

**Collaboration and Conflict: Insights into the Division of Household Labor among  
Working Couples in the United States and Italy**

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Working Paper, 36

2005

This study is part of an interdisciplinary, collaborative research endeavor conducted by members of the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf), under the direction of Elinor Ochs. CELf is generously supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation program on the Workplace, Workforce, and Working Families, headed by Kathleen Christensen. The authors are grateful to -

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The authors are also indebted to the working families who participated in this study for opening their homes and sharing their lives. This paper corresponds with CELf Working Paper #28. Additional information about CELf can be found at [www.celf.ucla.edu](http://www.celf.ucla.edu).

## ABSTRACT

### **Collaboration and Conflict: Insights into the Division of Household Labor among Working Couples in the United States and Italy**

Previous studies on the division of labor among working couples have indicated that managing parenting responsibilities and household tasks (the "second shift" according to Hochschild 1989, 1997) often becomes a site of contention (Klein, Izquierdo, & Bradbury 2004), partly due to a lack of a successful approach for managing this area of American working families' busy lives. This paper builds on our past analysis of interview and interactional data in which we examined couples' ongoing negotiations of responsibilities and expectations, and revealed the need for anthropological and psychological models to address the complexity of how spouses react to one another as they confront the everyday challenges involved in working family life. The current study takes a cross-national perspective and draws from interview and videotaped data of naturally occurring interactions of working couples to examine dinner preparation routines in Italy and the United States. We found a marked difference in the quality of affect and collaborative features of interactions, which appear to reflect couples' differing strategies on how to manage household tasks in working family life. However, rather than constructing a comparative cross-cultural schema, we point out certain cultural differences as well as similarities related to accomplishing everyday household activities. After reviewing the problems articulated by some of the couples in the United States, we examine collaborative features of interactions illustrated in the data in both countries, in which couples appear to effectively communicate and accomplish their tasks, together and apart. We have found that while the division of labor and the organization of space may differ in the two countries, interactive dimensions of collaboration, such as specific features of language, affect, and humor, shape the successful coordination of tasks between couples in both countries.

## 1. Introduction

Understanding how working couples negotiate the division of labor inside the home has emerged as key focus for scholars studying contemporary dual-income families in the United States (Chesley 2001; Hochschild 1997; Klein, Izquierdo, Bradbury 2004). However, there is a significant dearth of such research in Europe (Des Ruevieres-Pigeon et al 2002; Emigh 2000), where the number of working families are on the rise. By drawing from videotaped interviews and naturally occurring interactions recorded in homes in the United States and Italy, this paper will: (a) review problematic issues regarding the division of labor articulated in interviews by American working couples; (b) examine how these issues relate to the ongoing negotiation of responsibilities and expectations between spouses; c) analyze interactions in Italy and the United States in which couples effectively collaborate in dinner preparation activities; and d) elucidate features of collaborative interactions that may contribute to family well-being.

As Schmidt (2000) pointed out, there is wide variation in how working parents organize and manage everyday household tasks, and the manner in which the two adults coordinate their actions around these tasks will affect the quality of their relationship and the emotional tenor of the home. Partners' consensual understanding of roles and duties in the home are expected to promote efficient and affectively neutral interaction between partners, for example, whereas partners' inability to agree upon and enact a clear division of labor is expected to result in continual re-negotiation of duties and responsibilities. In turn, this lack of agreement is expected to engender frequent disputes and feelings of frustration. This paper examines the articulation of specific tensions in interviews with American working couples and how these issues shape other facets of their lives. In contrast, in the interviews conducted with working couples in Italy similar issues did not surface. In addition, analysis of videotapes of naturally occurring interactions in Italian homes confirmed that the couples in the study did not experience conflict as they conducted household tasks. These interactions revealed a high degree of positive affect, including the frequent use of humor and affection between family members in their everyday lives.

Psychologists interested in dyadic processes in close relationships have examined marital interaction using observational methods for nearly three decades. Although this work is conducted primarily in controlled laboratory settings (in which couples are instructed to discuss important sources of disagreement in their relationship), evidence is increasingly clear that objective indices of poor communication (e.g., expressing disagreement, being defensive, offering poor solutions to problems) are not uniformly detrimental to relationships. Instead, it appears that poor communication is particularly consequential for relationships when expressions of positive emotions – humor, interest, affection, and support, for example – are relatively rare (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Johnson et al., 2005). By studying how working spouses react to one another as they confront the everyday challenges involved in managing a family, we hope to gain new insights into family interaction, in part because the high degree of structure and artificiality of laboratory studies necessarily distance family members from the steady stream of tasks and responsibilities that arise routinely in the home.

We approach this work with the belief that the processes by which men and women in dual-income families negotiate their tasks and chores in the home will be illuminated by combining principles used in psychology and anthropology to study patterns of social interaction in intimate relationships. This study is the first to our knowledge to draw from videotapes of naturally occurring interactions between partners in two countries in order to better understand the nature of collaboration and conflict in household activities.

## **2. Background**

The growing number of dual-earner families in recent decades has led to new configurations of domestic work distribution among family members in working families worldwide. Researchers are increasingly examining how working families attempt to balance work demands with household and parenting responsibilities in the United States (e.g., Bond et al., 1998; Christensen, 1988; Galinsky et al., 1996; Hochschild, 1997; Hochschild & Machung 1989; Ironmonger, 1989; Schor, 1991). Hochschild's extensive research in the US, for example, concludes that dual-earner American families find themselves in a "time bind," whereby working adults have increased the time they spend at work and consequently have little time left for leisure, play, and relaxation (Hochschild, 1997). Other studies have found that this extends to additional dimensions of everyday life, with working adults claiming lack of time for exercise (Bertman, 1998), cooking meals (DeVault, 1990), cleaning the home, and seeking family health care (Siahpush, 2000).

In contrast, there are significantly few studies that investigate the organization of household labor in European countries. Italian research, based mainly on questionnaire data, has shed light on children's perspectives on the degree of father's participation in household work (Carnevale, Ciardo, Montingelli, & Perrucci, 2000) and increasing instances of women dropping out of the workforce after the birth of their first child in order to manage the household (Bertacchi & Lebbolo, 2000). It is important to note that all families in the Italy corpus live in Rome and that other researchers (Loyd, 2005) have observed that in rural and southern areas of Italy, women oversee the majority of mealtime tasks.

