This totality of data was key.

In addition, families in the childhood study also seemed to "click" with Lareau and had children who wanted to be in the study. Lareau also told the children and parents that she was writing a book based on this research. The idea of being in a book was thrilling to the children; it made a critical difference that the children told their parents that they wanted to be in the book. In the unemployment study, participants explicitly expressed that they hoped sharing their experiences would help others who were going through unemployment. In both studies, when we asked the families why they agreed in exit interviews, they frequently said that they wanted to "help us out." The honorarium (discussed below) was helpful to many families.

Since it is routine for potential research participants to decline to participate, researchers should have a potential pool of families which includes more families than they actually hope to study. In the childhood study, about one third of the families Lareau asked to participate refused (e.g., 12 of 19 agreed). A family who declined stressed that they were "not the perfect family"; one low-income family started and then stopped on the third day with little explanation. In the unemployment study, to recruit four families Rao asked 10 families and five declined. A sixth family declined initially but contacted Rao a few months later to agree to the observations. However, by that time, the unemployed husband was reemployed, which would have defeated the Rao's aim of capturing daily life during unemployment. The reasons for declining in the unemployment study fell in two broad categories: The unemployed partner had received a job between the interview and request for observations or the families declined saying that anything more than interviews was too invasive for them and out of their comfort zone. Given the intrusive nature of the request, we consider these rates to be reasonable.

Paying families

Both studies also provided an honorarium to the families. Families were told that they would be paid, "as a thank-you" and, in the childhood study, to "help cover the expenses from us being around and eating." In the childhood study, Lareau provided an amount equivalent to around US$550 in current US dollars, while Rao provided US$250. Budgets limited the honorarium, but we tried to make it large enough that the family could do something special with it, and some of the families in the childhood study used it for a vacation. The honorarium was likely not coercive in the unemployment study as two of the families agreed to participate before knowing about the honorarium. Additionally, even while unemployed, these families were in the top income quartile, meaning that US$250 was unlikely to be a significant sum.[10] Lareau worried that the honorarium was sufficiently large to be potentially coercive. Two families below the poverty level in the childhood study declined even though the honorarium was close to their monthly income (not including food stamps and housing benefits). If a researcher has limited funds, the families could be entered in a raffle. If money is not possible, researchers might think if there is any kind of gift they could give the family. For example, the researcher might have a friend who is an excellent photographer and arrange for a photo session; the researcher could then print a large photo and frame it as a gift. Two researchers could do a swap and provide favors for the families in the other's study. If researchers do have an honorarium, it is noteworthy that a payment above a certain amount requires the university to inform the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) of the payment, thereby generating elaborate paperwork for the family members to sign. It also means that their real names are given to the IRS. This situation did not apply to either of us. In the rare event that a family canceled partway through a project, the family would still be paid.

Talking about money is always sensitive, and it is advisable to try to limit the discussion of it. We both sought to make the payment seem more like a gift by getting cash and putting it in a fancy "thank-you" card. We also waited until the study was over to give it to the families. But the honorarium also could be given to the families in the beginning, or one half could be given at the beginning and one half at the end. It is better to avoid, however, a system of giving a payment per visit since it is awkward; it makes it harder to "pop by" for a few minutes; it impairs the ability to "come along" for small, unexpected events; and it is generally disruptive. Researchers will never be family members, but, as much as possible, they want to be integrated into family life. Having a payment per visit is extremely disruptive of this overall goal.

Ongoing Consent, Multiple Family Members, and the Risk of Coercion

The issue of consent was ongoing in both studies, and we often revisited it during the course of collecting observational data as well. To start with, when explaining the observational component of their studies, we both made it clear to the families that if they participated in this aspect of the studies, they would be consenting to visits, often daily, of two to three hours or more for about three weeks. Neither Lareau nor Rao provided extensive details about the family dynamics of interest because we worried that such details would make the participants even more self-conscious than they already were. Our institutional review board (IRB) did not require more than a general, accurate, summary of the goals of the study.[11]

Authors must, however, describe the study to the family members as part of the consent process. Here, researchers should think about, and possibly communicate to families, specific, routine activities which might be helpful for them to observe. Lareau generally told families, "Family life is a lot of work, and I am interested in learning more about all you do to help get kids through the day." Lareau also listed a set of activities she wanted to observe (e.g., haircut, grocery shopping, family event, homework, before school, and so forth) "to get a sense of daily life." But Lareau stressed, "it is up to you. We can always reschedule. You are in control here." In the childhood study, one father asked what the research team would do and was relieved to learn that he would not have to talk to the researchers when they visited for observations. Rao had explained the consent process and detailed what the observations entailed in a one-page memo she shared with each family that she asked to participate in the observational component. This broad document explained that Rao would "hang out" with the family, visiting daily for anywhere from two to six hours, and complete at least 50 hours with each family over a two-week period. It explained that the family could opt out of the study whenever they wished. She also informed each family that if they decided they did not want Rao to note down an event that occurred during her observations, they could do so. None of the families in the unemployment study, however, requested to have anything "off the record." Families in both studies thought the plan for observations was bizarre, but they generally had few questions.[12]

Not everyone is enthusiastic

Families have multiple members, but not all are equally eager to be in the study. Some family members emphasize the need for family privacy more than others. This complicates the process of consent. There is a "predictably unpredictable" nature of gaining consent from all members of the group; it is an ongoing process (Bosk 1979). In a perfect world, all family members would be equally enthusiastic, and researchers would never have awkward moments. But family life is complex, and both studies faced challenges where one or more family members pressured other family members to be in the study. This situation raised difficult ethical challenges. For example, in the unemployment study, in the Bach family, the teenage son, Parker, was less than enthused about participating in family observations. After being introduced by Darlene, his unemployed mother, Rao explained the study to Parker, handing him an assent form. The IRB protocol for minors requires parents to sign consent forms, and minors are provided with an assent form that details their participation in the study. This form is not signed by minors. As Rao, Darlene, and Parker drove back to the Bachs' house, Parker turned to his mother and groaning, whined "Do I have to?" Darlene smiled widely in the rearview mirror and nodded. Parker slouched back into his seat, while Rao looked at Darlene who smiled and shrugged her shoulders as though to say "teenagers!" Although Parker appeared unwilling to participate in the study, his participation was ultimately determined by his mother. This type of parental authority is typically an accepted part of mundane family processes in which adult parents often make decisions for children ranging from what children are allowed to eat, play with, what school they attend, and where they live. In both studies, the crucial point is that in these decisions to participate, or not, the pressure came from a family member rather than the researcher. Family members often do things that they do not want to do because of their familial relationships. Still, all family members need to provide written and verbal consent, or assent in the case of minors, to be in the study since each member of the family is a crucial member of the group.

Consent and vulnerable families

The issue of consent is one facet of an amalgam of ethical challenges. Overall, our goal was not to resolve ethical issues but to try to manage them in the best way we could, while realizing that, at times, our actions were fraught with difficulty. The most important strategy we each adopted was to repeatedly check in with family members to see whether it was okay to be there, whether they wanted us to leave, and whether they wanted us to make changes. Fundamentally, the role of *deference* (which we discuss later) is an ethical response to the situation: family members need to be in charge (even if it meant that the fieldworker does not get what she is looking for at a given moment). Similarly, in any institutional interaction, if there is any chance that the situation could be tricky or potentially harmful to the family, the fieldworker should leave.

For vulnerable families, such as those below the poverty level, extra safeguards should be followed given troubling issues of the power imbalance between researchers and families. In negotiating access to families, it is good to stress that allowing fieldworkers into the home because of preset schedules is not necessary—families can determine on an ongoing basis when they do not want fieldworkers to visit. Researchers should also be sensitive if family members look stressed and offer to skip a day.[13] For example, Lareau was wary about going with a poor family member to visit a caseworker since it might raise questions which could be harmful (e.g., if the caseworker learned of the [unreported] payment for the research). Even though observing the mother's interactions with the caseworkers was deeply relevant to the research question, Lareau avoided it. Instead, she went to get food stamps[14] with the mother where there was no direct contact with a caseworker.

Given the complexity of family life and the nature of ethnographic research, it is naive to think that all ethical strains can be avoided. Despite the researcher's best intentions, a study may feel coercive to the family—notwithstanding statements that the family should feel free to decline. Indeed, ethical quagmires have been discussed at length in ethnographic research from classical studies (Whyte 1981) to more recent works (Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy 2014). They are part of "the price of doing business," but it is important that the researchers talk them through with family members and, if necessary, be prepared to limit activities, change the study, or stop.

