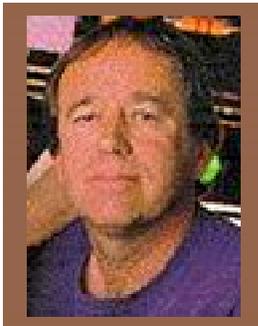




Conversations with the Experts

Slowing Down to Look at “Busyness”



Charles Darrah

Bio: Bio: Chuck Darrah is Professor of Anthropology at San Jose State University. He is a cultural anthropologist whose research has focused on work, families and technology. He is a co-founder of the Silicon Valley Cultures Project at San Jose State University (www.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/). His 1997 book, *Learning and Work: An Exploration in Industrial Ethnography*, is based on fieldwork in two manufacturing plants. Darrah and his colleagues, J. A. English-Lueck and J. M. Freeman, are collaborating on a book, *Busy-Bodies: Busyness and the American Dream*.

Editors Note: The following interview was conducted with Charles Darrah, Ph.D. who has studied the lives of busy working families. Dr. Darrah's recent research, supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, has examined the lives of families in Silicon Valley.

Darrah provided the following description of the research, “Fourteen families in the greater Silicon Valley region of northern California were studied through ethnographic fieldwork. We commuted with parents to their jobs and spent days with them at work. We shadowed their children during their days at school, daycare and after school activities. We joined the families for evening meals and after dinner homework. We participated in parties, shopping expeditions, housework and yard work, business trips, church activities, and running errands. We spent about 200 hours with twelve of the families over a year, and about 40 hours with two others that were studied for 4-6 weeks each.”

One of his recent papers, “Family Models, Model Families,” discusses some aspects of the tempo and rhythms of families’ everyday lives. This paper is available online at: <http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/SVCPfmmf.html>

An interview with Charles Darrah, Professor, Department of Anthropology, San José State University

Pitt-Catsouphe: On a practical level, it seems that most people are very familiar with the concept of “busyness.” And yet, your in-depth examination brings new understanding to the experience of busyness. Could you provide some background about your research?

Darrah: I am a cultural anthropologist and that means that I spend a lot of time just observing people.

What did I see observing these families? The striking thing is that you see people doing a lot of different things when you have the opportunity to watch them. Often, it is the seemingly small things – perhaps something a bit out of place – that helps you to understand the important issues in their lives. Just imagine. As a researcher, you might go into a workplace. You see whiteboards and you expect to see notes related to work, things such as technological drawings. However, what you find might be reminders of family schedules and notes about upcoming community events. Or, you go in people’s homes. What do you see? Space is organized for an office and it is configured around demands of workplace.

To an anthropologist, these are important clues. You begin to think about the complex linkages between home and work. And, you begin to focus on ways that people can be interrupted by work when they are at home and how they can be interrupted by their families when they are at work.

Pitt-Catsoupes: What were some of the key observations you made as you followed these families?

Darrah: First, it was clear that people were really busy. However, it is important to understand the nature of this busyness.

Everyone talks about how life is speeding up. As we studied this, we became skeptical of the speed metaphor. If life is speeding up, you should in principle be able to slow it down. And if you could “slow life down,” you’d see *same* activities but the activities would proceed at a different pace.

But that would not happen given the types of activities that are performed by today’s working families. If you slowed life down, you’d discover that people would not have to do many of their current activities. For example, if you slowed things down, you wouldn’t need as much planning and coordination, or keeping in touch, so the need for many of those activities would just vanish.

Planning is critical to the smooth function of working families. Families have meetings to confirm “who is picking up” and “when.” Families need to spend time anticipating what they will do if something unforeseen happens; who will step in and take care of it.

It is because we are so busy that we need to squeeze time for “intelligence gathering” about what might be happening at the workplace or in the community. Because we are so busy, we need to direct conversations at dinner table in a purposeful way to find out, “Is there something I might need to know about that might affect our schedules in the future?”