Goodnow (1989) notes that household work in many countries is "more than a means of producing goods and services. It allows the work to be as well a vehicle for expressing love and affection, for claiming rights (the right to be 'looked after'), and for negotiating equity" (p. 39-40). Thus, more than being a series of simple instrumental tasks, household work represents a complex set of interpersonal exchanges that enable family members to achieve solidarity and cohesiveness (Folbre, 2001; Wilk, 1996). Notions of fairness and exchange of goods and services are reflected in the structure and behavior of household members in some societies. Cheal (1988) characterizes a moral economic household as one in which cooperation and consensus are the reigning principles. In the political economy model, family members are driven by self-interest, which may result in conflict over resource and work distribution with decisions falling to those in positions of authority. However, Bartlett (1989) recognizes that in contemporary American family life these models may shift according to context and are not mutually exclusive. Examining displays of collaboration and instances in which individual interests conflict in

couples' ongoing negotiations is critical to understanding how these models operate in family life.

The approach represented in this paper provides access to these shifting contexts and permits direct analysis of a wide range of micro-level behaviors and interactional sequences. These include how the two partners manage household demands and engage with one another to collaborate or fail to coordinate effectively. Methodological orientations for the present study come from linguistic and cultural anthropological analyses of social interaction. The observation of behavior in the home is very difficult to record and capture through conventional anthropological methodologies such as participant observation and interviews. Earlier methods in cultural anthropology have included time allocation studies that document the participation of family members in the household (Johnson 1975, 1978). Dehavenon & Harris, one of the first proponents of videotaped research as a methodological tool for anthropologists write: "Most ethnographic data are acceptable as accounts of what people say they say, say they do, or say they ought to do. There remains the question of what people actually say they do. Videotape closed circuit system provides a technical solution for separating such "emic" from "etic" data in the study of family life in the home" (1971:1). Unlike psychological studies conducted in laboratory settings, analysis of naturalistic video data allows us to consider the specific temporal, affective, and material contexts in which couples' interactions occur.

Our current study also draws from recent work in linguistic anthropology, which shows that such features of interaction, such as affect and nonverbal cues-- eye gaze, gesture, and body posture and positioning -- all reveal participant attitudes toward the ongoing talk (e.g., Goodwin, 2000; Kendon, 1990). The structure and sequential organization of interactions also display how speakers are orienting to and understanding one another (e.g., Goffman 1981; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1990, 2000; Heritage, 1984; Ochs & Taylor 1995; Schegloff, 1995; Tannen 1993). Discourse analytic techniques can demonstrate the types of interactional work couples engage in at home, the challenges and difficulties of running a household, and the interactional consequences when expectations are either met or disregarded. The study of requests, challenges, and acts of accommodation and collaboration reveals how men and women frame their participation and positions within the family.

### **3. Methods**

#### Data from the US and Italy

This paper draws from data collected at two research centers, located in the US (CELF) and in Italy (i-CELF). The primary goals of both centers is to undertake qualitative, in-depth comparative analysis of the everyday lives of middle class families and examine their everyday challenges. The main purpose of such an international comparative perspective on family life is that it illuminates commonalities in how working families handle the complex demands of home and family across different cultures and reveals unique work-family patterns characteristic of each country, which may in turn suggest alternatives to existing local strategies for balancing family and work demands. Both centers have similar goals and criteria for selection of participants.

The UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) documented a week in the life of 30 middle-class, dual-income families in Los Angeles, California. To achieve this goal, we have taken an innovative approach to the study family life, integrating perspectives from cultural, linguistic, and medical anthropology, archaeology, psychology, applied linguistics, and education. We employ diverse data collection methodologies including semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, video-recording of daily activities, sampling of stress hormones, mapping and photographing families' homes and belongings, and tracking of family members' activities and uses of space. Each family is recorded over a period of a week for approximately 20-25 hours. Four days (two weekdays and the weekend) of video taping and tracking of family members is conducted by three researchers inside and outside the home (e.g., family members are videotaped as parents take children to and from school, run errands, engage in activities, eat out at restaurants, shop, etc.). Among other research interests, the Center documents how employed parents and their children manage and collaborate with each other in and across a spectrum of activities. Discourse analytic methods are employed to closely examine participant interaction. Of special interest is how the coordination of day- to-day family activities and communication also serve to socialize members into ideologies and practices concerning physical and emotional health and well-being. To be eligible to participate in this study, families were required to be homeowners with a monthly mortgage and they were required to have at least two children living at home, including one child between 8-10 years of age. Families were recruited through fliers in the schools, recreational facilities, and family and community newspapers. Efforts are made to include a wide range of ethnic diversity and occupations across working families. Families were paid \$1,000 in exchange for their participation. The Italy Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (i-CELf) employs methods very similar to those used in the US sample but restricted the size of the sample to 8 families.

Studies in psychology have yielded quantitatively rigorous descriptions of marital interaction (e.g., Bradbury, 1998; Bradbury & Karney, 1993), yet most of this work has been conducted in artificial laboratory settings or, in rare instances, has studied enactments of couples' interactions (Burman et al 1993). This work focuses on couples' discussions of marital problems in general, rather than the negotiation of household responsibilities in real time. Studies in anthropology demonstrate the power of qualitative methods and naturalistic observation. However, direct observation of middle-class, dual-career couples as they follow their everyday activities is rare. This study will contribute to the new and growing ethnographic investigation of managing household labor in the everyday lives of working families.

#### **4. Working Couples Discuss Household Management in the US and Italy: Interview Data**

Some of the most significant challenges that working parents in the U.S. face when managing a household and raising children involve negotiating responsibilities, trying to meet the needs of one's spouse, and communicating effectively to one another. In daily life the larger goal of managing a household becomes complicated by the lack of a satisfying model that takes into account the needs and expectations of each spouse. In the lives of several working couples in our study, a mutual lack of appreciation and respect surfaces in daily interactions, and in some cases, the most mundane requests can become problematic. Our data, which includes interviews,

individually videotaped home tours, and recordings of naturally occurring interactions, allow us to consider each spouse's routine, their resources for well-being, and their attitudes toward their home lives. As we discovered, spousal ideologies and the way in which actual everyday interaction unfolds affect many other critical experiences of family life.

As the cases below illustrate, it is often the case in our US examples that one or both partners feel the burden of accomplishing household tasks, which result in difficulties in the ongoing coordination of responsibilities and duties. This situation engenders feelings of frustration and frequent disputes, affecting the couple's relationship as well as compromising the individual's feeling of well-being. One mother, for example, felt so frustrated with what she considered an unfair distribution of household work that she told us: "You know? No sex -- I didn't get any help," when referring to the consequences of her husband's lack of involvement in household work.

