

ABSTRACT

Are We Happy Now?: Assessing the Role of Electronic Technology in Family Ritual and Parental Well-Being

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The ubiquitous nature of electronic devices today has led to questioning of the unintended consequences of technology on our relationships. Meanwhile, it is widely argued that the family meal can provide a place for regular family interaction. This paper ties these research strands together by examining how the presence of such devices during family meals might be related to the quality of these interactions and, ultimately, affect measures of parental well-being. Using data from the Culture of American Families survey (2011), I find that daily family meals are positively associated with parents reporting being “very happy” across two measures of well-being. Based on Collins’ (2004) theory of interaction ritual, I argue that parents strongly desire the emotional energy that results from parent-child interactions during the family meal, and my findings suggest that these positive results may be inhibited by the mere presence of electronic devices if this ritual does not take place daily. Thus, in the presence of electronic devices, even regular family meals may not be enough to produce the meaningful interactions that promote well-being.

Are We Happy Now?: Assessing the Role of Electronic Technology in
Family Ritual and Parental Well-Being

by

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CHAPTER ONE

In ceasing to be himself, modern man bears testimony to these phenomena not only when he suffers anxiety but even when he is happy.

- Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*

Introduction

The following study examines the relationship between parent-child interaction, via the family meal, and two measures of parental subjective well-being: happiness with the parenting experience and overall life satisfaction. More specifically, however, this work seeks to understand how the presence or absence of electronic technology at America's dinner tables might be related to the quality of family mealtime interaction and thus affect these measures of parental well-being.

Much of the literature on parenting points to the fact that parents are generally less happy than nonparents, despite tacit notions to the contrary (McLanahan and Adams 1987; Umberson and Gove 1989; Evenson and Simon 2005; Hansen 2012). And, while parental self-reports of well-being are important in and of themselves, they are perhaps even more important in their direct and indirect impact on child well-being and outcomes (Amato and Booth 1997). In fact, while positive parental interactions with children, such as support and monitoring, increase positive outcomes for children across a diverse sample of family types (Amato and Fowler 2002), specific family rituals, such as the family meal, can be positive for both children and parents alike (CASA 2012; Yoon, Newkirk, and Perry-Jenkins 2015). Thus, self-reports of parental well-being, such as those used for this study, can serve as a window through which the inner workings of the

family and the interactions that foster relationships among its members can be studied. In this analysis, such interaction will be viewed through the practice of sitting down to a family meal, which serves as a proxy for family communication and connectedness (Waldfogel 2006).

Previous studies that have examined the universally positive outcomes of the family meal for both parents and children have nevertheless pointed to an increased need for work that examines which factors might further foster or inhibit this important family ritual (Musick and Meier 2012; Goldfarb, Tarver, and Sen 2014). In this case, understanding the role that electronic technology may play in the family meal is instrumental to a better understanding of how this specific form of parent-child interaction affects parental well-being, and thus, the family.

As a result, this study is informed by recent research that attempts to understand how recent electronic technology, despite its benefits, has negative and unintended consequences on our face-to-face interactions and our relationships (Przybylski and Weinstein 2012; Misra, Cheng, Genevie, and Yuan 2014; Roberts and David 2016). As it stands, our consumption of electronic technology has increased to the point that 78% of teens age 12-17 and 90% of adults in the United States own a cell phone; and, our attachment to such devices causes two out of every three of these individuals to check their phone for messages even when they have not been alerted (Pew Research Center 2012; 2014). Therefore, this work is guided by one fundamental research question: how have measures of parental well-being (and thus, the well-being of the family, more generally) been impacted by the addition of electronic technology in our most important family rituals?

In the study that follows, I will attempt to answer this question by making use of data from the Culture of American Families (CAF) survey and by presenting empirical evidence through the use of binary logistic regression models on two measures of parental well-being: happiness with their parenting experience and overall happiness with their life in general. These analyses seek to answer the call for a better understanding of the possible mediating effects that electronic technology can have on the family meal, and as a result, the family (Musick and Meier 2012:490). As one who has been critical of how electronic technology can influence ritual, Bellah (2006:180) writes that with its “enormous proliferation of information,” technology “is in zero-sum relation to meaning.” Indeed, the arguments about the unintended, and occasionally detrimental, effects of electronic technology on our well-being, our family life, and our discourse stem from the power that technology has over us and on our ritual interactions, including family meals. It is with this in mind that I proceed in my attempt to provide a relationship between the presence of electronic technology, the family meal, and parental well-being.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review, Theory, and Hypotheses

Happiness and the American Family

Generally speaking, parents report being less happy than those who do not have children. In fact, despite the nearly universal and implicit belief that having children should make people happier (Hansen 2012), research has continually shown parents to be less happy than nonparents in their reports of subjective well-being (McLanahan and Adams 1987; Hansen 2012). Furthermore, much research has pointed to the negative effect that parenting has on well-being and mental health (Umberson and Gove 1989; Evenson and Simon 2005) and, in some cases, even indicating higher rates of depression for parents (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). While it remains that such impacts differ across various social contexts and family types (Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczek 2010), parenthood presents “a number of interrelated costs that interfere with well-being” (Hansen 2012:45). Namely, these psychological, marital, financial, and opportunity costs tend to impact well-being (Hansen 2012), and “act as suppressors of parents’ life satisfaction” (Pollmann-Schult 2014).

It remains, however, that not all research regarding parental well-being casts a negative light on parenting. Rather, it has been argued that parenting can result in a deeper sense of happiness through its ability to instill in parents a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Baumeister 1991). Similarly, parental well-being and identity are often tied in a positive way to having children, who are viewed by parents as a legacy that will survive them (Lyubomirsky and Boehm 2010). Indeed, such discussions of parental

well-being, while important in isolation, are also integral to the well-being of children (Amato and Booth 1997). And, while most studies of child well-being generally focus on the economic resources of the family and the behaviors of the parents (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994), including marital status and parental cohabitation (Brown 2004), it also remains important to examine parental practices that cut across a diverse set of family types and contexts (Amato and Fowler 2002). As Amato and Fowler (2002) demonstrate, parental support and monitoring are examples of positive parental behaviors that create universally positive results for children across a myriad of demographic variables for race, family structure, gender, income, and education.