Consent for family observations in institutions outside the home

In intensive family observation studies, researchers should expect to study families as they move across multiple settings, and these observations are an important part of the methods. But this methodological approach also brings additional challenges. For any observations that occurred in public spaces outside the home (e.g., grocery stores, zoos), Rao did not seek the consent of external parties as they were in public spaces, which are exempt from considerations of consent. In one of the families in the unemployment study—the Masons—Rao observed Rebecca's mother who dropped by frequently and gained the mother's verbal consent to record observations that included her. In the childhood study, the research team also accompanied families as they visited their relatives, attended baseball games, went to family reunions, and went shopping. In these instances, fieldworkers relied on verbal consent (after the study was explained to them by the family member).

Sometimes people asked fieldworkers in both studies questions about what we were doing with the family. We had a script to answer these. In the childhood study, for example, the research team said something very brief, "We are hanging out with the family to learn about all of the work that goes into getting kids through the day. They are such a great family. We are really enjoying it." The idea was to be vague but accurate. In the childhood study, if fieldworkers were going to visit someone else's home, a family member was usually in touch ahead of time to make arrangements. We also asked the family member what they wanted us to say or do in the setting; they took the lead.

Researchers following families into institutions (e.g., health care settings or schools) face different challenges. Visits to doctors' offices or school conferences required the consent of the *parent* for the researcher to learn confidential information and the consent of the *professionals* (since the field notes included the interactions of the professionals and some were subsequently interviewed). In the childhood study, family members signed several different consent forms (e.g., for every interview, before beginning the observations, and before interviewing a professional to gain confidential information about them). Lareau also asked some families to sign a broadly worded consent form releasing confidential data from many different types of professionals. In the school, Lareau had conducted extensive observations, was known to the teachers (who had signed consent forms), and could simply show up for parent–teacher conferences and ask the parent to allow an observation and sign a consent form.[15] Making arrangements to observe a doctor or dentist visit, however, involved both flexibility and luck. Lareau had to hope that when the need for such a visit arose, the family would remember to call one of the fieldworkers. In these instances, once Lareau knew they would be doing a visit, she secured a release form from the family and permission to contact the office in question. Armed with the signed consent form from the parent, and a blank consent form that needed to be signed by the doctor before the observation could begin, she went to the medical office a few hours before the visit to drop off the forms. Telephone calls did not work, partly because the request was so unusual, and there were so many people in the offices that the lines of communication were unclear. Appearing in person was time-consuming but always yielded the required signatures in a timely manner. Although somewhat bewildered by the request to observe, since the family had approved it, the health professionals were very accommodating. In short, showing up in person (with the consent forms) is the best method to gain access to institutions.

This strategy yielded very rich data since it allowed Lareau to see families out of the home in key moments that might influence their children's success. Of course, many of these institutional actors can exert considerable power over the lives of vulnerable families. As noted earlier, in the childhood study, fieldworkers elected not to conduct observations in some cases such as with the family who was meeting the caseworker since Lareau worried about potential harm to the family. These visits to doctors were usually routine visits to receive clearance to attend summer camp. Lareau did not think that observing these interactions posed unique ethical challenges. This may not hold in other cases. If a researcher is interested in observing families with gender nonconforming children, for example, intersex or children undergoing sexual and gender transition, observing visits to the doctor may not be appropriate or would require unusual levels of careful consideration of ethical issues since these interactions may be particularly sensitive.[16]

Guidelines for the Logistics of Conducting Observations

The process of conducting family observations requires paying attention to scheduling the visits, how fieldworkers should physically and spatially position themselves in the home, how fieldworkers should interact with family members, how long and how often visits to observe families should be, and finally, how and when to write field notes from each visit. In this section, we discuss each of these aspects.

Scheduling Visits

In both studies, if a family agreed to the participant observations, the fieldwork began whenever it was convenient for the family, usually immediately. We cleared our schedules in order to be available at the convenience of the families. In the childhood study, Lareau ritualized the entry and exit to the family. For the entry, Lareau and the research assistants would bring a dessert over to the family in the evening and talk to them all together, answer questions about the study, and make a schedule of visits. The schedule included the name of the fieldworker, time of arrival, and activity to be observed. The details looked as follows: Monday "before school and walk to school arrival at 7:00 a.m.," Tuesday "homework and dinner, arrival at 3:30," Wednesday "dinner and bedtime, arrival at 5:00," and so forth. Lareau gave the family a magnet with the name of the university to post this schedule on the refrigerator. The calendar had the arrival time but not the departure time; the departure times were "played by ear" depending on how things were flowing but usually were after two or three hours. The parents in the childhood study signed the consent form. Furthermore, in the childhood study, each family had multiple fieldworkers, with one being a "lead fieldworker" who visited the family three to four days per week, kept track of the field notes, and managed any issues that surfaced in consultation with Lareau. A second fieldworker visited once or twice per week; Lareau visited once or twice per week unless she was the lead fieldworker (as she was in two families). Each family only had one fieldworker visiting at any given time. Lareau stressed that the schedule could be changed at any time if something came up. The scheduling visit helped build rapport with all family members.

Rao had a less formalized entry, but she too explained what the consent entailed on this first day with each family, answered any questions, and went over what the visits would look like on the weekdays and weekends. Rather than making a schedule of visits for the period of family observations, Rao more loosely discussed "coming over each evening." The exact times were determined on a daily basis, and exact timing was confirmed by texting on the go regarding when Rao would reach the family's house each day. (Texting was not a mode of communication during the childhood study.) The schedule of visit was thus more flexible for Rao.

Both authors also did separate, formalized "exit interviews" with family members at the end of the visits to probe more issues and to ask how the visits had altered family life. In the childhood study, the exit interviews often took place with the researcher and the child in a park while the parents were interviewed at home. In the unemployment study, exit interviews (done separately with the husband and the wife) were typically conducted in a secluded space in the home (such as the family den, closed off). Children were not included in the exit interviews.

To ensure that each visit went smoothly, we sought to ritualize our participation with the families in an unobtrusive way. Specifically, we used small gifts as a way to gain and maintain entry and rapport. We found it helpful to provide small gifts during the study such as brownies, fruit, wine, or something that suits the family's preferences. Because Rao was often present for family dinners,[17] she made it a point to bring a small gift—usually a store-bought dessert for the family—at every third visit. Lareau ritualized the exit. She had a party with a special cake (with "thank-you" written on it), special paper plates the children usually chose, and pizza. This party was meaningful for the working-class and poor children in the study. Since the middle-class children had pizza and cake frequently, they did not see it as special and they did not appear to feel thanked by it.

The Visits

Since the family has a "thick membrane," researchers should be prepared for initial awkwardness (see Elliot et al. 2016). Indeed, we found the first few visits to be extremely awkward, although things gradually improved, particularly after the third day. During the first few visits, family members frequently glanced toward us, and their eyes often tracked us as we walked up the stairs or crossed the room. Family members treated us as an honored guest in the beginning, offering choice seats in the house (which we declined), and being solicitous about our welfare. By the third or fourth visit, things started to normalize. Lareau noticed on the 10th visit that things were more relaxed. Interactions at the beginning of a relationship are different than interactions later. Information collected is usually more valuable after the relationship has deepened. We found follow-up visits, even a month or two later, important to sustain the level of rapport established earlier. The design implications are straightforward. If a researcher can only allot 30 days to visit a family, it is usually better to observe daily for two weeks and then conduct follow-up visits such as once a month for a while. (This schedule is more likely to yield rich data more efficiently than spread-out visits such as visiting once per week for nine months.) In both studies, we found that a higher density of visits in a short time helped everyone get more comfortable. Indeed, originally Lareau began the study by visiting three or four times per week, but she noticed that things flowed better after the schedule happened to include daily visits for a few days since researchers could keep pace with changes in the family's schedule, families were less likely to forget about the visits, and everyone had more of a chance to adjust more rapidly. She then switched to daily visits (although it varied across families). An alternative approach is to determine how many hours of observations each researcher can spare (including travel and writing field notes). This figure, along with what the researcher deems necessary for their project and to which families agree, can guide the design.

The research questions help to guide the visitation schedule. For example, given Rao's goals of gaining insight into marital interactions during one spouse's unemployment, both spouses had to be home for this. As a result, Rao visited the family she was observing in the evenings (when the whole family would be at home) or just as the spouses were arriving home from work. All family members were at home for the majority of the time she spent observing families. On the weekends, Rao visited as per the family's convenience, typically around 10 a.m. and into the evening.

In sum, in both studies, we spent time explaining to family members what we were planning, and we arranged for intensive, daily visits. The frequent visits helped us understand the flow of family life, reduced cancellations, helped to build rapport, and generally helped everyone adjust to the strangeness of the endeavor in a more rapid fashion.

Where Should Fieldworkers Sit or Stand? The Issue of Spatial Positionality

Fieldworkers should carefully consider where they physically position themselves in the home as it is a constrained site. In the childhood study, many of the working-class and poor families had living rooms that were very small. Fieldworkers' actions are closely observed. Small decisions about where to sit and when to talk were all heightened. In middle-class homes, where the houses were large, fieldworkers had to make constant choices about which family members they should follow around such as when children abruptly got up from watching television and went upstairs. (Generally, once the parents knew that fieldworkers were in the house, fieldworkers did not check with the parents each time they moved from room to room. Fieldworkers did, however, check in with the children to see whether they were comfortable with them tagging along.)