The mother in the example below has previously noted that she handles most of the household work and childcare of their two children even when the father is home, while holding down a fulltime job. In the interview she tells us:

1        Personally I don't have a life.  
2        My life is my family because whatever their needs are  
3        they always come first before mine and I can honestly  
4        say that. He- and I think it's great- he does his  
5        golfing, he does his bike riding, and it doesn't take  
6        a long time and he needs that I don't get that yet.  
7        I don't have that yet. I don't have the time or the  
8        luxury. That for me is like a huge luxury that I  
9        don't see happening in any time in the near future.

While the others members of this family have time to pursue their own interests, this mother positions herself as the only member of the family who must continually sacrifice her own well-being for the needs of others in her family. Having time for oneself is equated with 'having a life', and not only does this mother feel that she has neither, she does not foresee any changes occurring.

Women's feelings of being over-burdened is well documented in the literature (Hochschild, 1997; Schmidt, 2002). We find that this is not unique to women and that fathers also voice a concern and desire to have their own time -- 'down time' -- for themselves. For example, Travis, a father of two boys ages 3 and 5, laments the constant demand of "managing someone else's needs", specifically being unable to fulfill the "demands" of his wife, which often comes at the expense of this own health. He talks about his family life situation as he spontaneously interviews himself in front of the video camera during his home-tour:

1        Umm, anyway, you'll notice when I'm walking around  
2        the house that, umm, there's basically very little  
3        respite for me. It's all about, umm, managing  
4        someone else's needs most of the time, and then (xxx)  
5        I'm not as strong and caring of my own needs, but I see  
6        that my own physical health is being compromised by not

7       doing that, so, umm, I'm starting to do more of that,  
8       which of course leads to aggravation from my demanding  
9       wife, umm, by not paying attention to her and not  
10      fulfilling her needs. So I think my house kind of  
11      represents, umm, work. And my work place kind of  
12      represents rest in a certain way.

Travis finds solace in his workplace. His home represents a place of stress, a setting in which there is “little respite” for him. Travis uses the video camera to interview himself, to take a moment and reflect on his life as a kind of catharsis. He feels he needs to attend to his own needs rather than to be constantly oriented towards others. This home/work dilemma has also been noted by Hochschild (1977) in her study of home and work places where she finds that the workplace can become a “haven from a hectic, unrewarding home life.”

During an interview, Travis and his wife Alice identify and elaborate on the nature of the different stressors that affect their daily lives. Alice recognizes that she is an “accomplisher” and that she is “domineering” and less “easy going” than Travis. From her perspective, the need to “push” Travis stems from her belief that it is the only way to make sure that any tasks and chores will get done. Alice explains:

1       I have to, like, I manage the household, and like, I  
2       delegate what needs to be done, cause basically,  
3       I'm the one in charge of seeing that - everything  
4       needs to get done. That's how I look at it. Anyway,  
5       so that's a really source of tension between both of  
6       us, I think. It's not like the trust thing. It's just  
7       that - that umm, it wouldn't be like Travis would walk  
8       into the room and go, gee, my underwear's on the  
9       floor. I guess I'd better pick it up. It'll be, like,  
10      Travis, pick up your underwear off the floor. I mean,  
11      it's like, basically for me, it's like having three  
12      kids in the house. Sorry, no offense. I love you  
13      very much.

Alice acknowledges that people may have different management styles and that in their case, because of her personality as well as her husband's, she ends up “doing the managing” around the house. The fact that she has to delegate tasks is a constant source of tension, and she equates her husband's lack of initiative to a child's behavior where an adult has to tell the child what to do. In this case she has to request from her husband (whom she refers to as a third child in the house – lines 11-12: “it's like having three kids in the house”) to pick up his underwear.

Travis, on the other hand, feels that he does do his share of the work, although as he points out, their expertise is different. He talks about his wife's management style (which he refers to as micro-management) as indicative of a lack of “trust” on her part, of not trusting his capability to carry out his responsibilities:

1       Father ((laughs)) There's many different kinds of

2 arguments. We have a few themes. One is trust  
3 that Alice tends to not trust that I'm getting  
4 anything done. ((laughs)) That's the one  
5 problem.  
6 IR Anything in terms of...  
7 Father Actually I've never actually laid it out like  
8 this. ((laughs)) And then, or watching television  
9 while she's talking. And then the third, I'd  
10 say, is micro-managing. Where, umm, well I  
11 guess that's kind of the trust thing too.  
12 IR When you say micro-managing and things getting  
13 done, do they have to do with chores in the  
14 house?  
15 Father Everywhere. It all runs together. Business  
16 stuff, umm, uhh, chores in the house,  
17 everywhere. It's all one.

A little later in the conversation:

1 Father I mean, she's no - she's not a saint in terms of  
2 keeping the place clean and uhh, fixing stuff  
3 or, she doesn't fix anything.  
4 Mother No, but I cook meals. I just can't do it all.  
5 I don't. But I made you dinner tonight.  
6 Father It's good.  
7 Mother There you go. I'm no saint, but I just can't do  
8 everything. I can't buy all the groceries, cook  
9 the dinner -  
10 Father I know but, just for the - don't you think that  
11 there's - you know that little board we have on  
12 the refrigerator?  
13 Mother Mm hmm.  
14 Father Why don't you use that and like, say like, umm,  
15 write me notes?  
16 Mother [I don't want to.  
17 Father [Number one, dishwasher. Number two, rain  
18 gutter.  
19 Mother To be honest with you, I don't want to have to  
20 tell you to do stuff. I want you to figure out  
21 that the - that the dishwasher needs to be -  
22 that you need to figure it out that the  
23 dishwasher needs to be -  
24 Father I did. Did you ask me to fix the dishwasher or  
25 did I?  
26 Mother No, you ordered a part, and then six months went  
27 by and we don't know what happened to it. I  
28 don't want to be, like, micro-managing you.  
29 Anyway, that's a whole other story.

Alice's frustration is evident not only in what she tells her husband but also in her demeanor during the interview. During this exchange it becomes clear that Alice does not wish to be in the position to have to constantly tell Travis what to do and when to do household tasks. He suggests that she post notes on the refrigerator, outlining appliances in need of repair, for example. She responds that she would prefer that he "figure it out." This comment indicates once again her desire for him to take initiative without her constant input. Another important feature of this interaction highlights the different spouses' expertise as an inherent aspect of the division of labor that determines their unique roles. Travis points out that Alice may cook but she "doesn't fix things." According to Travis, Alice's micro-managing is problematic beyond simply being told what to do at the moment something needs to be done, but expresses that his wife's "demands" permeate almost every moment of his waking life. He comments on his wife's continual negative appraisals and states that there is a great deal of "punitive language coming my direction." In his reply to a question about his wife's managerial persona and the context in which it emerges, he responds:

1 IR So when you talk about micro-managing, what would  
2 be, like, the context of the micro-managing?  
3 Father Well, she's on the toilet, we're obviously  
4 recording stuff here, and she's still screaming  
5 about stuff constantly. Now, let's just say I'm  
6 doing a third thing. Like I'm trying to - I'm on  
7 the phone but she's yelling at me from across the  
8 room for whatever, now it's more conflictual. So  
9 if I tell her to wait, and you know, she can't  
10 wait, then, you know, I'm not paying attention to  
11 her. Just all that kind of shit, you know? Or I  
12 might not be looking directly at her and she'll  
13 get upset because I'm not looking at her,  
14 therefore I'm not listening.

