THE EMERGENCE AND FUNCTION OF FAMILY RITUALS IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY

by

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ABSTRACT

The Emergence and Function of Family Rituals in the American Family

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In 1950 Bossard and Boll published their pioneering work on family rituals entitled Ritual in Family Living. Since then, numerous researchers have examined family rituals using various research designs. This study was done in the tradition of Bossard and Boll by closely examining the personal written accounts of 493 college-age students from a western university. Comparisons were made between the current sample and the sample of Bossard and Boll. Numerous changes in family rituals were identified. Christmas was found to be the most discussed ritual, but Christmas Eve rituals were more often discussed than Christmas Day rituals. The importance of family rituals from the perspective of respondents was discussed as well as the meaning behind them.

(91 pages)
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to assess family ritual, with primary interest focusing on the types, purposes, and perpetuation of family ritual. Families are perhaps spending less time together today than at any other historical period. Children are spending large portions of their day in child care, schools or other activities depending on their age. More mothers are working part- or full-time and more fathers, because of their work or through divorce or separation, are only seeing their children on occasional visits. One function of family rituals is to provide stabilization, consistency, and continuity amidst change. Through studying family rituals, researchers can learn what is special about families and what family members enjoy about being with one another. Family rituals “serve as a window into a family’s underlying shared identity, providing special access to the behavioral and emotional tenor characterizing each family” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 401).

The basic research on family ritual began with Bossard and Boll in 1950 with the publication of their book Ritual in Family Living, which examined the rituals in 186 families based on published autobiographies and on reports written by college students regarding rituals in their families of origin. Several investigators have attempted to clarify family rituals since then, but the current study has examined rituals using a methodology similar to Bossard and Boll’s original work. Most work on family rituals has been done comparing healthy families to alcoholic or otherwise
troubled families including families with a schizophrenic member and divorced families (Fiese, 1993). Though these studies have offered insight into the importance of family ritual, they have missed a methodological analysis of family rituals themselves. Thus, much of the literature is very specialized or dated.

The objectives of this study are multifaceted. First, this study aids in bringing the literature up to date in terms of a larger sample and in clarifying family rituals themselves through the utilization of a methodology similar to that originally employed by Bossard and Boll (1950). Second, Bossard and Boll’s work was done with an East Coast sample in the 1940s. The current project involves a contemporary sample collected from 1978 to 1988 from the western United States, thus further expanding the literature base. Third, this study illuminates the family and tells the reader, in respondents own words, what rituals are and why they are important. Lastly, this study not only identifies family rituals, but it also deals with origins, functions, and processes by which rituals survive or become extinguished.

All studies need a theoretical framework. Several theories illuminate family rituals including structural-functional, social constructional, and mobilization theories (Cheal, 1988). Family rituals influence family life through “pairing meaning and affect with patterned interaction” (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993, p. 634). Because of the high level of meaning that allows for participant interpretation of family rituals, symbolic-interactional theory was considered to be the theory with the most utility for examining family rituals—specifically, where they come from, what is their function, and how they work.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since Bossard and Boll's (1950) work on family rituals, little has been done to study the origin, occurrence, meaning, and/or types of family rituals. Theorists have hypothesized on these matters, but little empirical work has been done to further the understanding of family rituals. Family rituals have been studied in the context of alcoholism (Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss, 1988; Fiese, 1992; Wolin, Bennett, & Noonan, 1979; Wolin, Bennett, Noonan, & Teitelbaum, 1980), marital satisfaction in the early stages of parenthood (Fiese et al., 1993), divorced and married couples (Berg-Cross, Daniels, & Carr, 1992), late-life divorce (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992), and schizophrenia (Madianos & Economou, 1994). Family rituals have also been discussed and applied to marriage and family counseling (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988; Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1977) and psychotherapy (van der Hart, 1983; van der Hart, Witzum, & de Voogt, 1989). This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature dealing with family ritual. It does so by discussing each of the following areas: (1) What is family ritual? (2) categories of family rituals, (3) functions of family rituals, (4) patterns of family ritual, and (5) theoretical frameworks. Lastly, the investigator summarizes what is useful about the current literature and what is lacking.
Family Ritual Defined

It has been argued that "ritual is an enormously complex notion" and that "there continues to be considerable discussion concerning the definition of ritual" (Hartman & Laird, 1983, p. 106). Others have also noted this point (Laird, 1984; Roberts, 1988; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Despite these challenges, several scholars have attempted to define ritual.

Bossard and Boll (1950) noted that ritual is a "pattern of social interaction" which has three "unvarying characteristics" (p. 16). First, rituals are prescribed — having a "correct" way to be done. Second, rituals carry a sense of rigidity. The longer a ritual is carried out the more rigid its prescription becomes. Lastly, there is a feeling of rightness about the ritual. As family members participate in rituals year after year, an impression begins to form that this is the way we do things.

Bossard and Boll's (1950) explanation of family rituals has been the foundation for many other scholars in the study of family ritual. Elements of their original definition are found throughout the family ritual literature. On close examination of various definitions, many contain the words "patterned" (Fiese et al., 1993; Fiese & Kline, 1993; Roy, 1990) and either the word "prescription" or the word "prescribed" (Fiese & Kline, 1993; Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978; Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988; van der Hart, 1983). These terms imply that an understanding of who should attend and participate in family rituals exists (Fiese & Kline, 1993).
One aspect mentioned by many writers in their efforts to define ritual that was not included in Bossard and Boll’s (1950) definition is the symbolic meaning that ritual communicates (Fiese & Kline, 1993; Laird, 1984; Paddock & Schwartz, 1986; Roberts, 1988; Roy, 1990; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Wolin and Bennett (1984), for example, refer to ritual as “a symbolic form of communication” (p. 401, italics added). Fiese and Kline (1993) have argued that rituals are patterned and meaningful social interactions in which the roles are prescribed. Similarly, Roy (1990) explained, “Family rituals contain a central element of patterned, repeated, symbolic communication that is ordered, evocative in style, charged with social meaning, and directly impacts on family functioning” (p. 59, italics added). Rituals convey a message to the participants — one that conveys worth, confidence, and identity while legitimizing social attitudes and views (Laird, 1984). It is this symbolic message and expression of affect which separates ritual from other family interaction (Fiese & Kline, 1993). If this symbolic meaning is lost or is missing, family rituals can become empty (van der Hart, 1983). Thus, meaning from a ritual stems from the participants themselves and cannot be forced upon them. It is possible that a particular family ritual can carry little or no meaning for some while the same ritual can be very meaningful to others. Such reasoning seems obvious, but it can be misunderstood that family ritual is equally meaningful or important to all participants. This is often not the case.
In sum, family rituals are patterned social interactions between family members which contain the following characteristics: (a) prescription, (b) rigidity, (c) a feeling of rightness, and (d) symbolic meaning in which participants interpret and determine the worth. With these characteristics in mind, family rituals can be defined as patterned family interactions which, after repetition, become prescribed and rigid, and carry symbolic meaning. Family rituals are thus potentially very meaningful or empty with actual meaning determined by the individual participants.

Categories of Family Rituals

In a further attempt to clarify family rituals, various researchers have sought to categorize them so that they are more likely to be understood. Family rituals follow a wide array of family interactions from the deeply religious rituals to the less sophisticated daily interactions such as dinner time and greeting patterns (Fiese, 1993). The most broad categorization is provided by Bossard and Boll (1950). They described two types of family rituals, a) traditional — those which are obtained from previous generations, and b) the spontaneous rite or those which arise out of routine family interactions “such as going to bed, getting up, eating meals and relaxing various ways” (Bossard & Boll, 1950, p. 137; Schvaneveldt & Lee, 1983).

Wolin and Bennett (1984) outlined three categories of family ritual. First, family celebrations are those rituals which stem from larger culture influences such
as national holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July) and also include rites of passage such as weddings or baptisms. Second, **family traditions** are events that are more family specific such as birthday activities, vacations, and other special family celebrations which often include specific foods. Finally, **family interactions** are the “most frequently enacted but least consciously planned by the participants” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 406). *Family interactions*, similar to spontaneous rites as classified by Bossard and Boll (1950), include such activities as bed and dinner time routines as well as greeting each other and saying goodbye. It is the family interaction rituals that pattern and organize daily life by defining and reinforcing individual and family roles and responsibilities (Roy, 1990; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

Roy (1990) further broadened the categorization of family ritual into four categories by dividing Wolin and Bennett’s (1984) *family celebrations* into two categories: (1) *seasonal celebrations* and (2) *rites of passage*. *Seasonal celebrations* are family rituals characteristic of the broader society and culture such as national holidays, while *rites of passage* refer to celebrations that mark the accomplishment or development of family members. Other researchers have used categories similar to Roy’s, but with different or similar names (Imber-Black, 1988; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992).

It is important to note that the three works cited above (viz., Bossard & Boll, 1950; Roy, 1990; Wolin & Bennett, 1984) should not be seen as contradicting
works, but as complementary works that build upon each other. Further it should be noted that the works by Wolin and Bennett (1984) and by Roy (1990) were not empirical studies, but theoretical treatments.

In an attempt to differentiate, quantify, and measure family rituals, Fiese and Kline (1993) designed the Family Rituals Questionnaire (see Appendix). They examined family rituals in seven settings, two of which were “patterned interactions” (dinnertime and weekends); three were “family traditions” (vacations, annual celebrations, special celebrations); and two were “family celebrations” (religious holidays and cultural traditions) (p. 291). After noting the setting of a ritual, observers noted varying degrees of eight dimensions of that ritual (occurrence, roles, routine, attendance, affect, symbolic significance, continuation, deliberance).

Functions of Family Rituals

Family rituals are vital to both family (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Portes, Howell, Brown, & Mas, 1992; Wolin, Bennett, & Jacobs, 1988) and marital relationships (Fiese et al., 1993). Fiese et al. (1993) found that “more meaningful family rituals [were] associated with greater marital satisfaction” (p. 639) in couples with newborns or preschool-age children. Rituals may also be vital to family success during stressful times (Wolin et al., 1988). Children of alcoholics, for example, who maintained their family rituals were less likely to become alcoholics themselves (Wolin et al., 1980).
Rituals aid parents in the "transmission of [their] culture to successive generations" (Bossard & Boll, 1950, p. 39), including behavior patterns, attitudes, family goals, and direction. Through family rituals, children also learn about age and sex roles, rules, etiquette, manners, joy, and the expression of feelings (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973). Rituals have an ability to educate (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) through communicating symbolically "a group's shared construction of reality" and legitimizing social attitudes, behaviors, and roles while minimizing differences and conflicts (Laird, 1984, p. 124).

Through their repetitiveness, family rituals help to define the family by clarifying boundaries and roles as if to say "this is the way our family is" (Madianos & Economou, 1994; Shipman, 1982; Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 401) and thus "create a powerful sense of we-ness among the participants" (Quinn, Newfield, & Protinsky, 1985, p. 111). As would be expected then, rituals have been linked to adolescent identity development (Fiese, 1992), family solidarity (Berg-Cross et al., 1992; Klapp, 1959), lower anxiety in adolescents (Fiese & Kline, 1993), and higher self-esteem in young children (Gruber & McNinch, 1993).