Thus, while the research on parenting is not all doom and gloom, it perhaps goes without saying that parents face a wide array of both positive and negative emotions when it comes to their children (Lyubomirsky and Boehm 2010). For example, positive feelings of purpose that parents associate with their children can certainly turn into negative emotions, like anxiety, given the dynamic nature of both families and the world around them. According to the CAF survey, which provided the data used in this study, parents are, in fact, quite wary about the world in which their children are being raised, with a striking 64 percent of respondents saying that family life has declined (Bowman 2012). This decline in family life has certainly coincided with general feelings of decline regarding life and morality in America. Most interesting is the finding that a main concern among parents “pertains to dimly perceived outside threats,” which include those of modern electronic technology (Bowman 2012:14). In fact, the rise of social networking and cell phone use were viewed as mostly negative by 41 percent and 34 percent of parents, respectively (Bowman 2012). How might these responses be

indicative of further costs that are impacting parental well-being and, thus, the family? Could the stressors of technoparenting (Yardi and Bruckman 2011) and the gulf between digital native children and their digital immigrant parents (Prensky 2001) provide further evidence of reduced parental happiness? Indeed, results from the CAF survey make such difficulties abundantly clear:

With all of these connections at a child's constant disposal, it is no wonder that parents suspect their children are vulnerable to things "out there" that might harm them. It is also no wonder that most say parenting today, compared with 50 years ago, is not an easy task. (Bowman 2012:18).

Parent-Child Interaction and the Family Meal

As indicated, parental well-being and child well-being go hand-in-hand; and because parenting is universally accepted as both an important and demanding responsibility, much research has sought to understand these dynamic relationships. To this end, positive parent-child interactions, including spending quality time together, talking about school, and providing encouragement, have been shown to not only be the result of positive parenting practices and behaviors, but also result in improved child well-being across a variety of measures (Amato and Fowler 2002). And, more often than not, these interactions take place at the dinner table during a family meal. Simply put, the family meal is a proxy for communication between parents and their children (Waldfogel 2006). And, while such communication could theoretically happen just about anywhere, the dinner table at least allows for this interaction to occur regularly, allowing children a "comforting context to check in with parents about their day-to-day activities and to connect with them emotionally" (Musick and Meier 2012:488), while providing a

generally positive place for parents and children alike (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, and Story 2006).

In fact, there is much recent evidence that indicates what happens at the dinner table in America's families is strongly related to the developmental outcomes of children. Previous literature has adequately described the relationship between frequent family meals and improved relationships between children and parents (CASA 2012), which result in lower incidence of risky behaviors, such as substance use and drinking, in adolescents (CASA 2012; Sen 2010; Waldfogel 2006), as well as depression, violence and antisocial behavior, issues at school, and sexual activity (Fulkerson, Story, Mellin, Leffert, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2006). And, while not finding such benefits to persist into adulthood in their longitudinal study, Musick and Meier (2012) maintained that an increase in family meal frequency is related to a decrease in levels of depression, substance use, and delinquency among adolescents. Furthermore, in their extensive review of the family meal and risk prevention literature, Skeer and Ballard (2013:944) call this a "protective effect" that is fostered by the conversation that occurs during the family meal. And, as another example of this phenomenon and the reciprocal nature of parental and child well-being, it has recently been suggested that family meals can have a moderating impact between parental stress and child outcomes, especially for working-class fathers and their daughters (Yoon et al. 2015).

It remains, however, that other confounding variables may be present as "the frequency of family meals is undoubtedly related to family resources, relationships, and other characteristics that contribute to well-being" (Musick and Meier 2012:477). This is supported by the work of Goldfarb, Tarver, and Sen (2014), who also call for further

analysis of possible confounding variables. To this end, Musick and Meier (2012:488) found that families with higher incomes ate together more frequently. Similarly, Putnam (2015:122-124) argues that family dinner is an indicator of differences in parenting based on social class, while also demonstrating that the gap between the poor and affluent in holding to this traditional interaction ritual is growing.¹ Regardless of causality, however, the investments of time that parents make in the lives of their children are important; and, as indicated by the evidence throughout his work, Putnam (2015) demonstrates that those children whose parents made such an investment in time and energy invariably experienced better outcomes.

As a result of such empirical and anecdotal evidence, along with the growing impact of nonprofit organizations that aim to help families “improve the frequency and quality of their mealtime interaction” (The Family Dinner Project 2015), it is quite possible that parents are beginning to sincerely feel this push to take back the dinner table as more than just a symbolic stance. Instead, it can serve as a direct window into the felt well-being of parents and how they view their expected role performance, especially if family meals are viewed as “a way to keep connections with family members and ease daily stress in the fast-paced lives of today’s families” (Fulkerson et al. 2006b). A lack of understanding of one’s children can, at least in one’s mind, be directly related to a lack of connection or missed opportunities to communicate at the dinner table, and thus, a lack of satisfaction or happiness with one’s self as a parent.

¹ Turkle (2015:55) notices that such social class divisions are apparent even in our use of electronic technology at the dinner table, arguing that there are those, like Steve Jobs and other Silicon Valley parents, “who have-so-much-that-they-know-when-to-put-it-away.”

Interaction Ritual and Meaning

While Fiese (2006) has defined family rituals and routines by their ability to create a family identity and convey important family values, the sociological literature on ritual interaction provides a broader scope and a theoretical base for this paper.²

Beginning with Durkheim ([1912] 2001), group ritual interaction has been viewed as necessary for the creation of meaning and moral community. This ritual interaction is motivated by the intensity of emotion that becomes symbolized by the individuals in the group. The shared norms and values that embody our ritual actions, what Durkheim called the conscience collective, can be found in all areas of society, especially our families. Goffman (1971), in bringing these ideas into modernity, has also alluded to the loss of meaning evident in modern ritual. As he writes:

In contemporary society rituals performed to stand-ins for supernatural entities are everywhere in decay. . . . What remains are brief rituals one individual performs for and to another, attesting to civility and good will on the performer's part and to the recipient's possession of a small patrimony of sacredness. (Goffman 1971:63).

To this micro-sociological approach, the model developed by Collins (2004) is quite useful. By building on the ingredients necessary for ritual, including situational copresence, focused interaction, shared mood, and a barrier to outsiders, it is argued that ritual interactions of great meaning can take place in a myriad of situations (Collins 2004). From these situations, a shared emotional experience results in group solidarity, situationally sacred objects, a shared sense of group morality, and emotional energy, or “a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action”

² For a detailed historical and cultural analysis of the rituals and meanings that specifically surround our dinner tables, see Visser (1991).

