

# A Review of 50 Years of Research on Naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebration?

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This article is a qualitative review of 32 publications appearing since J. Bossard and E. Boll's (1950) seminal work on family rituals was conducted. Definitions are offered whereby a distinction is made between family routines as observable practices and family rituals as symbolic representations of collective events. The relative occurrence of family routines, as described in the literature, appears to follow a developmental course and is affected by the cultural environment. Family routines and rituals were found to be related to parenting competence, child adjustment, and marital satisfaction. The studies were limited by inconsistent methods of assessing family routines, reliance on samples of convenience, and a failure to distinguish between direct and indirect effects. Recommendations are made to better integrate theory with empirical efforts to demonstrate the importance of family routines and rituals in contemporary life.

Over 50 years ago, Bossard and Boll (1950) conducted an extensive qualitative study of family rituals. Through detailed analyses of diaries, interviews, and family memorabilia, they concluded that rituals were powerful organizers of family life, supporting its stability during times of stress and transition. Since that time, family rituals have sparked the interest of researchers and clinicians alike, although for apparently different reasons. Whereas much of the empirical literature is directed toward identifying rituals as naturally occurring events in families, the clinical literature is focused on the therapeutic benefit of rituals. The focus of this review is on naturally occurring routines and rituals and their functions in families during the last half of the 20th century. We limit our review to research of these activities in relatively healthy families in order to chart how they are a part of patterned group interactions, fluctuate across the life cycle, and are related to individual health and well-being. An examination of naturally occurring routines and rituals may inform subsequent reviews and research directed toward the therapeutic value of family rituals.

There are several reasons why we believe that the study of family routines and rituals is important. First, such study represents a focus on whole family process. A recurring problem in family research is gaining access to how the

family, as a group, is organized and finds meaning as a collective unit. Typically, subsystems of the family are studied (e.g., husband–wife; parent–child), and attempts are made to extrapolate to the larger system. With a few notable exceptions (cf. McHale & Cowan, 1996), the whole is considered separate from its individual parts. By definition, family routines and rituals involve multiple family members, with only family rituals serving to provide meaning to group activities. Second, family routines and rituals are embedded in the cultural and ecological context of family life. As we demonstrate in this review, there are significant cultural variations in the practice of family rituals that aid in our understanding of how families are similar as well as different across cultures. Family rituals and routines allow for a closer examination as to the specific ways in which culture affects family regulation. Third, family rituals and routines highlight the intersection between individual- and family-level factors. This aspect is important in two respects. First, it allows for an examination of how family life may affect adaptation and adjustment of the individual. Second, it allows for an examination of how individual perspectives and characteristics may affect whole family functioning. We begin our review with a brief description of the historical roots of the study of rituals in family life and offer definitions of routines and rituals that guide the remainder of the review.

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## Historical Background

Historically, family rituals have been studied with the intent of understanding what families do and how their daily practices may be shattered under conditions of family stress such as alcoholism. Bossard and Boll's (1950) catalogue of family rituals most clearly illustrates this type of study. For the next 25 years, rituals gained the attention of anthropologists, sociologists, and clinicians. The majority of this

work was theoretical in nature, outlining the key elements of what constitutes a ritual (e.g., Cheal, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988; Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Pratta, 1977; Troll, 1988; Turner, 1967; van der Hart, 1983). Most theoreticians agree that rituals involve a practical component in terms of organizing group behavior and a symbolic component that fosters group identity and meaning-making in group situations.

