Pre-print and pre-editing version.

Citation: Vagni, Giacomo. 2019. "Family Time Together." Pp.151-165 in *What We Really Do All Day: Insights from the Centre for Time Use Research*, edited by J. Gershuny and O. Sullivan. London: Pelican Books.

Chapter 7. Family Time Together

It is well recognised that family relations have changed dramatically over the past half century. However, how and what exactly have changed is more difficult to assess than one might think. Families are still one of the most important institutions in contemporary Britain. For example, families are still the main provider of care, as well as the main provider of moral and economic support, and everyday life itself is structured around the schedules of household members. Surprisingly, though, there are no existing reliable estimates of family time in the UK. In other words, we did not know, until now, how much time couples and families spent with each other, and what they do together.

Most of our time (when we are not at work) is spent, for those in couples, with the partner, and, for those who are parents, with their children. For example, couples spend about 7 hours together during an average day (7am-22pm). Families with young children spend about 5 to 10 hours together. Of course, important differences exist between men and women, as well as between workers, students or retirees. Nonetheless, these simple figures show how important the closest members our family network are to us. Interestingly, even though a lot has been written about family demographics (marriage, divorce, cohabitation, fertility), much less is known about how time together has changed in families. In this chapter, I will explore how time together with the partner and the children has changed between 2000 and 2015; the period just before and just after the technological revolution involving personal computers and other devices.

The context

Tracing the pace of family change is not an easy task, because family relations are constantly transforming. Because of this continuous state of change, comparing families in different historical periods or different institutional contexts can lead to misleading conclusions. For example, the very idea of 'family time' only fully crystalized during the

course of the 20th Century¹. In order for such an idea to emerge, the relationships involved in what we commonly think of as the ‘nuclear family’ had to become first privatised. Through the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, the family often served as the active unit of production. The separation between workplace and ‘home’ was much less concretely delineated, and children were considered as a source of labour. In contrast, parenting is commonly regarded nowadays as a long-term ‘investment’, where parents focus on giving greater attention to a few children.² It took a long and slow transformation for ‘family time’ to emerge as a *social category*, and many factors contributed to its emergence. For instance, the physical separation between work and home, or the cognitive distinction between working time and personal time.

It is of course impossible to define precisely when a social category starts to exist, but it is generally considered that the 1950s was the ‘golden age’ of the *idea* of family time. The *idea* of family time is still a very important idea in contemporary Britain. However, the meaning of family time has certainly changed between the 1950s and today. In the 21st Century, the great majority of people have more progressive attitudes regarding what makes a ‘good’ relationship: equality between the partners, mutual respect, and shared satisfaction, to name a few. The ideal of marriage is no longer based on religious beliefs. It is now grounded in ideas such as reciprocal affection, fulfilment and personal development³. So, *family time* is still highly valued by families, but for very different reasons. The challenge of any historical comparison is to compare things that appear similar but have different *meanings*.

In this chapter, I focus on the *practices* of family time at the turn of the 21st Century. I address two central questions: a) are families still spending time together? b) What are families doing together today compared to fifteen years ago?

Family time – a social category

Measuring family interactions is not as easy as it seems. Time use diaries provide three types of information: *what* activity is being done, *where* did it take place and *with whom*. The *with whom* information (the so-called ‘co-presence’ information) enables researchers to estimate *family time*. However, time use reports are conditioned on individuals’ own perception and interpretation of particular situations. These differences in perception are clearly noticeable when comparing the diaries of different family members. One partner may think that he/she is sharing an activity with the other, while the other partner might consider that they are doing separate activities. Family time is not an ‘objective’ category but rather a subjective interpretation of time spent together. Think about a situation where you were

sitting with your partner and both of you were using your mobile phones to communicate with someone else. Would you report this as being alone, or being with your partner?

To deal with this complexity I have estimated two different types of ‘family time’. The first measure only considers family time when *both* partners report being with each other and with the children (when they both ‘agree’ that they are together). The second estimate is more flexible and counts family time when at least one partner reports being with the partner and the children. One might think of the first estimate as ‘engaged’ family time, when both partners actively agree on the interpretation of the situation. The second estimate can be interpreted as a more ‘inactive’ kind of togetherness, when partners are present physically but not fully engaged with each other. I show both measures in Figure 2 but for the rest of the chapter I will focus only on ‘engaged’ family time.

Time together in families can be divided in four main categories. The first category is ‘family time’. It includes the presence of the partner and children. The second is ‘time (alone) with the partner’ or ‘exclusive spousal time’ (referenced as *Spouse Exclusive* in the graphs). The final two categories are ‘Mother (alone) with the children’ and ‘Father (alone) with the children’⁴. Time spent sleeping and in employment are not counted in the measure of time with spouse and family time⁵. In this chapter, I focus only on parents with children less than 8 years old.