Travis finds his wife's lack of boundaries problematic and complains that her micromanaging extends to times when he is engaged in other activities, such as talking on the phone. He also notes that there are times when she interprets his lack of eye contact after she makes a request as his lack of interest, which potentially escalates into an argument. Ultimately, both Travis and Alice express their frustration and concern with their inability to better coordinate and organize their household without the need for intense supervision from either spouse. Alice does not enjoy her position as manager of the entire household, and Travis feels intensely micromanaged and ultimately not trusted as a partner.

We find that couples who lack clarity of *what*, *when* and *how* household tasks and responsibilities should be carried out, feel drained, physically and emotionally rushed, and are unable to successfully coordinate and communicate their dissatisfaction in their lives. We also find that strategies for accomplishing tasks and assigning responsibility vary greatly. For example in another family, both spouses emphasize the importance of establishing a firm understanding regarding the division of household chores. The mother explains the need for

clarity, “We both have professions, we both are strong minded.” The father adds, “If she does it, I don’t interfere; if I do it, she doesn’t interfere .” These statements display the respect that each spouse has for one other’s household work domain as well as their need for clear boundaries. While the mother emphasizes their dual career status and their shared characteristic of being “strong minded,” the father points out the importance of not interfering in each other’s tasks. This last issue of ‘interference,’ which is tantamount to the demanding behaviors psychologists have studied previously in laboratory settings, is a problem for several couples in our study. The fact that the father above realizes that interference is a potential problem – one that can be avoided by a clear and consensual division of labor -- is a critical insight. It appears that partners’ consensual understanding of roles and duties in the home are expected to promote efficient and affectively neutral interaction between partners.

From the interviews conducted among working couples in Italy we find a different scenario. As opposed to the US where individuals express a desire for more personal time to accomplish individual activities, Italians appear to want more family time. Couples lament that they do not have enough “family time” and are unable to meet their children after school because of their work demands. However, they do not mention their need for “alone time” as an element of anxiety and deficiency in their lives. Furthermore, they express no overt complaints or communicate a sense of burden regarding household chores. They communicate a sense of togetherness, of positive affect and humor in the organization of their lives. In Italy, parents appear to be less overwhelmed by the sheer amount of children’s activities, which allows for more time to cook and be together. Compared to American families, Italian families spend more time at home with each other and in closer physical proximity, in part due to their smaller and more compact living spaces and by arriving home together at the end of the working day as most families own one car for the family.

## **5. Tension in Household Activities: Interactional displays of ‘Burden’ and ‘Monitoring’**

In the last section, couples discussed their perspectives on some of the problematic issues that arise in their everyday lives in regard to managing household activities. While some spouses feel unduly burdened by the demands from family members -- that the needs of the spouse and children come before their own -- or that their spouse’s expectations and communicative styles are overbearing rather than co-participatory. What do these counter-collaborative interactions look like and how are issues of trust and respect embedded in these situations? By examining the organization and construction of directive-response sequences, linguistic anthropologists and conversation analysts have demonstrated how equity and asymmetry are built through the ongoing talk among participants in interaction (Goodwin, 1990; Sacks et al., 1974).

An example of the display of “burden” and resistance toward collaboration is seen in the following interaction observed in one of the US families. The mother is busy in the kitchen, heating up plates of pasta, one by one, while her family is seated in the dining room waiting. In this segment, her children, as well as her spouse, display reluctance to participate in helping:

- |   |        |  |
|---|--------|--|
| 1 | Mother | I told you to come set the table Hannah. |
| 2 | Darren | Why can't Dad do it?                     |

((A few moments later))

3       Darren     Is mine done yet?  
4       Mother     It's done I got to put it in a bowl ok?  
5                    Just go sit down and I'll bring it to  
6                    you.  
7       Mother     ((while preparing dinner))<sup>o</sup>Oh my gosh.  
8                    Okay.

((A few moments later))

9       Mother     **SOMEBODY** CAN GET UP AND GET THE PEPPER  
10                   AND GET THE PARMESIAN CHEESE. I'M  
11                    **WARMING UP** STUFF HERE.  
12       Father     Why don't you get some of that Jake?  
13       Darren     Why do we have to get it?  
14       Father     Why don't you get the pepper - Could you  
15                    please get the pepper and the parmesan  
16                    cheese?  
17       Jake       I have *the cats* on me.  
18       Father     Okay, forget it. ((Starts eating))  
19       Mother     ((Brings the pepper and the parmesan  
20                    cheese)) Hhhhhh there.

While Susan, the mother of three children, rushes to prepare dinner, she asks her daughter, Hannah to set the table, which is her second request within the past few minutes. Her son, Darren, who has told his parents that he is hungry and would like to eat, sees his father standing nearby and suggests that his father set the table. His question in line 2, “Why can’t *Dad* do it?,” displays his impatience as well as his unwillingness to take on the task himself. This also suggests that family rules regarding who is responsible for setting the table are ambiguous and undefined, perhaps leaving this routine task open to negotiation on a daily basis. As it turns out, the father does end up setting the table after recruiting Darren’s help. However, Darren indicates in line 3, “Is mine done yet?,” which refers to his plate of pasta, and is an indirect request for his Mother to prepare his meal. His mother’s response attempts to placate him, as well as shut down his requests by asking him to go into the other room. By not giving her son another task to do and by telling him, “I’ll bring it to you”, she positions her son as the recipient of her actions, rather than as a co-participant in the dinner preparation process. However, she clearly needs help as her intermittent sighs and exclamations indicate in line 7, along with her declarative request in line 9, which is uttered in a loud voice: “**SOMEBODY** CAN GET UP AND GET THE PEPPER AND GET THE PARMESIAN CHEESE. I’M **WARMING UP** STUFF HERE.” Instead of selecting one person to do this task, her ‘**SOMEBODY**’, spoken with stressed intonation, implicates all the other members of her family as not participating, while emphasizing her own work, “I’M **WARMING UP** STUFF HERE.” Her intonational stress falls on the project occupying her while her family members sit around the table waiting.