During the 1980s members of the Center for Family Research at the George Washington University took the lead in the empirical study of family rituals. In an attempt to understand the interior workings of the family and how alcoholism affects family process, they interviewed and observed families in a variety of situations. Reiss (1981) initially proposed that families create rituals and ceremonials that can provide coherence to relationships, integrate family members as a group, and situate the family in time and place. Families could be distinguished by how they carried out their rituals and maintained them across generations. Operationalizing these constructs, Wolin and Bennett (1984) proposed that families organize their collective lives around a host of activities that foster family identity and fall into three categories: family celebrations, family traditions, and patterned family interactions. In a series of reports, Wolin, Bennett, and their colleagues described how family rituals might protect offspring from the harmful effects of parental alcoholism (Bennett, Wolin, & McAvity, 1988; Bennett, Wolin, Reiss, & Teitlebaum, 1987; Wolin & Bennett, 1984; Wolin, Bennett, Noonan, & Teitlebaum, 1980). Overall, they found that families whose rituals were subsumed by alcoholism were more likely to pass alcoholism on to the next generation and that offspring raised in alcoholic households fared less well when family routines were disrupted.

Before examining the empirical literature on family routines and rituals, we offer working definitions of the constructs.

### Definitions

Whereas scientific inquiry requires clear and precise definitions of the constructs under study, researchers agree that operationalizing routines and rituals is elusive at best (e.g.,

Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983; van der Hart, Witzum, & de Voogt, 1988; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). There are several reasons for this difficulty. It is likely that everyone has his or her own definition of what constitutes a family routine or ritual. Indeed, it is this personalized and individualized aspect of family organization that may provide special meaning to group activities and gatherings. Thus, routines and rituals may be unique to each family. Second, rituals are highly symbolic in nature and have a strong affective component. Bruner (1990) points out that when considering acts of meaning, the nature of study shifts from objective discriminatory responses to subjective interpretive experiences. Thus, the affect associated with rituals is recognized and interpreted by those involved and may not be detectable by the outside observer. To date, researchers have struggled with how to incorporate the individual's subjective experience into catalogues of what constitutes a ritual. We believe that some of these definitional obstacles can be overcome by distinguishing between routines of daily living and rituals in family life.

Routines and rituals can be contrasted along the dimensions of communication, commitment, and continuity. Routines typically involve instrumental communication conveying information that "this is what needs to be done." Routines involve a momentary time commitment and once the act is completed, there is little, if any, afterthought. Routines are repeated over time and recognized by continuity in behavior. Rituals, on the other hand, involve symbolic communication and convey "this is who we are" as a group. There is an affective commitment that leaves the individual feeling that the activity has a felt rightness and provides a sense of belonging. Furthermore, there is often an emotional residue where once the act is completed, the individual may replay it in memory to recapture some of the affective experience. Rituals also provide continuity in meaning across generations with the anticipation for repeat performance and an investment that "this is how our family will continue to be." When routines are disrupted, it is a hassle. When rituals are disrupted, there is a threat to group cohesion. The distinguishing characteristics are outlined in Table 1.

To illustrate, consider family mealtimes as an example. A mealtime routine may involve an instrumental communica-

Table 1  
*Definitions of Routines and Rituals*

Characteristic	Routines of daily living	Rituals in family life
Communication	Instrumental "This is what needs to be done."	Symbolic "This is who we are."
Commitment	Perfunctory and momentary Little conscious thought given after the act.	Enduring and affective "This is right." The experience may be repeated in memory.
Continuity	Directly observable and detectable by outsiders. Behavior is repeated over time.	Meaning extends across generations and is interpreted by insiders. "This is what we look forward to and who we will continue to be across generations."

tion of who needs to pick up milk on the way home from work. Once the milk is procured, there is very little thought about the grocery store. As often as not, this act may be repeated several times a week. The mealtime ritual, on the other hand, involves conversation as a group that may include inside jokes, symbolic objects, and acts meaningful only to the family and not easily detected by the outside observer. Once the family is gathered for the meal, there is an affective reaction that may be as simple as a sigh signifying that time has been set aside for the group and other demands are temporarily put on hold. There may also be elements of the gathering that have been passed down over generations including prayers, dishes, and even topics of conversation. Any routine has the potential to become a ritual once it moves from an instrumental to a symbolic act. As will be noted in this review, the terms *rituals* and *routines* are frequently used interchangeably, thus contributing to confusion in the field. Where possible in this article, we identify studies as focusing on either family routines or rituals.