(Collins 2004:49). These feelings are what individuals seek in their social encounters, allowing situations to shape individuals, and thus, causing us to be “socialized by our interactional experiences throughout our lives” (Collins 2004:44). This intense process of socialization through situational experiences is also a powerful part of our moral upbringing. The feelings that are produced by the creation of emotional energy in the group, therefore, lead individuals to a “desire for action in what they consider a morally proper path,” which has been determined through group solidarity as part of the interaction ritual (Collins 2004:42). In this way, moral development becomes part of the socialization process and these rituals can have a dramatic impact on the family, and society as a whole. Collins (2004:41) notes that “society is held together to just the extent that rituals are effectively carried out, and during those periods of time when the effects of those rituals are still fresh in people’s minds and reverberating in their emotions.” Thus, when ritual interactions, such as family meals, are on the decline, so too are morality and meaning.

Bellah (2006) makes use of a typology developed by Rappaport (1999), which includes a conceptualization of low, middle, and high-order levels of ritual meaning to argue that ritual in modern society is on the decline. “*Low-order meaning* is grounded in distinction,” which is merely informative and by itself produces “no solidarity, no morality, no society, and no humanity” (Bellah 2006:164). This level of meaning is based solely on self-interested pursuits and is mostly the domain of technology. *Middle-order meaning* serves to “link realms of experience and feeling that have perhaps become disconnected in the routine affairs of daily life” (Bellah 2006:164). Finally, “*higher-order meaning* ‘is grounded in identity or unity, the radical identification or unification of

self with other” (Bellah 2006:164). It is through this higher-order meaning that our ritual interaction becomes social. Bellah’s concern, however, is with the decline of such ritual. A decline that, like previous theorists, he links to technological advancement and increased use of electronic devices in our ever-“connected” society. As he writes, “The present moment, with its tendency to privilege information, that is, low-order meaning, above middle- and high-order meaning, is not a propitious one for ritual or even for the understanding of it” (Bellah 2006:180). Indeed, there are those who are trying to understand it. Such an erosion of interaction ritual is, in fact, being felt, as witnessed by the vast amount of new research devoted to understanding the impact of electronic technology and our relationship with it. And, part of this understanding, it is argued here, should be informed by how electronic technology plays a role in the ritual of the family meal, and thus, parental well-being.

Understanding the Impact of Technology

Modern technology has provided an array of positive outcomes for our contemporary society. Consider, for example, the efficiency of our travel, the ease and speed of communication, the comforts of central heating and air conditioning, the availability of food and clean water, as well as preventative medicine and the eradication of many diseases. These are but a few technological successes. But, there are those who argue that technology also has many unintended, negative consequences that society often fails to recognize. Such theorizing challenges our thinking about technology, which has been described by social philosophers and technological critics as having a totalizing impact on our social processes and interactions (Ellul 1964; Heidegger 1977; Borgmann

1984; Postman 1985; Sanders 1994; Turkle 1995).³ While new technological mediums and devices are the focus of this study, the work of theorists on the impact of television on our social lives can be quite insightful.

In the past, it has been argued that television has an addictive quality that turns us away from the things that give life meaning and fullness and ultimately, that which tends to make us happy (Borgmann 1984; Postman 1985). This “displacement effect” has a “tendency to prevent an idyllic childhood and a vigorous adolescence, to suffocate conversation, reduce common meals, supersede reading, to crowd out games, walks, and social occasions” (Borgmann 1984:141). Television has been called a “modern mask man puts on every evening” in its ability to isolate us from human interaction (Ellul 1964:379); and it has been postulated that through its non-rational content, television has created an entire culture based on entertainment, along with advertising that has destroyed public discourse (Postman 1985). The same may be said about other communication technologies, as these “*demand* superficiality, which actually institutionalizes the impulse toward polarization in public discourse” (Hunter 1991:168). In this pursuit of entertainment and through the intensely negative nature of modern discourse, Americans especially have placed themselves “in self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action” and created “an age of narcissism” (Borgmann 1992:3). This cultural shift is visible in all areas of our social lives, but its impact on family communication and interaction, and vicariously on our children, is cause for concern, especially considering the individual nature of today’s electronic devices.

³ Relevant here is the idea by Heidegger (1977:18) that the word “*techné*,” which means to “reveal,” was used by the Greeks to refer to the ability of art and poetry to reveal truth and help us to understand our world. Ellul (1964:29) also reminds us that the Greeks were “suspicious of technical activity” and sought balance and moderation in life.

The ever-present nature of electronic devices in our society has provided the impetus for numerous recent studies and theoretical perspectives that seek to understand their possible impact on our social interactions. A main area of interest is the erosion of face-to-face interactions and relationships with the use of electronic technologies. As Turkle (2012:xii), who has led this charge of late, argues, we use technology as a crutch because we are “insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy,” and thus, “we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time.” Meanwhile, recent experiments in this area have indicated that this approach to technology is quite possibly having detrimental effects. In fact, research shows that simply having a mobile phone in your presence can adversely impact the quality of your conversation with others, your feelings of closeness, as well as your ability to empathize with those around you (Przybylski and Weinstein 2012; Misra, Cheng, Genevie, and Yuan 2014). According to new research on the impact of cell phones on our intimate relationships, Roberts and David (2016:134) utilize the term “phubbing” to describe the process of being “snubbed by someone using their cell phone when in your company.” As the authors state, “partner phubbing creates conflict over such use of one’s cell phone which in turn impacts reported relationship satisfaction, and ultimately personal well-being” (Roberts and David 2016:140).

Further research has concluded that attempting to multitask by using electronic devices while studying negatively affects one’s grades (Junco and Cotten 2012); and, can prove very problematic to the classroom atmosphere within schools (Roberts, Yaya, and Manolis 2014). Because of the prevalence of use among young people, empirical analysis has also set out to determine which personality characteristics may enhance or

create cell phone addictions (Roberts, Pullig, and Manolis 2015). Along with offering solace and an escape from boredom, cell phones are “an important tool in creating a social identity for young adults” (Roberts et al. 2015:14-16).

In this way, it has been theorized that mobile phones, especially, have facilitated the creation of a new social reality. With the concept of “floating worlds,” or new types of in-group realities created by texting and the use of social media, face-to-face communication has in many ways lost its importance (Gergen 2010). Instead of engaging in conversation at the dinner table, for example, a person may be “relatively disengaged from those about him or her, as physically absent participants in the favored cluster are immanently present” (Gergen 2010:21). Thus, because of these new digital connections, we often disconnect from traditional forms of community and interaction much like Putnam (2010) has previously illustrated.

