Although discussions of parenting refer to quality time, parents' views of quality time have not been explored. Using the Sloan 500 Family Study, this article examines how 220 parents from 110 dual-parent families define the spending quality time with their families and finds 3 distinct views: Structured-planning parents saw it as planned family activities, child-centered parents emphasized heart-to-heart talks with their children, and time-intensive parents believed that all the time they spent with their families was quality time. Mothers and fathers both valued quality time, but, particularly when parents within a household disagreed, mothers more often described having a more active parenting role and assumed greater responsibility for quality time, reflecting a gendered division of parenting within the home.

“Quality time” has become part of our cultural discourse concerning what it means to be a “good” parent. Yet, for all its use in discussions of parenting, parents have not been directly asked what quality time means to them and whether or how they use it in regard to their own families. In this study, I look at how parents define spending quality time with their families. One of the first popular discussions of quality time was in a Business Week (1977) article investigating the “small” but “fast-growing” trend of mothers holding high-powered executive jobs. A few of these women admitted that having a demanding career could negatively affect their children; however, most insisted their children were not being harmed because it was not the amount of time they spent together that was important; rather, it was the quality of the time that mattered. But what these mothers meant by quality was not addressed and, similarly, academic discussions of parenting have overlooked what parents consider to be quality time with their families. Exploring the activities, amount of time, and nature of interactions that parents define as quality time is important for gaining a better understanding of the tension parents experience in balancing their work and home lives. In a sample of married middle-class couples with children, there were three distinct views of quality time: structured-planning parents felt quality time was planned family activities, child-centered parents saw it as heart-to-heart talks, and time-available parents believed that all the time they spent with their families while at home was quality time. Parents were similar, however, in that their views were shaped by their concerns over meeting work and home responsibilities while still attending to the needs of their children. Mothers and fathers both valued quality time, but, particularly when parents within a household disagreed, mothers more often described having a more active parenting role and assumed greater responsibility for quality time, reflecting a gendered division of parenting within the home.

Cultural models of parenting such as quality time give guidance to parents regarding what children need (i.e., quality time with their...
families), who should be meeting those needs (i.e., parents), and a rationale for why quality time is important for the child, the family, and even the larger society (i.e., quality time will counter the negative effects of parents working outside the home) (Hays, 1996, p. 221). Yet, such cultural messages are often not consistent meaning that parents are confronted with mixed messages of what it means to be a good parent. Spock (1945/1998), the well-known parenting expert, defined quality time as the “close, nurturing, and lovingly responsive” interactions between parent and child that occur during everyday routines such as household chores. Web sites aimed at working parents have promoted the idea that quality time should be relaxing and fun family activities, such as a vacation or a family game night, intended to help families take a break from hectic work and school schedules (e.g., fun.familiyeducation.com, 2006; hotelfun4kids.com, 2006). Spock, however, cautioned parents against interpreting quality time to mean solely such elaborate events, but Schmitt (1991), another parenting expert, has urged parents to set aside “special” time for catching up with their children. Nonetheless, some parenting advocates have urged parents to spend lots of time with their children instead of focusing on brief quality time moments (e.g., Lasch, 1998; saferchild.org, 2006). Entertainment portrayals of modern families have even weighed in on the debate, including the working-class sitcom *Roseanne* that dismissed quality time as a middle-class luxury. These various, and at times contradictory, perspectives mean that parents must interpret what quality time means for their own families and that different parents could develop different views.

Quality time has also been acknowledged in academic discussions of parenting, but it is usually mentioned in passing rather than empirically examined. In part, this is because more research has focused on time-use patterns within families instead of exploring how parents feel about time spent at work and with their families (for further discussion, see Daly, 1996; Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, & Johnson, 2004). In general, quality time has been depicted as an emphasis on the nature of interactions rather than on the amount of time families spend together. Parents’ views, however, have been inferred instead of systematically analyzed. Most social scientists, for example, who have pointed out the potentially negative consequences of the quality time mantra for parents have not directly examined parents’ interpretations. Hochschild (1997) identified that the quality time edict had increased the emotional work (or the “third shift”) of parents while at home and had caused many to schedule home life as if it were work. She discussed a few parents in her study who defined quality time as “segmented” time, or time they sat specifically aside to spend with their children, but she accepted this as the common understanding of quality time without questioning whether other parents shared this view. Similarly, Galinsky (1999) argued that quality time is “an unattainable goal, even a burdensome one” because it pressures parents into believing that certain types of interactions are more important than others (p. 208). She also suggested that parents equated “focused” time, or undistracted time with their children, with quality time when asked when they felt particularly “successful at home” (p. 89), but the types of activities and interactions parents considered to be part of this time were not spelled out. Because parents did not appear to be directly asked what quality time meant to them, it is unclear what proportion of parents shared this definition. Undoubtedly, parenting expectations are a source of stress, but given that parents’ views of quality have been largely assumed, and what researchers mean by quality time has often not been clearly explained, discussions of the possible negative consequences are speculative at best because they may be based on a definition that parents themselves do not share.

A few researchers have considered how parents and children interpret spending time with each other, but again, parents’ definitions of quality time have not been directly examined. Boyd (2002) looked at how stay-at-home mothers felt about the time they spent at home. Boyd concluded that these mothers were often critical of the idea of quality time, but she did not discuss what they thought quality time meant culturally or for their own families. Daly (1996) found that fathers felt that spending time with their children was a mark of being a good father and that they were concerned with the “quality” of their time together, but the activities and interactions these fathers saw as quality time were not discussed. Christensen (2002) found that 10- and 11-year olds in England did not distinguish quality time from time they spent alone, at school, or with friends. She also suggested that children had a different interpretation of quality time from parents, who were characterized as defining it as breaks from the normal family routine, but parents’ views
were assumed rather than studied. These studies are important because they begin to broach how families feel about the time they spend together, but they assume what parents mean by quality time as well as overlook the possibility that parents could have different outlooks.

Some research has pointed to the idea that how a parent envisions quality time may be related to their experience of work-family conflict. In her study of “intensive mothering,” Hays (1996) mentioned a few mothers in her sample who were concerned about spending quality time with their children. One mother defined quality time as time set aside at night and on weekends for her children and another saw it as being emotionally available to her child. Although not her main research interest, the subtle differences Hays presented indicate that these mothers could perceive different barriers (i.e., having to work a weekend vs. being distracted) to spending quality time with their children, which could impact their respective experiences of work-family conflict.

After controlling for how much quality and quantity time parents and children spent together, Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, and Robinson (2004) found that nearly half of parents felt they did not spend enough time with their children. The quantity of time was defined as when parents and children were “in fairly close contact” and quality time was defined as “focused time” where the primary activity was either the family eating together or one-to-one parent-child time (pp. 745 – 747). Unlike most other researchers, Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, and Robinson defined what they meant by quality time, but their measure of quality time may be more accurately described as focused time because it may not be capturing the activities and interactions parents themselves would define as being important. Although neither Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, and Robinson nor Hays fully explore parents’ views, their research suggests that how parents define quality time could be related to their experience of work-family-related strain.