We structure the rest of the review around three main topics pertinent to the study of family routines and rituals: (a) routines and rituals as patterned interactions, (b) the developmental course of routine and rituals, and (c) psychological health and well-being in relation to routines and rituals. By necessity, we constructed this review as a narrative of the existing literature. Although a quantitative review would lend itself to stronger statements about the relative effects of family rituals, the current literature is inconsistent in its quantitative focus. Thus, we aim to highlight the central findings and identify methodological strengths and weaknesses so that researchers may take an informed empirical stance in conducting future studies.

### Selection of Studies

Beginning with the year 1950, we searched the literature using electronic databases (PsycINFO, Medline) and the keywords *family routines*, *rituals*, and *traditions*. We excluded dissertations and non-English citations from our review. For the purposes of this review, we retained publications that focused on naturally occurring routines or rituals in community based samples. We also used the ancestral method and collected published material that was referenced in the articles. The results of the literature search netted 35 publications, of which 32 were included in this review. Three publications were excluded for the following reasons: (a) routines and rituals were identified post hoc on the basis of qualitative inquiry (SmithBattle, 1997), (b) the topic was limited to a description of a birthing ritual (Pritham & Sammons, 1993), and (c) routines were studied in the context of “dissident and traditional” colleges during the 1960s (Gustav, 1971).

### Descriptive Findings

Of the 32 studies reviewed, 13 provided descriptive information on the types of routines and rituals families practiced. One of the more common routines listed was

dinnertime. The frequency of a family meal where everyone was expected to be present ranged from at least twice (Feiring & Lewis, 1987) to 4 or more times a week (Ramey & Juliusson, 1998). Other types of routines listed were bedtime (Nucci & Smetana, 1996), chores (Goodnow & Delaney, 1989; Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996; Huston, Wright, Marquis, & Green, 1999; Warton & Goodnow, 1991), and everyday activities such as talking on the phone or visiting with relatives (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992). With the exception of dinnertime and amount of time engaged in routines such as television watching (Huston et al., 1999), studies rarely included reports of how frequently family routines occurred. This in itself may lead to a misguided perception that families do not participate in routines (Popenoe, 1993). Indeed, recent national polls have estimated that 3 out of 4 families usually sit down for dinner together and 9 of 10 believe it is more important than ever to sit down as a family for a meal (Gallup, 1997).

Several studies examined traditions that were important to families and thus could be considered rituals. The most frequently listed family rituals were birthdays, Christmas, family reunions, Thanksgiving, Easter, Passover, funerals, and Sunday activities including the “Sunday dinner” (Meske, Sanders, Meredith, & Abbott, 1994; Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988). In some cases, the degree to which the traditions were important was studied, and in other cases the symbolic role traditions played in family life was examined. Family rituals were seen as very important in providing togetherness, strengthening family relationships, emotional exchange, and stability, maintaining family contact (Meske et al., 1994), and providing opportunities to create special times in single-parent families (Olson & Haynes, 1993). There are also downsides to family rituals, as they involve considerable time and work (Meske et al., 1994) and can elicit family conflict (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996).

The descriptive data that we examined suggests that families engage in a variety of daily and weekly routines and that celebration of family traditions can provide special meaning to individual members. What is unclear, however, is the prevalence of such practices across diverse groups as well as at different points in the family life cycle.

### Routines as Patterned Interactions

According to Wolin and Bennett (1984), family routines are patterned interactions that are repeated over time. On the one hand, the notion of patterned interactions is consistent with family systems research that has identified specific patterns of behavior that are either detrimental or supportive of family functioning, the most notable example being patterns of marital conflict such as demand-withdrawal, which is predictive of marital dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1994). On the other hand, routines as patterned interactions extend beyond the specific behaviors that may be promotive or damaging to a focus on the context in which these behaviors occur. The context that has received the most attention is mealtime and its variation by family structure and culture.