Patterns of Family Ritual: 1880-1946

In 1950, Bossard and Boll identified family rituals described in 100 published autobiographies whose childhoods occurred sometime between 1880 to 1917. Later they identified family rituals described by 86 university students whose childhoods took place between 1917 and 1946. Comparing respondent
descriptions from the two data sets, Bossard and Boll then noted themes, patterns, activities, and changes in family ritual from 1880 to 1946. They referred to these changes as trends because several patterns were emerging. Hereafter these trends will be referred to as patterns. Bossard and Boll discussed the following patterns: education, reading, bathing, the Sunday drive, home entertainment, walking the dog, present giving, the family meal, community-provided family rituals, and father-child ritual schedules. Each of these patterns is now briefly summarized.

Education

Bossard and Boll (1950) noted from the autobiographies that education from 1880 to 1946 made a general shift from home centered to the formal classroom. Education went from a nightly family activity to a monthly checking of the report card sent home to the parents. Instead of the classics being read, which parents were often familiar with, textbooks were the focus of study, which only further alienated the parents from the education process.

Reading

Closely associated with education was nightly family reading. Because books were harder to come by, family reading often involved the family sitting around the table to listen as individuals read aloud from the classics or the Bible. With increased availability of reading materials came age-appropriate reading and thus eliminated much reading aloud to family members, though it was still common to read to young children. As children matured, the books they once
enjoyed were no longer of interest. The most common reading ritual identified by college students after early childhood was the family gathering to silently read the paper. Thus reading evolved from a family "out loud" activity into an individual or family "silent" activity.

**Bathing and Dressing**

Before the advent of plumbing in the 1920s, the weekly family bath on Saturday evening or Sunday morning was a prominent ritual mentioned in autobiographies. "It was a whole family affair, often involving Father's bringing in the water to heat, and Mother's supervising the baths of the children from the oldest to the youngest in order, before the parents themselves went through the rite of purification" (Bossard & Boll, 1950, p. 93). Not only did it represent a physical cleansing, but a spiritual cleansing of one's sins in preparation for the following Sabbath Day. With indoor plumbing came higher social standards of cleanliness. No longer was the weekly bath sufficient and youth of "dating age" often reserved the bathroom in early evenings in preparation for their night out. Others were left to use the bathroom at various times of the day and week.

**The Sunday Drive**

Though still a pleasurable ritual to many families in the 1940s as it was in the 1880's, the Sunday drive changed in method and meaning. Earlier autobiographers mentioned the family drive as a symbol of family pride — a time in which family members, clothed in "Sunday best," rode in open horse-drawn carriages. "It was the family at its best, on show, up for comparison with the
families of their friends" (Bossard & Boll, 1950). By the fifties, families crammed into a closed car in which individuals were barely visible. Instead of the routine routes traveled weekly in open carriages, more closed-in automobiles allowed greater distances to be traveled, separating families from friends and neighbors. The Sunday Drive no longer was an interaction of neighbors and friends, but a time of planned isolation of the family from its larger community.

**Home Entertainment**

Early family entertainment included reading aloud, musical evenings, family plays, spelling bees, and other family-created games. However, as it became easier and easier to experience quality entertainment outside of the home, family entertainment became less and less common. Bossard and Boll (1950) noted that Sunday night radio programs were becoming popular family activities by 1948 along with the use of records for family concerts. They noted that home entertainment changed in at least three ways from the 1880s to 1948. “The material involved is broader in scope and the performance is professional rather than amateur; participation is passive; and there is seldom any competition involved” (p. 95). Thus family entertainment went from heavy family participation to a passive listening to the radio or to going out of the home to a movie.

**Walking the Dog**

With the increase of suburban living from 1880 to 1948 came smaller yard sizes. As a result, family pets were moved indoors and became a more intimate part of the family. Walking the dog became ritualized because dogs did not get
enough exercise living indoors. The family dog became more of a family member with both entry and exit privileges to the family home. In one sense, walking the dog was an opportunity to be public in the confines of the neighborhood.

The Family Meal

As families moved from farms to cities, breakfast and lunch were no longer family meals. Mornings became a time to hurry of to school or work, reducing the time allowed for breakfast. Likewise, children ate lunch at school, dad ate at work, and mom ate at home. As a result, dinner became a reunion evening meal in which the table was set and all the family was together again. Sunday breakfast gradually became a highlight of the week as well. Earlier respondents, with childhoods from 1880-1917, did not distinguish between family meals and non-family meals because the entire family usually ate together at all meals.

Family Gift Giving

As America became more industrialized, it became much easier to buy things and give children cash. Additionally, greater marketing techniques led to the increased number and formality of gift-giving, particularly on Christmas and birthdays. Gifts were seen as an attempt to tie important people together, such as siblings or friends. Gift giving, with its attached symbolic meaning, was not common until after the 1920s.

Community-Provided Family Rituals

With increased urban living came an increase in the number of community-
provided events such as movies, sporting events, fairs, and circuses. These events provided families with numerous opportunities to have a night "out on the town." Those individuals growing up in the late 1800s did not go into town as often nor for as wide of a variety of activities. By the 1940s, having a weekly night out became a new ritual which was "strikingly different from anything found in the records of an earlier period" (Bossard & Boll, 1950, p. 104).

Father-Child Ritual Schedules

From 1880 to 1948, fathers moved from sometimes being continuously at home to spending much of their time away from home at work. As a result, formalized father-child activities became more common. These activities usually became scheduled, prescribed and "mother [was] often rigidly excluded" (Bossard & Boll, 1950, p. 102). Bossard and Boll (1950) saw the formation of this ritual as an attempt for both father and child to ensure that time would be spent together amidst busy schedules.

Summary of Patterns

In sum, Bossard and Boll (1950) noted several important patterns and trends that occurred in America’s family rituals from 1880 to 1948. These trends stemmed from industrialization, commercialization, and the movement of the family from small towns to larger cities. In some respects, despite there being more people around, the family became more isolated and individualistic. Activities that were commonly done as a family (education, reading, weekly baths, home entertainment, and meals) were either being done away with, being done
individually, or being drastically changed in some other way. In other respects, industrialization and urbanization brought new traditions to America’s families — walking the dog, the Sunday radio program, the day or night on the town, and one-on-one time with Father. The impact of these changes on the family were not necessarily well understood. While various scholars have discussed changes in the family as being either negative or positive, the changes noted by Bossard and Boll are not inherently good or bad for the family. The investigator notes that changes occur continually within the American family and these changes should be noted.

Theoretical Frameworks

Throughout the family ritual literature, there is a theme of symbolic meaning that rituals carry (e.g., Bossard & Boll 1950; Fiese, 1992; Imber-Black, 1989; Klapp, 1959; Laird, 1984; Paddock & Schwartz, 1986; Roberts, 1988; Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988; Roy, 1990; van der Hart, 1983; Wolin et al., 1980). Symbolic interactional (SI) theory focuses on the interplay of symbols and interpersonal interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993) and claims that all human behavior is laced with meaning that allows for both interpretation and response. Accordingly, to interact with others is to communicate with them.

SI theory offers two unique contributions to the field of family study (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). First, SI theory states that the family is a social group. Secondly, SI theory notes that through interaction with others, individuals gain a self-concept and a self-identity. Notably, family rituals have been linked to
a higher sense of identity in adolescence (Fiese & Kline, 1993). Further support
for the SI perspective of family rituals is found in the following statement, "Family
rituals appear to exert influence on family life by pairing meaning and affect with
patterned interaction" (Fiese et al., 1993, p. 634).

Summary of Research

From the above review of literature, the reader has learned that family
rituals are important. Rituals provide order and support within a family as well as
communicate inclusiveness to individual members. Much has been written about
what family rituals are, but little empirical work has been done to identify the
workings, characteristics, creation, continuance, and/or discontinuance of family
rituals. Similarly, the literature is often filled with a rosy view of family rituals. SI
theory states that the meaning of family rituals is determined by individual
participants. However, little work has been done to clarify what makes a ritual
enjoyable to some and unenjoyable for others.

Functions of family rituals have largely been studied in the context of
various dependent variables. For example, family rituals have been associated
with adolescent identity and family solidarity (Klapp, 1959). Klapp's (1959) study,
and the others mentioned above, have shown the importance of family rituals.
However, more work is needed to understand how individuals view the function of
their own family rituals.

Since Bossard and Boll's (1950) efforts to identify patterns in family ritual,
little work has been done to further identify current patterns. Family rituals are
dynamic and open to change. With the increased influence of urbanization, industrialization, and media influences, family rituals have no doubt changed over the last 50 years, but few scholars have sought to identify, describe, and clarify these changes. When these changes are identified, their impact can be more fully understood.

In summary, the literature base on family rituals is fragmented and somewhat dated. There are not a large number of studies dealing with family rituals and more work is needed. This study adds to the current literature base by examining what has happened to family rituals during the late 1960s to the early 80s.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Design: The Tradition of Bossard and Boll (1950)

In 1950 Bossard and Boll examined 100 autobiographies that were chosen at random from a selection of writers who included the period of their childhood. Of the 100 autobiographies read, 73 (52 men, 21 women) individuals described actual details of one or more family rituals. The publication of these histories extended from 1856 to 1946. These data were then compared with a later study involving a sample of 86 (52 men, 34 women) university students from advanced English classes at a large eastern university. These students were briefed on the meaning of the term ritual and then instructed to write accounts of the family rituals in their own families. The rituals described by these students primarily occurred during the 1930s.

The current project was an effort to further explore family rituals in the tradition of Bossard and Boll (1950) in an effort to generate new insight into family rituals as well as describe them in greater detail. Thus, the design of this study is both exploratory and descriptive. It is exploratory because many facts about family rituals are not known, and it is not intended to be generalized to a greater population (Miller, 1986). It is descriptive in that it refines and elaborates on the current understanding of family rituals by describing what rituals are, how they become rituals, and how they work. Additionally, this is a cross-sectional study in
which respondents provided data from a retrospective point of view. Content analytical methods were used to assess the papers and then code the data.

Sample

The sample consisted of 493 respondents, 421 females (85%) and 72 males (15%). Gender information was gathered from student names on papers and class records. All of the respondents were enrolled in an introductory marriage and family class of predominately freshmen and sophomore students at a western university with an enrollment of about 16,000 students. Consequently, the sample is quite homogeneous in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status, and religion. Based on the typical enrollment of the particular class and the enrollment characteristics of the university, most of the students were between the ages of 18 and 22, white, middle class Mormons from the states of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, California, and Arizona. Likewise, 80-90% of these students were single. All of the respondents had the same professor and received the same instructions regarding the class assignment. The homogeneity of this sample inhibits certain types of analyses such as race or religious comparisons; however, it is believed by the primary investigator that this homogeneity aids in focusing primarily on family rituals rather than on the differences that other variables may cause. The homogeneous nature of the sample helps to reduce variance, but obviously places limits on trying to generalize to broader populations. Since the major goal of this study was to assess family rituals in the Mountain Region of America and to make
observations in regard to earlier work by Bossard and Boll (1950), this more homogeneous sample worked well in this study.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from students in undergraduate marriage and family classes at Utah State University from 1977 to 1987. As a class requirement, a paper on family rituals was assigned, collected, and graded. Because it was a class assignment, detailed background information on each respondent was not obtained. Instructions invited students to write on various aspects of family ritual. Students were given orientation as to the project and brief examples of what ritual might be, but not a full lecture. Instructions across the classes over time were the same by the same professor. Students were required to write in detail about family rituals in their family-of-origin in terms of (a) the types of rituals that occurred in their families, (b) the importance and meaning of those rituals, and (c) the origin of those rituals. These papers tended to be three to four typed pages. All papers were initially read and evaluated for grading purposes for each class. At the time of grading, major rituals and factors related to these rituals were highlighted.