The “hidden element” of busyness is that people need to devote time to the construction of a communications infrastructure. When you watch people go through their days, you begin to recognize that many of seemingly “meaningless” activities – such as what appears to be a trite cell phone call – is really serious work. After some “chit-chat,” you might hear someone say, “Are we still okay with you picking up kids?” These calls are letting others in family groups know where you are, and they provide opportunities to re-confirm plans.

So, we began to appreciate this irony: families need management strategies to cope with their busy lives, but all of this critical planning and coordination can create more for the families to do. People take on management activities to be efficient but their busyness may increase as a result.

And, families also need to respond when things go wrong with the management activities! For example, many of the families kept elaborate lists on Palm Pilots. However, the day would come when someone would discover that they were supposed to be at particular place to pick up child, and they were in the wrong county because didn’t scroll down far enough to realize where they had to be next.

Pitt-Catsoupes: Is there any other way that busyness is more than just the number of tasks that need to get done?

Darrah: We found that people are not only doing a lot of things, but typically the tasks that they perform are completed in small chunks of time. Then, we noticed how people need to shift back and forth between different types of tasks. This is often called multi-tasking, but it is really much deeper.

The shifting we observed required that people move almost instantaneously from one set of thoughts or meanings to a whole different set. For example, I could be watching someone engrossed in a task needed for rolling out a high tech product, and then – BINGO – a message from the employee’s husband about something at home, such as a question about investment funds, flashes on their computer screen. This requires that people are able to shift back and forth between the different contexts of their lives.

Pitt-Catsoupes: In your opinion, what factors are driving the increased busyness?

Darrah: There has been a confluence of changes that have affected our state of busyness: technology, consumerism, patterns of labor force participation, and a shift in expectations about the roles of parents. Although it is hard to make the assertion that people are working “harder,” it is apparent that people are working “differently.”

Certainly, technology itself allows work and family responsibilities to flow into any sphere of life. We are equipped with pagers and cell phones, and we have ubiquitous internet access. We can “do work” and can “do family” at any time. And, so we do.

We also found that the time, thought, and energy that some people devote to consumption has contributed to busyness. The process of “buying” has become something like another job. People may spend lots of time on the internet researching purchases and comparing prices. Some people devote hours each week to shopping and checking out products. Once they have made the purchase, they have to spend time figuring out how to use them. And, if the product doesn’t function just right, people have to deal with the customer service departments. There has also been a proliferation of new markets, for example there are many more choices for leisure and recreation. Being an informed consumer has become another kind of work. For example, people are “empowered” to search out the best bargains they can find for airfare and lodging. But, with more choices, there are more responsibilities to manage personal finances, careers, and health care.

Cultural expectations, too, have changed. For instance, parenting entails a set of expectations about involvement in children’s lives. Parents may feel that in order to be “good” they are supposed to be involved in specific activities. In contrast to just a generation ago, parents are expected to be more involved in the lives of their children – even though they may feel they have less time to do so.

Underlying the shift in our expectations of families is a sense of “deregulation and privatization” of family affairs. The people we studied spent a lot of time gathering information and trying to make decisions about the education of their children, options for health care, and strategies for financial planning. In the past, either these choices did not exist, or, perhaps, the community or government made those decisions. There may be more choices today, but making the decisions takes time.

Oddly enough, even though families now have expanded responsibilities for these different aspects of their lives, there has also been a kind of re-regulation of our social environments. People have to conform to a lot of policies and procedures at children’s schools and they have jobs where the details are legally spelled-out, and you have to get them right. It is an interesting juxtaposition of “empowerment” and constraint.

Pitt-Catsoupes: Can you give us some examples of the ways that families manage their busyness?

Darrah: It is important to understand that each family we studied acted like a self-contained system. Although families experimented a lot, each of them had their own set of strategies for coping. Although the strategies varied from family to family, the different approaches made perfect sense when you considered them within the context of each family system.

For instance, one family coped by simplifying their lives. They talked about the boundary around their family. The members of this family thought carefully about what “to bring” across the boundary and into the family. They would think about purchases they would “bring in,” as well as relationships.

But, another family coped by a “master strategy” of having a constant flow through the family. They would become involved in all sorts of activities, and they would network with lots of people. They were real consumers of products, services, and goods.