This study fills a gap in research on parenting by directly asking middle-class parents what they consider to be quality time with their families. In doing so, I look at parents’ definitions of quality time as a mechanism through which they create a “vocabulary of motives” to explain their parenting choices in a way that affirms their status as a good parent (e.g., Garey, 1999; Godwin, 2004; Heltsley & Calhoun, 2003). Mills (1940) argued that individuals construct a vocabulary of motives to help them make sense of and to explain their actions to outsiders and themselves by drawing on socially acceptable words and images as a way to talk about their behaviors in a manner that emphasizes the appropriateness of their decisions. These vocabularies are not simply ways to justify past behaviors (Mills) but are a way to “impose order upon sets of behaviors, circumstances, and events that would otherwise seem chaotic” (Hopper, 1993, p. 802). A vocabulary of motives may not reflect the true motives behind one’s actions; rather, they are the culturally acceptable ways that individuals persuade others, along with oneself, that a decision or line of action was appropriate and necessary (Albas & Albas, 2003). The parents in this study used their quality time definition as a way to assert their status as a parent who has made suitable choices regarding how they have prioritized and spent time with their families while juggling hectic work and home schedules and responsibilities.

**METHOD**

**Data Source—Sloan 500 Family Study**

The concept of quality time has particular relevance for middle- and upper middle – class parents who are vulnerable to feeling a time bind because of demanding careers, an increase in dual-earner households, and an escalation in parenting standards aimed at middle-class parents (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). These parents can afford the trappings of intensive parenting (e.g., “concerted cultivation” Lareau, 2002), including music lessons and family trips, but they also have the stress of living up to high parenting expectations and, thus, may be particularly affected by discussions of quality time. Data for this study come from the Sloan 500 Family Study (Schneider & Waite, 2005), a comprehensive study of over 500 families examining the work and family experiences of middle- and upper middle-class families from eight communities across the United States conducted between 1999 and 2000 (for complete methodology, see Hoogstra, 2005).

**Sample Selection**

The present study is based on a secondary analysis of interview transcripts from 110 married mother-father pairs who participated in the Sloan 500 Family Study (N = 220 total interviews,
110 mothers and 110 fathers). To participate in the Sloan 500 Family Study, parents answered mail and newspaper solicitations distributed through participating elementary and high schools and local newspapers in the targeted communities, and families were not compensated for their participation.

Three criteria were used to select the 110 mother-father pairs used in this study. (Cases were added in stages during the analysis as described below.) First, only married mother-father pairs from dual-parent families were chosen to examine whether parents within a household agree on what quality time means. Quality time may also differ for single parents because they may be solely responsible for meeting both work and home responsibilities. Also, because the Sloan 500 Family Study targeted middle-class families, single parents who did participate were higher earning and more highly educated than such households in general. Looking at quality time strategies only among relatively well-off single parents may misrepresent the experiences and concerns of single parents more generally (e.g., Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Second, only mother-father pairs with teenage children were chosen (ages ranged from 12 to 18). Parents with teens may have different quality time strategies from those with younger children because teens have their own work, school, and extracurricular time commitments to consider and parents of younger children may have a different set of expectations concerning the needs of preadolescent children. Third, only mother-father pairs where both parents completed interviews were selected (59% of eligible mother-father pairs had both parents complete interviews). Conclusions of how the findings presented apply to other middle-class parents should be made cautiously because those who self-selected into the study and where both parents completed the study may feel less time constraints, which could influence their views of quality time.

Sample Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, the sample consists of 110 married mother-father pairs from mostly dual-earner households who earn well above the national average (median household income: $100,000 – $150,000). Most parents held professional, executive, or managerial jobs, over 81% of mothers and 78% of fathers. Representative of national trends, fathers tend to work longer hours (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004), but many fathers (61.7%) as well as mothers (20.6%) work over 46 hours per week. Most couples had two children, with a range of 1 – 5 children per couple. The Sloan 500 Family Study was designed to be representative of middle- and upper middle-class families more generally, but the resulting sample is more highly educated than such families in general (for discussion, see Hoogstra, 2005). Over 90% of fathers and 82% of mothers finished college, and 71% of fathers and 56% of mothers held

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education attainment</td>
<td>High school/some college</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced or professional degree</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Born in the United States</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly work hours</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 – 25</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26 – 45</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46 or more</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working a regular daytime schedule</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s occupation</td>
<td>Professional (e.g., teacher, lawyer, physician, professor)</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Executive/managerial</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sales/public relations</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service/clerical/manual</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes one mother who did not finish high school.

*Includes all hours worked during a typical week including bringing work home, staying late at the office, and so forth.

*Refers to a respondent’s usual hours at work and is defined as normally working between the hours of 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Most respondents who did not work a daytime schedule did not work evening, night, irregular, or rotating shifts but defined their typical schedule as other.
a graduate degree. The families in this study are also less racially and ethnically diverse than families nationally: Over 87% of mothers and 91% of fathers in the sample were White and most parents were born in the United States. Conclusions of how the findings presented here apply to other racial and ethnic groups should be made cautiously because other groups may have different childrearing and cultural traditions, which could influence their familiarity with and outlooks on quality time. The sample also included few blended families (7.8%). Blended families were not specifically targeted for recruitment into the Sloan 500 Family Study and may have been less likely to participate because such families can have added tension within the household (Hochschild, 1997; Stewart, 2005).

Data Collection
In-depth interviews with parents were completed by an intensively trained group of interviewers. Interviews were semistructured, lasted 1 – 2 hours; mothers and fathers were interviewed separately in their home; and interviews were fully transcribed. This study also draws on additional data from surveys completed with parents at the time of the interviews to determine mean weekly work hours (all hours worked during a typical week including overtime and hours worked at home), typical work schedule (i.e., regular day shift), and median household income. All names used are pseudonyms, all key identifying information was changed (e.g., teaching discipline), and all parents signed informed consent forms.

During their interviews, parents were asked, “There is a lot of talk these days in the media concerning quality time: What does quality time mean to you?” and “How do you spend quality time with your family?” Parents occasionally used the term “quality time” during other parts of their interviews and those usages were found to be consistent with a parent’s responses to the interview questions on quality time, with no one set of parents using the term more than another. I do not suggest that parents themselves used the term on a daily basis; rather, I conducted a textual analysis of parents’ responses to understand how parents developed their meaning of quality time.

A concern in asking parents how they spend time with their children is that they may offer socially acceptable answers. During their interviews, parents discussed many sensitive issues, including marital discord and job loss, and there is no reason to believe parents would be less candid on the topic of quality time. Moreover, because I am looking at parents’ responses through the lens of Mills’s (1940) vocabulary of motives framework, I am primarily interested in how individuals construct accounts, which involves using socially acceptable words and images to justify and make sense of choices and behaviors for outsiders (i.e., the interviewer).

Analytic Approach
Although both the mother and father in a mother-father pair were interviewed, the categories of quality time presented here are based on a parent’s individual definition of quality time. I did not assume that parents within a household would share a quality time outlook because parents have their own job demands and parenting experiences that may influence their views. This approach allows me to explore when parents within a family agree and disagree, and to compare mothers and fathers more generally. I used an inductive approach to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); the categories of quality time presented in this article emerged from reading and coding interview transcripts during a three-staged analysis. Also, I was not a member of the original data collection team and this outsider perspective allowed me to enter this research without preconceived notions concerning how parents felt about quality time.

Stage 1—Relevance of quality time. In the initial stage, I conducted a pilot investigation of nine mother-father pairs (18 parents) to determine whether quality time was a topic that had relevance for them and established that quality time was a topic of concern and reflection for parents.