Since there was not a “set” protocol for data collection, it is not surprising that dispersion of content of the papers was extensive. The data are rich and meaningful from a “real life” perspective, but more fragmented from a systematic methodological point of view.
Measurement

Once permission was granted to retain the papers for research purposes, the major professor and two graduate students (the coders) reread all papers in order to make a useful code book. A code book was developed so that coders could capture the following information: gender (identified by name or, if needed, class records), region (identified by reading through the papers), which rituals were discussed in detail, and what were the purposes of the ritual as described by each respondent. This was done for quantifying purposes. Standard elements of content analysis were used (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1992), and reliability ratings of those working on the content procedures exceeded 90%. This was obtained by coders reading through the same papers over time and coding the papers on code sheets. Coders were instructed to look for specific items of rituals in the papers. When a certain ritual was described, a “1” was entered into the data column for that specific datum. For example, if a paper contained a description of Christmas Day rituals, then the coder entered a “1” in the Christmas ritual. Likewise additional details such as opening one gift on Christmas Eve had their own data column. If no description of a ritual was mentioned in the paper, the data column for that ritual was left blank. Once this was done, the results of the coders were compared for content comparisons.

The code-book covered 194 data entry columns. Other numbers, besides “1,” were used for variables with more than one value. If a ritual was not written
about, it was left blank. It should be noted that many of the columns varied in terms of the amount of data from respondent to respondent, depending on which rituals the respondent chose to write about. For example, one writing about Christmas may not have made any mention of Memorial Day. Such a respondent would have a "missing" data in the column on Memorial Day. The data are not "missing" in the traditional sense of respondents failing to respond, rather, the data are only absent in the sense that the subjects did not report or write about a certain type of ritual. Likewise, it does not mean that this respondent's family did not have Memorial Day rituals. Rather, the respondent may have chosen not to write about that specific ritual. It is assumed that most respondents wrote about the most meaningful and memorable family rituals to them. Consequently, many other rituals may exist within each family, but obviously not all rituals were or could be described in these papers.

After careful review, data were entered into SPSS and descriptive statistics were employed to describe the sample. Several simple cross-tabulations were also completed.

Following efforts to quantify the data as described above, many of papers were separated according to content. For example, papers with any description of the Fourth of July were separated out and reread by the primary investigator for qualitative purposes. During this process, patterns, similar descriptions, and meanings were noted from paper to paper as respondents described the particular ritual under investigation. All major rituals discussed in this work were separated out and numerous papers were read. This aspect of the research proved to be
most time consuming, but also provided the most insight regarding specific ritual patterns, interaction patterns, and family rituals as a whole.

Validity and Reliability

In terms of validity, the assumption is made that students were truthful in telling the story of ritual in their respective families. The papers were required in the classes and a grade was given. It is assumed that motivation was high to do a good job and that students took the assignment seriously. Thus, the instrument adequately reflects and measures the subject under consideration. Secondly, these data are similar in many ways to the data collected by Bossard and Boll (1950). Thus, the inference is made that similar elements of family rituals are being measured and described and that the instrument adequately illuminates the major dimensions (type, frequency, origin of family rituals) of this study.

Several aspects of the methodology lent to reliability. First, the same instructions were given for the assignment to each student. Likewise, they were given by the same professor over time without prior lecture on the subject so as to reduce the degree of professor influence on the respondents' papers. Second, over time comparisons of the various sets of papers from several classes showed similar response patterns and data quality. Third, coder reliability was established, by having coders code the same papers and comparing coder data sheets for each of the coders. Coder reliability was found to be above 90% - meaning that over 90% of the data recorded on data sheets was identical to the data recorded by
other corders regarding the same paper. Inter-rater reliability was done before making one complete data sheet. Lastly, the large sample size helped to overcome the extensive dispersion that comes with this type of data collection through providing descriptions and profiles of a wide range of family rituals.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Introduction

The goal of this research was to study the emergence and function of family rituals. Rituals are a central part of the family, and a better understanding of ritual is of importance to both the research and education communities. By learning what makes families functional, scholars will increase their ability to educate and strengthen families by building on the critical components families have.

The findings in this chapter are presented in the following sections. First, a comparison in regards to ritual are presented based on region and gender. Then the analyses deal with the expressive portion of the data. In this part, the investigator presents findings in terms of categories of ritual and then provides case illustrations of the emergence, functions, and extinguishing of family ritual. Finally, historical and regional comparisons are made from the Bossard and Boll (1950) study, which reflects family ritual from about 1880-1948 in the state of Pennsylvania, with contemporary data from the Western Mountain Region.

Regional and Gender Comparisons

For the sake of this work, any ritual activity described by respondents in the assigned paper was classified as a ritual and examined as such. The number of rituals was examined to determine if different parts of the country report varying
amounts of ritualization. The South region reported a slightly higher number of rituals per person (mean = 12.88) than the West (mean = 11.95). Similarly, females (mean = 12.16) reported more rituals than males (mean = 11.49). It is important to realize that these rituals are not necessarily separate and distinct rituals. For example, a respondent who writes about relatives coming for Christmas dinner may actually be describing three rituals - Christmas, Christmas dinner, and relatives gathering. Thus, though females and Southerners wrote about more rituals it may be because they wrote more details about the rituals they chose to write on. In general, respondents described between two and five distinct rituals (Christmas, Thanksgiving, and birthdays for example), but within their descriptions of these rituals were found many more rituals.

Seasonal Celebration Rituals

Next, Roy's (1990) categorization of family rituals discussed in chapter 2, was used to classify rituals described by respondents. It was found that two categories — seasonal celebrations and family traditions — were the most commonly described rituals. Seasonal celebration rituals as defined by Roy were considered to be those rituals which stem from larger cultural influences such as those centered around national holidays. How a family celebrates various holidays is influenced both by the broader society in which we live and the family culture itself. Family traditions are addressed later.
Christmas

The most commonly mentioned seasonal celebration, as expected, was Christmas. Christmas was mentioned by 72% of respondents followed by Thanksgiving (19%), Easter (12%), New Year's Day (5%), and the Fourth of July (5%). See Table 1.

Females (74%) wrote more often about Christmas than males (65%). Surprisingly, Christmas Eve rituals (57%) were mentioned more often than Christmas Day rituals (42%). However, both were commonly mentioned together (27%). The day that children characteristically look forward to with great

Table 1
Seasonal Celebration Ritual Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas Day</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanksgiving</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Year's Day</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fourth of July</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorial Day</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>less than 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Patrick's Day</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>less than 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
anticipation is Christmas Day, which is largely because of various rituals associated with opening gifts. However, as individuals become older, it is Christmas Eve rituals which seem to be remembered more as do other events leading up to Christmas Day, such as selecting a Christmas tree, anticipating gifts, and decorating the house.

Of those who described Christmas Eve rituals, 69% mentioned food that is often the same each year. Though food was usually described as the “traditional” Christmas Eve meal with either turkey or ham, other Christmas Eve meals are special to individual families. Of those who wrote about Christmas Eve, 61% mentioned the opening of one present though less detail was spent in describing this activity. Christmas Eve rituals were also characterized by visiting with extended family and family activities such as games, dinner, and acting out the Christmas story.

Those who described Christmas Day rituals wrote about the following activities: opening presents (88%), getting up in the morning (76%), food (72%), and visiting with relatives (57%). Getting up included descriptions of who gets up first on Christmas morning and at what time, when is it “legal” for children to inspect gifts, and who usually wakes up the parents. Opening presents varied from the strict order of one person opening a gift as others watched in anticipation to complete chaos as all children tear open gifts simultaneously. From here on out, vignettes from the data are used to illustrate various rituals. A typical Christmas
Day involving each of the most often mentioned activities is detailed here by a male respondent:

Christmas day begins early at our house, somewhere around 5 or 6:00 A.M. We all line up in the hall leading to the front room with the youngest child first and my Dad last. The door is opened and we all rush into a room filled with presents. The first thing that we do is go over to the fireplace and see what Santa left for us in our stockings. After that my Dad passes out the presents and we begin to open them. After all of the presents have been opened and the mess is cleaned up, we have a big breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, and juice. The rest of the day is spent visiting friends and relatives.

The above respondent concludes that this Christmas routine is “the same every year.” A female recalled “tip-toeing in to see what our Christmas gifts from Santa were. Then after briefly looking at them, we’d tip-toe back to bed.” The next day while waiting for her mother to return from work, she and her brother would beg their father to open “just one gift, please!!” It is believed that because of the repetition, numerous details are remembered and easily described by respondents.

When discussing Christmas rituals, it is easy to get caught up in the “glitter” of the holiday. Numerous respondents remembered the smallest details as if Christmas were just yesterday. However, these details only seemed to serve as a context for the much more meaningful interpersonal interactions that were going on. Adults sitting around talking or playing games, children playing with each other, visiting with relatives, and adults “watching the kids and how excited they would get as they ripped open their presents” were what seemed to bring the greatest joys and create the most memories. One female respondent emphasized the importance of these family interactions at Christmas time in the following way:
Perhaps this tradition [Christmas Eve] doesn’t seem like a very special one, but I can assure you that it is because we are able to collect the [entire] family of 80 people under one roof at the same time. . . I feel . . . this tradition should be continued because it helps to unite and reacquaint our family with each other.

In general, gifts, lights, food, and entertainment are important, but it’s the family and family activities which make Christmas meaningful to most respondents.

**Thanksgiving**

Though filled with much less glitter and energy than Christmas, Thanksgiving is an anticipated event for many families. One male wrote:

The excitement would start the day before when Mom cooked everything except the turkey. She would always get up sometime in the middle of the night and put the turkey in the oven so we could eat sometime around one o’clock that afternoon.

Thanksgiving was a time of food (84%) and because of the size of the meal, many respondents described parents, usually the mother, beginning preparation the night before. Thanksgiving morning usually found the women further preparing food while men and children participated in activities such as watching football, playing games, visiting with relatives, and related activities. Thanksgiving dinner is commonly held at a specified time, usually in the early afternoon. Interestingly, if prayer was mentioned, it was usually described as an aberration from normal routine. For example, one male wrote, “This was the only time of the whole year that any mention was ever made of any kind of a prayer, much less a family prayer.” Additionally, relatives (76%) and grandparents (60%) were frequently mentioned,
and dinner was commonly held at the same place every year (57%). Post-dinner activities typically involved some form of being lazy.

The following vignette by a female respondent portrays the feeling of Thanksgiving:

At Thanksgiving, the turkey was to be prepared and “stuffed” the night before. We would put the makings for the big meal in the kitchen on the counter. The preparation of the meal would start at close to 10 PM when the little kids were in bed. Dad had not come home from work. The girls could now visit with Mom. We loved this time with Mom. . . It was a time alone with Mom that is now dear to our heart. . . . The afternoon after the feast was over was a lazy one. We would rest then eat, rest then eat, then rest again. The left-overs were put out on the dining room table for us to eat and eat some more again. We just expected to have a lazy afternoon. The TV was not turned on nor the radio. Each person could be on his own or we would play games together. It was time to worry about nothing. This afternoon was expected and cherished by all. I hated to think that in two hours the TV would come on and dishes had to be washed.