Figure 1 presents a snapshot of how joint activities appear for 7 randomly chosen couples in the time use diary data (pooling the 2000/1 and 2014/15 data). Three rows of data for each couple are shown, with the male partner’s activities in row 2 and the female partner’s in row 3 for each couple. The first row indicates if the activity was performed *with* or *without* the partner. The deep blue colour indicates if the partner was present or not.

Figure 1. Sample of 7 British Couples. Source UK 2000/1 & UK 2014/15. This graph shows the activities throughout the day of 7 randomly chosen couples of the survey. We can visually follow the activities of both partners (Male and Female). The vector “with Spouse” indicates if both partners were together or not during this activity. For instance, the couple number 4 spent very little time together.

A general decline in Family Time

Figure 2 shows the estimates for family time (‘engaged’ and ‘inactive’ as defined above), time with children, and time with the partner (also split into ‘engaged’ and ‘inactive’ time) for the 2000 and 2015 surveys. Weekdays and weekend days are shown separately. Estimates of ‘engaged’ and ‘inactive’ family time are shown as stacked columns, and the difference between them is large (about 3 hours during weekdays and 4 hours during the weekend). In respect of change between the surveys, *engaged family time* declined by about 30 minutes during weekdays and about 10 minutes during the weekend over the period 2000 - 2015. However, *inactive family time* did not show any sign of decline⁶. Mother’s time with children also declined, both during weekdays as well as during the weekend. This is surprising given the general context of increase in childcare time over recent decades. On the other hand, fathers increased their time (alone) with children, but only during the weekend. Finally, time (alone) with the partner (‘Spouse Exclusive’), increased slightly on weekdays.

Figure 2. Changes in Average Time with Family Members, 2000-2015. Family time includes the presence of the partner and the children. Father With Child includes time fathers spend alone with their children. Mother With Child includes time mothers spend alone with their children. Spouse Exclusive includes the time partners spend together without anyone else present. Two measures of family time are presented; the light bars stacked on top represented the “inactive family time” and the darker bars represent the “engaged family time”. The light bars stacked on top of Spouse Exclusive represent the time at least one partner report being with the other and the darker bars includes only the time when both partners report being together.

Comparing weekends and weekdays, we can note that all types of time together are higher during the weekend, showing the importance of weekends for family interactions⁷. Comparing women and men, we can see that mothers are still the main provider of care for children. During weekdays, they spend about 4 hours more than fathers alone with the children and about twice the time (alone with children) during weekends. There are still strong gender inequalities in term of time together with children, despite the fact that most women now are also employed⁸.

Figure 3 shows the sequencing of family time across the 24 hours of the day on Saturdays, Sundays and Weekdays for both the 2000 and 2015 surveys. Family time is represented by the deep blue area at the base of each graph. The light yellow area shows father’s time alone with children, the light blue area represents the mother’s time alone with children and the red colour at the top of each graph represents time alone with the spouse

(Spousal Exclusive). We can note that both family time and time alone with the partner is mostly concentrated in the evening, particularly on weekdays. However, comparing 2000 and 2015 shows that family time in 2015 appears more evenly distributed during the day and less concentrated in the evening. It seems that the decline in family time during weekdays is mainly due to a loss of time together in the evening.

Figure 3. Sequencing of time with family members by day of the week. This figure represents how much time families spend together throughout the day. The y-axis (vertical) shows the proportion of time together during a 10minutes time period while the x-axis (horizontal) represents the hours of the day (from 4am to 4am the next day).

What kind of decline?

In order to understand better this decline in *engaged* family time, let us take a look at the activities performed together in families. Figure 4 shows changes in different activities done with the partner and the children (family time) between 2000 and 2015. It is important to keep in mind when viewing these graphs that mothers and fathers can both report being together but might be in some instance doing different things. So, gender inequalities in activities can still exist even when couples are together. For instance, one partner can be cleaning and the other watching TV, with both reporting being together and *vice versa*.

Figure 4. Changes in Average Family Time Activities by Gender. This graph shows a selection of activities when mothers and fathers are together with their children.

Figure 4 shows that the two family time activities that declined the most between 2000 and 2015 are ‘watching TV’ and doing ‘domestic chores’. We can see that ‘watching TV’ together in families declined both during weekdays and weekends, for both men and women. This is also the case for domestic chores. Eating meals together and doing childcare together in a family did not change much. Leisure together in families increased slightly for women on weekends but decreased slightly on weekdays.