Stage 2—Development of quality time criteria. In this stage, I set out to understand how parents decided what constituted quality time by exploring the criteria parents themselves used to distinguish what was quality time with their families. In this stage, an additional 26 mother-father pairs were randomly selected and added to the sample (bringing the total sample to 35 mother-father pairs or 70 parents). More cases were added to have a greater potential range of diversity among parents so as to reach conceptual saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I found that parents drew on five criteria in describing quality time...
with their families: purpose, activity, parenting role, time, and place. Interviews were then coded thematically with open codes for each of these criteria (Table 2, left column). More specific, mutually exclusive axial (or secondary) codes within each open code were created to more precisely capture the range of parents’ responses (Table 2, middle and right columns):

Purpose. Purpose indicates what parents saw as the intended goal of having quality time. Some parents saw quality time as relaxation and recreation; others saw it as a bonding opportunity. And some thought the goal should be left open to accommodate the family’s changing needs.

Activity. Activity refers to the main type of activity parents associated with quality time (activity axis codes are based on Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Maintenance activities are necessary for sustaining routine daily domestic life (e.g., paying bills, doing dishes); leisure activities, either active or passive, are when recreation and relaxation are the primary goals (e.g., vacations). In productive activities, family members interact with one another and are emotionally invested in the activity, for example, some families use dinner time as a way for members to discuss important issues including negotiating the roles and responsibilities within the family unit (e.g., Ochs & Taylor, 1992).

Parenting role. Parenting role is what parents saw as their main responsibility during quality time (parenting role axial codes are based on Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). A challenging parenting style was when a parent stressed exposing their children to new experiences and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Codes</th>
<th>Axial Codes</th>
<th>Definition of Axial Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>Quality time as a break from everyday life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Quality time as an emotional connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Goal of quality time changes based on family’s current need. (Note: Activities coding schema is based on Csikszentmihalyi &amp; Larson, 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>Refers to activities where family members are interacting and “working” at being a family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>Activities related to sustaining daily domestic life: paying bills, doing dishes, and so forth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active leisure</td>
<td>Recreational activities where members are interacting and are physically active.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passive leisure</td>
<td>Recreational activities where family members are not directly interacting and are passive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting role</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>Encourages “adolescents to take on greater responsibilities, learn new skills, and take risks that lead toward greater individuation” (Csikszentmihalyi &amp; Schneider, 2000, p. 116).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>“[R]efers specifically to the parents’ responsiveness to the child … the child is comfortable in the home, spends time with other family members, and feels loved and cared for” (Csikszentmihalyi &amp; Schneider, 2000, p. 115).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Quality time as a set period of time (e.g., Sunday afternoon, 5 minutes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>Quality time requires a lot of time. No limit placed on quality time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Quality time occurs inside of the family’s home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Away from home</td>
<td>Quality time occurs outside of the family’s home.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intellectual pursuits to foster their child’s independence, whereas a supportive parent emphasized creating a home environment where a child feels loved and supported. An open parenting style indicated parents who described their approach as more flexible to meet the changing needs of their children.

Time. The nature of the interview data does not allow me to conclude how much time parents spent with their children; instead, this measure indicates how much time parents felt was sufficient for quality time to occur. Limited referred to a parent expressing that quality time could be a set period of time (e.g., an afternoon or 5 minutes), whereas generous time was when a parent felt quality time required a great deal of time and that no time limit could be placed on quality time.

Place. Place refers to where parents felt quality time would most likely occur, either in the home or away from the home.

Stage 3—Development of quality time categories. In the third stage, I set out to uncover more general views of quality time by looking for patterns among axial codes (Table 3). I was initially struck that parents had very clear opinions on the purpose behind quality time; why it was important for their family. Therefore, I grouped parents by what they felt was the intended purpose of quality time. By doing so, it became apparent that parents’ view of the purpose behind quality time was associated with the activities they saw as constituting quality time and was tied to how much time they felt quality time required. And activities were strongly related to where quality time was thought to most likely occur. Finally, parents who agreed on what activities and purpose constituted quality time had a similar view of their parenting role and responsibility during that time. Drawing on these associations among axial codes, I distinguished three categories to indicate differences in parents’ overall orientation to quality time.

All parents were classified into one category. Parenting views are undoubtedly complex, but this study captures a single dimension of parenting and family life; what parents count as quality time with their own family. Parents in the sample were quite familiar with the cultural debate surrounding quality time and were direct in relaying what they saw as the intended purpose of quality time. Most also gave a detailed example of how they had spent quality time with their family recently. In identifying the categories of quality time, several exceptions were noted. On occasion, cases arose where a parent had a unique view of the activities or parenting role associated with quality time relative to other parents who shared their view on the purpose behind quality time. These exceptions did not dismantle emerging categories but added nuance within a category, particularly differences between mothers and fathers.

After the categories were established, an additional 75 mother-father pairs were randomly selected and categorized as part of a larger study exploring parents’ experience of work-family related strain (bringing the total sample to 110 mother-father pairs or 220 parents). Additional cases were selected to increase the sample size to perform quantitative analyses using the survey data collected during the Sloan 500 Family Study. At the end of the classification process, I verified the coding and classification of all the cases and compared the responses of step and biological/adoptive parents to see if there were differences in their definitions of quality time.

RESULTS

Table 4 gives an overview of the three categories of parents. In short, structured-planning parents felt quality time occurred when they specifically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Axial Codes</th>
<th>Quality Time Category</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Parenting Role</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured planning</td>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>Active leisure</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Away from home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child centered</td>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Home/away from home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time available</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Maintenance, passive leisure</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents’ Definition of Quality Time

Structured Planning: Balancing Recreation and Challenge

Structured-planning parents described quality time as time specifically set aside from normal daily routines for special family activities, such as a vacation or a weekend trip to a museum. These parents described how their families needed to spend “enjoyable,” “relaxing,” and “uninterrupted” time together away from the hectic pace of work and school. Michael, an architect and father of three, felt that stress-free and pleasant time with his family was only possible when he was able to give his family his full attention, “Well, certainly the most prominent thing is it [quality time] should be fully devoted attention rather then distracted by personal or work requirements, and then hopefully something really usually satisfying and enjoyable.”

Structured-planning parents explained how their job responsibilities limited the amount of quality time they could spend with their families during the week. Long hours, pending deadlines, and high-pressure jobs made them feel stressed and exhausted at the end of the day, leading to less time to relax and to enjoy being with their families. Clarice, a professor of sociology and mother of two, believed that quality time was most likely

Table 4. Characteristics of Parents by Quality Time Category (N = 110 mothers and 109 fathers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Structured Planning (44%)</th>
<th>Child Centered (37%)</th>
<th>Time Available (19%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mdn household income</td>
<td>$100,000 – $150,000</td>
<td>$100,000 – $150,000</td>
<td>$100,000 – $150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M number of children</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% stepparent or blended household</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% mothers</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s M weekly work hours*</td>
<td>26 – 45</td>
<td>26 – 45</td>
<td>26 – 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% nonemployed mothers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% mothers who work regular daytime schedules*</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% mothers in service/clerical/manual jobs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% fathers</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s M weekly work hours*</td>
<td>46 or more</td>
<td>46 or more</td>
<td>46 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% nonemployed fathers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% fathers who work regular daytime schedules*</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% fathers in service/clerical/manual jobs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes all hours worked during a typical week including bringing work home, staying late at the office, and so forth. Refers to a respondent’s usual hours at work and is defined as normally working between the hours of 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Most respondents who did not work a daytime schedule did not work evening, night, irregular, or rotating shifts but defined their typical schedule as other. One father is excluded because he did not fully answer the interview section on quality time.