As children became more comfortable with the fieldworker, they would sometimes not update the fieldworker on their every move. This means that fieldworkers constantly have to figure out what to do. Compounding the difficulty, some family members were more supportive of the project than others. For example, in the Black low-income McAllister family, an aunt (who had a serious drug problem) was staying there. The children—Harold, and his sister (Alexis, 9)—were comfortable with the fieldworkers, but they deeply disliked having their aunt around. (Harold angrily said, "She's stupid.") The aunt, in turn, was annoyed by the fieldworkers. One Friday late afternoon, Greg (a Black male fieldworker) in his 20s has been playing basketball when Harold went back to the house (possibly to use the bathroom) without updating the fieldworker. Greg wrote in his notes:

Harold disappears on me. I wait 10 minutes before I go get him. The basketball crew dwindles down to four. As I walk to the house, I see Harold's mom. She waves. She says "Harold is upstairs." "Go 'head up; he's up there."

Greg moved cautiously:

I enter into the house. No one is downstairs…. I holler "Yo Harold!" No one responds. I begin to ascend the steps—I purposely make a lot of noise. Again, I holler—"Yo Harold!"

The aunt was hostile:

Harold's aunt Jill nastily replies over the clamor of the air conditioner and the noise of the t.v. –"Who is it?" I stop about 3/4 the way up the first flight of steps and yell back—"It's Greg." She again responds as if seriously annoyed (shouting) "Harold, Harold—go see what he wants." There is some rustling out of Harold's room. He descends the steps as Jill yells "Tell him you was going to sleep." Harold yells back as we go down the steps "I wasn't going to sleep" [He doesn't have any shoes on.] She yells "Yes you were!" At the bottom of the steps Harold yells—"No I wasn't see—I was watchin' t.v. now."

Harold and Greg left the house together and took up a perch outside. The fieldworker was also annoyed writing in his notes, "I can't stand Jill." Harold was more supportive of the fieldworker being there, but Harold also liked to move around, and he did not always invite the fieldworker to come along. Fieldworkers needed to decide where to be.

Furthermore, family members often have squabbles, and fieldworkers need to decide where to position themselves and how much to trail after family members when a conflict is unfolding. A field note from the unemployment study reveals the dilemma in the Jansson family where Robert, the father, had been unemployed for many months:

After dinner this evening, we were all sitting in the living room on the first floor. The kids, two-year old Taylor and four-year old Tessa were playing on the carpeted floor in front of the TV. Robert's wife, Laura, was sitting on the couch opposite the TV (Rao was sitting next to her), scrolling through Facebook on her phone and intermittently looking up at the TV which was on a news channel. Robert was reclining on the couch perpendicular to Laura.

The two-year-old's cheerful efforts to mount his father's leg created unexpected pain:

Taylor playfully climbed up Robert's leg when all of a sudden Robert yelped in pain. Taylor was pressing his weight against Robert's knee and Robert had jerked upright. Robert was trying to shove Taylor off of his knee. Robert's face had turned tomato red, and his mouth was open as he grimaced in pain. Robert shook his right leg as though trying to shake Taylor off as he loudly said, "Taylor get off my knee!" Robert's face went from tomato red to white. Laura looked up at this scene in alarm saying "Don't shout at him. He's just a kid, he doesn't know what he's doing." Robert rolled to his side, held onto his knee and said "I'm not at shouting at him, I'm in pain. He literally yanked my knee out, I'm shouting at that." Laura loudly said "Don't shout at him, you always do that, don't do that." Robert remained silent, and in a few minutes, Laura stood up and gathered the kids for bath-time. Laura walked up the stairs with Tessa and Taylor behind her and Robert following at the end.

This field note reveals a tricky situation. Usually, the fieldworker would follow the family upstairs, but given this incident, social conventions required giving the family their space. By following social conventions, the fieldworker risked missing out on seeing what Robert and Laura are like with each other when there is a tension. The fieldworker noted:

Because things had been so tense, I did not directly follow up, as I would usually do. On the way up to the 2nd floor Laura and Robert exchanged terse words. Laura said "You can't react like that to him, you always do." Laura acknowledged Robert's pain by adding, "I'm sorry you're in pain but he's just a kid," Robert was calmer now as well, and not in as much pain. He protested, "I wasn't reacting to him, I was reacting to the pain." The conversation ended here. I went up after about 10 minutes, when the kids had finished bathing and were being toweled off.

Arguments between couples are an important part of family life, yet observing them in real-time could be insensitive and potentially jeopardize the fieldworker's continuing access to the family. Because the fight had not been about unemployment per se, the researcher could justify not following the family upstairs at this critical point. Hence, we suggest that researchers skip following family members in uncomfortable situations if it is not germane to the research question. If the actions are central to the focus of the study, researchers should evaluate the situation on a case-by-case basis; in some instances, however, researchers can hang back but remain within visual sight and earshot of the family members. Each case is different.

In the home, some rooms may be more "public" than others. The living room, kitchen, or den where family members congregate together is often a space where the researcher is less conspicuous as opposed to the master bedroom or bathroom. Different rooms within homes carry different expectations of privacy, and fieldworkers must remain attuned to this. At times, we waited for participants to invite us in, and at other times, we checked that it was all right that we followed them into the more private rooms ("is it okay to come along or would you prefer to skip it?").

In addition, the presence of young children can complicate researchers' mobility within the home. Researchers around children often need to acquiesce to children's demands—smiling at them and playing with them. Yet, this can sometimes obstruct the researchers' goals of observing. In a summary of field notes from the second visit to the Jansson family, Rao noted that:

Robert was in the kitchen, trying to find the Kung Pao chicken that he was supposed to heat up for dinner. Tessa, between the dining room and the living room with me, and was keen to play with me and show me her toys. She wanted to play catch with [a] large plastic ball, so we did that in the living room for a while. Taylor busied himself with jumping up and down on the couch in the living room. Then we played "princess dominos," followed by a Dora the Explorer puzzle. I was a little frustrated at this point because…I wanted to be free to move around. Yet, I didn't want to say no to Tessa because I want her to like me. So, my solution was to tell Tessa to move to the dining room, from where I could see Robert in the kitchen, and keep an eye on the living room and entrance, and play there.

In the unemployment study, Rao privileged establishing rapport with Tessa although at a bit of a cost to her movement within the home. The parent–child relationship, the desire of parents to see their children happy, and the obligation felt by the fieldworker to contribute to this as a way of maintaining rapport with various members in the family further complicate the role of the fieldwork in the home. Researchers cannot eliminate these obstacles, but it is helpful to be aware of them to consider alternative paths. In all families, however, researchers need to find a physical location in the home and need to negotiate with children and others as family members move around. Researchers should skip following family members in uncomfortable situations. This is partly for practical reasons—to avoid offending family members and to maintain access—but also for ethical reasons of allowing family's some semblance of privacy even in the context of family observations. Skipping following family members, in cases like the example above, is an easy decision when the reason for conflict is not directly germane to the research question. If the actions are central to the focus of the study, researchers should evaluate the situation on a case-by-case basis. Each case is different, but decisions should be guided by a complex mix of ethics, deference, and the goal of maintaining access.

Are Fieldworkers Like "Family Dogs"?

Hochschild (1989) famously told her families that they should treat her like "the family dog." Yet, in both studies, we found that the "family dog" analogy was not quite apt. Social norms require researchers to greet family members, be introduced to others outside the home, and accept or refuse offers of food and drink during meals. The team-based approach of the childhood study and the solo fieldworker approach of the unemployment study both raised a few key points when it came to how families, and different members of each family, saw and responded to fieldworkers. In the unemployment study, Rao had met both spouses by the time of the first visit for family observation, but this was usually her first meeting with the children. Three of the four families she observed had children under the age of 6, who were typically excited and curious to meet her, meaning that she could not be as unobtrusive as a "family dog" might be. The fourth family had a teenage son, who, although initially awkward, warmed to her over time. The small sizes of these families in the professional middle-class meant that Rao was a visible presence in their homes.[18] The size of the families in the childhood study varied, but the researchers always stood out.

In both studies, we strove to collect observational data without disrupting the normal routine of each family excessively. We had a goal of getting a sense of the daily routines and interactions of the families, which we triangulated with our interview data. As such, while we were not invisible, we did seek to ensure that conversations did not center on our experiences or opinions and that families continued about their day to the extent possible. An example of this approach in practice is that we typically conversed when family members initiated conversations. In both studies, fieldworkers tried to be helpful and folded laundry, picked up toys with the kids, and helped kids with their chores. But we also had occasions where fieldworkers in both studies chatted with parents as part of the flow (while being cautious of not steering conversations) and asked "probing questions." These chats were more informative when only the researcher and one person were together and had privacy. For us, this occurred while driving with a family member or walking in the neighborhood. A common space like the living room, where other family members may listen in, hindered more in-depth conversations.