The next figure, Figure 5, shows changes in the time that parents spent alone with their children doing domestic chores and childcare. The activity that most significantly increased for both mothers and fathers was childcare, particularly on the weekend. During the weekend, childcare increased by 20 minutes for fathers and 23 minutes for mothers. During weekdays however, fathers did not increase their childcare time significantly, and their domestic chore time with children stayed approximately the same. However, doing domestic chores with children dramatically decreased for women. Nevertheless, gender differences are still strong in terms of domestic chores done while accompanied by children. In 2015, during weekdays, women were doing about 77minutes of domestic chores accompanied by children, while fathers were doing only 19 minutes accompanied by children.

Figure 5. Changes in Average Parental time Activities by Gender. This graph shows a selection of activities of men (fathers) and women (mothers) alone with their children. We can see that Childcare increased between 2000 and 2015 for men and women while domestic chores decreased.

Sunday family sociability

To get a more precise sense of how these changes in family time and activities play out across the day, I focus in here on how Sunday time with family members changed between 2000 and 2015. Sunday has traditionally been regarded as the day on which families spend time together. Figure 6 shows the sequencing of the activities of family time across Sundays in 2000 and 2015 separately for women and men. It is important to stress that this graph shows activities performed *only when families are together*.

Figure 6. Sunday Family Time Activities. This graphic shows the activities done together in families throughout the day. Family time here only shows the activities when both parents are present with their children.

If we compare 2000 to 2015 it is evident that family time on Sundays has become more spread out throughout the day. In 2000, it was more concentrated (peaked) during the evening but it seems by 2015 that the shape of the family time curve is more evenly spread through the day. We observe more family time spent in leisure (cream colour), particularly during the afternoon. One striking fact concerns family meals (eating together, in green). In 2015, it seems that family meals are ‘structuring’ the day much more than in 2000. We can see clear peaks in the green colour, representing breakfast, lunch and dinner eaten together.

The other important change is the decline in TV watching during family time, and in particular TV-watching during the evening. We observe TV watching as a family activity clearly during the evening in the 2000 data, but by 2015 TV-watching during family time was very much reduced. Moreover, it seems that no other activities really replaced family TV watching. If we go back to Figure 3, we can see that couple's time without children (spousal exclusive) is emerging more clearly during the evening. So, it could be that children are either going to bed earlier, or doing activities alone in the evening (using ICT devices?), leaving parents free to spend more time together in the evening.

We can see clearly from these activity sequences that mothers and fathers, even when together with their children, are sometimes doing different activities. Compared to fathers, mothers do significantly more domestic chores (red colour) than fathers during family time on Sundays. However, we can also see domestic chores during family time diminishing for both mothers and fathers between 2000 and 2015. In comparison, fathers enjoy more leisure (yellow colour) and TV-viewing (ultra-light blue colour) during their family time.

Discussion

What are the primarily conclusions one can draw from these results? Is the family really in 'decline'? The results presented here suggest that one must be extremely careful with this conclusion. The family has certainly changed, even in the relatively short period of the last fifteen years (2000-2015). I have showed that there has indeed been a decline in family time. More precisely, there was a decline in 'engaged' family time (where both partners report being together with their children), although not in overall family time if one includes all combinations of partners, parents and children. This suggests that the technological revolution of personal computers and devices has perhaps reconfigured our family time, but not led to an overall decline in the total time spend with our children and our partner.

I have also shown that the decline in family time is primarily due to the fact that families spend less time doing domestic chores together, and watch less TV together. One can interpret this change as a type of trade-off from 'quantity' to 'quality' time. Families might be experiencing an increasing 'shortage' of time, so, when they do spend time together, they focus more on leisure and meals together, as opposed to TV-watching or chores. The first question, then, is: is the decline in doing domestic chores while accompanied by partners or children necessarily a negative change?

The decline in domestic chores is part of a 'historical' trend rooted in the transformation of gender relationship over the course of the last 50 years⁹. Mothers, as well as

fathers, seem to have redistributed their scarce time to childcare rather than chores. The increase in childcare is also part of a more general trend. Children have become, over the course of the last century¹⁰, the centre of ever-greater attention and scrutiny. The evidence suggests that we are still in throes of this long historical process and childcare will continue to increase¹¹. Interestingly, mothers (alone) spend less time with children today than they did at the turn of the 21st Century. However when they do so, they focus more on childcare (rather than on domestic chores). The same can be said for fathers, with the difference that fathers have not made this trade-off with domestic chores but rather with TV- watching.