*p < .05.
to occur during vacations when she and her family were able to escape the demands of work and school:

Well, probably the most quality time I would say we spend is when we typically take one or two vacations a year. And the reason I say it’s quality time is because we’re away from the telephone, we’re away from the computers. We’re really, you know, we go someplace where we’ve all wanted to go to, that there are things we want to do, which we do together.

These parents felt strongly that family time was important but that a lack of family time during the week was okay. They believed it was more important that families spend time together when they were not distracted by outside responsibilities than spending a lot of time together while preoccupied. For Karl, a mechanical engineer and father of two, this meant emphasizing quality time on weekends rather than during the workweek:

Yeah. It [quality time] only comes on the weekend because, to have quality time, you have to have time to unwind. And, by the time you get home to the time that you go to bed. I mean, I’m not gonna say there’s not quality time there, ‘cause there is. But, it’s not much. It’s a small amount of time, when you get home at 6 o’clock, and you’re hitting the sack by 10:30.

Because they saw their lives as hectic, structured-planning parents described scheduling quality time in advance to ensure that their families spent quality time together. The name for this category emphasizes these parents’ commitment to scheduling quality time. They explained that quality time activities were a priority in their family’s lives. Louise, a physician, and mother of two, considered quality time to be an important aspect of her family’s schedule: “I mean, it [quality time] has to be set out in time. It’s identified. All four people must be there. All four of us have to be there.” Her husband Derek, a market analyst, shared Louise’s viewpoint and explained how they “automatically” programmed quality time each week:

But basically, spending time together—doing fun things, where we focus on doing things together and not being distracted. One of the things that we’ve set up to build that in automatically every week, on Sunday afternoons … we have what we call a Sunday afternoon adventure club where we do something fun. Like this past weekend, the four of us played soccer. Or, we’ll go to the museum. Or, we’ll go down to the lakefront. Or, we’ll go bowling. We do something fun together.

Some parents, including Michael, who emphasized giving his family his full attention during quality time, felt that planning quality time in advance put them in greater control of their work and home lives in addition to ensuring they spent quality time with their families:

Well, unfortunately, very often work takes the time priority because I guess my professional achievement orientation that, I say “unfortunately” because sometimes it happens more than I’d like. But I guess I feel I’m in enough control of the schedule that if I know in advance I can find the time for almost anything [such as] a day off to do something with the family.

Unlike fathers, who were primarily concerned with fitting quality time into their work schedules, many structured-planning mothers expressed concerns over trying to pursue their careers while still meeting their family’s needs. Kay, a novelist and mother of two, described the tension she experienced in making time for quality time while still finding time to write: “It’s difficult. I feel guilty. I feel I should be working on my book or something. And, there are times when I’m really ambivalent. I just, have a really hard time.” Her ambivalence over meeting career and family demands demonstrates how, according to Blair-Loy (2003), cultural models, or “schemas of devotion,” place working women in a precarious position because the demands of motherhood are at odds with the demands of the workplace (also, see Garey, 1999). Blair-Loy described various ways professional women manage these competing devotions (e.g., committing themselves to work or motherhood), and the ambivalence and compromises that often accompany these choices. Some mothers, like Kay, used their quality time definition as a way to explain how they were able to meet the needs of their children while still actively pursuing their careers, even though this way of reconciling the competing demands of work and home may not completely alleviate the strain they feel.

Although these mothers and fathers felt pressed for time, they believed quality time should happen regularly, every Sunday or every summer (particularly for more elaborate events such as a vacation to Florida). A weekly
commitment, as described by Derek and Louise, was a popular interval that parents thought would ensure that their family spent enough quality time together. The activities parents described often took up a sizeable period of time, an afternoon or a week in the summer, but were limited in the sense that they were an identifiable block of time that happened occasionally.

Most of the scheduled activities that structured-planning parents described, such as a weekend trip, took place outside of the home because of work responsibilities (e.g., bringing work home) and the necessary maintenance that a household requires. The home represented, literally and figuratively, pressing responsibilities and distractions, rather than an environment in which they felt quality time could occur. Lou, an editor and father of two, believed that quality time was more likely to happen when his family was away from home:

To me quality time generally means time with the family out of the house. I mean the house has all its own sort of pressures and so on. Getting away on a Sunday afternoon and going downtown or up North to a beach or something like that.

Some structured-planning parents also described planning more passive leisure activities at home such as a family movie night. These activities were still considered quality time because they were scheduled in advance and were intended to be a break from the family’s daily routine. These parents, including James, a lawyer and father of five, explained how they took steps to keep work responsibilities from creeping into their family’s quality time at home:

I would say [quality time is] giving total attention to the kids and the wife. And, not having any distractions and not having lots of friends around. Just kind of focusing on each other …. We put the answering machine on. So, we don’t answer the phone.

Several mothers also saw some family dinners as quality time, but not routine weeknight dinners, rather birthday dinners and Sunday get-togethers. Like other quality time events, these dinners were scheduled in advance and were considered to be a priority in the family’s schedule. Mothers’ emphasis on such dinners corresponds to research finding that mothers, even those in dual-earner couples such as Louise and Derek, bear the primary responsibility for this domestic task (Lee, 2005; Sayer, 2005; Waite & Lee, 2005). These dinners may involve more effort than the routine supper, but they are another way that mothers felt they could make time in their family’s busy schedules. Louise admitted that quality time for her family was “pretty rare,” but despite what was happening in everyone’s, life Sunday night dinner was “sacred”:

We had a big problem one year; [our son] had a Boy Scout thing that was on Sunday nights, and that was sort of our sacred night. And he could’ve ruined that, and it was really hard for a year, dealing with the fact that he would leave every Sunday night ‘cause that was our family night, that nobody would go out. Nobody would have meetings, nobody would go out with their friends.

It may appear that structured-planning parents’ approach to quality time was largely defined in terms of instrumental work or goal-oriented action, such as planning a trip or going to a museum, because the events were the marker that quality time had occurred. But these parents also described feeling responsible for ensuring that their families enjoyed their quality time together, which meant that these activities could become yet another obligation in their lives. At times, parents saw themselves as having to engage in emotional work by putting on a happy face to guarantee that everyone was having fun. Other researchers have also found that family recreational activities can increase the emotional burden and stress of parents who feel that they must ensure that family time is pleasant, with everyone getting along (e.g., Zabriskie, 2001).

Several mothers also saw quality time as important for the collective memory of the family. For Tara, a speech pathologist and mother of two, “[T]he memories that we share that we laugh about are usually things that happened on vacations.” This emphasis among mothers suggests that although fathers were also invested in these activities, mothers may have seen an additional overarching role for themselves during quality time: creating and preserving family memories.

Nevertheless, having a quality time event did not guarantee pleasant family interactions or memories. Clarice who considered the “most quality time” she spent with her family was during their vacations, admitted that these trips did not always go smoothly:
We go someplace where we’ve all wanted to go, that there are things we want to do, which we do together. It doesn’t mean that the whole time we’re gone we have a wonderfully harmonious experience. There are moments of tension and fighting.

Many mothers also conceded that teens, because of their own social concerns and schedules, could be less than willing participants, but mothers pressed for these activities because they saw them as beneficial for their families. Paulette, a stay-at-home mother of four, believed quality time was important, even if her children begrudgingly participated, because it was when her family was able to spend relaxing and strife-free time together:

Quality time is just when it gets quiet, and the strife ceases. All the bickering back and forth and just breathe deep, that’s quality time when your family gets to rest . . .