Hypotheses

By examining the impact that electronic technology has on the family meal, we can better explore not only how family ritual interaction has been affected by the exponential increases in the use of electronic technology, but also how aspects of parental well-being are potentially affected by this interplay of variables. Using the theoretical propositions of Collins (2004) stated above, it is argued that parents strongly desire the emotional energy that comes from parent-child interactions, such as those that take place at the family dinner table. And, furthermore, these interactions have a strong influence on their self-reports of well-being. Through the situational copresence and focused interaction of communication during family mealtime, parental well-being can be seen as existing within a reciprocal relationship with child well-being and overall positive family

interaction and functioning. And, while parental well-being can be a difficult concept to define (Lyubomirsky and Boehm 2010), previous lines of research have indicated that not only are family rituals important and overwhelmingly positive in regards to parent-child interactions, relationships, and well-being, but also the pervasive nature and use of electronic technology may be inhibiting these relationships in unintended ways. More specifically, the use of electronic devices around loved ones may be adversely affecting our satisfaction with relationships and self-reports of well-being (Roberts and David 2016). Thus, I propose the following hypotheses to guide the current study:

H₁: An increase in the frequency of family meals will be positively correlated with parental subjective well-being.

H₂: The presence of electronic devices will be negatively correlated with parental subjective well-being.

CHAPTER THREE

Data and Methods

The present study uses data from the Culture of American Families Project (CAF), which was conducted by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia during the fall of 2011. A web-based survey was conducted by Knowledge Networks to investigate a myriad of parental beliefs and practices across a nationally representative sample of 3,000 parents who have at least one child between the ages of 5 and 18 currently living at home. Table 1 outlines variables of use and descriptive statistics for this study.

Dependent Variables

Two dependent variables of subjective well-being were used for this analysis: parental self-reports of their happiness with their parenting experience to this point and their overall happiness with their life. Happiness measures have been previously shown to focus on present feelings of well-being in individuals and are typically more sensitive to the possibility of current stressors in one's life (McLanahan and Adams 1987). The measures of both parental and overall happiness were derived from questions on the CAF survey that asked respondents, respectively, "Taking all things together, how happy has your parenting experience been to this point?" and "Taking all things together, how happy are things in your life these days?" Both questions were originally answered on a four-point Likert scale (where 1 = very happy, 2 = rather happy, 3 = not very happy, and 4 = not at all happy). Both measures of happiness were re-coded as binary variables for

this analysis to measure the difference between those who report to be “very happy” overall and with their parenting, and those who do not. The distribution of each of these questions necessitated the creation of binary dependent variables for analysis as the vast majority of respondents answered on each measure that they were at least “rather happy” (over 94% of the sample for parental happiness and over 88% of the sample for overall happiness). Thus, the creation of binary dependent variables and the subsequent binary logistic regression models that have been estimated allow me to better identify predictors of being “very happy” on both measures. These binary dependent variables allow for each hypothesis to be tested on two separate measures of parental subjective well-being, which is important in exploring the difference between that which predicts parental views of their lives overall, as compared to that which predicts the perceived meaning and purpose that they may derive from the experience of being a parent.

Independent Variables

The key independent variable used in these models is a categorical interaction variable that was constructed using two questions regarding family meal time from the CAF survey. The first question, in which respondents were asked, “How often do children in your family typically sit down together with one or more parents for a meal?” utilized a six-point Likert scale (where 1 = never, 2 = rarely-less than once a month, 3 = once or twice a month, 4 = about weekly, 5 = several times a week, and 6 = daily). Parents that reported eating at least weekly meals with their children were asked a series of follow-up questions including one about the use of electronic devices at the table during family meals. This question was coded using the same six-point Likert scale and specifically asked parents, “How often do family members use electronics (such as

computers, cell phones [including text messaging], Game Boys, and e-readers) during family meals?” Framed as such, the question itself makes no normative claim about the use of technology being a battle between parents and their children. Instead, anyone at the table, including mom or dad, could be using their phone during this family ritual.

As indicated, these questions were combined to create the independent variable of “Quality Family Meal Time,” which is described in Table 1. Those respondents who reported eating a family meal once or twice a month or less (including the very few that reported never eating family meals) were not asked the follow-up question about the presence of electronic technology, and thus, represent the “few meals” category, which was the suppressed category used in both primary sets of analysis. Those who were asked the follow-up technology question include those who reported eating meals about weekly, several times a week, and daily. These respondents were further divided in the created categorical variable system by determining whether or not electronic technology was present at the meal to any extent whatsoever. This binary treatment of the electronic technology question allows for the following analyses to predict the statistical effects of devices simply being present at the family meal. This is important in exploring the potential impact that the mere presence of electronic technology has on interaction, regardless of how long, for what purposes, or by whom, it is being used (see also Przybylski and Weinstein 2012). Thus, those who reported eating weekly meals as a family were categorized as those who eat weekly meals without technology (those who answered “never” to the follow-up question) and those who eat weekly meals with technology present to some extent (those who answered the follow-up question with anything from “rarely” to “daily”). The same was done for those reporting to eat several

family meals a week, as well as those who reporting eating daily family meals. The frequency distributions of these family meal categories are illustrated in Figure 1 below, which indicates the cultural push towards frequent meals as those that eat “daily” meals (with or without technology present) comprise roughly half of the entire sample. In creating this categorical independent variable, analyses will seek to determine whether or not there is a statistically significant difference in reported parental well-being not just in its relationship to the frequency of family meals, but it will also serve to propose to what extent electronic technology moderates the impact of this family ritual on both dependent variables of parental well-being.

In order to further assess the importance of parent-child interaction on both measures of parental well-being, a question was included that asked respondents, “Being realistic, on a typical school day, about how much time do you spend interacting with your children?” This variable was unchanged for the analysis, using the original seven-point Likert scale of daily parent-child interaction (where 1 = none to 7 = more than 3 hours). Aside from this important measure, several other demographic control variables were used, including age, education, income, race, sex, region, marital status, number of children living at home, the presence of any adult children in the home, religious attendance, and number of hours worked per week by the respondent. Age is measured as a continuous variable from 18 to 81, education is based on the highest degree received (from 1st-4th grade to Professional or Doctorate degree), and household income ranges from 1 = less than \$5,000 to 19 = \$175,000 or more. Race (white = 1), sex (male = 1), and region (South = 1) were all coded as binary variables. Marital status was broken into a system of dummy variables, with “Married” as the suppressed category for analysis.

All respondents in this analysis had at least one child living at home (this ranged from 1 to 10), but a binary variable was also constructed to control for whether or not the oldest child in the home was an adult (18 years of age or older). Religious attendance was also included as a key cultural variable and was measured on a seven-point Likert scale (where 1 = “never” to 7 = “daily”). Finally, a natural log transformation was utilized to normalize the distribution of the variable for hours worked per week by the respondent.