Thanksgiving was a day that there would be no worries for the long afternoon. Once again, as seen above with descriptions of Christmas, it is the interactions with family that make these rituals meaningful. The size of the meal is remembered and cherished, but this only serves as a context for more meaningful family interactions. Holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving are days set aside to be spent with family. The food, activities, and gifts are not seen as the most important events. Meaning is found in the interpersonal interactions that take place. As the above female looks back, “it was a time alone with Mom that is now dear to our hearts.”
Easter

Easter is a holiday that is commonly remembered for dying eggs, hunting for candy-filled eggs, and filling baskets. These activities are usually held Easter morning or early afternoon and are followed by a meal or church services. Visiting with relatives was not as frequently noted when describing this ritual. Though some mentioned relatives, it does not appear, for the most part, that Easter is a ritual attended by lots of extended family. Perhaps this is because travel is limited to the traditionally “more important” holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. A typical account of an Easter family ritual is provided by a female as follows:

We boil and color eggs and my parents put candy in plastic colored eggs. Then at night, they hide all the eggs. When Easter morning comes around, the youngest goes first and all of us children hunt for eggs. There is usually a note from the Easter Bunny saying how many eggs he left so that we could find all of them and not end up finding one in the middle of the summer. We also all get an Easter present. This could range from a game to clothing to jewelry. When all of the eggs have been found and we have all seen each other’s presents, we all go to church. After we return, my mother cooks a light brunch and then later we have a much larger dinner with my grandmother.

Hunting for Easter eggs and candy-filled baskets was not reserved for the young only. Another female respondent, for example, wrote, “Each year, even though our youngest family member is 14 years old, my parents hide candy and eggs throughout the yard and house so that we can search for and find them.” Thus, the activities of Easter remain in many families even when the children are no longer “children.”
An interesting variation to the typical Easter Egg hunt was given by a female respondent as follows:

Easter has always been a fun time of year in our family. We always had a big Easter egg hunt either in the park or in our yard. My dad was always in charge of hiding all the eggs. Each one of us kids would have a little basket and the youngest ones would get a head start so that they would have a fair chance at finding the eggs. This was such a fun time, but there was something special my dad did. When he hid the eggs, he would put a price on each egg. The prices would range from 20¢ to $1.00 according to how hard it was to find the egg would determine the price it was worth. Every once in a while he would write, “you owe me 25¢” on an egg. Somehow no one ever found that egg. After all the eggs had been discovered, all the kids took their eggs over to dad to “cash ’em in for the bucks.” I remember the year I was five, I found the egg that had the $1.00 price on it. I was so excited because my big brothers would usually find it. But right after I found the “you owe me 25¢.” I was so happy about my big one dollar find, that I didn’t put my egg back, and I could afford to give dear old dad 25¢ since I was going to be so rich.

Further, descriptions of Easter activities often outlined events and activities, but usually did not go into depth about meaning of these events or meaningful interactions during these events. This is not to say that meaningful interactions did not occur. However, for some reason Easter almost seemed more routine than meaningful. One female respondent, for example, wrote, “I don’t even know if my brothers still celebrate Easter because I haven’t paid attention lately. Oddly enough, this ritual used to mean a great deal to me.” As this particular individual got older, she became less interested with this particular ritual. It lost meaning perhaps because all meaning was tied to the egg hunt and not other things such as meaningful interactions or religious beliefs.
New Year’s Day

New Year’s Day traditions are perhaps the most varied seasonal celebration ritual described by respondents. Though football game viewing, food, and a family party were often mentioned, activities varied. Unlike Christmas and Thanksgiving, New Year’s Day activities are less culturally defined. The following description of New Year’s Day was written by a male respondent:

We get Mom’s whole side of the family together to celebrate the coming year. It starts out by the women starting early in the morning cooking a big dinner. Each family brings some different types of food. There are about 10 families in all so the wives are cooking for about 60 people. When most everything is cooked, we meet at the church and play basketball, while the women are finishing up in the food department. When it gets time to eat the men pull out the long tables and everything gets set up. Someone asks the blessing on the food and then everyone digs in. We always stuff ourselves so we don’t feel like eating for a week. There is a table filled with cakes, all kinds of meat, jell-o salads and just about everything you can imagine. After the food is downed the women clean things up and we set the volleyball nets up and everyone gets in and plays a good game of ball. The one’s who aren’t playing go over and have a game of donkey. It’s a card game that can really get out of hand. Bruised hands, broken fingers and broken tables are the usual result. Then after everyone has had their fill of playing games they pick up and go home.

For this family, New Year’s Day was a large extended family event along with games, family, and food. Though these activities varied a lot between respondents, these three things were quite common. Surprisingly, only a couple of respondents described New Year’s resolutions on this day. One female respondent, for example, described it as a day the family wrote New Year’s resolutions and sealed them in an envelope to be read the next New Year’s Day.
Fourth of July

The biggest event is on the night of July 4th watching the fireworks go off all around the beach and lighting our own fireworks. It's a contest to see whose fireworks have the prettiest colors and last the longest. Of course we have a fire going in the bar-b-que pit and have hot dogs and marshmallows for our dinner on this night. When it is time to leave Bear Lake the pleading to stay another day starts but the parents always win and take the burnt bodies home.

For many in this sample, Fourth of July is a time for family, food, and planned activities. Though picnics, bar-b-ques, parades, games, and fireworks were commonly described, Fourth of July also includes many special family activities. One family has a predetermined theme and all family members dress up for this ritual. Another family goes hiking or horseback riding and after fireworks, another family roasts marshmallows over a camp fire. All of these activities provide an opportunity for families to spend time together and make memories. One female respondent wrote:

After dinner everyone tends to break up into their respective age groups. All the dads begin talking, usually about business. The moms start cleaning up dinner a bit, and me and my friends start to do a bit of serious swimming and water fighting.

Thus, this day provides a time for relatives and siblings to enjoy each other’s company through rewarding activities. The following account by a female respondent shows the fun that one family found with friends and relatives on the Fourth of July:

The morning of the 4th we prepare a big lunch for the afternoon. Sometimes we eat our lunch inside the cabin and sometimes we eat it outside on the picnic table, it all depends on what everyone wants to do. After we get through eating, we clean up the mess then we go either on a hike, or on a
horseback ride. Again it depends on what everyone wants to do. Later that evening we get prepared for the excitement of the celebrations of fireworks. Each one of us has our own little pile of fireworks that we set off. After we set off our fireworks, we go inside the cabin and play games until all hours of the night. The next day, we all sleep in and then we clean up the cabin and head for home.

Other families also had planned activities with relatives such as bar-b-ques or picnics at a park or other special location, the watching of fireworks and games such as basketball, softball, or football. It was these family activities that made the day rewarding for people and not necessarily the excitement of fireworks. In this way, Fourth of July is similar to Christmas and other seasonal celebrations. Though society provides a reason to celebrate and have a holiday, it is the family interactions themselves that make the day rewarding and meaningful. For example, even during the lighting of fireworks, one female remembered the little comments and jokes her father would make while lighting fireworks. She wrote, "Dad is then in charge of the entire firework show, with his running commentary on the greater aspects of fireworks. Everyone usually ends up laughing more at him than watching the show!!" Thus, it was not that she was merely watching fireworks; it was that she was watching her father light the fireworks and create memories in the process.

Summary of Seasonal Celebrations

It is obvious to the reader that families celebrate holidays. It is also clear that we know what typically happens in many homes on various holidays. It is to be expected and known that many families buy Christmas trees for Christmas, watch fire-works on the Fourth of July, and eat a big meal on Thanksgiving day. However,
these events alone do not make the holidays themselves memorable. Within each of these rituals are the family unique events that make the ritual memorable to them. The rituals provide a structure so that meaningful interaction can exist. Once families are together in the context of a seasonal celebration, such as Christmas Day, the real meaning of rituals can be interpreted and even felt by the participants.

Family Traditions

*Family traditions*, as described by Roy (1990), consist of those rituals that are continued because of influences within the family. National holidays or other outside influences (such as the media) do not directly lead to their formation or continuation. Family traditions are much more difficult to quantify because of the numerous special family rituals that exist from one family to the next. Birthdays (27%) were the most commonly mentioned family tradition followed by family vacations (20%), Sunday dinner (13%), and family reunions (6%). Other traditions included such things as fathers cooking a meal, family prayer, meal time, and special TV programs. Family traditions give each family its defined status and separate one family from another. Though birthday celebrations are becoming more commercialized with the sale of cards and cakes, their continuation is seen as primarily family influenced because families determine whether or not birthdays will be marked as a ritual and how the ritual will be carried out. See Table 2 for a list of family traditions as rituals.
Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Family Traditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birthday celebrations</td>
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<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family vacations</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday dinners</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family reunions</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad's breakfast/other meal</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>less than 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deer hunt</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>less than 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Birthdays

Birthday celebrations are perpetuated by individual families, but have larger cultural expectations as well. For those describing birthday celebrations, the most commonly described activities included a special meal (78%), which is usually followed by either cake and/or ice cream (64%) and present giving (53%). Singing “Happy Birthday” and going to a restaurant of the birthday person’s choice were also commonly mentioned. Through these activities, it is hoped that “the birthday person is made to feel special.” The following vignette by a female respondent portrays the typical birthday celebration:

A birthday in our family was a special day for the birthday person. It was “their” birthday. There was an extra feeling of love felt for the brother, sister or parent. You wanted to show your love extra today for the birthday person. Today was time to do something “good” for them. This was an unspoken law. You just wanted to make their day extra special for them. . . . The day went fast, then in the evening, after supper, the ice-cream, cake and party would come. It was an unspoken must. “There must be a party,” we would
say. We also had a homemade cake. It did not have the personal touch we wanted if it was store bought. The candles were blown out after the traditional Happy Birthday song. While we ate, the gifts were opened. The gifts were the kind you put personal thought into. The gift had to be the right one with a lot of forethought in its choosing. Love was put into each gift chosen for the birthday person. It made you feel happy and really good to feel the love the family shared just for you that day.

From the above vignette and others similar to it, there is a sense of a “feeling" that is created by families who make someone's birthday a special day. Some families have come up with creative ways to make the day special for the person honored. One family fills the birthday person’s room with balloons and toilet paper while the person is asleep the night before the birthday. Another made poster-size signs in which all of the family members wrote notes to the birthday person. Most of the notes were humorous, but some were also serious in tone. These signs were then hung on a wall with balloons where all entering the house could see and know it was someone’s birthday.

Several other respondents noted how the birthday persons were able to either choose to go out for dinner or choose to have a favorite meal cooked for them. An example of this was explained by a male respondent:

Every birthday is special at our house. We always try to bake the celebrity a cake of his or her choice. Also, we give the celebrity the choice of either going out to eat at one of our special favorite restaurants or having Mama cook a dinner with his or her favorite dish. And of course there are always presents to be opened and cards to be read. We always try to give presents that are meaningful and special. When we go out to a restaurant, we give him or her the presents after the meal.

It is through these means and many other unique methods that families create a feeling of worth for the birthday person. As one female respondent wrote,
"[My grandmother] wanted to do something to make that one day stand out apart from all the others. She wanted the 'birthday girl or boy' to feel important." Such an effort to make birthdays a special day, one that stands out for that person from the rest of the year, is what makes birthday celebrations meaningful family rituals that "[have] taken on a sense of rightness and belonging" according to one respondent.

Family Vacations and Reunions

Though vacations and reunions vary greatly from family to family, there are some common themes in the accounts given. Family vacations and reunions often happen at the same time of the year, usually during the summer and often have a prescribed location and planned activities which are often very meaningful to family members. An important part of the descriptions includes comments about anticipation and planning. Often this preparation adds to the excitement and enjoyment of the event.