At this point, Susan’s husband, Jeff, delegates the task to his son, Darren, in his request in line 12, to which Darren responds with another question, “Why do *we* have to get it?”. Darren’s answer repeats the same strategy he used in line 2 when he previously asked his mother, “Why can’t *Dad* do it?”. The stress on the participant (*we*, *Dad*) in these questions implicates Darren’s

stance on the division of labor in this family. It is unclear what has led him to behave this way, but the structure and tone of his utterances suggest that his father should be expected to do more, while the children should not be called upon to do these tasks. Instead of engaging with his son by responding to his question, Jeff turns to his other son, Jake, and asks him to bring in the condiments from the kitchen in lines 14 – 16: “Why don’t you get the pepper – could you please get the pepper and the parmesan cheese?”. The construction of this directive, in which the first formulation, “Why don’t you” is repaired to “Could you please” reveals a marked upgrade in politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978). The first construction, “Why don’t you” indicates a suggestive frame, while “Could you please” is more formal, indirect, and conciliatory. However, Jake promptly responds by indicating that his current situation warrants refusal, “I have *the cats* on me.” It is unclear why the father accepts this as a legitimate claim to not participate, but instead of attempting to coerce any of his children (he does not move on to ask his daughter), he shuts down the sequence with a defeated, “Okay, forget it”, and begins eating as a sign that he is done trying to enlist their help. At that moment, the mother enters and places the condiments on the table, with a loud sigh, “Hhhhhh there.” Not only does no one thank her, once the family begins eating, her husband and one of her sons complain repeatedly about the taste of the pasta noodles, while the other son declares that he doesn’t like the sauce. The lack of appreciation that Susan’s family shows her is striking, as is her husband’s reluctance to assist her and her children’s defiant stances toward participating at all in the meal preparation. Instead, they would rather remain seated at the table waiting for their mother to attend to their needs.

Our previous paper revealed the interactional structure of one spouse taking on an authoritative position and monitoring the other (Klein, Izquierdo, & Bradbury 2004) in the Cohen family. Some of their interactions bear repeating here for the discussion of features of counter-collaborative communication. David, the father, is preparing dinner for the family, which is particularly challenging for him, since he only recently began to participate in cooking activities. While he is primarily responsible for dinner, his wife, Julie, often helps or “supervises.” David attempts to appease Julie’s numerous queries, demands, and requests, which target him repeatedly throughout the dinner-making activity. In the interaction below, we find the father busy preparing dinner as the mother enters the kitchen and inquires about the status of the potatoes:

- |   |        |   |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Mother | Are the potatoes ready?                   |
| 2 |        | Oh, [I was just going to do that.         |
| 3 | Father | [Almost.                                  |
| 4 | Father | I'm making such a mess.                   |
| 5 | Mother | You always make a mess, David.            |
| 6 | Father | I know.                                   |
| 7 | Mother | It's like (you don't know how to cook).   |
| 8 | Mother | (This is going)-look at what you've done! |
| 9 | Father | (Laughs, glances over at camera)          |

When David acknowledges that he is “making such a mess,” Julie confirms and generalizes his assessment to all the occasions in which he takes on meal preparation: Her next comment, “It’s like you don’t know how to cook” is a further critique of his poor performance. David, however, calmly accepts her condemnation and even finds his performance humorous. Instead of joining her husband in laughing about the situation, Julie continues to take on a supervisory role:

(continues from above)

10 Mother First of all, you don't do this ✓on the stove.  
11 You do it over on the counter. Ugh. You're going  
12 to have to clean up, too. So sorry to inform  
13 you.  
14 Father I know that. I'll clean it up.

Julie's imperative directives sound parental and position her as the observer and evaluator of his actions. She refuses to shift her orientation to respond to David's humor, and instead maintains a monitoring role in the interaction. This pattern of participation also surfaces on a subsequent evening in the couple's kitchen.

1 Mother (Did you put) these in there?  
2 Father What?  
3 Mother (Here).  
4 Father Yeah, they're in there.  
5 Mother Why didn't you put them in?  
6 Father Oh, because there were like more than twice as  
7 many as that.  
8 Mother Oh.  
9 Father There's a good ten, twelve in there. I think.  
10 Mother I thought you were changing; (xxx)?  
11 Father (*laughing*) I changed my shirt and my shoes.  
12 Mother This is probably just about done.  
13 Father Yes, I was just checking it and it wasn't  
14 quite- it was a little al dente.  
15 Mother Stir it though.  
16 Father I have been.  
17 Mother Are you putting cheese on the salad or is that  
18 for Josh's quesadilla.  
19 Father That's for Josh's quesadilla,  
20 [but go right ahead.  
21 Mother [How about feta? You want that feta?  
22 Father The sauce is- no, the sauce is controlling ✓me  
23 as opposed to me controlling the sauce. Yeah,  
24 feta's great.  
25 Mother Why are you using this lime?  
26 Father I squeezed a little on that salad.

David fields his wife's series of questions and comments (in lines 1, 5, 10, 12, 15, 17, 21, 25) without hesitation and appears to be doing his best to meet her expectations of how the meal should be prepared. He attempts to inject humor into the situation on more than one occasion. In line 10 when Julie critiques her husband's clothes, as she wonders why he has not changed, David laughs as he responds that he has changed certain articles of clothing. While he chooses here to handle his wife's close scrutiny of his behavior and appearance with humor, Julie refuses to engage or respond with any playfulness. David again takes on a humorous stance in lines 22 – 23, when he comments that the pasta sauce is controlling him when it should be the other way around. Julie does not acknowledge this comment at all and instead continues to micro-manage

the activity. David's tone shifts shortly after this exchange. He makes no more attempts at humor and self-deprecation, and instead, his tone becomes less friendly and more adversarial.

- 1 Mother     You know what, I heard this morning on NPR that  
2             police departments are going to start taping  
3             their interviews with um (pause) you know,  
4             suspects.  
5 Father     You don't say.  
6 Mother     Well they haven't been doing it before.  
7 Father     Genius idea. Yeah.  
8 Mother     You know what? I don't need your sarcasm.  
9 Father     Yeah you do.

Unlike his previous attempts to be playful, David's response to Julie's comment is received as antagonistic. David criticizes the idea behind the news story she is relaying, rather than anything about Julie personally, yet she chooses to defend the idea and appears to be slighted personally by his comment. Her annoyance is apparent in her hostile response in line 8 ("You know what? I don't need your sarcasm").