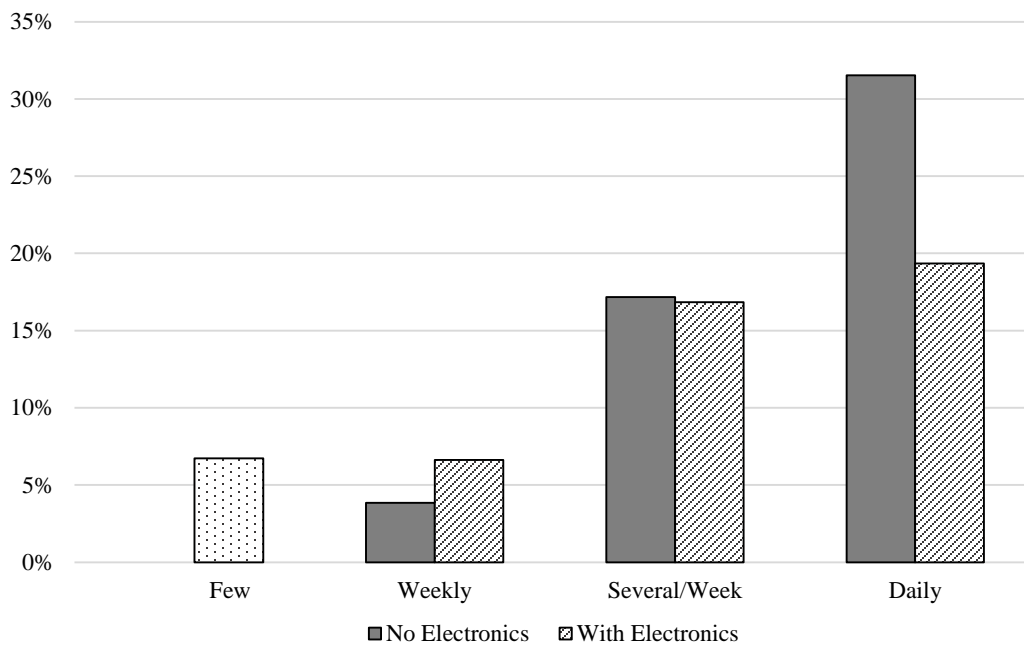


Figure 1. Frequencies of Family Meal Time from CAF Data

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Binary Logistic Regression^a

Variable	N	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Parental Happiness ^b	2,904	0.464	0.499	0.0 - 1.0
Overall Happiness ^b	2,904	0.299	0.458	0.0 - 1.0
Interact with Kids ^c	2,903	5.900	1.174	1.0 - 7.0
Quality Family Meal Time ^d				
Few Meals	2,897	0.066	0.248	0.0 - 1.0
Weekly Meals, No Electronics	2,897	0.038	0.190	0.0 - 1.0
Weekly Meals, With Electronics	2,897	0.065	0.246	0.0 - 1.0
Several/Week Meals, No Electronics	2,897	0.168	0.374	0.0 - 1.0
Several/Week Meals, With Electronics	2,897	0.165	0.371	0.0 - 1.0
Daily Meals, No Electronics	2,897	0.309	0.462	0.0 - 1.0
Daily Meals, With Electronics	2,897	0.189	0.392	0.0 - 1.0
Age	2,904	41.488	8.833	18.0 - 81.0
Education ^e	2,904	10.938	1.639	2.0 - 14.0
Household Income	2,904	12.104	4.374	1.0 - 19.0
White ^f	2,904	0.722	0.448	0.0 - 1.0
Male ^f	2,904	0.285	0.452	0.0 - 1.0
South ^f	2,904	0.326	0.469	0.0 - 1.0
Marital Status ^g				
Married	2,904	0.743	0.437	0.0 - 1.0
Widowed	2,904	0.009	0.096	0.0 - 1.0
Divorced	2,904	0.088	0.284	0.0 - 1.0
Separated	2,904	0.023	0.151	0.0 - 1.0
Never Married	2,904	0.063	0.243	0.0 - 1.0
Live with Partner	2,904	0.072	0.259	0.0 - 1.0
Number of Children Living at Home	2,904	2.199	1.062	1.0 - 10.0
Any Adult Children ^h	2,904	0.182	0.386	0.0 - 1.0
Religious Attendance ⁱ	2,884	3.199	1.829	1.0 - 7.0
Hours Worked/Week ^j	2,857	2.637	1.673	-0.29 - 4.61

Note: ^a Based on the 2012 Culture of American Families Survey Data; ^b Binary Variables created for analysis (1=very happy); ^c Time spent interacting with own children on typical school day (0-7 Likert scale); ^d Created Categorical Variable System ("Few Meals" as suppressed category in analysis); ^e Measured as Highest Degree Received; ^f Binary Variables for race, gender, and region (white=1; male=1; South=1); ^g System of Dummy Variables used with "Married" as suppressed category; ^h Binary Variable for any adult children (18 and older) living at home; ⁱ Measured from 1=never to 7=daily; ^j Natural Log of Hours Worked per Week.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Following the previously outlined hypotheses that an increased frequency of family meals will be positively related to parental happiness and that the presence of electronic devices at the dinner table will negate this relationship to some extent, binary logistic regression analyses were used to estimate these effects across two measures of parental subjective well-being. Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the results of empirical tests of both hypotheses for the dependent variable of parental happiness with their parenting experience, while also controlling for key demographic variables. These models are essentially the same with the exception of the suppressed category used in the dummy system for the important “Quality Family Meal Time” variable. While Table 2 uses “Few Meals” as the suppressed category, Table 3 compares all other meal categories to “Daily Meals, No Electronics.” Each model allows for a slightly different view of how parental happiness is potentially affected across these categories by comparing them to each bookend in the system (in other words, not eating together much at all and eating together every day without the distractions of technology). Thus, the inclusion of both models allows for a deeper comparative analysis regarding the effects of the presence of technology across categories of family meal frequency, as will be further explained. Tables 4 and 5 follow these same patterns by empirically testing the dependent variable of parents’ overall happiness with their life in general.

