

Part III

THE RECORD OF HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES ACCORDING TO SPACE AND TIME

Introduction

A detailed sequential record of the activities which took place in the sample dwelling during one waking day in June 1965 appears below. The detailed observation of behavior in small groups over fixed periods of relatively short duration is an investigative method frequently utilized by social and behavioral scientists, especially in studies in which data which lend themselves to quantification are desired. It is, however, a method which has so far been primarily employed in laboratory studies of interaction and other behavior rather than in research in natural settings, and it is most closely associated, therefore, with conventional topics in psychology. In ethnography, extended participant observation of a less intensive nature is better suited to most descriptive goals, although exceptions occur. When the objective involves an understanding of behavior which is either routinized or frequently repeated, the intensive observation of activity within a particular space-time frame is a productive investigative method. It has previously been used in the study of domestic life by Roberts (1956) in his detailed treatment of the daily round in five households among the Zuni although, as Roberts points out in the introduction to that monograph, even discussions of the daily round are usually not based on intensive observation but on the ethnographers generalized experience in the society over an extended period of time (1).

The intensive observation of activity in the domestic setting is a method which enhances the scope and depth of data derived from an extended, more generalized experience. The former process results in greater detail in the overall record and lends itself to quantification. For example, a summary of a generalized experience in the culture might indicate that 'demand feeding' of infants was the rule. Only a detailed observation, however, has the advantage of indicating how many times during a day an infant is actually fed and under what conditions and hence how 'demand feeding' may differ in detail from society to society. Similarly, a summary of a generalized experience might indicate the uses to which domestic spaces of particular types are conventionally put. Only a detailed observation, however, permits us to see with what frequency such spaces are used by particular householders for a given purpose.

An intensive observation of daily life has another heuristic advantage in that it permits the ethnographer to determine whether existing descriptions and his own general impressions are actually based on fact. Close attention to a narrow range of data of considerable detail frequently reveals that existing descriptions are in need of qualification or partially in error. For example, Yalman cites "looking after the children" as one of the responsibilities of a Sinhalese wife (1967:107). Detailed observation revealed, however, that the most time consuming routinized activity of a Sinhalese wife was food preparation, and that it actually required so much time that child tending was necessarily undertaken by others in the household as well. As a matter of fact, in those few households in which no additional adults or older children were available for child tending, the activity was actually reassigned in part to kinsmen from other households. Similarly, Yalman observes that husband and wives do not sleep together (1967:108). We found that sexually segregated sleeping arrangements were not established until some of the children in the family had reached the age of six or seven. Young couples with small children under the age of six generally sleep together with their children in the same room as Hu, Wi, ElSo, YoSo and InfSo did on the day of the observation.

A related advantage of intensive observation is that it provides a reliable basis for choosing between characterizations of domestic life when they are in conflict. Yalman's brief treatment of life in the household (1967:107-8) suggests a clearcut assignment of most tasks on the basis of sex, and whereas we would argue that some of his generalizations ought to be qualified (for example, some activities culturally assigned to women are undertaken by men in old age), we are in basic agreement with his general treatment. By contrast, in Ryan and Straus (1954:211-2) there is a brief, and from the perspective of this observation and our extended experience as well, a none-too-believable account of the Sinhalese as a people who lack precise sex-role assignments in domestic chores. Although accurate in some of its details, the overall conclusion seems to greatly misrepresent values in work assignment.

The precise description of the routinized use of domestic space has important practical applications. Throughout the developing world, local governments and international agencies have embarked on rural housing schemes of various kinds, but detailed studies of domestic space, how it is used, by whom and under what conditions are frequently lacking. In addition, in the field of agricultural development there has been considerable recent interest in incorporating women in Sri Lanka and elsewhere into what might be described as 'visible' economic activities such as cultivation. Yet precise and detailed studies of how women

ordinarily spend their time in traditional societies are lacking, and consequently, there is often no basis for judgment as to whether incorporating them into cultivation activities is a practical alternative. Among the Sinhalese, the food preparation activities make such heavy demands on the time of young women, that even the care of their own children is undertaken at least in part by other kinsmen. The heavy demands in this area are directly responsible for the fact that the transplanting of rice seedlings, a cultivation activity which is culturally assigned to women, is not undertaken by most households in Rangama.