A female described the following family reunion/vacation activities including planning, anticipating, and preparation:

When my sisters and I were small, my mother would always take us to visit our grandparents for the summer. We would look forward to this summer visit all through the winter. We went by car once or twice, but usually went by train. The ride down was as much fun as seeing our grandparents. I suppose I feel this way because of all the preparation that went into this day. Mama would make reservations at Christmas time and one of our gifts under the tree was always a new summer dress for the train ride. The day we left for grandma's and grandpa's was always an exciting day.

Another female respondent described in detail the activities that would go on each year at their family reunion:
One of the most lasting traditions is our family reunion. They have been going on since my Grandmother was a child. They are generally held in Nephi, Utah. There’s always a special program that goes along with our picnic lunches. We always reserve a large picnic area in the local park. When grandmother was [younger] everyone looked forward to having her read, “At the Ball-game.” This last year for a special treat, I gave the same reading. It truly pleased her and the older relatives. This may turn out to be a continued tradition. Our family looks forward to spending a day in Nephi each summer because it is about the only time many of the relatives ever see each other. It has also been a time for the family to organize its genealogical research.

From the above account we see some general characteristics of family reunions and vacations. They often happen at the same time of the year and are often held at a certain location and involve similar activities year after year.

Respondents noted being able to see relatives they normally do not get to see. For example, one male respondent noted, “as is usually the case, it is a pleasing sight to see all 50 members of the family camping together at the same time.” Having everyone together is a central theme of family reunions and family vacations.

Another female respondent noted:

We enjoy traveling together because it seems to bring us closer as a family, sharing experiences in historical places, such as Charleston and acting like small children while at Disney World in Florida. It also enables us to spend time together without pressures of school, my mother’s teaching and my father’s job.

These are times to be together and as such they are looked on with fondness for the unity they build and the memories they help to create.

Sunday Dinner

Sunday dinner (for simplicity purposes, those respondents who described a
special meal on Saturday were also included in this category), for most respondents describing this ritual, evolved into a ritual and became a special occasion through one of two ways; one, the family may plan to eat together since hectic schedules during the week make this difficult, or two, Sunday dinner becomes a reunion meal for families with a sibling that returns home for a weekly meal with his or her spouse. Either way, what makes Sunday dinner or Sunday meal (some families have a special breakfast or lunch) a ritual is that it is different from other meals throughout the week. Sunday dinner is usually different in three ways. One, usually the entire family is together for the Sunday meal. Two, the Sunday meal is a more extravagant meal than any other during the week. Lastly, Sunday meals are special to some families because this is the meal where Dad is the cook. A description of the first two factors is clearly outlined by a male respondent as he explained Sunday dinner:

The meal is more elaborate than our regular meals for it is always a seven course dinner. . . . At this meal every member of the family is expected to be in attendance. There are a few exceptions but not many. It seems so hard for all of the family to get together for a meal during the week that my father feels that it is important for us to all be together for this meal.

Notice, the family is together and the food is described as “elaborate.” This meal is usually the same each week or something very similar to it. For example, a female respondent wrote, “Sunday’s noon meal was a feast. We came home [from church] to the smell of fried chicken or pot roast cooking in Mom’s kitchen.” On top of being a feast, Sunday dinner “provides at least one time for my family to be together.” By providing an opportunity for all of the family to be together, families
have an opportunity to "sit around and either talk, laugh, or fight, for about an hour... and can qualify as a time for family love, family feuds, relaxing, or for entertainment" according to one male. Because all of the family is expected to attend the Sunday meal, it usually occurs at the same time each week for clarity and for scheduling purposes whether it be Sunday breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

As mentioned earlier, for some families, the Sunday meal is special because Dad is the cook. Those describing their father as cooking a special meal almost entirely described them as cooking breakfast of the same foods each week. Several respondents noted that Dad started cooking once a week to give Mom a break. A female respondent noted her father cooking breakfast each week with his special waffles along with its origins as follows:

Another family tradition or ritual comes weekly. Every Sunday morning is Dad’s day in the kitchen. Dad always cooks the family breakfast. He has his own recipe for waffles and they are delicious. Every week he discovers a new topping or syrup for the waffles. Everyone eats together. Which is very unusual with our family. Everyone gets a chance to unwind and tell their week. This ritual started because my mother was tired of cooking the whole week long. My father likes to cook waffles and invent new toppings. So my mother decided to turn the job over to him. My father also gets a lot of satisfaction from this because everyone praises him for a good job.

Thus we see that for families who enjoy a Sunday meal ritual it is a time to come together, enjoy each others company, and reacquaint themselves with each other after a busy week. Additionally, they are special because they are nicer than normal meals and having Dad fix the meal has added meaning.
Summary of Family Traditions

Because family traditions are family specific, they have an ability to create family unity and togetherness. They are the rituals which separate one family from another. For seasonal celebrations, most everyone in the community is celebrating the day. But for family traditions, it is “just our family” and that is what makes it special. Because it is just family, these moments are often looked back on with fondness. They are used to create new memories, which are the fuel to further discussion in years to come. As families spend time together doing enjoyable activities, families grow together according to many respondents.

Through birthday celebrations, specific members are made into “celebrities” and efforts are made to make the day special for that person. Through family vacations and reunions, families are allowed to play together, visit with relatives, share memories, and at the same time create new ones. Likewise, the Sunday meal provides families with the chance to connect each week and reacquaint themselves with their ongoing lives. Children who move out often return for a Sunday meal with spouse and children, making this a special event each week.

Assessment of Family Rituals: The Good and the Bad

of Family Rituals

Family rituals in the research literature are largely described in positive terms and as such may paint a rosy-colored and unrealistic picture of family life. Often left out of discussions of family rituals are images of parents struggling to
provide a meaningful Christmas on a low budget, the effects of marital and family discord, and the contention that may arise during a family ritual when someone acts out of the norm. Though these aspects of family ritual were not a primary focus of the present study, some aspects of reported ritual were not positive. For example, rituals are occasionally continued despite objections from children or other family members. Compared to most rituals described by respondents as “enjoyed by all,” these rituals are often continued because of a routine that cannot be broken or because of the wishes of parents. For example, one female respondent described a family ritual she did not like:

One tradition my family has that I think is really strange is eating sauerkraut on New Year's Day. I don't know where it originated but my mom thinks that it brings our family good luck in the coming year. My brother and I both hate sauerkraut with a passion, so we would just as soon forget this particular tradition. But my dad likes sauerkraut and my mom feels very strongly about serving it, so we suffer through sauerkraut once a year.

This mother was deeply rooted in tradition, perhaps a carryover from European descent, yet her children failed to see value or meaning in this ritual. Consequently, they disliked it and wanted it to end. Perhaps out of respect for their mother, they allow it to continue. Interestingly, this respondent noted that in her future family this ritual would not continue.

Similarly, another female respondent described having her aunt's family over every Thanksgiving despite the development of resentment and jealousy between the two families. She stated that “both families dread being with one another.” These families were caught in a routine that could not be broken. It started with
good intentions, but has evolved into a boring, frustrating event, but is nevertheless continued. In this family, the driving force for the continuation of this ritual is not the enjoyment it brings, but rather the obligation felt from a well established routine. Thanksgiving, once a meaningful interaction, has become a yearly obligation.

Similarly, another female respondent described dislike for a ritual even though it was enjoyable, because it lacked meaning. She wrote:

One ritual in our family that I do not enjoy very much is the Memorial Day ritual. We cut all the flowers from our yard and cart them to the cemetery to decorate the graves. We have an hour delay at my grandma’s house while she arranges at least 50 cans full of flowers to decorate the graves of all her relatives and neighbors. The graveyard is lots of fun because cemeteries are always such a treat to visit. I dislike this ritual because for me it holds no meaning. I don’t believe it is of any benefit to the deceased, but it is important to my grandma so we go and do it to please her. Seeing my grandma happy is the only payoff I get from this ritual.

From the above examples, one can see that the interpreted meaning of the interaction is perhaps more important than the interaction itself. One female respondent did not like Christmas because “it is so commercial and fake.” For this individual, some of the meaning of Christmas has been lost by commercialization and the feeling that people are obligated. Others described rituals that had no meaning and the less than enjoyable activity was frustrating for them. As a result, these rituals are ones that children do not anticipate perpetuating in the next generation.

Patterns in Family Ritual: 1970s to 1980s

One of the goals in this study was to compare across time and geography to
assess similarities or differences in family ritual from the Bossard and Boll (1950) study to the present time. As described previously in Chapter 2, Bossard and Boll identified 10 patterns in family rituals from 1880 to 1948 which they noted from student papers and autobiographies. Briefly they described patterns in the following areas: education, reading, bathing and dressing, the Sunday drive, home entertainment, the evening snack, doing the dishes, walking the dog, gift giving, the family meal, community-provided family rituals, and father-child ritual schedules. In this next section, the investigator examines these patterns of family for similarities, differences, and changes in these trends from the 1960s (the earliest period of childhood for some of the respondents) to the 1980s.

The following patterns described by Bossard and Boll (1950) were not mentioned by respondents in the current data set: education, reading, bathing and dressing, doing the dishes, and walking the dog. Why respondents did not write about these rituals is not exactly clear, but it is clear evidence that change has occurred in family rituals from the 1950s [as outlined in the Bossard and Boll, (1950) study]. When respondents are asked to write about the meaningful family rituals in their family, these rituals apparently did not come to mind. These "simpler" rituals have been replaced in meaning and significance by the more commercialized family rituals such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. In a general sense, many family traditions have been replaced by seasonal celebrations. Seasonal celebrations are more commercialized, noticed, and expected by society. As such, media has played an important part in shaping America's family rituals.
Though these “lost” rituals still occur in many families, they are not considered to be the most meaningful rituals by respondents in this sample. A hundred years ago, families relied more heavily on family created rituals rather than rituals created by the broader culture. Families were more isolated and often had few media or commercial influences.

The following rituals outlined by Bossard and Boll (1950) were described by respondents in the current data set: the family meal, the Sunday drive, gift giving and father-child rituals. Each of these rituals is compared and contrasted with the findings by Bossard and Boll on these rituals.

The Family Meal

Sunday dinner has continued to be an important family ritual. With the increase of formal education in the last 50 years, combined with more women working as well as fathers, families are spending less time together throughout the week than they were a hundred years ago. Consequently, meals are not typically a time in which the entire family is in attendance. If this does occur during the week, it usually only happens at dinner time. The primary function of a family meal, usually described as occurring on Sunday and for some families on Saturday, was for the entire family to be together. Adding to the ritualization of this activity was the inclusion of relatives who have left home for college or marriage. Thus, the family meal has further become a reunion meal — a time to catch up on all of the happenings in each others lives by spending time together. A special meal often
referred to as a “feast” further adds to the ritualization of the family meal. One female respondent wrote of this meal as “a time that we can share together because most of the times we don’t see each other. . . .” This was a central theme throughout respondents’ writings on the family meal.

**Sunday Drive**

Though the Sunday drive was mentioned by several respondents, it does not appear to be as prominent of a family ritual as it was in the era covered by Bossard and Boll (1950). One description of the Sunday drive was given by a female respondent:

> After Sunday dinner, everyone (including our cocker spaniel, Blackie) went for a drive in the country. This was Mom’s only outing for the week and it was the only time we went out as a family. Therefore, it was very important for all of us. We sang in harmony as Dad drove along. We sang old hymns or funny little songs we had learned as children. If we were good in the car, we knew that Dad would stop at a country store somewhere along the way and get sodas and candy for everyone. The dog, Blackie, was so spoiled that she refused to get out of the car when we got home if she hadn’t gotten her ice-cream on the drive.