A third family had an explicit strategy of creating a social contract, which specified the responsibilities and obligations to the other members of the family. According to the members of this family, everyone had to follow script of this social contract every day. It was interesting to us that they were rarely able to do this because something always seemed to happen and family members had to adjust throughout the day.

Networking among friends and coworkers was buffer for busyness. In some cases, the parents realized that they needed to maintain these networks because “you never know” when you might need these friends. Families with relatives nearby often commented that they could call on extended family members for help.

We also found that families talked about and worked on themselves as a family. For instance, once they had decided to participate, several families asked if the research team would give them a report card, which could tell them how they were doing. Essentially, they wanted to know how they are doing *vis-a-vis* other families. We found that they were so enmeshed in own world, it was hard for them to compare their experiences with other families. Interestingly, at end of study, no family asked us for the report card. We think that their participation in the project actually gave them an opportunity to think about own family processes and to consider the choices they had made as well as what they wanted to do in the future.

Pitt-Catsoupes: How do children connect to the culture of busyness?

Darrah: We found that virtually every family articulated a philosophy about “hurrying” or “not hurrying”

children. The work-family demands on all these families compelled them to make decisions about time and schedules.

Some of the parents voiced the opinion that world is a busy place and that “being hurried” is just part of life today. Others, however, felt that the world is “crazy enough,” and that we should make children’s lives as unhurried as possible. Many of these parents bent over backwards so that the busyness of their lives did not disrupt the lives of their children. These parents often thought about their own childhoods – a time when things weren’t too scheduled. They may go to extraordinary lengths to recreate that type of experience for their own children. Of course, this effort can make the parents’ lives more complicated as a result.

We need to recognize that the schedules of children can be busier than families. Often, these schedules reflect the children’s preferences, so it is an over simplification to say that these children are victimized. In fact, the busyness of children’s schedules can have a big impact on the parents’ lives. Furthermore, the children’s lives can be portals that carry the parents into other relationships – relationships that can be essential for the parents as they cope with all the busyness.

It is also important to acknowledge that the kids also participate in the decisions and voice their opinions about what works and what doesn’t work. Although the kids typically didn’t control the family’s schedule because of the parents’ work schedules, they often nudged the scheduling of specific activities in the direction that they wanted.

I think we need to pay attention to an important consequence of the busyness for our children. The master story of our family lives becomes focused on being productive and efficient, and children hear that language. The larger purposes or goals of our lives may become unclear to our children, but the message is clear: it is important to be productive and efficient.

In fact, there may be a broader concern that our busyness fragments families’ ability to create stories that will guide them in future. It is stories that help children to understand, “This is how we –as a family – live.” When families lose track of those larger stories, it is difficult for children to grasp what we are about.

Pitt-Catsoupes: What are the implications of your study for business leaders and policy makers?

Darrah: I think our society needs to grapple with our new expectations for families. Families are now being asked to take on lots of functions in addition to the mutual support of family members. Families have to buffer all sorts of uncertainty that is introduced from the outside. Families are making lots of decisions about their children’s development and education; they are now actively managing their job transitions and careers.