While families know how to deal and interact with a "family dog," they were usually unsure of how to treat fieldworkers—to ignore them, treat them as a guest, or behave in a familiar fashion. Hence, it is helpful for ethnographers to give families guidance; "Oh, don't worry about me, I will just hang out and watch television with the kids" was something that Lareau would tell families. In the childhood study, the fieldworkers would often hang out with the children and play games with them. Still, this lack of surety from research participants about how to treat the researcher almost always alters dynamics within families. In the childhood study, children reported that the families tidied up before the arrival of the researchers and, in the middle-class white family, the eldest boy reported that "my mom talked more." We speculate that families also might have changed the meals, dressed differently (wearing more company-appropriate clothing); in the case of spouses, they may have been less physically affectionate with one another or fought less. Despite these potential changes, we do think that observations capture relationship dynamics relatively deeply. Furthermore, when participants perform for the benefit of the researcher, it is still as useful as other common data collection methods such as in-depth interviews since performances can be helpful in revealing what behaviors participants value and idealize—or at least find socially valued (Pugh 2013). But, more importantly, it is difficult to constantly self-censor, especially over the course of numerous, daily visits. While family members may perform more, or present more of a front stage (Goffman 1959), we are reasonably sure that the family members became more relaxed and revealed more "backstage" moments of family interactions as the study unfolded. Of course, family members also perform for each other—including at the dinner table or in other family gatherings.

We also found that fieldworkers were not like "family dogs" because social norms required more strategic interaction with family members than the "family dog" analogy suggests. For example, when fieldworkers arrived and departed, family members asked about our trip there or about our plans for the weekend when we left. As an ethical issue and instrumental issue to increase integration in the field, we both sought to be helpful to family members; a form of social interaction obfuscated by the "family dog" analogy. For example, Lareau and the research assistants held babies, chased after toddlers, played basketball, talked about television programs with the children, and generally sought to be helpful with household chores. Rao similarly helped set and clear away tables for mealtimes and helped clear away children's toys at the end of the day. This was tricky for Rao as she was interested in understanding the marital dynamics during unemployment including around housework. Typically, she would wait to see who would take the lead, for example, in setting the table and then help that person. Cleaning up toys was almost always the children's responsibility in the families she observed, so she would quickly check with one of the parents if "I can help pick up a couple of things?" They would usually nod, and she would proceed to help. This way she was able to attempt a balance between not creating awkward boundaries between herself and the families but also not interfering too much in the running of things. Hence, ethnographers ideally will find a way to be helpful which is not too disruptive of the central research goals of the study.

Our interactions with family members in both studies were delimited by our conviction that fieldworkers should not significantly transform family life, particularly when an issue was core to the focus of the investigation. Consequently, Lareau did not give rides to family members (even though it would have been very helpful) since the focus was on how the families managed daily life. When the subject came up, she pled that the insurance regulations at the university did not permit it. In addition, as we discuss below, even if children's actions made the researchers uncomfortable, if the parent was present, Lareau told the research assistant not to intervene. In both studies, fieldworkers sought to minimize how much we talked to family members. Lareau would nod sympathetically and look interested, but she said little as she did not want to disrupt the flow of daily life. Most of what she said was praise ("that is really cute"), curiosity ("how does that work?"), or self-deprecating comments ("when I was a kid, my sister and I fought like cats and dogs. We were wild."). She also sat and looked interested, smiled, and nodded and helped with household chores, but said little. In retrospect, Lareau wished that she had probed more, for example, by asking an open-ended, relatively neutral, "How do you think that went?" after a visit to the dentist or doctor. Lareau also followed the technique of "holding up a mirror" by repeating back (word for word) what a family member was saying. For example, when a mother expressed deep dislike for a teacher ("I hate the school") or anxiety about the future ("I am worried"), Lareau would repeat what she said either directly or in a slightly different fashion (e.g., "you hate the school" or "it is easy to be worried"). This technique is very helpful in interviews and can make people feel "heard." If it could be enacted in a casual way—and if other family members were not in ear shot—it possibly might have led family members to say more.

When family members asked Rao questions about her opinions or her life, she usually responded succinctly and without detail. Rao's responses were more concise than they normally would be in other social settings. However, both authors also offered a sympathetic ear when the situation warranted. For example, Rao was alone several times with Rebecca Mason, an unemployed mother. Rebecca and her own mother, who drops by the house frequently, have a fraught relationship which Rao observed. On reaching the Mason's house, Rao would often see that Rebecca was on the phone arguing with her mother or upset because her mother had visited earlier. In these times, Rao would listen sympathetically to Rebecca, nod in agreement as Rebecca vented in frustration, and offered brief sentences of assurance like "that sounds like a difficult situation" or "I am sorry you are going through this—it must be difficult." Through their communication and their (hopefully helpful) actions, researchers are able build rapport and find their place in the family.

How Often Should You Visit and for How Long?

There is no perfect amount of time to visit. Lareau and her assistants usually visited only two to three hours at a time, but some visits (e.g., when the family went to a funeral in a city two hours away) lasted many hours.

Budget and time constraints also shaped the extent of fieldwork possible: Lareau had research assistants who had to be paid for their work (e.g., about 10 hours per visit including travel time, observation time, and field note writing time). These budget constraints led her to settle on daily visits for three weeks per family. Lareau had an ambitious design with three social classes (e.g., middle class, working class, and poor) and two racial groups (e.g., Black and white families). The research was tiring and difficult to complete, and the number of families was, in the end, excessive. Because Rao was the sole researcher on her study, she was guided more by the constraints of her schedule. Although we both wished we could have followed each family for a longer period of time, limited resources made that impossible. Ideally, researchers should leave a site when they have reached theoretical saturation and are no longer learning new things (Lofland et al. 2006; Small 2009). In both the childhood and unemployment studies, we found that reaching theoretical saturation was realized for some, but not all, aspects of family life. Nevertheless, in both studies, we collected a great deal of data.

The duration of the visits was guided by a blend of the researchers' interests and the family's preferences. It is imperative to get to know families, be there long enough to see the topic of interest, and adjust to the specific nature of the events being studied. Lareau was studying parent–child interaction. This interaction was an ongoing feature of daily life; thus, in two hours, there would be dozens of interactions relevant to the study. Rao, however, was studying job searching and the impact of unemployment on families. In briefer durations, for example, two hours, she could observe how family members went about daily activities like doing chores. But it took observations lasting for longer, such as four hours, to reveal other aspects of their life, for instance, how spouses discussed the unemployed partner's job search. The research question, broadly conceived, structured the visits.

When ending intensive observation, it is helpful to openly ask the family whether it is okay to stay in touch. Rao also stressed that research moves slowly, and it will be a long time before she would be done and able to share any "findings." At times, families face new and unexpected developments that offer extremely valuable data for the study. Clarifying these expectations when the intensive observations are wrapping up can be helpful. We both continue sending annual holiday cards to each family. But some families from the childhood study felt hurt and angry after seeing the published book and severed ties with Lareau (for more details, see Lareau 2011, Appendix). With the remaining families, Lareau continues to send holiday gifts, and she sends more significant gifts on the birth of a child. In one case, she covered the cost of a tombstone after the death of a parent. Other researchers have discussed the importance of reciprocity in the field (Desmond 2016); further, in the childhood study, these gifts occurred several years after the last round of interviews. No future rounds of data collection are planned in either study.

Working in a Team Compared to Working Alone

Family observational studies are rare. Most studies have been done by one researcher working alone (e.g., Cooper 2014; Hochschild 1989; Paik 2016; Reich 2005; Stacey 1990; Stack 1974), but team ethnographic studies do exist (e.g., Lareau 2011; Bowman et al. 2019). As noted above, family observations often require having numerous visits (ideally in a short time period) combined with the need to spend many hours per day writing field notes. Clearly, family observational studies can be time-demanding for ethnographers; the time required to travel, carry out fieldwork, recover from doing fieldwork, and write field notes can consume almost all waking hours. Hence, using research assistants can help reduce the workload and increase the sample size. Research assistants also can have valuable insights; ask probing questions; and provide valuable racial, class, and gender diversity in a team which can help in building rapport with participants (as well as increasing the legitimacy of the study). Team studies can help the researcher study more families and visit the families longer thereby increasing the strength of the project in the eyes of some readers.