Interviewer: Do you think like those types of things like your children perceive as quality time also?

Paulette: No. They act like we’re torturing them. “Oh, do we have to go? We want to stay here. We don’t want to do family things.” They do that. Big time they do that.

Several mothers described strategies to make quality time more appealing for their, at times, unwilling teens because the structured-planning approach relies on teens being active participants. A mother of two and a physician once used a trip to a museum to “bribe” her teens into participating in quality time; another mother, a teacher with three teens, admitted that shopping at a mall “irritates me” but it was a main quality time activity because her teens enjoyed it. Structured-planning mothers’ concerns over teens’ reluctance suggest that they may assume greater responsibility for the actual planning of quality time corresponding to research that has found that mothers are more often in charge of the family’s schedule (Daly, 2002).

In the end, many structured-planning parents indicated that they wished they could spend more time with their children or that quality time was more frequent. Fred, a truck driver, admitted that he was not able to spend much time with his wife and two children, but that was okay because he regularly scheduled quality time activities:

[L]ately we’ve been going to plays. You know it’s not a lot of time but the time we do I think is quality time, you know, like we’ve been going to, we have a subscription to the theater. You know, like it’s a play going on every month so that’s time we spend and like maybe once or twice during the week.

Only having occasional family time did not challenge structured-planning parents’ belief that they made appropriate parenting choices because they ensured that their families spent “sufficient” quality time together by reserving family time on
a regular basis. Structured-planning parents created a vocabulary of motives whereby good parents did not focus on the amount of time they spent with their families but emphasized providing their children with educational and recreational activities on a regular basis. Weekend getaways and museums trips were not simply fun but became something structured-planning parents felt their family needed to escape the stresses of everyday life and to spend enough time together.

Child Centered: Support During Everyday Moments

Child-centered parents also felt that they did not have a lot of time to spend with their children because of their family’s work, school, and home responsibilities. Unlike structured-planning parents, however, they described quality time as the intimate heart-to-heart talks they had with their children. For Child-centered parents, quality time was when they were “catching up,” “connecting,” “sharing,” “bonding,” and “communicating” with their teens. Child-centered parents explained how their demanding work schedules limited their time at home and caused them to feel drained at the end of the workday. Kelsey admitted that she felt constantly “overwhelmed” as she tried to balance her demanding work schedule as a social worker with family responsibilities and that at times she felt the needs of her three children were slighted:

“I feel stressed and overwhelmed all the time. I really do. There’s just not enough time to get done what I want. So I’ll just breeze through here, and it’s like you’re skimming through life, you know? And you know that people need time … so really most of my time is spent doing these tedious things and telling my kids, “Later, later, later.” And it’s a miserable feeling.

To make the most of the little time they felt they had with their families, child-centered mothers and fathers defined quality time as the heart-to-heart conversations centering on their teens’ needs and interests, albeit often brief, that occurred during day-to-day routines and chores including while folding laundry together. When asked how she spent quality time with her daughter, Kelsey described how she “catches” moments during everyday errands:

… you just kind of catch it when you can. You know, if I’m going to the grocery store I’ll say, “Do you want to come with me?” That was really good for my older daughter. She would like those kinds of little things … Or if I could drive her to school and just kind of be there, you know, and let her know that I do care about her.

Child-centered mothers and fathers shared this concern over making time for their families in the midst of their hectic day-to-day work lives. Several child-centered mothers, however, like some structured-planning mothers, described concerns over meeting overarching career goals while still attending to their children’s needs. For Kelsey, part of the tension she described was in making enough time for her teens while she finished a master’s degree program to further her career as a social service educator.

Child-centered parents saw moments during household chores as quality time. They were not referring to “maintenance” activities but rather to “productive” moments wherein family members were emotionally connecting. Marc, a physician and father of four, even considered cleaning the family’s pet cage quality time if he was able to talk to his son: “[I]f I’m up there talking to him, that’s quality time. But if he wants me to help him clean out the iguana cage. Oddly enough that’s quality time.” And many mothers, including Kelsey, relied on time in the car while doing errands or driving their teens to school because it was a time when they felt their teens were a “captive” audience and that they could have important talks about family values or what was going on in their teens lives. Research has found that mothers spend more time than fathers driving for errands and chauffeuring children to activities (Surface Transportation Policy Project, 1999). Many mothers, such as Andrea, a mother of three and an educator, saw this time as an important opportunity for quality time:

I always thought the time in the car was quality time. Because, I had this kind of captive audience. So, I always knew more about them I think, than if they had walked to school or you know, been on a bus.

 Teens’ extracurricular activities were also part of what child-centered parents considered to be quality time. Although they occurred outside the home, they were a part of a family’s normal routines and were another way that parents felt they could encourage their teens’ interests. Child-centered fathers in particular emphasized
going to their teens’ sporting events as a way to be supportive and to connect with their teens. Steven, a lawyer and father of three, believed attending his children’s games was a primary way he could be supportive of their interests:

Again, if we’re going places, we want to bring them along, so we can talk. We attend their games often. That’s what we call quality time. I think lately, a lot of the quality time is going to their activities.

Unlike structured-planning parents who saw themselves as activity leaders and teachers during quality time, child-centered parents believed their primary parenting role was to “be there” for their children. This idea of being emotionally available to their children corresponds to the parenting style of support, whereby parents create a home environment in which a child feels cared for, safe, and supported (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). For Kim, a stay-at-home mother of four, quality time meant “being there” to lend support to her children:

Quality time to me is being there when they most need me. Whether it’s to study for a test or after a terrible day or after a terrible experience with a teacher or after a really crummy game, which we had last night. That’s to me quality time.

Child-centered parents most often mentioned the activity-based approach of structured-planning parents as the cultural definition of quality time, but they were also critical of this view. Quality time should not be recreation. Rather, child-centered parents felt it was an opportunity to express nurturing and support for their children and their interests, which they believed was unlikely to occur during a staged family activity. Theresa, a research scientist and mother of three, described how unplanned time with her daughter was more likely to elicit a meaningful conversation concerning her daughter’s interests:

When I think of quality time I think of time when we’re having some kind of meaningful interaction. I think, for us at least, the quality interactions that I feel I have with the kids don’t come when I specifically set time aside. That conversation I was talking about with Jaclyn about the roots of privacy and property, we had that conversation when we were folding clothes in the kitchen together …. And they don’t happen at a set aside time; they happen on the day-to-day. You can’t plan quality time or else it’s a disaster. Most of the time it’s a disaster if you plan it.

Although critical of what they considered to be the culturally accepted meaning of quality time, child-centered parents affirmed their status as good parents by defining emotional support as the most important thing a child needs. In particular, these parents believed that teens were at a point in their lives when having involved parents was crucial because of the important decisions teens faced, including what college to attend. Nathan, a high school teacher, was especially concerned about guiding his son through the difficult decisions that face teens:

See, quality time to me—I am there. You know, the kids don’t need you when they’re five years old. They need you when they’re 17 or 18, when they’re dealing with the sexual issues, the drug issues, and the alcohol issues.