The tension that arises in everyday interactions concerning household management can influence the quality and nature of communication between couples as they broach other domains of discussion. As some psychological studies note (Johnson et al, 2005; Roberts 2000), humor and positive affect in marital interactions is likely a predictor of marital success and can help to neutralize the effects of poor communication skills. In the interaction above, we see that the conversation remains in affectively neutral territory until the husband offers a critical remark about the news story, at which point the tension between partners increases sharply. At the same time, we realize that the reasons for interactional patterns of conflict in marriage are complex and are often the symptom of underlying tension concerning other issues related to professional work status and differing rights, obligations, and expectations. For example, the husband in this couple is temporarily unemployed and is seeking work, which may contribute to the wife adopting more of a dominant position and the husband's acceptance of her micromanagement of his cooking.

## **6. Collaborative Interactions: Humor, Positive Affect, and Joint Activity**

While several of the spouses in the U.S. sample express frustration regarding household division of labor, some couples seem to be particularly skilled at smoothly accomplishing the task of preparing dinner as well as other household tasks. We see a variety of interactional styles that display collaboration: 1) silent collaboration, in which both partners work in the same space and go about preparing the meal; 2) one partner is constructed as expert or authority in a particular task, either humorously or with genuine respect; 3) coordinating together, in which partners verbally organize the activity in concert; and 4) collaborating apart, in which partners are doing their share of the labor in separate locations. The first category, 'silent collaboration', is difficult to capture in a transcript since nothing is verbalized, rather, it is the silent, smooth coordination of tasks in which both partners contribute to the household activity of meal preparation and clean-up, without needing to clarify information or monitor one another's tasks. We expect that

these couples have worked this way for a while, both know their way around the kitchen, and feel at ease with their responsibilities.

The second category, in which one partner routinely takes on a particular task and is discursively constructed as the expert, is found in U.S. and Italy data in slightly different ways. For example, in one Italian family, the couple discusses why the wife is always the one to do the dishes. We should add that the father in this family does contribute spontaneously to dinner time labor by clearing the table, returning food and other items to their various places in the kitchen, and helping the children get organized just after dinner. In the following interaction, the father positions himself as a competent 'dishwasher' who is willing to take on this task:

- 1 Father So Nicoletta doesn't want me to wash the dishes  
2 because I make too much foam -  
3 Mother No, it's not just the foam, you're bad at washing.  
4 Father [No  
5 Mother [It's different  
6 Father It's not that I wash it poorly - no I finish all-  
7 Mother [You make too much foam. You know what he does?  
8 He takes the towel and puts the washing-powder on  
9 it after he washes the dish.  
10 Father No, I'll show what I do ((*he walks toward the*  
11 *sink*)).  
12 Mother No (.) I'm nervous, I don't like it ((*Father walks*  
13 *back*)) It's better to wash the dishes with hot  
14 water. You know what he does?  
15 Father The very hot water, it is already on when I wash.  
16 Mother And yes, sure you understand -  
17 Father I use more water pressure, it's true.  
18 Mother He- the hot water is on and he washes a dish every  
19 half hour.  
20 Father You know hot sterilizes more -  
21 Mother This is very hot, put your hands in, it is hot with  
22 the gloves. this is very hot.  
23 Father Can I show how I wash the dishes?  
24 Mother No::: no (xxx)  
25 Father And it is not possible ((*he's leaving the kitchen*))  
26 Mother Anyway I'm nervous he has washed dishes only once  
27 in his life.

While the father expresses a desire to get involved in this activity, the mother takes on the role of the expert and negatively evaluates the father's ability to wash the dishes in the manner she prefers. However, unlike Julie in the previous example in the last section, Nicoletta initiates a humorous perspective and also responds to her husband's amusing counterarguments with humor. While she points out that her husband poorly executes the dishwashing chore and lacks experience in this area, instead of creating tension, the couple's interaction is quite playful. The mother's hyperbole ("He washes a dish every half hour") and her expressions of fear and extreme refusal of his attempts to show off his dish-washing prowess, all contribute to the light, comical affect in this interaction.

In the Pico family, who also resides in Rome, we see another humor-infused interaction related to dishwashing:

1 Father Okay mom what do we have to do?  
2 Child 1 What does *she* have to do.  
3 Mother What I have to do:::, O:h my go::d  
4 Father The dishes that the omelet was on you have to  
5 wash it because after-  
6 Mother So I have to wash everything.  
7 Father We have saved three -  
8 Mother Okay.  
9 Father Four.  
10 Child 2 ah:::  
11 Father What happened?  
12 Child 2 It was my finger.  
13 Father The muscle's okay, let's go help mom just for a  
14 moment.  
15 Mother No-no.  
16 Father No? We go pla::y, Can we play mom?  
17 Mother Yes.  
18 Father *Brava::!!*((*kisses mother on her forehead*))  
19 Mother You say this every evening.

As the family finishes dinner, the father asks his wife in line 1, “Okay mom what do we have to do?,” a question that places the mother in the role of the authority who determines what needs to be done and assigns tasks to the rest of the family. The father indicates that the post-dinner chores are a collective effort by using the pronoun ‘we’. However, one of the children calls her father’s perspective into question and reframes the situation in line 2, “What does *she* have to do?,” stressing the pronominal switch that implicates the mother as responsible for the impending tasks. The mother takes up a humorous stance to the dinner clean-up work in line 3, and affirms her daughter’s viewpoint that she, the mother, is the one who must accomplish this task alone. In her utterance, “What do I have to do::: O:h my go::d”, the vowel elongation and intonational stress humorously and dramatically frame her task as monumental. The father repeats but downgrades his offer by suggesting that they help the mother in lines 13 - 14, “just for a moment,” however, his wife refuses (line 15: No-no). After confirming that his wife will not accept help, he comically asks permission to play (line 16: “No? We go pla::y, Can we play mom?”), again attempting to place her in an authoritative role. After the mother replies, ‘yes’, the father responds with a loud, “Brava::!” (Excellent!), and kisses his wife on the forehead. His strong display of positive affect is a show of appreciation to his wife, however, as she points out, ironically, in line 19, “Yes, you say this every evening,” indicating that the routine is that she is the one to clean up while he plays. Afterwards, the father sashays out of the kitchen, dancing with one of his daughters. On another evening after dinner while mother attends to the dishes again, the father helps his children with homework. When his children begin reading, and therefore no longer need his help, he tells them, “Well, if you have to read, I will help Mom!,” and goes into the kitchen to join his wife. Although the mother is in charge of cleaning up, the father in this family often helps spontaneously with managing the household by attending to the children or assisting in the kitchen.