Researchers differ in their approach, but, in the childhood study, Lareau was the person to negotiate almost all aspects of recruitment and consent for the families, design the schedule of visits, decide what research assistants should focus on during the visits, and work closely with team members to ensure highly consistent data collection across sites. The research assistants were responsible for arranging transportation to and from the families (and were reimbursed for transportation and travel time), carrying out the observations, talking to Lareau on the phone after each visit, and writing field notes.[19] They attended team meetings, and research assistants were also invited to use the data for their dissertation projects. Interestingly, in the childhood study, fieldworkers had favorite families. Families also had favorite fieldworkers. In Black families, the boys showed their preference for the Black male fieldworker over other fieldworkers, thereby reinforcing the value of a racially and gender-diverse team of researchers in building rapport.

Still, there are multiple challenges with teamwork. First, teams are costly, requiring a major grant. Second, teams create challenges with ensuring a consistent pattern of data collection. Research assistants also can have missteps (just as the principal investigator can) and damage rapport. Third, there are hurdles for researchers working in a team as they navigate the complex process of moving from field notes to a research question, considering disconfirming evidence, and honing a theoretically informed thesis (Luker 2008). After all, ethnographic scholars often begin with “sensitizing concepts” and a general set of research questions, which are honed by the data collection process through an emergent process. In a team, this means that the principal investigator writing up the results of the study must have a deep understanding of all the data. Yet, this depth of knowledge can be difficult to gain unless the principal investigator collects the data. Fourth, since there are multiple possible lines of inquiry, team members may disagree about the most important questions to pursue; the principal investigator needs the input of research assistants, but the principal investigator must also provide leadership and manage differing interests. Fifth, since intensive observation is a challenge, research assistants can benefit from professional development opportunities. It is critical for the principal investigator to provide emotional support to team members, show gratitude, and be a good listener in times of difficulty. In addition, team members need help with their own professional development. But these mentorship relationships are time-consuming, and they likely come at a time when the principal investigator has many demands. Finally, as in any group, team members will cohere and, at times, fracture. Team members may also compete for the attention and mentorship of the principal investigator.

A lone ethnographer, such as Rao, has more control over the relationships forged with family members which is invaluable. Rather than relying on the field notes of others, the lone ethnographer can carry out participant observation and have a much deeper understanding of the setting. There is more flexibility to develop the focus of the study and more time to work on the study. However, the lone ethnographer usually has a smaller sample, which provides limited opportunities to introduce variation into the subject matter being studied. In short, the lone ethnographer is the traditional approach to carrying out ethnography. There are cases of team ethnographic research projects, but the team approach also has numerous challenges.

Writing Up Field Notes From Observations

In the long run, high-quality field notes are the lifeblood of an intensive observational ethnographic project. Rao usually wrote a brief one-page outline of the day’s visit each night, followed up by detailed field notes the following morning and afternoon, before returning to the family in the evening. In the childhood study, Lareau wrote field notes immediately after every field visit; other fieldworkers in the childhood study would telephone

Lareau for about 20–35 minutes, recounting the events of the visit. These phone calls were crucial to provide Lareau with a vivid sense of families' activities and give the fieldworker detailed directions on what should be written up in the field notes. Given the labor-intensive nature of writing field notes, only selective aspects of the visit could be highlighted. The team of three fieldworkers also reviewed each other's notes and had a weekly meeting to discuss emerging analytic themes and challenges in fieldwork. A major constraint on the duration of the visit is the time needed to write field notes. Fieldworkers should never schedule visits unless they have time to write field notes (see, among others, Emerson et al. 2011; Lareau 2000). Normally, there is a ratio of at least two-to-one in terms of time spent writing vis-a-vis time spent observing to allow for sufficient detail in field notes. A two-hour visit can mean time allocation for five hours of writing field notes which is considered a reasonable "ballpark," but it depends on the research focus and how much happens during that visit. Timely and detailed field notes that capture interactions including facial expressions, tones, gestures, and other such tactile experiences are the key to this form of data collection (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

Fieldwork is a complex task, and researchers vary in the skills they bring to the project. Some gregarious researchers can easily build rapport but then struggle to write detailed, vivid, and accurate field notes.[20] Lareau found that the field notes of research assistants varied in quality, so she eventually sent them small tape recorders to carry into the homes. The audio recordings were then used to write up the field notes.[21] Fieldworkers always mentioned the tape recorders and displayed them openly (e.g., by putting it down on the dining room table or holding it in their hands). Hence, any taping should be done openly and with the permission of family members and normally be mentioned on every single visit. The tape recorders, did, however, create strain in some families as members would repeatedly glance at them, talk about them, and seemed conscious of them at times. Other family members, especially children, ignored them and did not seem particularly concerned about them. This pattern surprised us, but, as F. Erickson (July 1991, personal communication.) once said, "If they get used to me, then it doesn't matter what I bring—tape recorders or video recorders." Despite the benefit of the recordings, recording people can alter the dynamic. Of course, with the widespread use of cell phones, it is more common for scenes to be recorded or filmed. Still, recording makes some family members very uneasy. Lareau would not generally recommend it. Nonetheless, a recording dramatically improved field note quality for some fieldworkers. For discussions of the use of video see Aarsand and Forsberg 2010; Erickson 2006; and Golann et al. 2019.

Rao did not take any notes or jottings while she observed the families (nor did the researchers in the childhood study). In these small-sized families, three to four members, an additional person—Rao — stood out in the family. Jotting notes, however discreetly, for example, during dinner table conversations where each participant was entirely visible, would have been unfeasible. The families she observed were interested in Rao's note-taking. At least one adult in each family she observed asked her about her lack of note-taking—they expected her to take notes. She explained that she made jottings based on her observations on the commute back to her home; then, she would develop those jottings into full-fledged field notes within the next 24 hours.[22]

In sum, ethnographers planning to conduct family observations face a number of logistical challenges including scheduling of visits, finding a physical space to position oneself in the home, carving out a way to interact with family members, and managing the writing up of field notes. We found it helpful to create regular, repeated, and routine interactions with family members as part of the observations; by making our actions more predictable, it helped everyone adjust.

Balancing Intrusion and Data Collection

Intrusion, Experiencing Powerlessness, and Deploying Deference

Fieldworkers straddle a delicate boundary between having access to private and quintessentially familial moments and maintaining a sense of discretion so that family members do not acutely feel that they are being intruded upon. Fieldworkers can at once be in the position to exploit their subjects since it is the researchers who ultimately represent the subjects even as fieldworkers depend on research participants for continued access to the field site (Duneier et al. 2014; Punch 1986; Stacey 1988). We found that fieldworkers' worries about intruding upon families, while maintaining access to the family, leads to a sense of powerlessness for the fieldworker, which has not sufficiently been documented in previous accounts. Once inside the door of the family, researchers are deeply constrained and usually do whatever family members do including watching television shows they would never otherwise watch, listening to political views they may believe are abhorrent, and playing games with children long after the pleasure was subsided. Yet, the point is to learn about the routines of the family. To leverage this powerlessness for data collection, we suggest that cultivating a *deferential* stance can be a useful strategy. By deference we mean prioritizing family members as experts on their family, allowing family members to guide the researcher into the routines of family life—for example, where to sit, when to eat, what to eat. Using deference means shrinking one's presence in the family, embracing one's powerlessness for data collection purposes so that the researcher doesn't become any more of a focal point than the researcher already is.

In the first few visits in particular, families fell into the role of hosts and worried themselves with taking care of us. In the childhood study, a fieldworker described one of the early visits to watch Billy's baseball game with the Yanelli family.

At about 7:30 pm, I told Linda, the mother in the family, that I should get going. She said, "I'm gonna walk you out. I want to know that you get the right bus and all." I told her I didn't want her to miss any of Billy's game, and so I could walk out myself. She repeated that she wanted to know that I got on the bus.

Eventually, after much back and forth, the fieldworker convinced Linda that she didn't need an escort. As families try to be helpful to fieldworkers, the fieldwork may become an even greater imposition. Intrusion may be minimized, but it cannot be eliminated.

In addition, in someone's home, fieldworkers have less control over when they can exit, spaces they can enter into within the home, or even when and what they can eat. For example, in the unemployment study, Rao had a challenging day when she was hungry observing the Smith family on a Saturday, arriving at one in the afternoon.

I had eaten an early lunch [around 11 a.m.] before making the 90-minute journey to the Smiths' home, and I wasn't totally surprised when a couple of hours into the fieldwork [around 3:30] I started getting hungry: my stomach was growling. Usually I take a couple of bananas or granola bars with me (easy to carry and filling), but today I'd been in a rush and forgotten to put them in my bag.

In the early days of the observation, the Smiths' had constantly offered Rao food and had shown Rao their pantry and fridge, directing Rao to help herself. Rao had never needed to do so. They had fallen into a routine, and Rao now felt uncomfortable rummaging through their pantry. Furthermore, leaving the house to get food seemed interactionally implausible. As a home in a residential area, the nearest business was situated several miles from the Smiths' home, and Rao did not have a car. Giving a reason for leaving would have been awkward. She felt powerless and unsure what to do:

The hours from 3–5 pm seemed to stretch on forever. To be honest, I don't even know how good my…observations were…I was hungry, and didn't know what to do. Finally, at about 6, we all ate. The next couple of hours of observation, until I left at about 8, were definitely more fruitful.