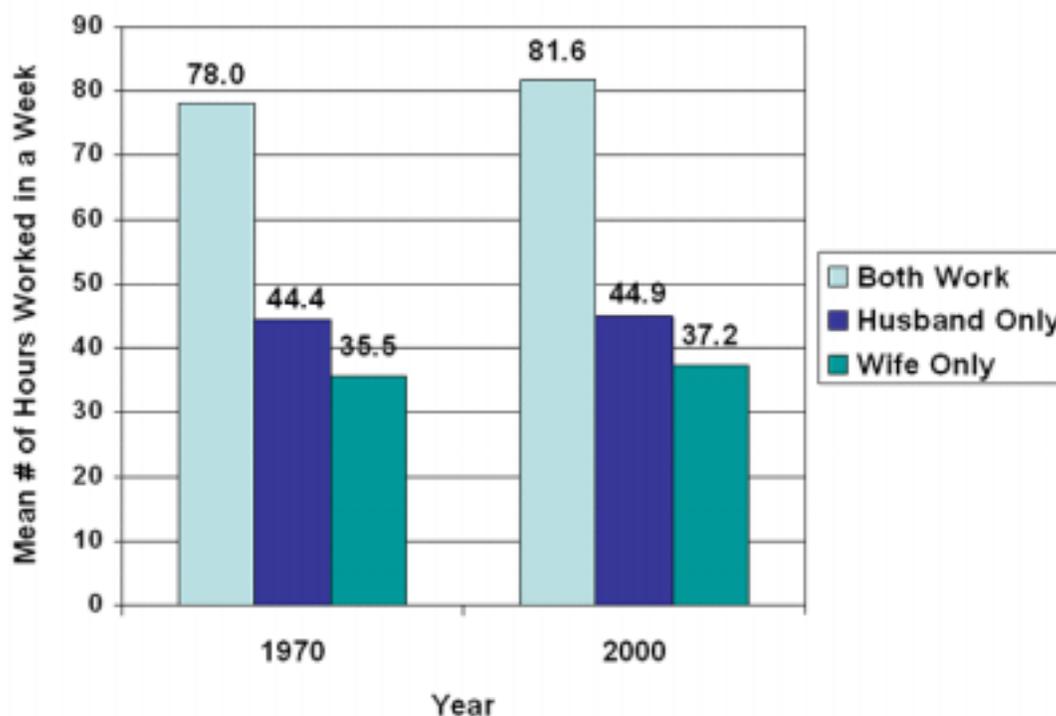
In order for families to manage, we need some new “rules” that recognize and acknowledge how deeply work and family have become inter-connected for many people. Busyness forces people to blur boundaries so that they work at home and “do family” (and community) at work. It is almost impossible to keep work out of homes, but it is equally difficult to keep our larger commitments out of the workplace. In essence, we need new rules for connecting and disconnecting so that we can manage the busyness. How each of us does this is distinct to our families and so I think we need to adopt practices that build upon what families are already doing to cope. We should make no mistake about the seriousness of succeeding with this. There are high stakes, and families know this.

Ultimately, I think it is very important to consider, “Which families will be the winners and which the losers in this new era? Which families will have access to the different types of resources they need?” Addressing these questions is not a luxury for society or for employers. The responses will clearly shape what sort of country we will be. And if creating and maintaining a skilled and knowledgeable workforce is central to national competitiveness, then how employers address the questions becomes critical.

To contact Charles Darrah, please e-mail him at darrahc@email.sjsu.edu or call (408) 924-5314.

Editor’s Note: In the above interview, Dr. Darrah has discussed the many “layers” of busyness. We anticipate that many of our readers are also interested in some of the measures of how families spend their time. The following graph reflects data from the Current Population Survey (1970 & 2000) presented in Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson’s book, *The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality*, which was published by Harvard University Press (2004).

"Trends in Joint Hours of Paid Work By Husbands and Wives, 1970 and 2000"



Additional Resources: Related to Family Time and Busyness

Global Perspectives

Health Canada: This organization oversees health and safety policies for Canadians. The website includes a series of fact sheets titled "The effects of time use and time pressure on child-parent relationships" (see below for the link).

- To visit the homepage click here <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/index-eng.php>
- To download a series of fact sheets titled "The effects of time use and time pressure on child-parent relationships."

Global Perspectives

International Association for Time Use Research: The IATUR's purpose is to promote and support research for time-use studies.

- Click here to visit the homepage <http://www.stmarys.ca/partners/iatur/>

Global Perspectives

Statistics New Zealand: This government website contains official statistics for New Zealand.

- To view the homepage, click here <http://www.stats.govt.nz/>

Global Perspectives

Take Back Your Time: "Take Back Your Time is a major U.S./Canadian initiative to challenge the epidemic of overwork, over-scheduling and time famine that now threatens our health, our families and relationships, our communities and our environment."

- Visit the homepage at <http://www.timeday.org/>

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.

E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-4033 / 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-1080



www.bc.edu

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation