

'Drama of the American Working Family' Examined

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Armed with a \$3.6 million grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and a wide range of anthropological, linguistic and psychological research methods, a team of UCLA faculty is gearing up for a landmark study of a species under considerable stress: the middle-class, dual-income family.

The nine highly regarded UCLA researchers will devote the next three years to filming and documenting the everyday routines of 30 families residing in the greater Los Angeles area. The material then will be housed in the UCLA/Sloan Working Family Archive, where it can be studied in depth for years to come by researchers seeking to understand a sector of the American public that stands at a crossroads.

"No one has ever created a digital video archive of this sort," said Elinor Ochs, the team's leader and winner of a 1998 MacArthur Fellowship.

"Of course, there have been television documentaries that focus on a single family and there have been studies of families carried out within separate disciplines. The new center, however, will promote broad interdisciplinary tracking of how middle-class families day by day balance the responsibilities of work and family life."

From the pleasures of sharing a home-cooked meal to the tedium of folding laundry to the tensions of getting everyone out of the house on Monday morning — no aspect of family life will be too mundane for a team who expects to fill 1,080 digital cassettes and 3000 CD-ROMs with 800 hours of family interaction.

"The idea is to get a sense of one week in the lives of 30 families," said Ochs, a professor of anthropology and applied linguistics in UCLA's College of Letters & Science. "We want to capture a rich enough record so that people from many different disciplines can garner profound meaning from the material and do so for many generations to come."

The project is being conducted under the auspices of the newly established UCLA/Sloan Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf), which is devoted to detailed, ethnographic research on middle-class families and home life.

CELf is being founded by a \$3.6 million grant from the Sloan Foundation, a New York City-based, nonprofit organization that sponsors research in a range of areas, including family life. Since 1995 the Sloan Foundation has established five other university centers that conduct research on working families. CELf is the only Sloan-sponsored center attempting to capture what researchers are calling "the drama of the working family" on video.

"What has been missing among our centers is a sharp focus on everyday life," said Kathleen Christensen, program director of the Sloan Foundation's Family-Work Research Program. "We thought UCLA researchers could help us understand what is happening on a minute-to-minute basis in these families, which are leading complexly structured lives."

Actually several studies within a single study, the new UCLA research project brings together researchers in biological anthropology, archaeology, medical anthropology, primatology, linguistics, clinical psychology and education.

"The overarching concern is how family and household activities help members of dual-earner, middle-class families to bond and thrive," Ochs

said.

The team will collect data for research into marital relations, stress management, child development, space utilization, language development, health practices, and recreational and socialization patterns.

"Typically, anthropologists have studied populations outside of their own society," Ochs said. "So American middle-class social organizations haven't received enough attention in anthropology even though the group is experiencing tremendous change and it represents a considerable portion of the population."

In the 30 years since women started entering the full-time workforce, family life has changed dramatically, but neither labor and employment law nor research has kept pace with the changes, the Sloan Foundation's Christensen said.

"We're living through a period of profound change," she said. "So we're particularly excited that Elinor Ochs has assembled an outstanding group of social scientists to help us understand the day-to-day manifestations of this shift."

The project will begin in earnest later this year, with three ethnographers tracking and videotaping one family every other week. In an attempt to collect a sample of both weekday and weekend family interactions, the team will follow the family for two weekday mornings, two weekday afternoons and evenings, both Saturday and Sunday mornings, and both Sunday evenings within the 14-day period.

"We'll be there in the morning when people get up and parents are shepherding children out the door," Ochs said. "And in the afternoon we'll jump in the car with parents as they're leaving work and follow

them as they go the grocery store, pick up the kids from school and shuttle them here and there to various activities. We'll follow the family members as they return home and capture their evening routines, such as getting dinner on the table, monitoring homework, paying bills, doing the laundry and getting the kids ready for bed. We're also going to catch family weekend activities and Sunday evening preparations for the week ahead."

In addition to ethnographic videorecording, a field researcher will use ecological sampling methods from archaeology and primatology to collect additional ethnographic information about how family members utilize home spaces and "artifacts." A particular interest is in spaces in homes that bring people together and separate them. The researchers will also monitor the stress of parents and children throughout the day by measuring cortisol levels — a marker for stress — in their saliva. In this way, the project hopes to understand how workplace and school tensions affect family life.

The CELF team will begin recruiting families this fall. They will be looking for families with two to three children, one of whom is between 8 and 10, an age range when children's homework load sharply increases, significantly adding to the need for parental involvement. The family must own its home, and both parents must be employed at least 30 hours per week outside the home. The number of subjects is designed to allow the team to delve in depth into the lives of each family while discerning some quantitatively valid patterns across the whole group.

"We're going to be collecting an enormous amount of information from each family," said Thomas Bradbury, a UCLA professor of psychology and CELF researcher who will be looking at the dynamics of marriage in these families. "Any more would be prohibitive in terms of data collection. Any less would prevent us from drawing conclusions about middle-class families as a whole."

Ochs is known for her research on the role that language plays in socialization and emotional well-being across the life span and across cultures. Having written or edited seven books and more than 80 scholarly articles and books ranging across several disciplines, she is co-author with Lisa Capps of a forthcoming book from Harvard University Press, "Living Narrative," about the ways in which individuals recount life experiences through everyday storytelling with family and friends. She is a fellow of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Source: UCLA

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