Other fieldworkers might have felt more comfortable breaking the established routine of interaction in the observation. This and other experiences have led us to conclude that fieldworkers should eat before they enter a site. Then, as part of the desire to be integrated into the setting, it is always advisable to accept offers of food or drink with enthusiasm. This means that, at times, the fieldworker needs to eat twice in a brief period. It also means that researchers are frequently eating food they dislike or even eating food that can make them ill—which is what Sackett (2019) did when she was observing families living in refugee camps. In addition, since food is scarce in many low-income families, researchers are in a bind when family members offer scarce food to the researcher—but if the researcher refuses the food, it can cause offense. Since the researcher is trying to become closer to the family, and since refusals of offers of food creates distance or, in some cases, an insult, it is vastly preferable for researchers to accept offers of food whenever possible. More generally, fieldworkers should be prepared to renounce their autonomy over some aspects of their lives.

Deference also surfaces when the fieldworker accompanies the family to unfamiliar settings and needs to be able to engage in conversation topics that matter to the family. In this example, Lareau drove her car to meet Harold, a low-income Black boy, and his Dad (who lives separately from the mom) to go on a shopping trip to buy clothes for camp. The three of them walked to the bus stop to wait on a blazing hot summer day:

We wait for the bus. Harold's Dad stands against the building in the shade where it is cooler. Harold walks around on the sidewalk but, after a few minutes, stands to his father's left. They talk about the basketball game. I ask if they watched it. Harold tells me that the Knicks won. I ask, "Are you rooting for anyone?" He says, "Houston." His Dad tells him that it is unlikely that they will win. He says, "They have to win back at home and then they have to win when they don't have the home court." Harold interrupts him, "Home court advantage." Dad says, "Don't bet the rent."

Lareau felt out of place:

It is hot…. Harold's Dad is being curt and reasonably distant. I feel as if I am imposing. Harold smiled warmly to me when I first drove up but hasn't smiled since…. I feel uncomfortable.

In the reflections, Lareau noted that she lacked good conversation topics which can involve casual banter noting, "If I knew more about basketball, it would be easier to chat." But, as she ruefully commented in her journal, she was not knowledgeable on the preferred conversation topics:

I knew at the time [late night] I should have watched the [basketball] game but I wanted to watch a drama instead. It would help if I knew more about basketball. I know a fair bit about baseball but that…isn't much use here. This job is a pain.

Being up-to-date on the latest activities of sports teams can be extremely valuable in fieldwork as the fieldworker needs to defer to the family's interests. Fieldworkers will vary in how much they talk and how much they watch, but they need to have conversation topics to share which are of interest to the families they are studying.

Furthermore, the need for the fieldworker to defer to the family becomes complex when moving out in public space. As many others have noted (Steinbugler 2012), whites and Blacks are not interpreted as being "together" in public space. That same day, Lareau was sitting at a table in the fast food restaurant while Harold's father was not there yet. Harold went to join her at the table. A stranger, an older Black woman, motioned to Harold that he should not try to sit at the table with Lareau since it was occupied. Lareau spoke up to her, smiled, and said that they were together. In this instance, the stranger chastising the child in the study is likely linked to the oft-discussed patterns of race relations in public spaces (McIntosh 1989; Steinbugler 2012). Lareau would have liked to have been more deferential to Harold in this setting, but it was complicated by other social norms.

The Urge to Intervene

The issue of researchers' intervention during fieldwork is fraught, and we both generally sought to minimize their own presence in the field sites.[23] This "low profile" raised issues of how, and whether, to intervene if fieldworkers observed troubling events and interactions as well as the impact of our presence on the experiences of family members. All of these decisions are difficult, and there are no easy answers.

In deciding when to intervene, researchers are always guided by their own ethical and moral beliefs.[24] For example, Lareau felt it was important to respect the families and the ways that they lived their lives. Lareau believed that the parents were doing their best, and she was convinced that, with very few exceptions, there are not universally established ideal methods of child-rearing which have prevailed across historical periods. She did not believe that she held superior information of how the parents should behave, and she did not want to try to change them. She held on to this view even as there were emotionally taxing experiences connected to having a close-up look at family poverty. For the childhood study, Lareau established the rule that team members would only intervene if there was blood or if it was a life-threatening situation. (As we explain below, neither Lareau nor Rao was a mandated reporter.)

Most family life is mundane. Still, one difficult moment did occur when a toddler took Lareau's keys and headed to an unprotected electric outlet where he might have experienced a severe electric shock. In this instance, Lareau leapt to her feet to intervene, but an aunt grabbed the keys from the child first. Lareau certainly learned of illegal activity and observed challenging moments, but the childhood study had a rigid rule to avoid interventions. Although extremely unlikely that she could have come to the attention of government officials, Lareau had planned to face any consequences with her employer or the courts (including a contempt of court citation and jail time) than follow a path of either revealing confidential information about families with authorities or destroying field notes (Khan 2019; Lubet 2019). Rao, on the other hand, informed the participants that the field notes would be kept securely on a password-protected computer, and any printouts would always be kept in a locked drawer when not in Rao's possession. She also informed the families that in the highly unlikely event that the legal system should request her to turn over the field notes from her observations, she would follow suit in so doing. As a non-U.S. citizen, Rao was particularly wary of any complications of being caught up in the legal system. The approaches of Lareau and Rao present two of the various alternatives in terms of how to deal with the tricky, and not easily resolvable, issue of continuing to protect participants during and after fieldwork.

As noted above, our role in the field did, however, include helping out or lending an empathetic ear when family members discussed issues of importance to them. For the most part, we both strove to maintain a level of distance from the goings-on in each family. Other scholars have questioned whether "objectivity" is a desirable, or even feasible, way of collecting observational data (Stacey 1988). But we both decided that since we were interested in understanding family routines, we would try to minimize our presence and maintain an uninvolved stance to the extent possible so as not to disrupt routines even more. In the childhood study, this meant that none of the fieldworkers would intervene in family dynamics unless there was an immediate and grave threat to someone's life.

But this decision did not shield us from difficult predicaments. Although most of the fieldworkers' interactions with family members were comfortable, and even fun, at times it could be painful to watch family interactions. In one family in the childhood study, the Brindles, difficult moments were nearly continuous. One fieldworker found it painful to watch Katie hit herself on the forehead in full view of her mother and auntie while they all watched television. Relatedly, although Lareau would have intervened immediately if the child was in a life-threatening situation, she did not want to chastise mothers for not following historically specific standards of child-rearing since she thought it would be fundamentally disrespectful to the mothers. Nonetheless, despite this commitment, Lareau fretted when she saw Ms. Brindle leaving her 18-month-old son alone in the bathtub for several minutes, feeding him whole grapes (which were a choking hazard), and allowing him to carry around a washcloth with Comet cleanser all over it as she wrote in her journal:

My reaction is profound, deep, and negative…. She is letting him down. It makes me feel angry and powerless…. I hate to go. I hate to go back…I have done eight visits and even though it is getting better six more visits seems like absolutely forever.

Seeing kids go hungry was stressful, and all of the field researchers found the work to be emotionally exhausting.

Depending on fieldworkers' own class positions and sensibilities, different issues troubled them. A working-class-origin, male, Black fieldworker, Greg, in the childhood study was deeply troubled by the rudeness he perceived middle-class children as showing to their parents; patterns that some of the middle-class-origin fieldworkers hardly noticed. He wrote about a white middle-class family:

Sammy (4) begins to cry and whine. Then he calls her mother in a whiny voice at least five times and then shouts MOM! before she responds. She seems rather annoyed, "yes Sam." Sam is whiny and loud, 'Mom can the people see me when I was in the way back [of the car]?" She responds rather calmly as she read the directions to the baseball field, "Well Sammy you know that the windows are tinted and the people might not be able to see you when you wave." Sam begins to whine again, "I want them to see me!" Sam whines for at least 15 minutes of the 20-minute trip….

This distressed Greg:

I was getting a headache. I wanted to kick his mother's butt for letting him get away with that whining. And kick his butt for acting like a baby…I was surprised that the mother said little or nothing. And when she did speak, "Okay Sam we have to take this road," she sounded as if she was pleading with him. Who's the parent?

In discussions of ethics, standards of evaluation are usually culturally specific. Attuned to these varying standards, Lareau sees it as a mistake for researchers to assert that there is a right or wrong approach to raising children or to evaluating the behavior of family members. As noted above, Greg, a fieldworker in the childhood study, placed a premium on respect for adults. He saw behaviors he disliked in the upper-middle-class families. Other fieldworkers, however (raised in upper-middle-class families), were upset by witnessing corporal punishment. Our reactions to findings in the field thus constituted another form of data.