The waking day as a logical time unit for the study of domestic space

In most conventional studies of economic activities in traditional societies, the logical time unit for study is taken to be the calendar year since the focus is on the activities associated with the agricultural timetable. Although the time of year may influence the nature of some of the activities being undertaken in domestic space, most activities there are routinized on a daily rather than on a calendrical basis, hence the term 'daily round.' The kind of food under preparation naturally varies seasonally, and there are some slack periods in the agricultural timetable during which men may be present in the domestic setting for more of the waking day than they are in times of heavy work. With these qualifications however, there is much about one waking day which is like all others, and therefore a limited and detailed observation such as the one which appears here reveals a great deal about other days, both in this domestic setting and elsewhere in Rangama.

The conduct of the observation

The record of observation which appears here was made by R. MacDougall who was spelled or joined by B. MacDougall during various periods of the day. The record of activities was made by hand. An alternate procedure, one in fact used by Roberts (1956) in his work among the Zuni, would have been to use the field tape recorder for the data collection. Our tape recorder was routinely used otherwise for taping interviews which were conducted with Rangama residents. However the kataa peTTiyə, 'talk box,' as it came to be known, was regarded as a fascinating gadget by practically everyone in Rangama, and it often proved to be a troublesome companion when taken out of our dwelling. Although some of the observations made in this study were made from the yard, most of them were made from the stoop on the north side of Room B where it met

the porch. It was felt that the presence of an anthropologist talking continuously into the machine in the midst of the domestic activity would prove to be a disruptive influence in such a small-scale setting. As it was, beyond some initial discussions about the notebook, the householders generally went about their work and we about ours. However, there was one significant alteration of routine behavior which may have stemmed directly from our presence in the compound and that was the failure of WiFa to leave the yard during the waking day. Under normal circumstances he would have left, at least to bathe. We observed early in the day that WiFa told a washerman who visited the compound that he would come to the washerman's dwelling later in the day. He never went however, and his decision not to do so may well have been influenced by our presence.

The emphasis in the data collection was placed primarily on recording the conduct and progress of work activities and hence the use of domestic space. Recording was done in a location (at the corner of the porch) which permitted the best view of most activities underway but it was naturally difficult to see everything which was taking place within the two poorly lighted interior rooms. Consequently, the observer frequently got up to check on the progress of activities in these rooms.

Explanatory detail is sometimes included parenthetically below, but in most cases it is unnecessary since a domestic activity usually develops in a logical sequence so that its purpose becomes clear without editorial comment. It should be noted, however, that our own understanding of the purpose of a few activities is incomplete because they occurred outside our line of vision. On those occasions when the householders went out of the immediate compound into the surrounding garden area, it was not possible to observe their activities closely and still continue to record the activities of the householders who remained in the dwelling. Indeed, in most instances, we were not intended to be observers, since the householders went to these areas principally to defecate and urinate. In one case, however, WiMo took a mamoty to the garden area, began digging and returned shortly without dirt or produce. The activity was not repeated or logically developed in another way, and the purpose of it remains unclear. In another instance, Wi returned from this area with plant material (named and classified botanically below), perhaps with the intention of making a condiment. Again, however, no sequence of activities involving the plants followed as we expected it would, and thus the purpose of the collection is unknown.

Whenever possible linguistic data were recorded, particularly when they pertained to interaction with the children, but it was not possible to keep track of the activities of numerous householders and record their speech at the same time. For the most part, therefore, the content of conversations between individuals was summarized to the extent that the recording of activities permitted.