Child-centered parents’ view of quality time was very individualistic: Quality time was tied to the interests of a specific child unlike structured-planning parents who emphasized the entire family being together. The name for the child-centered category highlights how this approach addresses a child’s distinctive needs. Kelsey, who described taking her younger daughter on errands to possibly catch a quality time moment, approached her older daughter before bedtime because she knew that daughter was more likely to want to talk later in the evening. Lana, an office administrator, even had difficulty defining quality time because of what she considered to be the unique needs of each of her five children:

How, how can I define quality time? I have five children. They are so different! I have, you know guys and girls, difference of ages, difference in personalities. What each one needs is so different. What quality time [is] for each one is so different. And I don’t think it’s, for me it’s not something that can be put in a nice little definition.

Child-centered parents did not work fewer hours or earn less than the other parents in this study (Table 4). They perhaps felt comfortable in critiquing popular notions of quality time because they were already able to provide their children with extracurricular activities and family vacations. But their approach may have relevance for single-parent or lower income families. Edin and Kefalas (2005) speculated that single, low-income mothers may see quality time less in terms of the cultural notion of providing challenging
opportunities for their children (a model that structured-planning parents followed). They rely more on keeping their children safe but also on “being there” for their children in a manner more akin to the child-centered approach, a model that does not require much in the way of financial or time resources. Edin and Kefalas’s research suggests that non-middle-class families are affected by the discourse on quality time and that parents’ interpretations may be shaped by their available resources.

Though requiring little money or time, child-centered parents pointed out that their version of quality time can be emotionally taxing. These seemingly unplanned interactions often required prodding by parents (e.g., asking a daughter to come along to the store) even if they seemed spontaneous to teens. Parents also felt that this approach intensified their emotional work while at home, or their “third shift” (Hochschild, 1997). Hochschild (1983) saw a major part of emotional labor as being when individuals “manage” their feelings to exude a particular outward emotion. For child-centered parents, because their approach centers on creating a supportive home setting, this meant being emotionally “on” while at home, or making sure they were able to be approachable, supportive, and emotionally engaged, even if they were preoccupied after a long day at work or with household responsibilities. Janet, a clerical worker, felt quality time was “Those times that you don’t plan and have a good heart to heart talk” with her children. Her husband, Phil, a pipe fitter, shared his wife’s perspective but was concerned that being distracted could cause him to miss a quality time opportunity with his two sons:

I can be very distracted sometimes when they want to talk to me and what I find is that I’m not really hearing what they’re saying. And to me that’s not quality time. Quality time is when you’re there with the individual, hearing and feeling what they’re saying and giving back to them your feeling and your energy and thought. If you’re not doing that then I don’t think that’s quality time. I think that’s blowing them off basically. It’s basically telling them that they’re not, that whatever you’re doing is more important than what they are doing.

Despite the potential downsides of their approach, child-centered parents’ view of quality time was a way to ease the tension they faced in balancing their work and home lives because it confronted a central dilemma they faced in describing themselves as good parents: ensuring that their teens’ needs were met while only having limited time to spend with them. Festinger (1957) posits that cognitive dissonance results when one acts counter to one’s beliefs and the magnitude of the dissonance will be related to the importance of those beliefs. For parents, dissonance may occur when they feel they cannot spend as much time as they would like with their children because of work. Festinger also believes that individuals seek ways to relieve this dissonance. Child-centered parents did so by creating a definition of quality time that emphasized that good parents valued the nature of interactions with their child over the amount of time spent together. Phil believed his biological son, Connor, had sufficient quality time even though he and his wife were not home often because of their work schedules. Unfortunately, he saw his stepson, Patrick, as having less quality time because Patrick’s biological father works at home. Patrick spent a lot of time at his biological father’s home, but Phil believed he spent little quality time with his biological father who was often distracted by work. Although Phil and Patrick’s father seem to have a tense relationship, Phil’s view stresses that, for him, the amount of time spent is less important if parents make an effort to have quality time when they were with their children:

[Connor] probably has more quality time at home, even though Margaret and I are both working and I’m working a split shift and bouncing back and forth, than Patrick has over at his place with his dad … . But Patrick has very little quality time with his dad. They hardly have any quality time at all and he has a lot of time with his dad. When we do get a few moments, five or ten minutes of quality time is worth a weekend of diversion.

Many structured-planning parents saw quality time as happening weekly, whereas child-centered parents saw it happening more frequently, but not necessarily daily, and the moments they described were much briefer in duration. Cindy, a bank teller, stressed that even a few minutes with her three children was important quality time:

Quality time means to me, just even if it’s 15 minutes, it’s just that one-on-one, uh 5, 10, 15 minutes. In my opinion it doesn’t have to be hours, but it’s it’s just that, you know, “I love you, you’re very important to me.” … it’s that exchange, even a silent exchange. Just that one-on-one.
As child-centered parents defined quality time, they created a vocabulary of motives stressing that, although their family’s work and school lives were hectic, they were fulfilling their parenting responsibilities. It was not the amount of time they spent together that mattered but that their teens felt cared for. In the midst of their day-to-day lives, doing dishes or cleaning the iguana cage were not just household chores but a chance to have a quality time moment with their teens. Although these parents felt they did not have much time to spend with their children, they saw themselves as being good parents because they made a concerted effort to be supportive of their children and of their interests when they were together.

Time Available: Just-in-Case Parenting

Structured-planning parents defined quality time as fun and relaxing family activities, and child-centered parents saw it as intimate talks between parent and child. In contrast, time-available parents felt that all the time their family spent at home together should be seen as quality time. As Sue Ann, a pediatrician and mother of two, explained, “To me, when we are together, it’s good, quality time. Bad times, or good times. They are all quality times. I think that’s the fact of life.” Tony, a physical therapist with two children, felt that all day-to-day family interactions, whether tense or tranquil, were quality time, “Basically it’s every second you have with them is quality time. And sometimes the quality time isn’t the greatest because maybe you’re mad at each other.”

Unlike the other parents in this study, time-available parents asserted that the quantity of time a family spends together is as important as what goes on during that time as explained by David, a professor of computer science and father of five:

Absolutely nothing, it [quality time] means nothing to me. I think it’s a lot of talk in the media. When you spend time with your kids, you spend time with your kids. I don’t worry about what kind of time ... , We’re always around. I mean when they’re not in school, one of us is here.

In fact, according to time-available parents, parents and children do not need to be interacting at all for quality time to occur. A parent may be preparing dinner while a child does homework in another room; just being at home together is what is important. Unlike child-centered parents who saw quality time as potentially occurring during any daily routine, even those that occurred outside their home such as a teen’s sporting event, time-available parents, such as Sharon, a medical transcriptionist and mother of two, felt quality time could only occur when the entire family was home together: “Time, is what matters—just being here. Just, being in the same house to me is quality time. You don’t have to be doing something to make it quality time. If you’re spending time together, that’s all that matters.”

Like Sharon, many time-available parents were quite critical of what they saw as the activity-based and the heart-to-heart talk approaches to quality time. They felt that these types of interactions were staged and artificial and did not reflect most of the time a family spent together, which was not always enjoyable, relaxing, or meaningful. Todd, a real estate banker and father of three, felt that quality time was just everyday life:

It’s [quality time] not overly structured or artificially created in the sense that now we’re going to have it. I don’t think we’ve ever done that. But again, it’s just been basic “Here is our life” and we do it.

Time-available parents believed that these commonly accepted notions of quality time allow parents to feel that they can make up for not being home much by having an occasional family vacation or bonding moment. Katie, an interior designer and mother of two, firmly believed being a good parent means spending a lot of time with your children:

I’m having a lot of problems with that [quality time], ‘cause I think that it’s oftentimes used as an excuse and it takes away people’s responsibility, particularly towards their kids. But, you know, this kind of, “Yeah, yeah, I’m listening,” kind of a thing or, you know, just at a mealtime, I mean, I don’t think it qualifies. I think quality time—I think children need large amounts of time. You know, and if you can’t give large amounts of time, then the kid suffers. I mean, that’s, you know, quality time or not, I think you need to be spending large amounts of time.

Some, but not all, time-available parents rejected the term quality time altogether because they felt that it was simply a buzzword created to lessen the guilt of parents who did not spend much time with their children. According to Karen, a real estate broker and mother of two, “It’s just, it’s ridiculous. Quality time is—and even my daughters make fun of that expression. You know, granted there are a lot of parents
who don’t pay attention to their kids.” Her husband, Ted, a sales representative, shared her criticism:

Quality time is just a euphemism for a parent who spends no time with his kids and he gives his kids two hours on a Saturday afternoon. … So then they don’t feel guilty. Quality time should be every minute that you’re with your kids.

Many time-available parents believed those who subscribed to the quality time rhetoric did so to pursue their careers. According to Alan, a medical transcriptionist and father of five:

I think someone made that up because they felt guilty that they weren’t spending any time with their kids. So, they thought well, if I could just spend 15 minutes of quality time then I can go work on my career the rest of the time and let the kids wander and all that the rest of the day.

By modifying or even rejecting what they saw as the cultural definition of quality time, time-available parents in fact avowed their status as good parents: Good parenting meant not scheduling quality time but prioritizing their families above work. Unlike structured-planning or child-centered parents who described creating quality time outside of their work schedules, these parents explained how they had made career choices to spend more time at home. Niles, a psychologist and father of three, prided himself on being less career oriented:

I think if you want to work 80 hours a week, you’re not gonna have much time for a family. I see as very positive, the counter-current in American culture, where men and women are saying to their law firms and to their medical offices, “No. I’m not gonna work on the weekends. Yes. I am going to go home, or else I want to work someplace else.” Because, if you want to have a successful family, you have to put some time into the family.

Similarly, Mary, a research scientist and mother of one child and stepmother of two additional children, explained that her husband turned down a deanship at a prestigious university in another state for “family reasons” because it was more important for their family that her husband saw their children every day:

He turned down that position because that would mean we wouldn’t be able to be with the children every day. We would make enough money to fly them out twice a week, but we decided that the parenting doesn’t happen on planned weekends.

Because all family time was quality time, time-available parents did not see themselves as having a set role during quality time by either scheduling activities or being a good listener. Rather, they described themselves as being more flexible because they saw their main parenting role as being available to their children “just in case” a need arose. Edwin, an architect, described a recent important quality time moment when he was not directly interacting with his daughter, but where he felt he was fulfilling his main parenting role by being home and reachable:

My daughter was having a party. She didn’t want me anywhere near the party. … And that’s fine. Okay? But some kids came to the door who weren’t invited and she wanted me to answer the door because she could see who was there. Because she was sure that these kids had come to the party because they thought there were no adults. And when I opened the door these kids said, “Oh, hi” and they walked away. You know? Now I was not spending time interacting with my daughter as such, but she needed me there to protect that party in a sense. And I think that’s quality time too. I mean, I’m fulfilling my role as a parent.

In general, fathers were more likely to be drawn to more lax approach to quality time (23% of fathers vs. 14% of mothers, Table 4) and the name for this category emphasizes that these parents defined quality time as being home often and available to their teens, even though they waited for their children to approach them. Whereas child-centered and structured-planning parents actively sought out quality time and catered family time to their child’s needs and interests, time-available parents relied on their children to approach them with a concern or just to “hang out.” Ann, a sales representative and mother of three, felt her teens know that she is available, if they need her:

I think quality time to me is when they need to talk to you, whatever you’re doing, you just stop and hear what they have to say. I mean, they may come in to you and say, this is really bothering me. I mean, it may be in the middle of the news, but we can catch up on the news later.

Time-available and child-centered parents both saw daily routines and household chores as prime
quality time. For child-centered parents, however, it was the emotional interaction that may occur during household chores that made them potential quality time; “connecting” with their children was essential. For time-available parents, these daily chores did not have lead to an emotional interaction with their child. Just performing these maintenance activities (e.g., doing laundry) or engaging in instrumental action was sufficient for quality time to occur, as long as their children were nearby or at least at home.

Because interactive activities were not the focal point of quality time, time-available parents also saw passive leisure as quality time. Edwin, who had protected his daughter’s party, defended the idea that watching television could be quality time:

And the concept of being able to spend time with your kids where you’re not just sitting watching the television, but you’re interacting with them in some great fashion was appealing. Sometimes I think the kids just want you to be there, physically, even if you’re not doing anything. The mere fact that you’re there has some benefit. Even if you are just sitting there watching TV.

Although time-available parents stressed the amount of time they spent together as a family, they did not work less (or earn less) than the other parents (Table 4). A work schedule is only an indicator of the time parents have available for their families, and a limitation of the data analyzed in this study is that I cannot conclude which set of parents spent more (or less) time with their teens. Time-available parents, however, did not feel that their job demands cut into time with their families. When asked if he ever felt overwhelmed in meeting work and family obligations, Edwin replied, “not very often,” whereas the child-centered Kelsey described being overwhelmed regularly. That few expressed an intense time bind may partly explain why not many parents held the time-available view.

Although time-available parents expressed fewer concerns over having enough time for their families, like other approaches to quality time, being time-available is a way of reconciling parenting and work roles. This more expansive definition of quality time may lessen the feeling that family time is scarce because no one type of activity or interaction is prioritized over another. Time-available parents constructed a definition of quality time where watching TV and hanging around the house (whether or not they were interacting with their children) became a mark of being a responsible parent because they were around for their teens just in case they were needed.

Mothers’ and Fathers’ Agreement on a Quality Time Approach

Thus far, I have looked at how individual parents define quality time. Because the sample includes mother-father pairs from dual-parent families, I also examined whether parents within a household agreed with one another. Just under half of the parents in this study (46%) shared their spouses’ outlook on quality time (Table 5). Of couples who agreed, 47% shared a structured-planning view, 39% a child-centered view, and 14% a time-available view. The high number of structured-planning couples suggests that this approach requires the concerted effort of both parents because of the scheduling and financial commitment often involved. Yet parents’
agreement does not mean that parents equally take part in family time as evidenced by structured-planning mothers’ greater concerns over planning quality time when teens were reluctant. Couple disagreements, however, may conceal even greater gender inequities in day-to-day parenting practices. In couples where parents disagreed, both parents engaged in symbolic work by designating certain family interactions as being important quality time, but these approaches emphasize different levels of how proactive and involved a parent needs to be during family time. For instance, fathers were more likely to be time available in general and these fathers were the most likely to disagree with their spouse. Over 72% of time-available fathers disagreed with their spouse, whereas around half of parents in all the other categories did (Table 5). Therefore, time-available fathers more often had child-centered and structured-planning wives, both approaches characterized by a more active parenting style. Alex, a business owner and father of three was time available, but Peggy, a stay-at-home mom, was structured planning who felt quality time occurred during their annual summer getaways: 

Table 5. Mother-Father Pairs Agreement on a Quality Time Approach (%) 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% who agree: 46</th>
<th>Composition of couples who agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structured-planning couples 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-centered couples 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time-available couples 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% who disagree: 54</td>
<td>Composition of couples who disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured planning</td>
<td>Child centered 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured planning</td>
<td>Time available 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child centered</td>
<td>Structured planning 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child centered</td>
<td>Time available 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time available</td>
<td>Child centered 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time available</td>
<td>Structured planning 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% who disagree with their spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured planning Mother 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child centered Mother 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time available Mother 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured planning Father 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child centered Father 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time available Father 72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 109 mother-father pairs.