Mandatory Reporting

Some researchers are clear that they do not plan to intervene in families. Complicating this situation, however, is the reality that dominant institutions have (historically specific) standards for how family members should act, and, in some instances, ethnographers can be "mandated reporters" which means that they have a legal obligation to report specific behaviors to state agencies. Mandating reporting was not enacted in the United States until 1963 (McTavish et al. 2017), and the precise obligations vary across states, but most require mandated reporters to contact child protective agencies, for example, with evidence of "serious physical neglect," "bodily harm," or "intentionally, knowingly, and recklessly…create a likelihood of sexual abuse" (Keep Kids Safe 2019, see also Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance 2020). Although there is not much research on the effectiveness of mandated reporting, one meta-analysis found that negative experiences were reported in 73 percent of the articles in the meta-analysis, including complaints "the child was removed from harm, but the foster care environment was worse than the family-of-origin environment" (McTavish et al. 2017).

While we did not encounter the issue of mandated reporting firsthand, it is part of a more general set of moral choices which ethnographers routinely face (Anspach and Mizrachi 2006; Bosk and De Vries 2004; Emerson 2001; and Heimer and Staffen 1998). Furthermore, researchers' decisions regarding how to respond to mandated reporting are also, realistically, part of more general decisions regarding how closely citizens comply with the law (e.g., speeding, reporting all forms of income on their taxes). So too, there will likely be variations in how closely researchers hue to the letter of the law on mandated reporting. One option is for researchers to gain a "Certificate of Confidentiality" from the National Institutes of Health (2020) before beginning the research (since it is not valid after the research has begun). Although there is ambiguity, many researchers believe that this certificate protects the researcher from being mandated to share information or report families (Paquette and Ross 2020). But, if researchers are going to engage in mandated reporting, we believe they must tell the family ahead of time and, ideally, as part of the consent process. This follows the best practice of other professionals (e.g., see Langford 2000). As much as possible, there should be transparency about this issue between researchers and research participants.

That said, given the complexity of family life and the nature of ethnographic research, we believe that it is naive to think that all ethical strains can be avoided. Indeed, ethical quagmires have been discussed at length in ethnographic research from classical studies (Whyte 1981) to more recent works (Duneier 2004; 2011; Duneier et al. 2014).

Intensive Family Observations Are Costly but Sociologically Rewarding

Family observations yielded rich data that deepened our analysis. Our observations illuminated micro-interactional strategies of daily life which are only rarely demonstrated in sociological studies of the family.

First, observations provided unexpected insights. Second, observations captured intimate and ephemeral moments of family life which are crucial to families yet so often missed in scholarly writing.

Some areas of family life—for example, equal parental participation in child-rearing or a gender equal division of housework—are fraught with norms of social desirability, and this issue of social desirability can particularly influence interviews. Sometimes, the claims parents made in interviews were not supported by the observations, often providing fieldworkers with unexpected insights. For example, in his interview, Robert Jansson explained to Rao that, since he became unemployed, he has been responsible for preparing the dinner each evening. Since she was deeply interested in this issue, Rao had extensive probes on this topic, but his interview did not suggest that his wife had any continuing involvement in the preparation of dinner. But when Rao observed the family, she noted how although Robert prepared the dinner his wife Laura remained involved by providing Robert with step-by-step instructions. The ownership, control, and invisible (Daniels 1987; DeVault 1991) work of planning meals remains hers. Rao moved between the living room and the adjoining dining room as she observed:

After returning from work, Laura proceeded upstairs to their bedroom to change out of her work clothes. Almost as an after-thought, Laura called back down from the stairs, “Is there any broccoli with dinner?” Robert called back from the kitchen saying “No.” Laura replied “Please make some. Just steam a bit of broccoli. And the chicken nuggets for the kids.” Robert rummaged in the kitchen, pulling out some broccoli florets from the fridge. Taking out a chopping board, he chopped the broccoli into bite-sized pieces before steaming.

The observation demonstrated that Laura helped vastly more than an interview with either of them revealed:

Laura soon came back to the kitchen, wearing sweatpants. She walked casually between the kitchen and the dining room, which were connected, as Robert set the table with lettuce, chips, the steamed broccoli and the dish of enchiladas. Laura checked on the nuggets and pulled them out of the oven, placing them on a cutting board on the counter-top. Robert asked her whether the nuggets had baked for long enough and Laura responded by saying, “Yes, they’re pre-cooked so you don’t have to cook them for that long.” Robert nodded. Laura chopped the nuggets up into smaller pieces so that Tessa and Taylor could eat them easily.

Robert did in fact prepare the dinner, but the observation reveals how he looked to Laura for the guidance on the details of food preparation, seven months into his unemployment. These details, accessible through observations, are not minor but crucial to Rao’s goal of understanding the household division of labor during unemployment. Interviews did not fully reveal them. As scholars have previously noted (Jerolmack and Khan 2014), narratives and beliefs may not perfectly accord with behaviors. This is particularly the case when it comes to issues of social desirability—such as the proper way to raise children. If feasible, family observations can shed light on these otherwise hard-to-capture interactions.

Fieldwork also captured moments of intimacy that provided a more textured understanding of the different facets of family life. In the unemployment study, Rao was observing the Mason family one evening. Rebecca and Chuck Mason had been married for five years and had an 18-month-old daughter, Ellie. Rebecca was unemployed but was searching for jobs as an audiovisual technician. This evening Rebecca had had a fight with her mother where her mother called her “immature” before the fieldworker arrived:

While venting to me, in their kitchen on the first floor, Rebecca turns to me and, smiling, says “just to let you know, I won’t be able to keep it together once Chuck gets home.” She had talked to Chuck briefly on the phone and texted him, telling him that she had talked with her mother.

That evening, her husband, Chuck, brought her a surprise:

Chuck came home a little after 6:30 p.m. He walks over, saying his usual energetic “Hi!” to Ellie and Rebecca (to Ellie, bending down, “I’m so happy to see you!”). As he walks toward Rebecca and gets closer to her, a few feet away from her he starts arching his back and saying “Ugh! My back hurts” a couple of times. Getting even closer to Rebecca he says “could you do something about my back?” Rebecca has a somewhat puzzled smile on her face. She reaches her arms out toward his back just as Chuck slowly turns so that the bouquet of red roses and purple filler flowers that he has been hiding behind there became visible. Rebecca gasps and smiles widely. They hug. Rebecca starts sobbing into the nape of his neck. Chuck rubs her back and consolingly says, “I know, I know.”

As Rebecca thanked her husband, Chuck said, “Well, I thought this should be a flower day.” As such, the fieldworker is privy to backstage activities (Goffman 1959). Family observations thus enable researchers to understand the microworkings of intimacy in family life. We see how parents and children, and spouses, experience intimacy through mundane activities and small moments of togetherness. Intimacy is foundational to the contemporary institution of marriage and family in the United States and the social processes therein. Intimacy among family members provides the foundation for these family bonds, enabling families to complete (even joyfully) the task of getting kids through the day or dealing with unemployment. Capturing intimacy, often left out of studies of family life, is an extremely important aspect of intensive family observations. Even these short bursts of visits illuminate tender moments among family members, imbuing these interactions with humanity. But it is often challenging to capture these micro-moments through interviews, where they may be entirely too taken for granted for participants to recall, and when recalled participants are unable to describe them vividly.

Conclusion

Ethnographic studies focusing on private spaces of family life are rare. Some of the challenges in ethnographic observation will surface in other settings. Yet, normative expectations regarding family members’ privacy at home create an additional complication for carrying out research. The family, however, is a crucial social institution, and the handful of ethnographies of the interior of the home have been disproportionately insightful and hence influential (Hochschild 1989; Lareau 2011; Stack 1974). This article seeks to develop more systematic methodological guidelines to aid future ethnographers of the family. The challenges to collecting observational data in homes and with families are extensive. Family ethnographers face distinctive challenges as they negotiate the unintentional intrusion, spatial positionality, powerlessness and deference, and moments of intimacy. Ethnographers also have unusual hurdles when they accompany families on visits to doctors, dentists, and other institutions.

Not all families will agree to be in such a study, of course, but our experiences suggest that it is possible to gain access to families to collect observation data in families and to observe intimate family moments. These observations are, in our view, vastly better than only relying on “self-reports” from interview data. Interviews are much richer if one can use them to explore things that one has observed and vice versa. Intensive observations can reveal insights about interactional processes that make up family life. These processes cannot be fully captured through other means such as survey methods, time-diary data, or even in-depth interviews. For us, the details from observations were not just rich in themselves but were integral to producing analytically nuanced concepts and arguments—which is the goal of much qualitative research.

Intensive family observations are also crucial for capturing moments of social connection—however fleeting they tend to be. An accurate portrayal of the key elements of family life cannot be achieved by examining discrete, isolated actions. The appropriate focus is on *interactional processes*, including the broader context in which these social transactions are typically embedded. Future research might observe other familial dynamics including how family members created the bonds of family obligations, ways in which family members undermine each other, variations in humor used in families, families’ use of ritual to create family solidarity, and the gendering of children’s daily lives. Intensive family observations, although relatively untapped as a methodological strategy, stand to make useful and important contributions to sociological research.

But, the dynamics of families are distinctly different from nonfamily settings, particularly in terms of the social obligations family members have toward one another. As ethnographers are thrust into these complex patterns of mutual obligation, they are likely to stumble. These mishaps are unfortunate, but it is foolish to believe that ethnography can be carried out without error (Fine 1993). Our goal here is to help future ethnographers reduce some of the trial and error in family ethnographic research with the goal of increasing the pool of such valuable studies for the future.

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Footnotes

1. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this helpful point.

2. In a vigorous debate on the relative utility of interviews compared to observational methods, Jerolmack and Khan (2014) argued that observations are key to understanding people's behaviors since their beliefs, typically obtained through interviews, do not always align with the behavior they claim, with responses from Cerulo (2014), DiMaggio (2014), and Vaisey (2014); see also Lamont and Swidler (2014).

3. Some dissertations have used observations, including, Steinbugler (2005), and Theophano (1982). Linda Burton directed a study involving over 40 fieldworkers. Some of the publications from this study have been published in sociology journals (Cherlin et al. 2004; Roy 2004; Matthews, Detweiler, and Burton 2006), but most of this research has been published in human development with a wide variety of coauthors.

4. For example, if a researcher seeks to understand family processes in families where wives outearn husbands, there typically would not be a physical "community" where all such families reside that the researcher could embed herself in. Many research questions about family processes may thus not speak to a "community" situated in a demarcated geographical space.

5. We use our respective names to describe specific examples and "we" when we discuss common challenges in family observation. Because some issues we discuss were more salient in one study than in the other, a thematic section in this article may contain an uneven number of examples from each study.

6. This sample did not yield sufficient numbers of white children below the poverty level nor middle-class Black families. Lareau then approached organizations serving poor families and, using acquaintances, including members of her church, did a snowball sample to bolster the numbers of Black families. Even so, since 10 of

the 18 Black middle-class families came from the school settings, the snowball approach played a limited role in the overall study as there was also a Midwestern site (see, Lareau 2011 for more detail). The total sample was 88 families.

7. For Rao, although the sites where she had recruited the families to interview and observe meant that couples could know each other, the families that she did eventually observe did not appear to know each other.

8. In three cases, for the two Black middle-class families and a white poor boy, Lareau recruited families for the intensive observations without doing prior interviews. In those instances, she wrote or called the family (based on a recommendation of another family or an educator) to describe the family observations and the interviews. She met the families, and they agreed to be in the study before the interviews took place. But, this approach was not ideal, and carrying out the interviews provided a smoother process to get to know the families before asking them to participate in the observations.

9. Lareau also had conducted 36 interviews in a Midwestern community, and those interviews provided valuable conceptual guidance in case selection for the family observations.

10. All four families were paid the honorarium, but two were not informed about it earlier because the grant money was being finalized.

11. Other institutional review boards may follow different guidelines that will shape how much specificity researchers must provide to participants.

12. One reviewer asked whether family members could have things “off the record,” but this was never requested by anyone in the family observations in either study.

13. This did not happen in either study. But in the childhood study, family members sometimes forgot we were coming and told us later that they had forgotten.

14. These benefits are now known as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program.

15. School observations, however, only capture 9 of the 12 students in the study since both Black middle-class children and the white boy in a poor family attended other schools. Lareau did not gather any information from the school on these three families.

16. Mundane interactions and practices—such as going to the doctor, going to the bathroom, participating in extracurricular activities, playing with certain toys—are often excessively socially policed when it comes to gender nonconforming children and adults. Daily practices that gender-conforming adults and children take for granted may become riskier for gender nonconforming individuals. For more on this, see Schilt and Westbrook (2015). For recent qualitative research on gender nonconforming children and the everyday risks they experience, see Meadows (2019) and Travers (2019). Note however, for example, that Meadows does not focus on the home as a site of observation.

17. In one case, the family wanted to go out for a coffee and dessert for an impromptu celebration while Rao was visiting. In order to stymie any awkwardness about payment, Rao decided to just order a glass of still water (free). This gave her something to sip on for the duration of the outing. She avoided complicating the payment situation: whether she would pay the entire bill, the couple would, or she would pay for her portion. The impact on lifestyle, including eating out, is an important part of unemployment experiences, and she wanted to be able to observe how the family handled this. Although both the wife and the husband urged her to order something she declined with “Oh I’ve been indulging so much in food, I need to be good now!” Lareau in the childhood study felt it was ideal for researchers to accept invitations from families for some food items when possible. It was rare for most of the families to go out, and, when they did, fieldworkers offered to pay but accepted the family’s offer (which was usually what happened). Indeed, in the childhood study, the payment was explicitly framed as partly to cover the expenses of having fieldworkers there eating dinner and so forth.

18. Rao was a young woman from a respected university in the area. This may have been a key reason that families were willing to participate in a study seeking to observe them during unemployment. As a middle-class, Indian woman, Rao aligned with the families she observed along their class status but not along dimensions of race and nationality. In the absence of a comparative case of a young male fieldworker in this study, it becomes challenging to discern how specifically her gender, as it intersects with her race, nationality, and class, may have impacted access. The couple in one of the families she observed said "We need to tell the babysitter what you're doing, because otherwise she might think that we're going to hire you and she'll lose her job!" It is not unusual to find young women given access to the private realm of the family, typically as caregivers for children (Bessen-Cassino 2018). Access for Rao may have been easier than for a male counterpart. Rao's race and nationality also became salient in specific moments during family observations. Please see Methodological Appendix in Rao, forthcoming (Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment).

19. Surprisingly, in a team-based approach, rapport appeared to be transferred. In the childhood study, in two instances due to unexpected scheduling problems, after one fieldworker had been there daily for two weeks, a new fieldworker showed up to do the observation (which, while not ideal, seemed better than canceling the visit). In both cases, the children had not been introduced to this particular fieldworker. Nevertheless, after only a few minutes, the children and adults would resume family interaction (including the children crawling over the fieldworker) in a manner suggesting comfort. Since it had taken the first fieldworker a while to get to this point of ease, this immediate friendliness with a brand new fieldworker was quite striking. The situation, not the person, appears to be what families need to get accustomed.

20. At the beginning of the study, Lareau hired on the basis of fieldworkers forging rapport, but, by the end of the project, she hired on field note quality. (She gave potential candidates an exercise to write field notes and paid them for their time.) In addition, it was essential to interview on family background. The experiences of fieldworkers shaped what they saw. "Insiders" with shared class background sometimes knew what to look for, but "outsiders" had fresh perspectives. Hence, a research team where students had varying class backgrounds was also helpful.

21. Lareau was distressed by the relatively low quality of field notes of some members of the team. If she were to do it again, she would hire people for a spring semester or summer; if the field notes were not excellent, it would be possible to make a transition. But, she hired research assistants to begin in the fall, and once the semester had begun, it was not possible to change the assistantships of the graduate students. Furthermore, the graduate students were working very hard on the project and eager to please her; Lareau's consistently critical feedback on their field notes was harming team relations. And Lareau had limited resources as well as a tight time frame; she could not wait another year to begin again with a new team. Fortunately, the use of audio recorders dramatically improved field note quality. But, the tape recorders (which were small, black recorders about three inches by four inches in size) were disruptive and far from ideal. If fieldworkers can write strong field notes without audio recorders, this is the ideal solution. Once other research assistants on the childhood study used recorders, however, Lareau did as well so that the data collection process would be consistent across team members.

22. Other ethnographers have noted that they make digital recordings by talking into recorders on their way home from fieldwork. Rao did not do this. Lareau did it rarely but found the quality of the field notes suffered when she dictated notes. Additionally, how to deal with field notes while the study is ongoing, and especially after, also has ethical considerations beyond logistical ones. This is an important issue, but delving into the legal considerations in writing field notes is outside the scope of discussion in this piece; see, among others, Khan (2019) and Katz (2019) for more on subpoenas, ethical challenges, and field notes.

23. There is an extensive literature about the role of the researcher in the field which is beyond the scope of this article. For a discussion of feminist methodology, see, among others, Davis and Craven (2016) and Stacey (1988). For obligations to people in the field, see, among others, Duneier (1999), Jerolmack and Murphy (2019), Duneier et al. (2014), and LaRossa et al. 1981.

24. Instrumental reasons—a fear of having their research ended—might also guide researchers' actions and shape their role in the field.

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