Table 2
Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Parental Happiness^a
N = 2,838

Variable	b		SE	Odds Ratio	β
Intercept	-2.285	***	0.449		
Interact with Kids	0.286	***	0.038	1.331	0.186
Quality Family Meal Time					
Weekly Meals, No Electronics	0.066		0.269	1.069	0.007
Weekly Meals, With Electronics	0.180		0.231	1.197	0.025
Several/Week Meals, No Electronics	0.561	**	0.194	1.752	0.115
Several/Week Meals, With Electronics	0.423	*	0.194	1.526	0.087
Daily Meals, No Electronics	0.735	***	0.186	2.085	0.187
Daily Meals, With Electronics	0.683	**	0.192	1.980	0.148
Age	-0.007		0.005	0.993	-0.032
Education	0.015		0.028	1.015	0.013
Household Income	0.009		0.012	1.009	0.021
White	-0.135		0.094	0.873	-0.033
Male	0.287	**	0.094	1.333	0.072
South	-0.060		0.085	0.941	-0.016
Marital Status					
Widowed	-0.450		0.431	0.638	-0.024
Divorced	-0.334	*	0.151	0.716	-0.052
Separated	-0.315		0.267	0.730	-0.026
Never Married	-0.277		0.183	0.758	-0.037
Live with Partner	-0.138		0.166	0.871	-0.019
Number of Children Living at Home	-0.108	**	0.041	0.898	-0.063
Any Adult Children	0.232	*	0.115	1.261	0.049
Religious Attendance	0.079	**	0.023	1.083	0.080
Hours Worked/Week	-0.015		0.026	0.985	-0.014
Pseudo R ²	0.079				
PRE	0.044				

^a 2012 Culture of American Families Survey Data (1="Very Happy")

^b "Few Meals" used as suppressed category.

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.0001.

Table 3

Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Parental Happiness (Ancillary)^a
N = 2,838

Variable	b		SE	Odds Ratio	β
Intercept	-1.550	**	0.456		
Interact with Kids	0.286	***	0.038	1.331	0.186
Quality Family Meal Time ^b					
Few Meals, With or Without Electronics	-0.735	***	0.186	0.480	-0.101
Weekly Meals, No Electronics	-0.669	**	0.224	0.513	-0.071
Weekly Meals, With Electronics	-0.555	**	0.179	0.574	-0.076
Several/Week Meals, No Electronics	-0.174		0.118	0.840	-0.036
Several/Week Meals, With Electronics	-0.312	**	0.120	0.732	-0.064
Daily Meals, With Electronics	-0.052		0.113	0.950	-0.011
Age	-0.007		0.005	0.993	-0.032
Education	0.015		0.028	1.015	0.013
Household Income	0.009		0.012	1.009	0.021
White	-0.135		0.094	0.873	-0.033
Male	0.287	**	0.094	1.333	0.072
South	-0.060		0.085	0.941	-0.016
Marital Status					
Widowed	-0.450		0.431	0.638	-0.024
Divorced	-0.334	*	0.151	0.716	-0.052
Separated	-0.315		0.267	0.730	-0.026
Never Married	-0.277		0.183	0.758	-0.037
Live with Partner	-0.138		0.166	0.871	-0.019
Number of Children Living at Home	-0.108	**	0.041	0.898	-0.063
Any Adult Children	0.232	*	0.115	1.261	0.049
Religious Attendance	0.079	**	0.023	1.083	0.080
Hours Worked/Week	-0.015		0.026	0.985	-0.014
Pseudo R ²	0.079				
PRE	0.044				

^a 2012 Culture of American Families Survey Data (1="Very Happy")

^b "Daily Meals, No Electronics" used as suppressed category.

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.0001.

As Table 2 indicates, there are a number of variables that are positively related to parents reporting being very happy with their parenting experience. In fact, along with four of the measures of quality family meal time, time spent interacting with their children, their reported rates of religious attendance, and the presence of any adult

children (18 and over) in the home all increase the odds of reporting being very happy with parenting. The particularly large effect of interaction with one's children on parental happiness (33 percent increased odds of reporting being very happy as a parent) is not surprising and confirms the strong relationship between parent-child interaction and well-being, while also serving as a key control that allows the family meal variables to be measured net of parent-child interactions. Furthermore, based on the data, males also have increased odds of reporting to be very happy as parents compared to females when controlling for all other variables in the model. It is possible that this finding is related to the fact that women tend to experience greater role strain as they balance perceived traditional gender roles regarding parenting along with those of work (Scott and Alwin 1989). Meanwhile, negative odds of reported happiness can be seen amongst those parents that are divorced, as compared to those that are married, and as the number of children living in the home increases; neither of which is surprising.

Of great interest, however, are the findings relating to the family meal, both in terms of frequency and in terms of the role of electronic technology. For these analyses, one must take into account both tables presented above, which utilized the same overall models, but suppressed different categories within the family meal construct to fully explore the relationship between frequency of family meals and the presence of technology across these categories. As Table 2 illustrates, those families that eat several times a week or daily have increased predicted odds of reporting to be very happy when compared to families that eat few meals together. Not surprisingly, this finding is consistent with the research previously discussed on the importance of frequent family meals and also lends support to Hypothesis 1. However, it should be noted that there is

no statistical difference in terms of parental happiness between eating weekly meals together as a family and eating meals a couple of times a month or less. This is certainly not a minor finding considering the hurried nature of modern parenting and the scheduling conflicts that often limit such important family ritual interactions.

When it comes to the role of technology during the family meal, Table 2 indicates decreased odds of happiness within both statistically significant categories when electronic technology is present at the table. For example, “Daily Meals, No Electronics” is the strongest variable in the model in its positive relationship to parental happiness. However, this positive relationship decreases, albeit slightly, with the inclusion of technology. Similar negative moderating effects of technology can be seen across the two categories of parents who report eating several meals a week as a family. Perhaps more helpful to the overall analysis are the findings described in Table 3, where “Daily Meals, No Electronics” is the suppressed category in this system. First, there is no statistically significant difference between daily meals with and without technology in terms of parental happiness, which supports the idea that daily meals are an incredibly important means of creating space for family interactions that are positive in their relationship to parental happiness even in the presence of technology. Second, families that eat several meals a week together without electronics experience no predicted significant decrease in measured subjective well-being either when compared to those who eat daily meals. However, and most importantly, those parents who report eating several meals a week together, but also allow individual electronic technology at the table to any extent, have predicted decreased odds of parental happiness when compared to those who eat daily meals without technology. This lends some support to Hypothesis 2

and may suggest that if technology is invited to the table to any extent, it's unintended, negative consequences on parental well-being can only be counteracted by the highest possible frequency of family meals. In other words, if technology is invited to the table, families had better be having daily meals together.