In the Ripe family, in which both spouses have demanding television executive jobs, the couple routinely collaborates in the kitchen and begins the activity by choosing a wine for dinner and enjoying a glass together as they work. The following exchange takes place as meal preparation begins. The mother has just questioned the father about the frequency with which he loses his glasses, and advises him that if he wore his glasses more often, he would not lose them, which is a suggestion that could be taken as a type of criticism or scolding. However, she also remarks that:

- 1 Mother Do you know that::: the charming 50 years old
- 2 people who wear glasses are more charming?
- 3 Father I'm still charming.
- 4 Mother Okay. *((ironic))*

Thus, an instance of what appears to resemble the 'micro-managing' we see in the U.S. data triggers a playful sequence in which the couple orient to one another with humor. On another evening, the couple problem-solve together about the status of the fish, which is baking in the oven.

*((Mother is in the kitchen and Father enters))*

- 1 Father It was ringing? *((the oven))*
- 2 Mother No.
- 3 *((the oven rings))*
- 4 Father Now we check to see if it's cooked. (19.0) °It's
- 5 not cooked°
- 6 Mother It isn't cooked?
- 7 Father (xxx)
- 8 Mother But it's possible that it'll be very dry?
- 9 Father So this is the right way.
- 10 Mother I have to check, wait
- 11 (6.0)
- 12 Father You have to test
- 13 Mother No- no, I understand the consistency. It's cooked
- 14 but no maybe a little bit of ( ) the fish
- 15 will be cooked inside eh
- 16 Father Yes.

As the father opens the oven door to examine the fish in line 4, he says, "Now we check to see if it's cooked", framing this event as collaborative by using the first person plural, and displaying that he understands what his next task is in this cooking activity. He concludes in a low voice but loud enough for the mother to hear, "It's not cooked." His wife then expresses her expectation that the fish should be done by now, with her negatively formulated question, "It isn't cooked?" and suggests that if they continue to bake it, it might end up "very dry." At this point, the father defers to the mother in line 12, "You have to test", positioning her as the expert in gauging these matters. In line 13, the mother examines the fish and concludes that the father was correct that it needs a little more time to cook. At this point, the couple engages in joking about how often they eat pasta. Shortly after, their son comes into the kitchen.

1 Child How much more time?  
 2 Father We are waiting a few minutes for the grill.  
 3 Child Have you added salt in the middle?  
 4 Father Yes, mom added the salt.  
 5 Mother Mom added it.  
 6 Father We have also added mushrooms.  
 7 Child On mine?  
 8 Father On yours, *too*.

In his response to his son's questions about dinner, the father replies, "We are waiting a few minutes for the grill", employing the second person pronoun 'we', which indicates the collaborative aspect of this activity. It is discursively significant that this type of pluralizing occurs frequently in collaborative interactions, while it is rarely used in the conflictive, counter-collaborative talk examined earlier in this paper. In the conversation above, both parents align together when responding to their son's query about the salt, and the father volunteers the information that mushrooms have also been added to meal, most likely because he expects this will be met with enthusiasm, which displays that he knows his son's preferences for food. His son does, indeed, orient to the mushrooms and makes sure that his particular serving will include some, to which his father playfully replies affirmatively. The positive affect with which this couple interacts with one another and orients to the dinner preparation activity is also shared with their child, just as the negative affect in the interactions examined previously is not only shared with children, but it is also replicated by them.

We also see collaborative problem-solving sequences in an American family during meal preparation. This couple is augmenting one part of the meal that they bought pre-made.

1 Mother You know what. Do you want- Can you cut some  
 2 more of the [chicken up and put it in here?  
 3 Father [Chicken  
 4 Mother Because that's the only thing I don't like  
 5 about this.  
 6 Father They didn't give you enough?  
 7 Mother I, I don't think there's enough chicken in,  
 8 stir-fried chicken in here.  
 9 Father (Let) me do that. Are you make- You want to  
 10 make the uh this? (P) Oh for them.  
 11 [Pot stickers.  
 12 Mother [Oh Jason likes that.  
 13 Father Yeah.  
 14 Mother Where'd you put the broccoli?  
 15 Father Oh it's- ((*picks up bag of broccoli and*  
 16 *shows to Mother*))  
 17 Mother Oh.  
 18 Father Let me get on this side over here.  
 19 Jason Daddy what are we having for dinner?  
 20 Father You're having your noodles. The [chicken-  
 21 Mother [()are rice.  
 22 Father The rice. Chicken- The chicken rice with uh  
 23 egg roll.  
 24 Mother See ya.

When the mother asks her husband in line 1 to cut more chicken, she offers a partial explanation for her request by explaining that, “that’s the only thing I don’t like about this” – to which her husband replies, “They didn’t give you enough?”. His response indicates a high degree of intersubjectivity and orientation to his wife’s concerns about the meal, by anticipating the nature of the problem. He then offers to add more (line 9: “(Let) me do that”) which also displays his willingness to collaborate. This type of exchange stands in direct opposition to the demand-withdrawal behaviors examined in our previous paper (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Heavey et al, 1995; Klein, Izquierdo, & Bradbury, 2004), in which a request by one spouse is either not acknowledged or not pursued by the other spouse. In the interaction above, we also see that the mother positively reacts to her husband’s query about her making the potstickers in line 11, and they both align regarding their son’s enthusiasm for this food (line 12: Mother: Jason likes that. Line 13: Father: Yeah.). As the couple continues to coordinate and organize the meal’s ingredients, their son comes in to ask about dinner. After telling their son about the meal, he leaves without giving a response, to which the mother orients, humorously in line 24, “See ya” and the father laughs. The interactive process between these spouses is fluid, and they orient to one another as well as to the tasks at hand attentively, as their rapid request and response sequences demonstrate.

Another American family, we also see the couple attempting to cultivate a context of positive affect and display collaboration. As the dinner preparation begins one evening, the father has just put on a jazz CD and offers his wife something to drink.

1 Father Sweeps, you want any wine?  
 2 Mother Sure.  
 3 Father I bought you zinfandel that you *love*.

He starts his utterance in line 1 with the address term, ‘Sweeps,’ which is an abbreviation of ‘Sweet Pea’, an affectionate nickname for his wife. He also displays his thoughtfulness by telling her that he purchased the wine she prefers. In this family, the wife’s income is greater than her husband’s, and she works longer hours. While they often collaborate on making dinner, on another evening he manages the meal preparation mostly on his own. At one point while he is out on the patio barbecuing the chicken on their grill, his wife comes out to offer to help.