Feiring and Lewis (1987) reported that family size influ-

ences the roles that parents play during mealtime. In larger families, the father's caretaking role increases in order to help out while the mother's leadership role is less relative to that experienced in smaller families. When fewer adults are available as conversation partners as in single-parent families, however, more time is spent in adult-child talk than in two-parent families of similar size (Ramey & Juliusson, 1998).

Two reports have examined cultural differences in conversations during mealtime. Martini (1996) found that Japanese American families are more likely to discuss group activities and shared experiences at the dinner table whereas Caucasian American families were more likely to focus on the child's activities and individual experiences. A similar pattern was noted by Blum-Kulka (1997) in a comparison of American and Israeli families. Israeli families tended to recount stories that included multiple members of the family, whereas American families tended to focus on the individual's daily experiences.

In a study of family conversational style (Baxter & Clark, 1996), routine practice and ritual meaning was distinguished with the use of the Family Ritual Questionnaire (Fiese & Kline, 1993). Routines were defined according to responses on the roles and routines items, and ritual meaning was defined according to responses on items dealing with affect, symbolic significance, and commitment to continue the activity across generations. For Asian American and European American respondents, the meaning associated with family rituals was positively related to reports of the open exchange of ideas and freedom to express individual opinions. Of interest, the amount of routinization reported by the European American respondents was negatively related to open conversation and positively related to conformity and more adult-centered conversations.

In sum, mealtime has been found to be a fruitful setting to study repetitive patterned interactions that are a part of family routine life. Despite time and work challenges to arrange a family meal, the process inherent in this routine is related to such factors as size of family and culture. On a repetitive basis, families come to define who they are by the routine patterns in which they engage as well as the conversations they hold about such routines. Stories of family routines are often shared with children, which in turn, are related to how the family interacts during mealtime (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999). Clearly, a weakness in the study of patterned interactions is the limited range of ethnic groups that have been studied. As there appear to be distinctive process and content differences across some ethnic groups, it is important to further this research to more clearly identify the nature and meaning of these differences. Patterned routine interactions may be powerful conveyors of culture and aid in our understanding of how culture influences family organization.

### Continuity of Family Rituals

It is likely that routines and rituals fluctuate across the family life cycle. Routines and rituals should be influential during times of transition (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) and are

passed down through the generations, with the younger generation taking on more responsibilities across time (Cheal, 1988).

During the transition to parenthood, adults must reorganize their lives to include the demands of child rearing. In a cross-sectional study of families whose oldest child was either an infant or of preschool age, the practice of regular routines and meaning ascribed to rituals was found to be different according to stage of parenthood (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993). Families whose lives were focused on the intense caregiving demands of raising an infant reported fewer predictable routines and less affect and symbolism associated with family gatherings than parents whose youngest child was of preschool age. The authors speculated that once the child can be a more active participant in family life, routines become more regular and rituals, more meaningful. Recent studies have documented that during the preschool and early school years, parents and children begin to negotiate and make compromises around routine activities such as bedtime (Nucci & Smetana, 1996). From the early school years to the early teen years, there is an increase in the number of routine self-care activities for which children are deemed responsible (Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996). As children become more competent, they are more actively involved in family routines.

A notable transition that may threaten the practice of family routines is divorce. Pett et al. (1992) found that even in cases of late-life divorce (after age 50) offspring reported that the impact of the divorce is keenly felt in the disrupted practice of traditions such as Christmas, birthdays, vacations, and Thanksgiving. However, maintaining regular routines in divorced and remarried families may foster better adaptation in children, providing them with a sense of security and stability of family life (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986; Henry & Lovelace, 1995).