Table 4
Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Overall Happiness^a
N = 2,838

Variable	b		SE	Odds Ratio	β
Intercept	-2.794	***	0.501		
Interact with Kids	0.196	***	0.043	1.217	0.127
Quality Family Meal Time					
Weekly Meals, No Electronics	-0.228		0.322	0.796	-0.024
Weekly Meals, With Electronics	-0.158		0.276	0.854	-0.022
Several/Week Meals, No Electronics	0.338		0.219	1.402	0.069
Several/Week Meals, With Electronics	0.230		0.220	1.259	0.047
Daily Meals, No Electronics	0.561	**	0.210	1.753	0.143
Daily Meals, With Electronics	0.330		0.217	1.392	0.072
Age	-0.012	*	0.006	0.988	-0.059
Education	0.025		0.031	1.025	0.022
Household Income	0.046	**	0.013	1.047	0.110
White	-0.222	*	0.101	0.801	-0.055
Male	0.096		0.103	1.101	0.024
South	0.026		0.092	1.026	0.007
Marital Status					
Widowed	-0.753		0.565	0.471	-0.040
Divorced	-0.119		0.171	0.888	-0.019
Separated	-0.506		0.324	0.603	-0.042
Never Married	-0.379		0.218	0.684	-0.051
Live with Partner	0.003		0.186	1.003	0.0004
Number of Children Living at Home	-0.010		0.044	0.990	-0.006
Any Adult Children	0.058		0.127	1.059	0.012
Religious Attendance	0.152	***	0.025	1.164	0.153
Hours Worked/Week	-0.077	**	0.028	0.926	-0.071
Pseudo R ²	0.087				
PRE	0.052				

^a 2012 Culture of American Families Survey Data (1="Very Happy")

^b "Few Meals" used as suppressed category.

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.0001.

Table 5

Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Overall Happiness (Ancillary)^a
N = 2,838

Variable	b		SE	Odds Ratio	β
Intercept	-2.232	***	0.501		
Interact with Kids	0.196	***	0.043	1.217	0.127
Quality Family Meal Time					
Few Meals, With or Without Electronics	-0.561	**	0.209	0.570	-0.077
Weekly Meals, No Electronics	-0.789	**	0.270	0.454	-0.083
Weekly Meals, With Electronics	-0.719	**	0.218	0.487	-0.098
Several/Week Meals, No Electronics	-0.224		0.127	0.800	-0.046
Several/Week Meals, With Electronics	-0.331	*	0.131	0.718	-0.068
Daily Meals, With Electronics	-0.231		0.119	0.794	-0.049
Age	-0.012	*	0.006	0.988	-0.059
Education	0.025		0.031	1.025	0.022
Household Income	0.046	**	0.013	1.047	0.110
White	-0.222	*	0.101	0.801	-0.055
Male	0.096		0.103	1.101	0.024
South	0.026		0.092	1.026	0.007
Marital Status					
Widowed	-0.753		0.565	0.471	-0.040
Divorced	-0.119		0.171	0.888	-0.019
Separated	-0.506		0.324	0.603	-0.042
Never Married	-0.379		0.218	0.684	-0.051
Live with Partner	0.003		0.186	1.003	0.0004
Number of Children Living at Home	-0.010		0.044	0.990	-0.006
Any Adult Children	0.058		0.127	1.059	0.012
Religious Attendance	0.152	***	0.025	1.164	0.153
Hours Worked/Week	-0.077	**	0.028	0.926	-0.071
Pseudo R ²	0.087				
PRE	0.052				

^a 2012 Culture of American Families Survey Data (1="Very Happy")

^b "Daily Meals, No Electronics" used as suppressed category.

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.0001.

Tables 4 and 5 present the findings for the overall happiness of the parents surveyed, allowing for a more inclusive measure of parental life satisfaction. As Table 4 shows, time spent interacting with one's children and reported rates of religious attendance continue to increase the odds of reporting to be very happy with life overall.

In fact, these two variables have the largest effects in the entire model, while increased household income is also positively related to increased life satisfaction according to these findings. Not surprisingly, both age and reported hours of work per week are negatively associated with life satisfaction, while interestingly the results also indicate that whites experience lower odds of overall happiness when compared to other racial groups. Of course, most interesting here, however, is the finding that only one of the categories within the constructed categorical variable of Quality Family Meal Time is positive and statistically significant: Daily Meals without Electronics.

As Table 4 indicates, when it comes to overall life satisfaction for parents, only one type of family meal appears to matter net of other interactions with children and that is the daily meal uninterrupted by technology. Such daily meals increase the odds of a parent reporting being very happy with his or her life by just over 75 percent when compared to those that eat few meals together as a family. Indeed, family meals matter, but more importantly for our analysis is the fact that these same daily meals drop out of significance when technology is present. In other words, daily meals with technology are essentially no different than eating one or two meals a month when it comes to one's overall happiness as a parent. This finding again supports Hypothesis 2 and further indicates that our devices can potentially have unintended, negative consequences on our interactions, and thus, our feelings of well-being. Further support for this argument is provided by Table 5, in which the suppressed category was changed to "Daily Meals, No Electronics" for further comparative analysis. Here, the findings mirror those from Table 3, indicating similar relationships between electronic technology and the family meal even when estimating overall happiness, as opposed to parental happiness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusion

The importance of the family meal as a time to slow down and talk is not lost on parents, but that does not make it easy to accomplish. For parents today, children's evening schedules already overflow with extracurricular activities in this age of concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003). With this in mind, nonprofit organizations such as The Family Dinner Project, along with a myriad of empirical researchers, have sought to provide evidence that an effort to increase family meals and improve the quality of interaction around the dinner table will result in positive outcomes for parents and children alike. What the research presented here suggests, however, is that even "regular" family meals may not be enough to produce some kind of meaningful interaction that promotes well-being in parents, and thus within families more generally. In fact, these findings suggest that even attempts to meet as a family around the dinner table on a weekly basis may not provide an advantage to one's happiness as a parent or to one's overall life satisfaction when compared to eating together only a few times a month or not at all. And, as Visser (1991:266) notes, when entertainment surpasses talk and "where families spend less and less time together, removing dinner-time talk may well be a serious deprivation: it takes away what was scarce in the first place."

As indicated, empirical testing supports the hypothesis that increased frequency of family meals is positively related to parental happiness in terms of both their subjective feelings about their parenting and their overall life satisfaction. However, to reap the benefits of the family meal, this research suggests that such rituals should take place

more than once a week. Weekly meals, in all models, were not shown to be significantly different from eating just a couple of times a month as a family. This may be particularly disconcerting for families whose busy schedules have them passing by each other like proverbial ships in the night; but, like other attempts to bring families together in meaningful interaction, perhaps this research can simply provide another empirical example for the value in creating the time and space for such positive interactions between parents and children to occur, whether they are at the dinner table or not. In support of Hypothesis 1, the findings of this study do reflect previous research that has illustrated the importance of family meals as a means of communication and interaction, and thus positively related to parental well-being, in their ability to create a “protective effect” and ease the stress of a busy family schedule (Skeer and Ballard 2013; Fulkerson et al. 2006b).

