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Families’ Every Fuss, Archived and Analyzed



Ann Johansson for The New York Times

Lyn Repath-Martos and her husband, Antonio, were among the couples who agreed to let researchers’ cameras into their homes.

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

Published: May 22, 2010

LOS ANGELES — “Get your jacket.”

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Dad, shoulders slumped, face grave, is standing over his 8-year-old, trying to get the boy out the door. The youngster shifts, ducks, stalls; he wants the jacket brought to him.

“Get your jacket.”

The boy stalls more, and Dad’s mouth tightens.

“Get. Your. Jacket.”

The boy loses it. “You’re always acting like a control freak!” he cries, turning to throw himself on the couch. “I’m not calling you names or anything, but you’re a control freak.”

At a conference here this month, more than 70 social scientists gathered to bring to a close one of the most unusual, and oddly voyeuristic, anthropological studies ever conceived. From 2002 to 2005, before reality TV ruled the earth, researchers at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#), laboriously recruited 32 local families, videotaping

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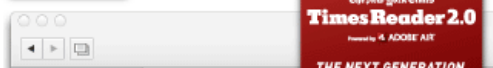
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nearly every waking, at-home moment during a week — including the Jacket Standoff.

Filmmakers have turned a lens on the minutiae of unscripted domestic life before, perhaps most famously in “The Osbournes” on [MTV](#) and the 1970s [PBS](#) program “An American Family.”

But the [U.C.L.A.](#) project was an effort to capture a relatively new sociological species: the dual-earner, multiple-child, middle-class American household. The investigators have just finished working through the 1,540 hours of videotape, coding and categorizing every hug, every tantrum, every soul-draining search for a missing soccer cleat.

“This is the richest, most detailed, most complete database of middle-class family living in the world,” said Thomas S. Weisner, a professor of anthropology at U.C.L.A. who was not involved in the research. “What it does is hold up a mirror to people. They laugh. They cringe. It shows us life as it is actually lived.”

The study captured a thin slice of Los Angeles’s diversity, including two black families, one Latino, one Japanese, and some ethnically mixed couples, as well as two households with gay, male parents. The families lived, most of them, well outside the city’s tonier ZIP codes, in places like La Crescenta, east, and Westchester, near the airport.

After more than \$9 million and untold thousands of hours of video watching, they have found that, well, life in these trenches is exactly what it looks like: a fire shower of stress, multitasking and mutual nitpicking. And the researchers found plenty to nitpick themselves.

Mothers still do most of the housework, spending 27 percent of their time on it, on average, compared with 18 percent for fathers and 3 percent for children (giving an allowance made no difference).

Husbands and wives were together alone in the house only about 10 percent of their waking time, on average, and the entire family was gathered in one room about 14 percent of the time. Stress levels soared — yet families spent very little time in the most soothing, uncluttered area of the home, the yard.

“I call it the new math,” said Kathleen Christensen of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which financed the project. “Two people. Three full-time jobs.” Parents learned on the fly, she said — and it showed.

Dual-earner households with children have existed for years, especially in lower-income neighborhoods. But the numbers have jumped in recent decades, to 46 percent of families with children in 2008 from 36 percent in 1975.

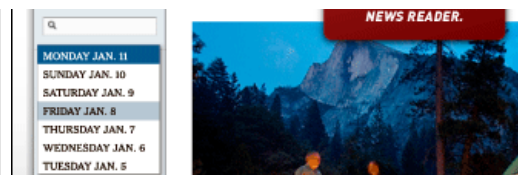
Lyn Repath-Martos and her husband, Antonio, know all about it. With two children, ages 5 and 8, two full-time jobs outside the house and a mortgage, they qualified for the study in 2002. For \$1,000, they filled out a sheaf of questionnaires, sat for in-depth interviews and allowed a small film crew into their 943-square-foot house east of Los Angeles to record every moment.

One researcher roamed the house with a handheld computer, noting each family member’s location and activities at 10-minute intervals.