There may be a developmental course to the ascription of meaning to rituals. In general, parents tend to ascribe more meaning to rituals than do their college-age children (Fiese, 1992; Meredith, Abbott, Lamanna, & Sanders, 1989). Older generations continue to endorse a commitment to family rituals as important for building successful families (Meske et al., 1994). In interviews with adults, Rosenthal and Marshall (1988) found that nearly 80% of their respondents reported observing some manner of rituals with their children that were rooted in their family-of-origin practices. Moreover, among the grandparent participants, 65% indicated that rituals were continued from their children to grandchildren. Responsibility for maintaining kinship ties and organizing family gatherings appears to reside with the middle generation. In a study of 314 families, close to 70% of respondents identified the family "kin keeper" as being between 40 and 59 years of age, with 85% indicating that the kin keeper was female (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). Rituals may provide an opportunity for the oldest generation to remain involved in family gatherings even though the practice of daily routines may be less frequent in the oldest generation (Ludwig, 1998). In cultures where elder members are revered, older adults are often the focus of the

routine and are paid respect through the presentation of gifts and food during family and cultural celebrations (Ingersoll-Dayton, 1999).

Whereas children may be more involved in the practice of routines from elementary school through adolescence, the meaning ascribed to family rituals appears to become more central once offspring become parents themselves. The observable practice of the ritual may serve as a connection between generations, fostering continuity and family strength. Thus, the generational transmission of family rituals may include not only the practice of a specific routine but also the belief that rituals are an important part of family life, serving to reinforce family ties.

According to cross-sectional data, there appears to be a cycle to family routines and rituals across generations. Once children can actively participate in routines, they are given more responsibility over time. However, the meaning ascribed to family ritual life does not appear to be central until after late adolescence. Because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, we are not able to identify the course of routines and rituals within families across time. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research on transitions during adolescence that may be associated with less frequent involvement in family rituals but more involvement in peer-based routines.

### Routines and Rituals in Relation to Health and Well-Being

Family routine practices are an indication of family organization and are important for the psychological health and well-being of its members (Reiss, 1989; Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss, 1987). In general, family organization has been shown to be related to psychological adjustment in clinical samples (e.g., Dickstein, St. Andre, Sameroff, Seifer, & Schiller, 1999; Hauser, Jacobson, Lavori, & Wolfsdorf, 1990). Thus, we expected that the practice of regular family routines also would be related to adaptation. According to the anthropological literature, the symbolic function of rituals fosters a sense of belonging and promotes feelings of group membership (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977; Turner, 1967). Thus, we expected family rituals to be related to feelings of closeness and belonging.

### *Routines and Parenting*

One area that has received considerable empirical attention is the degree to which family routines assist parents in adapting to their new role as caregiver. Sprunger, Boyce, and Gaines (1985) found that mothers of young infants report more satisfaction in their parenting role and feel more competent when there are regular routines in the household. It is likely that a transaction occurs between parent and child in the practice of regular routines whereby child behavior is better regulated and parents in turn feel more competent. Children with regular bedtime routines settle to sleep sooner and wake up less frequently during the night than those with less regular routines (Seymour, Brock, During, & Poole, 1989). Moreover, when there are regular routines in the household, infants have shorter bouts of respiratory infec-

tions (Boyce et al., 1977) and preschool children are considered generally healthier overall (Keltner, 1990). Thus, during infancy and preschool, children are healthier, and their behavior is better regulated when there are predictable routines in the family. Not surprisingly, a healthy child also makes parents feel more competent, which is also related to regularity of routines. Because the literature base is cross-sectional, we cannot make statements about the direction of causality. It is likely that competent parents are more effective in creating family routines and that satisfying routines provide a sense of competence. Further, the child's contribution to this transaction cannot be ignored, as children who are easy to settle also may be more responsive to routines in general.

### *Routines in Nontraditional Families*

A few studies have examined whether the effects of regular routines are restricted to two-parent families. The presence of family routines under conditions of single parenting, divorce, and remarried households may actually protect children from the proposed risks associated with being raised in nontraditional families. In a study of 156 African American 6- to 9-year-old children with single mothers, Brody and Flor (1997) presented a complex picture of how family routines are part of a transactional process between maternal and child characteristics. Family routines were found to be related to mother-child harmony when mediated by maternal self-esteem. Single mothers who practiced regular routines felt more competent, which in turn, was related to how well the mother and the child got along with each other. These findings were corroborated in a qualitative study conducted with single parents who were considered "successful" by parenting experts. On the basis of in-depth interviews, these parents felt that part of being a successful single-parent family included an effort to create special times together through bedtime routines, special family activities, and holiday celebrations (Olson & Haynes, 1993). Guidubaldi et al. (1986) reported that regular bedtime routines predicted better academic achievement and fewer school absences for children postdivorce. Similarly, adolescents in remarried households are more satisfied with family life when there are regular routines (Henry & Lovelace, 1995).