1 Mother Adam, what do you want me to do? Rice? Salad?  
 2 Father I'm doing rice already.  
 3 Mother Okay, You got (.) broccoli?  
 4 Father I have mixed vegetables steamed.  
 5 Mother You want that paper out here or can I bring it  
 6 in?  
 7 Father Yeah, that’s all done, I’m done with all that.  
 8 Mother Okay.

In lines 1 and 3, the mother attempts to contribute to the meal preparation activity, however, her husband assures her that he has already attended to all the relevant side dishes. In line 5, the

mother than shifts her focus to helping her husband with another task and offers to bring in the newspaper as he brings in the chicken.

The last category of collaboration displayed in this data set, ‘collaborating apart,’ which occurs with great frequency when families barbeque, was observed in the U.S. data but not in the Italian data. Due to the separate spatial sphere for barbequing, which takes place outside, while the remainder of the meal preparation, such as side dishes, occurs inside, the couples who barbeque are working in different locations. In all instances of barbequing in our data, the husband attends to the barbeque while the wife prepares other items in the kitchen. This realm of American life appears to remain steadfastly gendered. Since families in Italy do not prepare barbequed foods, we do not observe the practice of ‘collaborating apart’ among the Italian couples. The different cultural organization of space makes possible different configurations of household labor when it comes to dinner preparation in the two countries.

## 7. Conclusion

Families are comprised of individuals who coordinate their behaviors in relation to one another, and in working families – that is, families in which both adults work outside the home and raise school-aged children – the challenge of coordinating behaviors to meet family needs is especially great. A central premise of this paper is that the emotional tone of family life pivots to a significant degree on the extent to which family members negotiate and enact effective strategies for contending with the numerous tasks that daily life presents and, more generally, that observing family members as they go about their everyday routines and activities in managing the home can reveal important insights into the organization and dynamics of families. We drew upon two samples of interview and videotaped interaction data, from Italy and the United States, to examine what happens in families when the evening meal is being prepared. The exchange of behaviors between spouses during this time was the primary focus of our analysis, and we aimed to combine concepts from anthropology and psychology to highlight the specific interactional sequences that depicted the interplay between coordination of behaviors involved in task management, on one hand, and the emotional tone of dyadic interactions on the other.

Several findings stand out from this analysis. First, we identified several excerpts, typically from interviews, which demonstrated that (a) the burden spouses experience in managing their household responsibilities interferes with individual well-being and expressions of intimacy, (b) spouses spontaneously mention the struggles they experience in their relationship over the allocation and completion of chores, and (c) that when spouses reflect on the division of labor in their family, they sometimes understand their arrangement in terms of trust (e.g., ‘Does my partner trust me to do what I am expected to do?’) and authority and subordination (e.g., ‘I want my partner to recognize what to do and do it,’ versus ‘I want my partner to prompt me when tasks need attention’). Thus, housework appears to be far more than the mere completion of tasks needed to keep the family running smoothly; it also colors individuals’ daily experiences and contributes to how individuals identify themselves in relation to the partner and how couples characterize their partnership.

Second, we presented excerpts designed to show that interactions around everyday chores are indeed tinged with strong and often unacknowledged emotional reactions: some partners feel unappreciated because other family members fail to contribute to meal preparation, some express dissatisfaction at how family members go about their chores, others express frustration at the seemingly endless list of tasks that must be completed in a timely manner. Conversely, in some of the families presented here, the management of tasks presented opportunities for genuine humor, irony, and warmth. In some instances these were unilateral expressions of humor that appeared to keep interactions from becoming abrasive (as in the case of a father who was cooking dinner, using humor to deflect his wife's persistent monitoring) and in other cases we saw how positive expressions were shared by partners (and children) and thus served to perpetuate engagement and collaboration. With the present samples we cannot know whether these interactional sequences are stable features of the families studied, nor can we know whether these negative and positive exchanges have any long-term bearing on individual and family well-being. We can assume nevertheless that for some couples the shared enterprise of raising a family is a source of pride and pleasure, that for other couples these same responsibilities are a source of pain and tension, and that for perhaps most couples the reality lies between these two extremes. We are hesitant to suggest a mechanism that explains this variation, in part because so many are plausible and in part because the present data provide little leverage for ruling them in or out. However, it would seem that families are most successful in contending with the routine tasks of everyday life when (a) family members are active contributors to these tasks rather than passive, entitled recipients of others' contributions, (b) family members acknowledge the contributions that others make (even if only by not criticizing them for their efforts), (c) some consensually established arrangement has been established so that the allocation of tasks to people is not renegotiated anew each day, and (d) there is flexibility rather than rigidity in the arrangement so that one family member can 'pick up slack' if another is unable to fulfill their usual responsibilities. These would seem to be the conditions most likely to promote positive engagement in families, and to promote the view that everyday chores are a vehicle for connection rather than a threat to individual well-being, though of course here we are unable to disentangle these conditions in any causally meaningful way from the positive engagement itself.

Third, we observed differences between families that appear to be linked to their country of residence, with American families tending to be more tense and individually-oriented in their exchanges and Italian families tending to be more relaxed and communal in their approach to household management. The homes of Italian families were smaller than those of the American families, which would seem to militate against this pattern of results. In any case, we are hesitant to draw firm conclusions on this point, owing to the fact the samples studied here were relatively small; positive expressions were in fact evident in the American sample; and it is quite possible (though impossible to confirm) that the observed findings is a result of higher levels of marital unhappiness in the American couples than in the Italian families. The more important point, we believe, is that data from both countries provide important glimpses into the patterns of collaboration that *can* occur in families, and that family members actively create the settings – to their benefit or to their detriment -- in which task management occurs. A deeper understanding of the dynamics underlying harmonious management of daily tasks might help identify the specific elements of interaction most likely to foster expressions of positive emotions.

Interpretation of these findings is limited by several considerations. First, although our review of the interaction data suggests that the families were interacting in normal, natural ways, we cannot know this with certainty. Hence it is possible that the exchanges studied here are artificial, exaggerated, or unusual in unknown ways. Second, the size of the samples studied here limited the generalizability of the conclusions that can be made. We have no reason to expect that the samples studied are unrepresentative of dual-income couples in Italy and the US, though we have to assume that we have not captured the full range of situations that families confront or the full range of responses to those situations. In this respect our observations must be considered as suggestive of other analytic avenues that might be pursued rather than as definitive statements about the division of labor in families. Notwithstanding these and other limitations, the present analysis highlights the centrality of household management in the lives of dual-income families, and it identifies some specific strategies that families employ as they attempt to collaborate around these tasks.

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