“I would never volunteer for a reality series,” said Ms. Repath-Martos, an administrator at the [NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory](#). “But I was curious. And I thought that — well, this is going to sound crazy — I thought that it wouldn’t be that invasive.”

The initial sensation was one of being studied by anthropologists.

“I was in the kitchen making kids lunches, the cameras were rolling, and I thought, ‘O.K., observe how this is done.’ ” said another study participant, Aaron Spicker, a businessman who lives in Redondo Beach with his wife, Merrill, a corporate finance specialist, and two daughters.



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But after a while, they said, family members shrugged off the cameras and relaxed.

The same cannot be said of the fieldworkers, most of them childless graduate students seeing combat for the first time. “The very purest form of birth control ever devised. Ever,” said one, Anthony P. Graesch, a postdoctoral fellow, about the experience. (Dr. Graesch and his wife have just had their second child.)

In one house, Dr. Graesch was recording locations when an escalating argument threatened to get ugly. He bailed out for air and continued to track people inside by peeking through the windows. “Luckily it was a one-story bungalow,” he said.

In weekly meetings, the researchers discussed what they were witnessing.

“Every time we met, I felt like I was on the defensive,” said Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, the research director, who herself has two children and a working husband. “I mean, it’s not like I approved of everything these parents were doing. But I could relate to them. I knew exactly what they were going through.”

Continual negotiations, for one. Parents generally were so flexible in dividing up chores and child-care responsibilities — “catch as catch can,” one dad described it — that many boundaries were left unclear, adding to the stress.

The couples who reported the least stress tended to have rigid divisions of labor, whether equal or not. “She does the inside work, and I do all the outside, and we don’t interfere” with each other, said one husband.

The videotapes reveal parents as at-home teachers, enforcing homework deadlines. As coaches and personal trainers, sorting through piles of equipment. As camp directors, planning play dates and weekend “family time.”

“The coordination it takes, it’s more complicated than a theater production,” said Elinor Ochs, the U.C.L.A. linguistic anthropologist who led the study. “And there are no rehearsals.”

In addition to housework, mothers spent 19 percent of their time talking with family members or on the phone, and 11 percent taking occasional breathers that the study classified as “leisure.” The rates for fathers were 20 percent chatting, and 23 percent leisure — again, taken in fragments.

Still, parents also had large amounts of solo time with their children, a total of 34 percent for mothers and 25 percent for fathers, on average.

Half the fathers in the study spent as much or more time as their spouse alone with at least one child when at home, and were more likely to be engaged in some activity, like playing in the backyard, the study found. Mothers were more likely to be watching TV with a child.

Occasionally, camera crews caught family members spitting into a small vial. This, too, was a part of the study: Researchers measured levels of a stress hormone called cortisol in the saliva, four times a day.

These cortisol profiles provided biological backing for a familiar frustration in many marriages. The more that women engaged with their husbands in the evening, talking about the day, the faster their cortisol dropped. But the men’s levels tapered more slowly when talking with a spouse. (A previous generation’s solution: “cocktail hour”).

Inside, the homes, researchers found rooms crammed with toys, DVDs, videos, books, exercise machines; refrigerators buried in magnets; and other odds and ends. The clutter on the fridge door tended to predict the amount of clutter elsewhere.

Outside the homes, the yards were open and green — but “no one was out there,” said Jeanne E. Arnold, a U.C.L.A. archaeologist who worked on the study. One family had a

17,000-square-foot yard, with a pool and a trampoline, and not even the children ventured out there during the study.

That, of course, would mean leaving the house, which is not always as simple as it sounds.

At the door, having found his jacket, the 8-year-old in the video flops to the floor and is demanding that someone tie his shoes.

Now Mom joins Dad, hovering over the boy, hands on hips, giving him the same hairy eyeball as her husband. Hours seem to pass as the youngster struggles with his laces, his jacket sleeves, his attitude. Finally Dad caves in, and drops to the floor to help him out.

And then, just like that – through some combination of stubbornness, patience and dumb love – it is over. The clothes are on, the door swings open, and father and son go out, into the world.

A version of this article appeared in print on May 23, 2010, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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