According to Steinglass et al. (1987), stress in the family is often first noted by the disruption of family routines. There is the potential for routine life to be disrupted by divorce or remarriage or to be compromised because of decreased economic resources in single-parent families. However, if routines are maintained under these potentially vulnerable conditions, parents and children are more satisfied with family life and adapt better outside the household. We again caution against conclusions that place routines as a causal factor in adaptation. It is also likely that families who are able to maintain routines and rituals even in the face of divorce may be distinguishable by other characteristics, such as lower levels of conflict, which can contribute to child adjustment.

### *Meaningful Family Rituals and Adjustment*

The symbolic nature of family rituals provides a sense of belonging to groups and should foster a strong sense of personal identity (Bennett et al., 1988; Cheal, 1988; Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). With few exceptions, a distinction has not been made between routine practices and ritual meaning in empirical studies. Fiese and colleagues have found, however, that the meaningful aspect of family rituals is related to adolescent identity (Fiese, 1992) and to marital satisfaction during the early stages of parenthood (Fiese et al., 1993), whereas the routine practice alone was not related to outcome. A closer examination of these findings is warranted to illustrate how family rituals can tap the intersection between the individual and the whole family as well as connecting subsystems to the whole. In the adolescent study, identity was measured along several dimensions including identity integration and lovability (O'Brien & Epstein, 1988). Identity integration refers to an inner sense of cohesion and integration of different aspects of self-concept. Lovability indicates that the person feels worthy of love and accepted as a person and can count on others. Responses on these dimensions were found to relate positively to the family's report of the symbolic significance and affect associated with family rituals. In the same vein, the relative cohesion experienced in the marital relationship was found to be related to the same factors in family rituals for young parents (Fiese et al., 1993). These preliminary studies serve to illustrate that the individual's sense of belonging with others and their own sense of who they are is positively related to the symbolic features of family rituals, highlighting the intersection between individual (and couple) characteristics and whole family process.

Other researchers have found that routines are negatively related to internalizing symptomatology in children (Brody & Flor, 1997; Portes, Howell, Brown, Eichenberger, & Mas, 1992). These findings are consistent with the role that rituals may play in fostering mental health. However, because a distinction has not been made between the practice of the routine and the meaning of ritual it is not possible to determine the unique contribution that rituals may make in psychological functioning. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that children with behavioral problems may be more difficult to engage in family group activities, thus contributing to an overall disruption in routines and rituals.

## Study Design Issues

### *Measurement*

It is important to consider how family routines and rituals were assessed before making a final evaluation of study strengths and weaknesses. In the studies reviewed in this article, family routines and rituals were assessed through questionnaires, interviews, frequency checklists, or direct observation. The most frequently used self-report questionnaires were the Family Routines Inventory (FRI; Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983) and the Family Ritual Questionnaire (FRQ; Fiese & Kline, 1993). However, taken

together, these studies represent only 25% of the studies reviewed. There are advantages and disadvantages to both of these measures. The FRI is relatively brief (28 items) and easy to complete. However, its focus is primarily on the frequency of predetermined routines. The FRQ, on the other hand, is longer (56 items) and uses a force-chosed format to reduce the effects of social desirability but may be more difficult to complete. The FRQ, however, is designed to look at the family routines in different settings, such as dinnertime, birthdays, and weekends, and provides the family with an opportunity to choose which routines best exemplify their family life. The FRQ distinguishes between the practice of routines and the meaning of rituals. Future research endeavors would be strengthened if researchers would adopt these questionnaires, with established reliability and validity estimates, rather than using single-item or newly developed questionnaires with unknown psychometric properties.