Although Alex mentioned these summer trips as well, for him quality time meant all the time he spent with his children, no matter what they were doing:

I think the people that didn’t want to spend time with their kids, came up with the word quality time. So, that means they could go out Saturday night. And they could go golf all day Sunday. Then, they could say that 15 minutes they gave them on Friday night, was quality time. There is no substitute for spending time with your children. I don’t care if you’re talking, I don’t care if you’re sitting in the same room and you’re doing different things. It doesn’t matter.

Nevertheless, Peggy focused on the fun times they shared during family vacations: “I think it’s [quality time] just being relaxed and the talking and laughing with each other.” But she also felt that Alex was less involved with their children while at their vacation home: “Actually, a lot of it [vacation activities are] away from my husband, he just likes being home.”

Both time-available mothers and fathers, such as Niles, described making career choices to allow them to spend more time at home. On the surface, the time-intensive approach may seem more egalitarian compared to the other approaches where mothers, but not fathers, expressed concerns over meeting career goals. But many time-available fathers felt that mothers should not work outside the home (or at least should cut back on their hours) so they were in fact shifting a great deal of the responsibility for spending time with their children to their spouse. Alex said:

My wife could have worked. She could have worked, and I’m sure we would have had more money. But Kendall would have suffered. Just time with your children. I’m not a sociologist, I’m not a psychologist, but, from all the studies they run, they’ll never convince me that a mother staying home with their child and say, we’re done with this after one year, two years. And then get back to their job. You need to make a commitment with your child and take time off.

Alex’s and Peggy’s different approaches show that although both parents can create a vocabulary
of motives to explain their parenting decisions that reaffirms the appropriateness of their choices, the emotional work of designating certain types of interactions as important may conceal which parent bears greater responsibility for ensuring the family spends enough quality time together. Neither spoke of tension over the issue, but their differing accounts of their family’s quality time suggest that Peggy planned their family getaways and spent more time with their teens while on vacation because her view of quality time rested on a more interactive parenting style.

Parents in blended families were not more likely to disagree, but there were few stepfamilies in the sample. Because quality time scripts center on how parents envision their parenting role, being the biological or the stepparent in a family could influence a parent’s view of quality time and whether they agree with their spouse. Joe is the stepfather to his wife’s two teens who live with them full time and he has a biological daughter who visits them every other weekend. Joe described his structured planning approach as, “spending time together, doing something that we all enjoy” and his favorite quality time activities included vacations, sporting events, and family movie night. His wife, however, Elisa was child centered: “I guess quality time is spending positive time with the boys.” She described quality time as the talks she had with her sons during errands and their bedtime routines. Elisa’s and Joe’s definitions reflect their different parenting roles within their household. Elisa described prioritizing talks with her sons, whereas Joseph discussed planning fun things to do with his stepsons and his daughter whom he sees only on weekends. In fact, Elisa did not mention her stepdaughter but only her sons who live with them full time. Elisa’s and Joe’s views demonstrate how the various parenting roles within a blended family may add another set of motives that could cause parents to develop different views of quality time.

QUALITY TIME AS A VOCABULARY OF MOTIVES

I explore how parents describe spending quality time with their families, an overlooked topic despite the popularity of quality time in academic and popular discussions of parenting. Results of this study indicate that parents—even parents within the same household—can interpret quality time very differently. But parents in this study still shared a set of core beliefs: Good parents prioritize spending time with their families and teens benefit from spending time with their parents. Parents also described many similar instrumental actions they take with their children, but it was the emotional work and meanings attributed to these actions and events that differentiated their views of quality time. All families took vacations, but for structured-planning parents, it was the scheduling involved and the emotional work in ensuring that the family had a fun, educational, and relaxing time that made vacations quality time. These parents described tasks such as driving their children to school as additional household obligations, whereas child-centered parents saw them as potential quality time because of the emotional connection between themselves and their child that may occur. Time-available parents tended not to define quality time in terms of a specific instrumental or emotional action; rather, all time at home came to signify that they were available to their children just in case. And although any parent may watch (and even enjoy) TV with his or her children on occasion, only time-available parents identified this as being part of quality time.

Yet how parents talk about spending time with their families is not necessarily an accurate portrayal of how much time a family spends together or the structure of that time. Mills (1940) theorized that motives “are not mental or biological states that somehow impel action; rather, motives are social constructs through which actors impose meaning onto situations” (Hopper, 1993, p. 801). Although parents linked their view of quality time to actual choices they had made such as turning down a prestigious job or Peggy planning annual summer trips, their quality time definition may not have been the driving force behind their actions. Instead, their quality time definitions reflect how parents explained their choices in a way that affirms their status as a good parent by drawing on popular notions of what it means to spend quality time with their families and accepting or modifying those messages to justify the decisions they have made in regard to juggling family time and their family’s job demands. Sociologists have long been interested in the relationship between motives and actions, but most who invoke a vocabulary of motives framework have overlooked the actual relationship between motives and behavior (see Hopper). Future research linking time diary data collected in the
Sloan 500 Family Study (see Hoogstra, 2005) to parents’ quality time definitions could help to answer the empirical question of the relationship between quality time and the amount and structure of family time as well as the more theoretical question of the relationship between motives and action.

Moreover, research has shown that even in dual-earner households, mothers perform more housework and childrearing including emotional work, although fathers are doing more than in the past (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Sayer, 2005). In this study, moms and dads did not differ in the symbolic importance they placed on time with their children. But mothers at least described themselves as being more responsible for quality time in the day-to-day parenting within a family as shown by the case of Alex and Peggy. In general, mothers were more often drawn to the more active child-centered and structured-planning approaches, structured-planning and child-centered mothers expressed greater concerns over teens’ willingness to participate in quality time, and structured-planning mothers described a more active role in scheduling quality time. Time diary data would make it possible to investigate how mothers’ and fathers’ respective definitions relate to the way their family actually spends time together and whether one parent’s view has a greater impact.

Parents’ interpretations of quality time addressed what they saw as their teens’ most essential needs (e.g., a break, supportive guidance, or a safety net). Further inquiry should examine the impact of these definitions on child outcome measures such as self-esteem. Research should also explore how teens respond to these various quality time scripts and whether their views of what is valued family time differ from their parents’. This study also has implications for understanding parents’ concerns over balancing their work and home lives. Discussions of the negative consequences of the quality time edict, and parenting mandates more generally, have treated parents as having the same expectations regarding spending time with their families. The results of this study, however, show that parents have different views of quality time as well as perceive different barriers to spending time with their families. Structured-planning parents cited costs and scheduling hassles as additional sources of stress, whereas child-centered parents were troubled by having to be on after a long day at work. By treating all time at home as quality time, time-available parents were the only parents who seemed satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their families. How a parent interprets cultural messages regarding what it means to be a good parent may lead to or result from differences in the tension they experience in trying to meet their job and family responsibilities. Future research should explore the relationship between a parent’s quality time approach and their experience of work-family-related strain.

NOTE

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