The Sunday drive for this family was a time to get away and create their own memories. Similar to the family meal, the Sunday drive is seen by respondents as a time for the family to all be together, talk, laugh, and joke. Hence, because of busy schedules, families are forced to make time for each other. Two ways some families do this is through the family meal once a week and the Sunday drive.

**Gift Giving**

Gift giving has continued to grow in a dramatic fashion during the past 50
years. This practice was most commonly mentioned during Christmas and birthday rituals. Of significance is the emphasis that society has placed on this ritual primarily through media influences. Gifts are expected on special days and if they are not given, then others may question this aberration. Not only has the expectation of gifts changed, but so has the number of gifts. It is not uncommon for children to receive 10 to 15 gifts, whereas 50 years ago, gift giving was very limited. One writer described how her family members decided not to buy each other presents on birthdays in an effort to save time and money in the following way:

To most people this sounds ridiculous, but to us we like it because it's easier and cheaper than buying something for everyone. . . . A lot of people wonder if we are not a close family and have very little family love. But that's not the case. We do have a lot of family love and I think we are as close as any other family. To me a present does not mean a lot. Just knowing people around me love me means more to me than a gift.

In this example we see that birthday present giving is considered the societal norm and when it is not done, some people may wonder if something is wrong with the family. To outsiders, the meaning of not giving gifts is unclear and appears odd.

In general, families interpret gifts as concern and love for those whose birthday it is. When gifts are not given, others may doubt the level of love that exists.

Father-Child Rituals

Father-child rituals were mentioned by several respondents. Though obviously not common in all families or even mentioned by all of the respondents, to many individuals, time with Dad is often very meaningful. It becomes a bonding time — a time where inclusiveness between father and child is felt. The activities
mentioned varied from watching football games together to wrestling with Dad after
dinner. However, it was not so much the activity, but the interaction with Dad that
seemed most meaningful. Consider the following example of one female in the
sample who described a ritual involving herself and her father. She wrote:

The only two members of our family who are affected by this ritual are my
dad and I. In fact, I’m not so sure if the other members of my family are even
aware of its presence. My dad and I have some very personal feelings about
this ritual. At the same time, the ritual provides some mutual feelings
between us. As I watch my dad bait the hook, I have good feelings. I know
that he cares about me, and what I do, and he wants me to do my best. I
often smile and laugh inside as I watch my dad bait the hook for his twenty-
year-old daughter. But at the same time, I love it. It gives me a feeling of
being secure — not just when fishing, but whatever I do. My dad is always
willing to lend a helping hand even if it is a simple task like baiting a hook.

This ritual continued without others knowing about it and thus created a
sense of togetherness, security, worth and enjoyment between the two. Similar
feelings were shared by other respondents as they described a sense of
inclusiveness with their father.

Emergence of a New Ritual in the Past Fifty Years: Popcorn and TV

During the past 50 years, several rituals have emerged. One ritual that has
emerged is popping popcorn and watching the family’s favorite TV show. This is
seen as a technologically influenced ritual. No longer are families hovered around a
radio to listen to the Sunday night drama, but families are watching TV together.
With the ease in which families can pop popcorn, popcorn has become part of the
Sunday evening show. One female respondent described it as follows:
The next family ritual is my favorite. It also occurs weekly. Every Sunday evening the whole family gathers in the family room to watch television. My youngest brother pops three large batches of popcorn and my father makes homemade root beer. This is something all the family looks forward to each Sunday... This ritual got started some years ago when my mother received a popcorn popper for her birthday. Everyone was so excited and it was such a treat to pop popcorn together. The newness of the popper soon wore off, but the ritual remained.

Here we see that the advent of the popper brought a new ritual to the family — one which this respondent considered to be her favorite. Another female respondent described her family's popcorn ritual this way:

One of our more casual rituals that we do in our present family is to get together as a family and pop tons and tons of popcorn and watch our favorite TV program “football.” We feel like this is a very fun and close time to be able to enjoy each other as friends. Even though it might seem like a casual situation it can be very bonding and an enjoyable situation. Now that I am away from home, I can appreciate this ritual much more. It makes me realize the true closeness and bonding strength we gained as a family. The meaning that this ritual has given me will encourage me to carry this tradition on to my very own family.

Popcorn and TV is a ritual that has allowed families to spend time together and enjoy each others company in a way that does not require immediate interaction. Thus, the family feels a sense of inclusiveness without lots of activity. Here we see a change in technology, but family time laced with symbolic meaning is still what is commonly enjoyed by participants. Though this ritual is considered a new ritual within the past 50 years, it could also be considered in terms of the evolution of a ritual from listening to the radio, to watching TV, to watching TV with popcorn as a family. Either way, change has occurred in the past 50 years in this ritual.
Evolution of Rituals

Birth and Formation of Family Specific Rituals

The formation of many rituals, particularly the family-specific ones, tends to be unknown to many family members. Respondents often stated they did not know of a particular ritual’s origins, but its enjoyment led to its continuation. Many other rituals originate out of unusual experiences and, because of the joy and unity felt, they are continued. This is clearly seen in the following vignette by a female respondent:

It all started on a winter day. My little sister’s birthday was coming up and we just had to think of something to do to let her know we had remembered. We wanted to do something really different and exciting. The night before her birthday came and some friends and I were out toilet papering, and the idea came to mind. It sounded crazy, but we decided to do it anyway. My older sister and I started off at about 12 o’clock and began from the curtains tying bows, stringing it from the lights, winding it around the bed, and furniture until her room was covered with toilet paper. I am surprised we did not wake her up. Then we filled the whole room with balloons. It was a glorious sight. The next morning, before she woke up, we cooked her some breakfast and took it to her in bed. It was so exciting because she loved it. The ritual continued for a long time. Everybody took his turn helping. The kids toilet papered and Mom and Dad fixed breakfast.

Other rituals start out of need. For example, one female respondent reported that the ritual of her father cooking Sunday dinner started “because [her] mother was tired of cooking all week long. So my mother turned the job over to him.” A need by another mother to have time away from the family also led to an interesting ritual:
For years my mother has made a point of shopping every Friday. She takes one of the children to town with her each week. My mother first originated this idea to get away from the kids one day a week, but now it has become a ritual that at least one child goes with her. It would really be a special day when your turn came to go shopping. . . . It was important to each child to have his turn to go shopping.

Though rituals may start because of various reasons, it is clear throughout the profiles that they all begin with some kind of repeated interaction between family members. This interaction need not include all family members, but rather can consist of any combination of family members.

Survival, Continuation, Growth and Development of Family Rituals

Rituals are often formed spontaneously as described above. Initially the novelty may keep the ritual going. Eventually novelty wears off, but some rituals continue for an indefinite period of time because of the enjoyment they bring or the meaning they carry.

Included in the evolution of rituals from birth to death are the changes that gradually take place as a ritual occurs time after time or year after year. A gradual evolution of one ritual from a little meal to a very detailed ritual was outlined by a female respondent regarding Sunday dinner:

Sunday dinners started just gradually by having dinner after church every week. We were all young and no one was married yet so it did not really seem like a ritual, it was just having dinner on Sunday like any other day. Then my older sisters started having guys over and my oldest sister got married and came to see us on Sundays, so my mother just worked it so they could have dinner with us. The next summer my other sister got married so then she would come home Sundays for dinner and to visit. These Sunday dinners are usually always the same, with roast, potatoes and gravy. To me that is just a regular Sunday dinner and it seems
different to me when someone tells of having this same dinner another night of the week, because to me that is a “Sunday dinner.”

Originally the Sunday dinner lacked meaning and was not viewed as a family ritual because it did not stand out as something special. Once the Sunday dinner took on new meaning, it then became a formalized ritual. It is assumed that this meaning grew out of a repeated pattern of enjoyable interactions and not out of forced compliance.

Another female respondent described the evolution of a New Year’s Day ritual — waffles and ice cream for breakfast. She stated:

The ice cream part began when we invited a couple over for New Years breakfast long ago. They knew what we were having and brought along a little tradition of their own — ice cream. It’s been with us ever since.”

She later described:

Even the ice cream bit is important. My big brother decided to have it on his waffle one ordinary morning and my little brother got really upset. “But mom that’s for New Years — It’s not fair!”

The child’s statement, “it’s not fair” provides additional insight into family ritual. When a family member does something outside the prescribed expectations such as date and time, others may feel left out. Perhaps this is why children rarely open their Christmas presents on December 1st with no one else around. It is not fair to others because they are not there to share in the activity. Sharing the activity and being together are essential for the ritual to be meaningful.

Associated with the continuation of rituals is the oft-heard description of “being together talking and reflecting.” One respondent described Christmas as
"a time for all of us to talk and catch up on each other's lives." Another wrote, "Everyone in the family, including sister-in-laws [sic] had to show their favorite home movies of themselves when they were little kids. Some of them were so funny I thought we would never stop laughing." Subsequently, the continuation of family rituals can be seen in a cyclical pattern. Families get together to reflect on memorable occasions, which in turn creates new memories. These new memories are the seeds for the ritual in the future. This can be seen in the description of one female respondent's reason for the continuation of a ritual. She said, "This ritual continued because it brings us hours of enjoyment, and it always reminds us of the little incidents with my younger brother."

A male respondent described the formation and continuation of a ritual as having the same root. He wrote:

It began because it made us closer as a family and we could express our feelings on a special occasion. The reason it was started is similar to the reason that we continue it. It draws us together and keeps us together.

In sum, many rituals are started from routine events. When an enjoyable event is repeated and paired with meaning, that event or activity is likely to become ritualized. Though a majority of rituals were described as being positive, some rituals are repeated even when meaning is lost. This aspect of ritual is discussed later.

The End or Disruption of Family Rituals

Not all rituals last to be passed on to the next generation. A change in family structure due to divorce, marriage, or a child moving out often leads to the
change or ending of some family rituals. One female respondent wrote, "Most Family Rituals in my family are of the past. After my parents were divorced, rituals were just discontinued, but memories of them are still clear in my mind and heart." Another respondent noted, "I can already see that rituals can change as the family changes... This is sad in a way, but children eventually grow up and leave home. This causes a lot of rituals to die."

While some rituals will end with such family structure changes, these changes also provide opportunities for new rituals to develop. As described previously, the marriage of a child made Sunday dinners more meaningful to one family as their child and her spouse returned each week for dinner. Marriage also allows for the mature child to choose which rituals will be continued and which ones will be left behind. Rituals that were described as not being continued when individuals formed their own families were those rituals that were not enjoyable to the participant. Often this is due to being forced to participate in an activity that the child does not enjoy and/or an activity that has little meaning to the child. When rituals are not enjoyable and lack meaning, there is little chance that the ritual will continue. Some rituals like Christmas, Thanksgiving, and even birthday celebrations are more likely to continue because of societal norms which drive the replication of these rituals. However, within these larger rituals, there are many smaller rituals that children will choose to replicate or abandon when they form their own families.