An equal number of studies (18% each) used interview techniques or frequency checklists to assess family routines. The advantage to interview formats is the ability to follow up with additional questions to clarify how routines may be important to family members. However, applying interviews across studies is difficult, and there is frequently little information given as to how the interview data was reduced or coded. Checklists provide a useful format for determining frequency but are limited by presenting families with a restricted choice of activities that may or may not coincide with the family's definition of what constitutes a routine or ritual.

Studies aimed at depicting the patterned interactions associated with family routines typically adopt observational techniques and comprised 16% of the studies reviewed. Different observational coding schemes were used across studies, with some relying on detailed accounts of conversation and others focusing more on roles and affect present during family routines. Future studies may well pair direct observation with self-report questionnaires to determine whether families' appraisal of their routines is related to how they act. The apparent mismatch between self-report and behavior frequently noted in family systems research (Reiss, 1981) may be reinvigorated by an examination of perception of routines and actual family behavior.

It is interesting to note that only one study reported the use of diaries in assessing routines (Huston et al., 1999). Given that routines may change throughout the course of the life cycle, we know very little about how they fluctuate day-to-day. Recent measurement advances in the use of diaries suggest that this may be a fruitful way to examine how routines are patterned in family life.

### *Sampling*

Because the focus of this study was on naturally occurring routines and rituals in community-based samples, it is not surprising that the majority of studies we reviewed were drawn from samples of convenience. We think that this may be a serious issue for the study of family routines. Although many of these studies were not representative of all families,

when investigating the range of experiences that families have in their daily lives, it is incumbent upon researchers to recruit a diverse sample. Families that do not regularly practice routines may not be sufficiently organized to participate in research studies. It may be necessary to expand the scope of studies to include clinical samples that are at known risk for poor family organization to more accurately reflect the less organized spectrum of family life.

### *Direct Versus Indirect Effects*

The studies we reviewed appear to fall into two categories. On the one hand, routines are proposed to directly affect outcome. On the other hand, they are embedded in a larger context where they are but one aspect of family effects on outcome. The former studies are clearly illustrated in the work of Boyce et al. (1977) and Fiese et al. (1993), where family routines and rituals are proposed to directly affect family health and well-being. The work by Brody and Flor (1997) and Keltner (1990) most clearly illustrates conceptualizations whereby family routines are proposed to indirectly affect child outcome by fostering the health and well-being of parents. Research aimed at studying the direct effects of family routines has been influential in developing systematic ways to evaluate family routines and rituals as well as placing them in generational context. Research that takes into account indirect effects has been more influential, however, in placing routines in the broader context of child outcomes. More often than not, indirect models are necessary in linking family process variables to individual adaptation (Lewis & Feiring, 1992). For example, children raised in homes with elevated levels of marital conflict may not only be exposed to harmful negative affect but also experience more ineffective parenting that compromises healthy development (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). An examination of direct and indirect effects can further illustrate how different subsystems and individual characteristics can affect family functioning as a whole. We think that each approach can inform the other, however, particularly when placed in an integrative theoretical framework.

### Integrating Findings With Theory

Our review of 50 years of research directed toward documenting naturally occurring routines and rituals suggests that families do carry out regular patterned interactions that fluctuate over time, are affected by culture, and are related to the health and well-being of the family members. To synthesize these findings, we place our summary within a theoretical framework proposed by Sameroff and Fiese (1992, 2000). Families are proposed to be organized systems where behavior and representations are coded to promote development. The family code consists of routines and rituals, stories, and myths. Family routines are most clearly observable family practices, and family rituals include a representational component of symbolic meaning. Both family practices and representations are a part of family routines and rituals and serve to highlight how culture, the

family life cycle, and individual characteristics intersect to form the whole family. We summarize these aspects in Table 2. In terms of individual health and well-being, family routines and rituals are a part of the larger ecology (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) associated with satisfaction with family relationships, related to child competence in domains outside the family, and providing a role for the older generation. Family routines and rituals are but one part of the family code. However, a distinguishing feature of this aspect of family organization is the intertwining nature of family practices and representations across the family life cycle.