The second question is whether the decline in TV-watching, as part of family time, is worrisome. TV is often regarded as a ‘passive’ activity with little cultural benefit¹². However, one can make the case that watching TV together in families might have a range of positive outcomes for family life. First of all, watching TV at certain specific hours on a routine base can serve as a *family ritual*. Rituals are important because they foster solidarity and a sense of identity¹³ for families. Watching the same TV program according to a regular schedule can contribute to a shared family culture. Moreover, we shouldn’t underestimate what is actually going on when watching television together. Family discussion and debate often sparkle in front of the TV¹⁴. In this sense, TV *is* a social activity when others are present. Furthermore, watching emotionally ‘intense’ TV programs in the company of others touches the realm of collective emotions. An intimate bond is created when individuals share joint stimulation and excitement¹⁵. Solidarity is fostered when individuals experience intimate emotions in a collective fashion, and TV as a medium can channel these emotions into a shared experience.

Unlike domestic chores, the decline in TV watching is not explained by a long-term historical trend related to wider changes in gender ideologies, but rather it is the consequence of an ‘exogenous’ factor: smart phones and other related ICT devices. It was difficult, 20 years ago, to imagine what would replace traditional TV-watching in the future. Nowadays, household members do not need to watch TV programmes at the same time. In principle everyone can watch what he/she wants to watch when they want to watch it. In this sense, devices have fostered greater ‘individualisation’ in media use. Temporalities have become more tailored to the individual, rather than the collective.

Parents’ schedules are difficult to organise, and leisure time is often scarce. So, devices can give parents more leisure time because the kind of leisure that devices provide does not need to be synchronised with other family members. In the 1950s, if you wanted to play you had to organise and synchronise your schedule with a playing partner. Now, you can use your device to play with a *virtual* partner, who might, or might not, be a real person,

possibly living in a completely different time zone and living according to a different schedule¹⁶.

These devices can connect individuals, not only beyond physical space, but also beyond temporalities and synchronicities. This opens the doors to what can be called a '24/7 social society'. This may be viewed as a positive outcome. But then, we must ask: 'what happens to sociability with the people we *physically* live with?' This can mean our family members, or our friends and neighbours. Some authors make the argument that TV has had a negative impact on our relationship with the community¹⁷. However, it could also be argued that the decline of TV watching is an important factor in the reduction in family interaction. In this sense, TV time together is a factor fostering family time. We saw that the 'device revolution' has impacted family TV watching in the evening, and this lost TV time has not been replaced by another collective social activity. It has just been lost in terms of social time. So, what families now have to figure out is how to (re)connect the 'global', to which they can now be constantly connected, with their 'local' *physical* family interactions.

¹ References to the history of the family: Shorter (1977), Gillis (1985), Tilly and Scott (1988).

² Becker (1993)

³ Cherlin (2009)

⁴ All childcare activities are counted as time with children.

⁵ Unfortunately, the 2000 survey did not record time with spouse but time with other household members. So, in order to compare the two surveys, I had to broaden the definition of the 2015 survey to include time with other household members. I therefore removed from the analysis all 'complex' households, and focused only on households with children less than 7 years old. Because of these restrictions, I believe that the 'other household member' reported by a spouse is, in most cases, the partner.

⁶ OLS regression (holding constant Marital Status, Age, Number of Children, Age of Children, Social Class, Employment Status & Day of the Week) confirms that family time declined during weekdays. However, the 10 minutes difference during weekends is not significant when controlling for socio-demographic characteristics.

⁷ Consistent with the work of Lesnard (2009)

⁸ Results from OLS regression shows that full-time mothers spend significantly more time (alone) with children than full-time fathers (controlling for other characteristics).

⁹ See chapter 3.

¹⁰ See for example, Aries (1962).

¹¹ Time use studies seem to point in that direction.

¹² This view is generally held by middle- and upper-class individuals, for a discussion see Bourdieu (1979).

¹³ See Durkheim (2013) for a contemporary theory of rituals Collins (2014) and family rituals Lesnard (2009).

¹⁴ One example is the Channel 4 program 'Gogglebox' where we can observe couples, friends and families literally watching TV together. Even though the camera might contribute to forcing the discussion and reactions, we can recognize the extent to which watching TV is a true social activity.

¹⁵ Collins (2014).

¹⁶ Some authors made the argument that 'virtual' contacts cannot replace face-to-face contacts ('physical co-presence') in term of health benefit (see Pinker (2014)) but also in term of solidarity (Collins, 2014).

¹⁷ See Putnam (2000) Bowling Alone chapter 12.

For complete references please see the book.