The reduction of such family stress has undoubtedly been aided by the advent and increased use of electronic technology to connect us from afar, coordinate schedules, and increase our general efficiency. However, much recent research, which has been previously noted, points to the unintended, negative consequences that have arisen from the increased role that electronic technology plays on our interactions and in our relationships. Our engagement with and in such technology has produced a level of disengagement with those in our immediate physical environment (Gergen 2010). More specifically, electronic technology, by its mere presence, has detrimental impacts on our interactions and our relationships (Przybylski and Weinstein 2012; Roberts and David 2016). This study, has attempted to address the possibility of such consequences on the family meal and well-being in an attempt to answer the call for a better understanding of

such relationships (Musick and Meier 2012). To that end, in support of Hypothesis 2, it can be suggested that when individual electronic technology is brought to the table, its mere presence may detract from the mealtime interaction itself, as well as reported feelings of happiness in parents. In fact, the data suggest that only daily family meals can stand up to electronic technology when it comes to measures of both parental happiness and overall life satisfaction.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding in this study is that when it comes to overall reports of happiness in parents, only one type of family meal seems to be significantly different from eating few meals as a family at all: daily meals without technology. And, while daily meals without technology do not appear to differ from daily meals with technology, ancillary analyses, as presented previously in Table 5, seem to suggest at least partial evidence to the contrary.¹ Furthermore, across both measures of parental well-being, reduced odds of happiness are predicted when electronics are present among those families that eat meals together several times a week, as opposed to daily. Such moderate decreases in well-being may seem inconsequential, but could relate to Collins' (2006) concept of emotional energy, which he claims is not only the key outcome of interaction rituals, but also the key ingredient in perpetuating chains of interaction rituals. Decreases in emotional energy at the dinner table could theoretically be linked to aspects of ritual interaction that are broken down by the use of individual electronic technology, including a mutual focus, shared mood, and a barrier to outsiders. Deficiencies here could also reduce ritual outcomes, like group solidarity, symbolic meaning, and feelings

¹ In this analysis, the “Daily meals, with electronics” variable was significant at an alpha level of $p < .1$, which was not reported on the table or in the results section. Here, the presence of electronics at daily meals decreases the odds of parents reporting being “very happy” by about 20 percent when compared to electronics being absent from daily meals.

of morality, which might have consequences across a myriad of parent-child interactions and have an additive effect over time on parental well-being and ultimately parent-child relationships. The fact that these findings remain statistically significant net of other reported parent-child interactions lends further support to Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, it remains that electronic technology is probably not simply removing meaning from interaction, but altering meaning instead. Such subtle changes in how we take part in ritual, may in fact be evident in these findings, as Bellah (2006) has indicated that technology tends to produce low-order meaning that is largely self-interested and does not produce group solidarity.

As with any study, there are limitations to this work. First and foremost, these findings are not necessarily causal in nature. As previous research has indicated, there are a number of possible confounding variables at play when it comes to how the family meal relates to feelings of well-being. While attempts were made to control for income, it remains that there are differences in the frequency and quality of family mealtime interactions when it comes to income and social class (Musick and Meier 2012; Putnam 2015). Future research should seek to interact both frequency of family meals, as well as measures of quality interaction based on the presence or absence of electronic technology, with demographics such as income and education in order to account for possible differences across social class. Furthermore, while these models indicate that increased frequency and quality of family meals are positively related to two measures of parental well-being, it remains that the inverse might also be true. Those who are happier, in general, will probably choose to eat meals together more often. The reciprocal nature of this relationship could also be true for the findings relating to the use

of electronic technology. It remains possible that technological devices and their “floating worlds” could provide an escape from family dysfunction as well.²

Second, this research has also been limited to some extent by the available data. While the measures of parental well-being used for this study can be correlated with child well-being (Amato and Booth 1997), future research should seek to balance these findings by incorporating measures of child well-being and measures of parent-child relationship as dependent variables. Also, these findings do not necessarily reveal answers to questions about the nature of today’s “technoparenting” or the digital gulf between parents and their children (Yardi and Bruckman 2011; Prensky 2001). The measures used for this study simply allowed for the presence or absence of individual electronic technology at the dinner table to any extent and by any member of the family. It remains that respondents could be reporting technology use by their spouse just as easily as they could be reporting use by their children. Thus, research that further addresses parental attitudes about their children’s use of electronic technology, whether at the dinner table or not, would be quite informative. However, such variables could be biased by the possibility of negative framing of the question that make them too normative for such empirical analysis anyway. The development of unbiased technology questions would immensely aid in future multivariate analyses of the unintended consequences of electronic technology on other aspects of family interaction and relationships between parents and children overall. Also, as the nature of technology use becomes more individualized, comparing these results to watching television during the

² As Turkle (2015:47) has found, “These days, parents complain that children won’t talk to them because they are so busy with their phones at mealtime; children have the same complaints about their parents . . . We are at an odd standoff with neither side happy.”

family meal may provide a glimpse into how technologies are viewed differently by parents and children alike.³

This study has sought to tie together two lines of current research: those regarding the ritual of the family meal and those discussing the unintended consequences of electronic technology in our society. Despite the limitations discussed above, this paper presents an empirically-supported theoretical argument about the relationship between these two strands of research and argues that the mere presence of electronic technology at the family meal is, in some instances, negatively correlated with parental happiness, and thus the well-being of the family, more generally. The ability of electronic technology to simultaneously connect and disconnect us remains intriguing; and because, as Bellah (2006:178) claims, “ritual and society tend to change in relation to each other,” there will undoubtedly be areas here for continued inquiry. Indeed, if nothing else, these findings, along with the current research of so many others, may give us pause for reflection. As Sherry Turkle writes, “We prepare ourselves not necessarily to reject technology but to shape it in ways that honor what we hold dear. . . . Technologies, in every generation, present opportunities to reflect on our values and direction” (2012:19). Perhaps, with a deeper understanding of our relationships and our interactions, the current effort to bring American families together around their dinner tables can continue to help parents shake off their anxieties and find a bit more happiness in their lives.⁴

³ Bellah, quite interestingly, points to television as having played a major role in creating national rituals that have been shared by millions of people, including the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (2006).

⁴ Borgmann (2000) calls rituals like the family meal “focal concerns” and argues that they can aid in our concerted efforts to reflect shared values and aspire to excellence in an age of “paradigmatic consumption.”

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