### A Cause for Celebration?

Our review was motivated, in part, to determine whether there was sufficient scientific evidence to suggest that family routines and rituals play a central role in family life and whether they can be considered a reasonable vehicle for promoting healthy families during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We discovered that routines and rituals are important purveyors of culture and regulators of development. However, the scientific study of routines and rituals remains relatively immature. We make several recommendations that will hopefully strengthen this field, so that we can more accurately determine the relative effects of routines and rituals. We have already addressed the important issue of measurement and sampling. Future efforts warrant the use of measurement tools with known psychometric properties and careful attention to sampling. Casting a wider net in terms of ethnic diversity is not only desirable but essential for capturing changes in family demography and the variety of ways families face the challenge of raising children and getting along with each other. Greater attention needs to be paid to direct versus indirect effects. We believe that this can best be accomplished through the use of multimethod multitrait longitudinal studies. Finally, we warn against studying family routines and rituals as more powerful predictors than other aspects of family life. We contend that family routines and rituals may indeed be markers of more traditional family process variables such as cohesion and organization. However, in terms of scientific endeavors, the study of family routines and rituals provides a unique opportunity to compare and contrast practices and representations—a contrast that has been fruitful in other areas of research such as in the case of attachment theory. Further, we contend that family routines and rituals make sense to families. Family members can identify what routines they practice and distinguish whether they are important or unimportant in their particular family. Such routines can be directly observed in their practice. The study of family routines and rituals thus may allow us to break away from the tradition of identifying “good” and “bad” traits and focus on how families find success and meaning in their collective lives.

### Implications for Application and Public Policy

There is a well-founded precedence in clinical practice for the use of rituals to effect change (Imber-Black et al.,

Table 2  
 Summary of Family Routine Practices and Ritual Representations

Review category	Routine practices		Ritual representations	
	Study questions	Findings	Study questions	Findings
Descriptive	What types of routines do families practice?	Daily and weekly routines include bedtime, mealtime, chores, regular phone contact with relatives, and watching television.	Do families practice rituals that are important to them and their extended family?	Family traditions such as reunions and Sunday dinner provide times for togetherness and strengthening family relationships.
Cultural variations	How does family structure affect family routines?	Regular and predictable routines ease stress in single-parent families and promote better adjustment in children postdivorce.	Are family rituals affected by culture?	Mealtime conversations are symbolic and consistent with cultural values of independence and group membership.
Family life cycle	Does the practice of routines vary by different stages of the family life cycle?	Routine practices follow a developmental course of increasing frequency during early childhood and school years. The middle generation takes on role of organizing family gatherings.	Are family rituals important during key transition points?	Meaningful rituals are associated with a stronger sense of marital cohesion during the transition to parenthood and provide opportunities for older members to be involved with grandchildren.
Intersection of whole family and individual adaptation	Do predictable routines promote healthy outcomes?	Predictable routines are associated with parental competence, child health, parent-child harmony, and academic achievement.	Are meaningful family rituals associated with overall adjustment?	The symbolic and affective components of rituals are associated with marital satisfaction and adolescents' sense of personal identity.

1988). We hope that this review will encourage practitioners to attend to naturally occurring routines and rituals as a part of their assessment of whole family functioning. Indeed, the structured assessment of family routines and rituals may guide clinicians in their selection of interventions that have a greater likelihood of being successful with particular families (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2001). With regard to policy, we believe that there are two take-home messages. First, families do engage in routines and rituals that are an important part of contemporary family life. Although families may be challenged to meet the busy demands of juggling work and home, there is reason to believe that routines and rituals may ease the stress of daily living. Second, culture plays an important role in the expression of routines and rituals. Policies that are sensitive to such differences and celebrate unique traditions may pave the way for a more informed stance in respecting family diversity.

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