To illustrate how the displeasure of a ritual and lack of meaning lead to the gradual death of a ritual, we look at a male respondent's story of family prayer:
Each evening around 7:00, my mother, my father, my brother, my two sisters and I would crowd around in the dining room. My father would then read a scripture from the bible and a prayer would follow. My father emphasized that each one of us repeat the Lord’s Prayer after him. My brother never thought much of the little religious service, and eventually he withdrew; he refused to attend these services and argued that Sunday morning church was service enough! My two sisters didn’t exactly enjoy these services, but for Mom and Dad’s sake they participate attentively. I never thought of the services as being useful and, at times, I wanted to do something else, but being the sweet, innocent child that I was, I obeyed Mom and Dad and never missed a prayer meeting. Mom treasured this service, she thought of it as an excellent way to ensure that each family member believed the same thing, religiously. This truly was an important ritual to my parents. Anytime one of us would refuse to come in and participate we would be looked on as being disrespectful to God. Eventually, this service was held less and less often due to the refusal of participants and other problems like homework, basketball practice, and etc. [sic]

The above example illustrates how parents struggle to implement and maintain a ritual that is meaningful to them despite numerous objections from their children. For these children, a prayer service of this style and length was too much and as such became burdensome and meaningless. As a result it became grounds for contention rather than unity. Gradually, the division and contention it caused within the family led to the ritual gradually being done away with in this family. When parents overly enforce a ritual, with an unwillingness to modify it to meet the age and interest requirements of their children, the ritual becomes more of a hindrance than an aid to family unity. Such rituals will eventually end.

Payoffs of Family Rituals

Family rituals have a power to bring families closer together as noted by
35% of the respondents. Family rituals often serve as a time to get together, which becomes more important as family members move out. One respondent wrote, “The whole family enjoys being together and often this is the only time of the year when we all get to see each other.” Another wrote, “Christmas is mostly a time for all of us to talk and catch up on each other’s lives.” Closely connected with bringing the family together is the emotional reward (29%) that rituals bring family members. Time together with family, reflecting on good times, and creating memories are often emotionally rewarding to family members. Less commonly mentioned were the rewards of carrying on traditions (19%), fun (8%), and other rewards (9%).

Some respondents gave several of the above reasons as a payoff for rituals. For example, one male wrote:

Family rituals are important. They give our family a chance to be together and learn more about each other. Not only are they important, but they also give our family a sense of unity and something to look forward to. I'm glad our family has built up strong family rituals and traditions and I hope that we will be able to continue them in years to come.

In summary, rituals are viewed by participants as ways to bring the family together which is emotionally rewarding and fun. “Rituals let us each feel we’re part of a special group with our own ‘games’, and ‘secret jokes.’” Less important is the simple idea of carrying on a tradition for traditions sake. Respondents who found particular rituals to be especially fun and meaningful often desired to continue them in their future families. However, rituals that continue out of habit after the ritual has lost its emotional reward and unifying power can become a
chore that is dreaded rather than looked forward to as discussed earlier. Rituals of this type are likely to be dropped when a new family of procreation occurs.

Characteristics of Family Rituals

Participants Are Known and Absentees Are Noticed

Rituals contain a degree of inclusiveness. Those who are supposed to participate but do not are noted and even questioned for their absence. Some rituals involve the entire family while others develop between individuals within the family. "We all" was commonly used for family rituals, indicating all were present and, to varying degrees, a part of the ritual. Other times it was "just the children" or "just the adults" or "my brother and I." Almost all specified rituals mentioned have a prescribed membership. When one of the members is absent, "it's a let down" in most cases. Numerous, if not all, respondents noted who was involved in specific rituals. This is illustrated adequately by a male respondent:

One of the fondest rituals I can remember was the wrestling scene between my father and my brothers and I every night when Dad would get home from work. I have four brothers and the range in age from youngest to oldest is five years. Almost every night Dad would get home, take off his suit and tie and start reading the paper. When my oldest brother thought he was about done reading, he would gather us together and we would jump dad. We usually wrestled about fifteen minutes before mom notified us about dinner being ready. What I now realize about this ritual is how close it brought all the men of the family together. In a way it taught all of us to stick up for each other and defend one another.

He continued in his paper describing a ritual involving his sisters:

Flipping to the other side of the coin I will now bring up a ritual involving my sisters, of which I have three. I guess in this instance my parents wanted me to realize that being close to my sisters was just as important, if not
more important, than being close to my brothers. One ritual we went through was walking one of my sisters to school one day, another sister the next, and still another sister the next. We would all rotate who we walked to school with. Since the boys outnumbered the girls, I wouldn’t have to do this everyday, but when my turn came, I was expected to do it and I did. I realize that it helped solidify our family. Another strong part about this ritual was that I think it helped out my sisters even more in knowing that they were being looked after.

From the above example, we see how certain family members were expected to participate in each ritual. The first involved only men of the house, while the second involved girls and boys, yet on some days certain boys were not required to walk a sister to school. However, as this respondent noted on his day, he “was expected to do it and [he] did.” Almost all rituals described by respondents included some description of the participants. Participants are known, anticipated, and expected to carry out roles in certain ways. When they fail to do so, they may be questioned or reprimanded.

“Seems Like a Little Thing”

While reading through the profiles, numerous respondents were noticed downplaying their family rituals as “not a big thing” or as simply being a “little thing.” One female respondent stated:

Simple little things seem to have the most meaning and play the biggest part in my family rituals. . . . The rituals I’ve tried to explain have very little meaning to anyone except my family and me. They are just small, virtually insignificant happenings in our everyday living, but there would be something missing [without those little things]. They are each symbolic in themselves, but all in all they are the little things that symbolize that we are a family.

Similarly, a male respondent downplayed an unusual ritual in his family. He wrote: “Easter two years ago, we had a little extra twist to add to breakfast.
My brother colored a raw egg. It's really stupid, but you can imagine the feeling my dad had when my brother cracked the egg on his head."

Another male wrote, "one that sounds pretty small, but kind of has a big meaning behind it is . . . ." Looking back, he wrote, they "seem kind of funny in a way, but they all seem irreplaceable. . . . They add a little spice and warm memories."

In general, witnessing family rituals from afar is like attending a new religion for the first time in which the rituals are unfamiliar. The rituals might appear as meaningless or strange to outsiders, but nevertheless they are usually rich in meaning and significance to members. Family rituals, then, are the fingerprints of a family, which distinguish one family from another and separate members from non-members. Outsiders will not understand them, "but that's what makes them fun and interesting," according to one respondent, "because [they are] your families and no one else's."

Symbolic Interactional Theory and Family Ritual

The interpreted meaning of specific family rituals is the driving force behind them. Those rituals that are deemed meaningful by at least one family member are continued if that particular family member is powerful enough to encourage their continuation. Sometimes, rituals are continued because they are meaningful to parents despite opposition from children. Opposition from children often arises when children do not see the ritual as meaningful. This is especially prevalent when children do not enjoy the activity associated with the ritual. Thus, symbolic
interactional (SI) theory has played a major role in clarifying the data examined. SI theory asserts that interaction has meaning and as family members interact, meaning is expressed. Behaviors must be interpreted and understood. The meaning of a ritual is not necessarily universally understood. Likewise, participants often understood the underlying symbolic meaning of rituals, but realized that outsiders would not be able to understand this meaning. They claim that their rituals may "appear as a little thing" to outsiders, but are very meaningful to participants.

SI theory also helps one to understand why seasonal celebrations such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and New Years Day activities vary from family to family. Yes, there are common activities on these days, such as a Christmas tree for Christmas, but there are other unique family rituals as well. Some begin without purpose, but continue because of their great meaning.
Family rituals have been shown throughout the literature to have importance and significance to families. The purpose of this study was to examine family rituals in the tradition of Bossard and Boll (1950). Bossard and Boll examined family rituals by analyzing autobiographies written in the late 1800s to the 1930s and reading papers written by college students describing their family of origin’s rituals. By using a similar methodology, the current study has examined family rituals with the following goals in mind. First, this study examined the content of current family rituals including which rituals were written about most, the details associated with each ritual, and the purposes of these rituals. Second, it is clear that family rituals have changed in the past 50 years. As such, this study has sought to identify some of those changes and note possible reasons for these changes. Third, this study sought to clarify what makes rituals enjoyable to some and unenjoyable to others. Fourth, this study was an effort to clarify the workings, characteristics, continuance, and discontinuance of family rituals. Lastly, this study dealt with the functions of family rituals from the perspective of the participants.

The sample for this study was collected from 1978 to 1988 and consisted of 493 freshmen and sophomore students from a predominately white, Western Mountain Region university. Students enrolled in introductory marriage and family
classes were instructed to write papers on family rituals that were of importance to their family as well as the origin and the function of these rituals. Papers were graded and permission granted to keep these papers for future analysis. These papers were typically three to five pages long. Papers were read by coders, content was analyzed, and data were entered on code sheets.

Main Findings

Regional and gender comparisons were made to see if specified variables were associated with the amount of ritual described by respondents. Though slightly more rituals were reported by females and Southerners, these differences were not found to be statistically different. This may be do to the lack of structure in terms of methodology.

Next, seasonal celebrations — those rituals which stem from larger cultural influences such as those surrounding national holidays — were examined for consistency, content, and function. Seasonal celebrations included Christmas Eve and Day, Thanksgiving, Easter, New Year's Day, Memorial Day, and Saint Patrick's Day rituals. The most common seasonal celebration mentioned was Christmas. This is consistent with the findings of Schvaneveldt and Lee (1983). However, when further examined, it was found that Christmas Eve activities were described more often than Christmas Day activities. Christmas is anticipated and looked forward to because of gift-giving activities, but it is Christmas Eve activities that are typically remembered with fondness and detail years later. Noted amidst all the glitter and
excitement of the Christmas ritual was the importance of family interactions. Family was at the center and core of these activities. It was also noted that this holiday has changed perhaps more than any other family ritual in the past 50 years. Gift giving has become more extravagant and formalized. More gifts are given at Christmas time and there are more activities around this holiday than were given 50 years ago. It is not uncommon for families to ritualize decorating, finding a Christmas tree, Christmas Eve dinner, and waking-up activities on Christmas morning among numerous others. Christmas is much more detailed than it was 50 years ago. Largely these changes are seen as the result of urbanization and commercialization. Societal norms stemming from commercialization have led to extravagant Christmas celebrations and detailed Christmas family rituals.

Christmas is a time for many families to reunite with one another. Children who have moved away from home return with their families and extended family members often visit as well.

Family traditions were also examined. Family traditions include those rituals which occur because of influences within the family. These included birthday celebrations, family vacations, Sunday dinners, family reunions, and Dad's breakfast or other meal. The most often described family tradition was birthday celebrations. Birthdays are usually a day set aside for the birthday person to feel special. Respondents described gift giving, cake and ice cream, family visiting, parties, and other surprises as means of "making the person feel special."

Birthdays also have changed greatly in the past 50 years. More is typically done
today for the birthday person than before. Gift giving on this day, as with Christmas, has become a societal norm. When families do not give gifts on this day, it is viewed as a lack of love or concern by some individuals outside the family.

The Sunday meal has also become a fairly common family tradition described by respondents. The Sunday meal, usually dinner, has become more of a reunion meal on a weekly basis providing “an opportunity to spend time with relatives” (Schvaneveldt & Lee, 1983). Unlike other meals throughout the week, this is a meal in which all family members are expected to attend and usually do. Also, common to the Sunday meal is the attendance of family members who have moved out of the house because of marriage or college. Because almost everyone is present, the Sunday meal allows family members to catch up on each other’s lives, laugh, play games, and enjoy each other’s company. Though also accompanied by nice meals often described as “feasts,” the Sunday dinner is typically seen as special because the family can be together. Bossard and Boll (1950) noticed the emergence of this ritual in the late 1930s because of hectic schedules families encountered as a result of formalized schooling and parents who worked out of the home. Similar reasons have led to the formation and continuation of this ritual in the 1970s and 80s.