Summary of principal work activities of the adults in the two households during the waking day

WiFa (1)

WiFa was the only adult member of the households who never left the compound area and the one who was the least active physically. He spent much of the waking day on the charpoy on the porch or in the yard. His major activities were child tending, medicine preparation and woodworking. Minor activities included chasing and tending fowl and chopping wood. Of the major activities, the most time was committed to child tending which was combined or alternated primarily with personal care or with leisure (eating, betel chewing, shaving, daydreaming) rather than with other household tasks. It was supportive of other household tasks, however, since WiFa often distracted the two small boys on the porch while Wi and WiMo went about their work inside. Child tending was nevertheless not always an activity of choice. As with the other adults, most of WiFa's interaction with the children was initiated by them. When it was initiated by WiFa, it often consisted of a reprimand for disturbing books, papers or domestic articles. However, when the children cried or were hungry, he held them from time to time, and he also comforted the infant if the women were busy. On one occasion in the morning he participated in the imitative play of one of the children, and in the evening he attempted to teach them the scriptures.

WiFa's schedule was roughly as follows: He was engaged in child tending from the time he arose (about 6:00 a.m.) until he left the compound briefly for the side yard to defecate at 8:08. When he returned, he began his medicine preparation activities (most of the time was spent in reading his books on medicine), and they continued until 9:22. During that time he was secondarily engaged in child tending since the children pestered him continually. From approximately 9:30 until 10:30 he was again primarily engaged in child tending. At 10:35 he began making a wooden spoon, and he continued this activity, again with interference from the children, until after 11:00. Between 11:15 a.m. and 1:52 p.m. he was again primarily involved in child tending, combined in the middle of the period with the consumption of the noon meal. He shaved from 1:53 until 2:09 and was thereafter primarily involved in child tending for the next 2-1/2 hours (except for a brief period around 3:15 when he helped WiMo prepare tea). He chopped wood for the cooking fires between 4:48 and 5:11. For the rest of the waking day, except for a brief period in which he captured chickens and put them up to roost, he was involved primarily in child tending.

WiMo (2)

WiMo was engaged in a much wider range of domestic tasks than WiFa, in greater physical activity, and she actively utilized all three interior spaces (Rooms A, B and the porch) as well as the yard.

WiMo's activities were roughly as follows: From 6:00 until approximately 6:20 she swept the yard and the interior of the entire dwelling. At 6:28 she filled a depression in the yard with dirt, an area which was muddy from a recent rain. Between 6:30 and approximately 6:41 she rested and was involved principally in child tending. At 6:41 she began to wash utensils and to prepare tea. From 6:50 until 7:25 she was intermittently involved in child tending which was combined and alternated with the following activities: collecting and washing tea cups and sweeping and ordering the kitchen. She was again involved in child tending from 7:25 until approximately 8:35. This was a period which included her morning meal. At 8:38 she again cleaned up around the dwelling and from 8:43 until approximately 9:20, she pounded and winnowed rice. Between 9:26 and 9:39 she prepared green gram for cooking. Thereafter she took the sleeping mats out for airing and at 9:47 began to rekindle the fire. This activity continued until 9:58 when she began cooking. Her cooking activities (spelled by washing pots and sweeping) continued until 12:44 when she began serving food. She tended the children intermittently during this period and continued doing so during her noon meal. Child tending continued until 1:44 after which she swept up around the dwelling and pounded millet until 2:05. She was principally involved in child tending until 2:32, and thereafter she pounded millet until 3:12 when she began to boil water for afternoon tea (with help from WiFa) and then collected and cleaned the cups. These activities were combined with child tending and continued until approximately 3:49. Subsequently she worked in the kitchen, packed down millet huskings in a basket and swept for about twenty minutes. Between 4:10 and 4:55 she was primarily involved in child tending except for a brief period when she pounded millet. From 4:55 until 5:05 she swept up around the dwelling and brought in the sleeping mats. She was involved in child tending until she left the compound to bathe at 5:20. She returned to the compound at 6:04 and began taking the firewood (cut by WiFa) into Rooms A and B. She continued this activity for about twenty minutes when she began kindling her own fire. At 6:28 she began cooking, and she continued this activity until approximately 7:50. Between 7:50 and approximately 8:56 she cooked, tended children, and served food, after which she began eating her evening meal. WiMo cleared up the cooking utensils at 9:04. This was followed by a period of relaxation combined with child tending until she went to bed.