As can be expected, not all family rituals are viewed in positive terms or are enjoyable for all family members. Symbolic interaction theory asserts that all interaction has meaning; however, that meaning is determined by individual participants (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Thus, though some rituals are very
meaningful for some, it can also have little or negative meaning to others. Fiese et al. (1993) stated that "family rituals appear to exert influence on family life by pairing meaning and affect with patterned interaction" (p. 634). Rituals sometimes become non-enjoyable when meaning is not clearly understood by participants or when the meaning is lost. These typically tend to be unique family rituals in which the children fail to understand the parent’s reasoning behind the ritual. Additionally, this was seen in families who carried on a ritual despite it being an unpleasant experience. Thus, when parents are unwilling to adjust or change rituals that are unpleasant, children typically find the ritual to lack meaning and view it less favorably. Fiese and Kline (1993) stated that "rituals hollow in meaning may be recalled as times for following rules and fitting roles, whereas rituals deep in meaning may be recalled as a time for sharing stories and jokes or planning for the future" (p. 298). Commonly mentioned throughout these data was a desire for very enjoyable rituals to be continued endlessly without change. However, as children grow and new generations arise, rituals must change to meet the interests and ability of those participating in the ritual. It is when parents or other participants cling to rituals without being willing to change them despite unpleasant experiences that rituals become burdensome. As the ritualization behavior itself is placed ahead of meaningful interactions, rituals lose favor with participants.

Attempts were made to note changing patterns in family ritual from 1950 to the 1980s. The following patterns noted by Bossard and Boll (1950) were not mentioned by any of the respondents in the current data set: education, reading,
bathing and dressing, doing the dishes, and walking the dog. These rituals are not as frequently described by respondents as they were 50 years ago. This may be due to design differences in these studies or their loss of importance as more significant rituals became more prevalent. These rituals are everyday ongoing family rituals that happen on a regular basis. As such they do not appear to be as meaningful as the larger, less routine family rituals such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays, and the Fourth of July, though they definitely can be.

The following patterns were discussed in terms of findings comparable to Bossard and Boll (1950): the family meal, gift giving, the Sunday drive, and father-child rituals. Of these, the family meal and gift giving have continued to grow in importance in the past 50 years. The Sunday drive was mentioned by only a few respondents. As such, the exact pattern or trend in regards to this ritual is more difficult to ascertain from this sample. However, the Sunday drive appears to becoming less common as reflected by these data. The father-child rituals appear to be as important as they were 50 years ago, though, again, they were not mentioned by very many respondents. For those who did mention father-child interaction rituals, they were very meaningful in terms of feeling important, inclusiveness, and in creating a bond between father and child. Family rituals have been shown to have a positive correlation with an adolescent’s general self-esteem, identity, and feelings of belonging (Fiese, 1992). It appears that father-child rituals are also linked with these variables.
Bossard and Boll (1950) noted that as fathers spend more time out of the home because of work and other commitments, father-child rituals become more meaningful. Further work needs to be done regarding the level of father-child rituals which exists among current families and the potential influences of these rituals on child outcomes and family relationships.

An additional purpose of this study was to examine the formation, evolution, and death of family rituals. It is clear that many rituals form out of spontaneous interactions that, because of their enjoyment, are repeated in the future. Family rituals that are rich in meaning and enjoyable for participants are likely to continue in the future. Those rituals that lack meaning and/or enjoyment may be continued if a powerful family figure, such as a parent, enforces their continuance. Such family rituals are often left behind as children move on and create their own families. Changes in family structure often lead to the end of some rituals and the beginning of new ones. Family reunions, for example, originate as families spread out. On the other hand, some rituals, such as popcorn and TV, may end as children move away from the home. Furthermore, divorce can cause the disruption of some family rituals (Pett et al., 1992). One respondent considered all of her family rituals to be in the past since her parents had gotten a divorce. As can be seen then, rituals form and end for many reasons (Fiese & Kline, 1993). However, they usually continue for similar reasons: they are enjoyed by most and are meaningful to family members. Rituals that are continued without these factors tend to be resented by some of the participants.
The function of rituals in the lives of the participants is the ability they have to bring families closer together (35%). Repeatedly mentioned by participants was the fact of being together and sharing moments which only created more memories and created a sense of unity or "we-"ness. This togetherness time and the closeness felt are also emotionally rewarding to participants. Elsewhere researchers have associated greater marital satisfaction with more meaningful family rituals among parents with young children (Fiese et al. 1993). The ability of family rituals to carry on traditions (9%) was a much less important function of family rituals. Several respondents felt that things just would not be the same without these rituals. However, it is the loss of the emotional closeness and the rewards of these rituals that would cause such feelings of loss.

Characteristic of family rituals is the prescribed role each member plays. Individuals are assigned to or just do certain roles largely based on the workings of the individual family. Along with details of what goes on during some rituals are descriptions of who does what. This is clear, noted, and expected among participants. Clear expectations of who is to participate in the rituals also exist. Whether all family members including extended family are to participate or whether just certain family members such as mother and a child participate, this is known and absentees are noted and questioned. It is through these means that rituals "help to structure the ways people think about their social world" (Laird, 1984, p. 124).
Further, family rituals often appear to be "a little thing" to participants. Trying to explain a family ritual to an outsider is often very difficult because the meaning is not felt. Outsiders are not able to feel the "we-"ness or the emotional reward felt by the participants. Thus, respondents commonly described rituals as "little things" with lots of meaning. Rituals are often difficult to describe to someone outside the family system because meaning is not clearly understood. The meaning and purpose of rituals can only be felt through experiencing them in terms of a shared history.

Conclusions

Rituals often carry rich meaning. As described above, when meaning is missing, the ritual becomes a burden to some participants. Something about rituals separates them from the rest of the day, week, or year. When something that is usually reserved for these special occasions is done at another time and thus out of context, others may question the individual's behavior or even correct the "violators.” Family rituals provide a sense of unity and togetherness for participants. Though families vary in terms of how they carry out their seasonal celebrations and family traditions, "all families need rituals to survive" (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 419). Participants in rituals perceive that these rituals mean little to outsiders because outsiders do not understand the underlying meaning.

As expected, respondents noted gifts at Christmas time and fireworks on the Fourth of July. However, often family members will remember the little things
other family members do while performing these rituals which makes them memorable and meaningful. For example, several respondents noted a younger sibling being the first one up on Christmas morning or how siblings open their presents. One female respondent remembered vividly as her father joked while lighting fireworks. Interestingly, family members remember these little things more than the gifts or the fireworks. Why is that? Gifts or fireworks are not what is important, but it is a desire within to cling onto memorable experiences — to cherish them and hold them dear. Respondents noted that some family rituals involved the sharing of these meaningful and often humorous memories.

Participants seldom mentioned the actual gifts given or opened, but they did remember some of the slightest interactions that took place. Family rituals provide an opportunity and a context for families to be together in meaningful interactions. In a sense, they are events that provide families time together associated with positive emotions.

Limitations

Though these data come from a fairly large sample, the sample is predominately female, Caucasian, and Mormon. Therefore, these findings are not generalizable across samples. Because of the lack of sample diversity, these data do not contain sufficient demographic variables to allow for correlations or cross tabulations. The predominance of female Mormon Caucasian respondents may also skew the data.
Further, the data were lacking in terms of family demographics, stability, wellness, and happiness. What is not known from the respondents is how happy and stable their homes were in general. These data did not allow one to study the power of rituals in terms of stabilizing the home or preventing divorce. Though most of the respondents spoke of their rituals in positive terms, it is not known if that was typical of everyday events in their home. Likewise, these data do not allow one to examine how family size influences the number of rituals and their meaning.

The period of data collection is also a concern. These data were collected in the late 1970s to the 1980s. During the past 10 years great technological advances have been made in terms of personal computers, computer games, the internet, video recorders, and videos and other forms of home entertainment. All of these advances provide for changes in or the creation of new family rituals.

Additionally, data are only collected from one family member. Because of this, it is not possible to determine how differing family members feel about a particular ritual nor its bonding effect between siblings.

Discussion

Many changes have and will occur in the future as related to family rituals. With technological advances in terms of increased TV viewing, personal computers, and other technological advances, it is unclear how these changes will impact family rituals. More and more families are turning to individual activities rather than family activities. Whereas families used to sit around and watch a TV
show together, more and more youth have their own TV, video games, or personal computer which occupy them for hours.

Further, changes in family structure will also bring changes in family rituals. Today there are more divorced families, step-families, and single-parent families than ever before. For example, Pett et al. (1992) found that Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthday celebrations, and vacations were the rituals most affected by parental divorce. Divorce, then, requires that these rituals be modified to fit the new family structure and to create new meaning. Elsewhere, Kelly (1995) purported that family rituals aid step-families by providing a “safe manageable context for the expression of strong emotion” and by creating a sense of identity for individual family members. New family rituals can aid in reducing anxiety about change, clarifying boundaries and family roles, and connecting the two families (p. 71). Families are also smaller than they were 50 years ago and the trend continues. These structural changes in the family provide for new rituals to be created and less relevant rituals to be done away with.

Noted earlier were the roles described by respondents in their family rituals (Roy, 1990). For example, on Thanksgiving Day several respondents mentioned the distinct gender and age distinctions. Note how one male describes this ritual:

While the food is being prepared by the women, everyone else finds something to do. The men go into the living room to watch the games on TV and talk. The children spend the time upstairs and outside playing games. . . . After we have finished eating, we go back to what we were doing before. The women clean up the dishes while the men and children watch TV and play.
A female respondent likewise noted how women cook, men go hunting, and children watch the Thanksgiving parade on TV. Another respondent wrote of the after Christmas meal: “The rest of the day, the men sit on their rears and watch football while the women sit in the kitchen gossiping and stuffing their faces.”

It is assumed that in many families these gender and age distinctions continue. However, as women become more a part of the work force and more egalitarian roles are established in the home, gender assignments may lose such rigid lines and undergo many changes.

**Suggestions for Additional Research**

Future studies can make greater use of structure and utilize such independent variables as region, gender, SES, religion, marital status, and family size. Some religions, for example, are more ritualistic than others, and some prohibit the celebration of seasonal celebration rituals. It remains unknown how these religious influences impact the number of family rituals families have and in turn how they impact family functioning. Are seasonal celebrations substituted with additional family traditions, or do these families greatly lack in the number of family rituals as compared to families of other religions?

The literature base is currently lacking the perspective of the elderly and their accounts of seasonal celebrations and family traditions. To gain a clearer understanding of how family rituals have changed during the past century or so, elderly individuals could be asked to describe the evolution of seasonal
celebrations such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July along with family traditions such as birthdays and family meals from their childhood to modernity.

Because so much of the power of family rituals is associated with the meaning of them, the next level of research needs to distinguish between families who have highly meaningful and enjoyable rituals and those families that have very rigid, unenjoyable, and meaningless rituals. Obviously some families will have some of each. However, it may not be the actual number of family rituals that is important in building functional families, as it is the number of meaningful family rituals as compared to rituals that are less pleasant.

Interestingly, family rituals have been studied by focussing on individual respondents and not on families. Many studies involve college age students. Family rituals need to be studied in context of the family. One individual may especially enjoy a particular ritual, while others despise it. The impact of such rituals needs to be examined within families. Likewise, the bonding impact of rituals needs to be studied. Some rituals, for example, may be better at bonding siblings together while others may aid in bonding parents to children and vice versa. These topics can further be studied by interviewing entire families either as a group or as individuals.
REFERENCES


Settings and Dimensions of Family Rituals

(Fiese and Kline, 1993).

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