Case studies are an important tradition in the social sciences, particularly when researchers believe that the object under study needs to be captured in vivo, in its own context, not inferred from outcomes. Communities, social clubs, juvenile gangs, occupations, professions, and immigrant families were among the first and most famous case studies carried out by American sociologists in the first half of the 20th century. Their enduring contribution, if one can reduce an extraordinarily rich and diverse body of investigation to one sentence, is the light they shed on how groups, identities, and disparities are produced and then reproduced over time. Two examples of a relatively recent vintage illustrate the point well and also help to put Nelson’s work in context.

Rubin’s (1976) classic work, Worlds of Pain, is a case study of White working-class families, the “silent majority,” who are unable to fulfill the American dream. A great deal had been written about working-class life before and after Rubin’s study. What set her study apart was the window it opened into the internal dynamics of family life and the relationship between behind-the-scenes drama and social structures.

The “world of pain” that Rubin depicted contrasted dramatically with the world experienced by middle- and upper-middle-class couples. Through her interviews and observation, Rubin chronicled how young working-class men and women, desiring release from conflict and tension in their parents’ home, attempt to gain independence by rebelling, having early sexual experiences, and establishing their own individual lifestyles. Yet, as she also showed, the flight from parental restriction and economic dependence often led to other, more oppressive bonds. For example, a lack of sexual experience (particularly for women) and early pregnancy channel many young couples into marriage and parenthood. Furthermore, early family responsibilities, combined with inadequate formal education, yoke working-class husbands into lower status, dead-end jobs; working-class wives are saddled with children and, because of their lack of skills, have extremely limited opportunities for continued education or subsequent investment in work-related skills. Men can struggle to improve their family’s economic lot, but cyclical unemployment, tiring work, and organizational barriers to white-collar work create an iron curtain that prevents escape from the working class. The result, as the couples themselves describe, is a situation in which one’s family becomes a social and psychological pressure cooker.

Rubin’s research, though exhaustive in the sense that she studied many facets of these families’ lives, was not built on a random sampling of families or a series of controlled experiments. What it did, by contrast, was systematically document and compare, through in-depth interviewing, the way couples in different classes handled similar situations, for example, courting, marriage, childrearing, employment/unemployment, and the family economy. Moreover, the research was intentionally focused on process—how things got done or came undone—to better assess whether the things others saw as outcomes (e.g., divorces, marital abuse, childrearing practices) were pathologies (e.g., rooted in personality) or the effect of other structures (e.g., labor markets). In-depth interviews made it possible to explore men’s and women’s own understanding and explanations for their situations, to compare what

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men and women said so that differences might be investigated further, and, perhaps as importantly, to allow Rubin to illustrate her conclusions using the words of the people she studied.

DeVault (1991), in *Feeding the Family*, looks to carework and gender for insight into what family means in practice. Nurturing, a central and daily aspect of family, sustains group life. The process of “feeding work” is a form of social interaction that engages all group participants. Through meal production, DeVault uncovered the ways such activity draws women into serving others and subordinating their own identities and how the family meal is bound up with the normative ideology of the middle-class family. DeVault’s intent was to expose the processual character of one form of invisible work that occurs in group life and to explore how the meal becomes a vehicle for making family life. DeVault deliberately sought diverse families (by structure, race, income, etc.) whose only commonality is that they all had a child at home. She wanted the richness of multiple versions of feeding work without privileging one type of family as the norm. Through comparing these multiple versions, she is able to build a theory about how providing sustenance produces (and reproduces) family life on a daily basis. This in-depth interview-based study used a guideline of questions that DeVault asked systematically to all respondents, while tailoring each interview to ensure that the unique aspects of each family are recorded. Her intent was to begin with daily life and ordinary experiences that are taken for granted. Through her respondents’ own words, she could provide the reader with their understanding of food patterns and the process through which they created social interaction with family members. To get respondents to articulate this invisible work, DeVault pays close attention to shared meanings, to language, and to nonverbal cues. The data she collects through in-depth interviewing expose the logic of constructing family life as well as the powerful ideology that continues to provide certain social traditions of families.

To reflect the variety of single mothers in our society (e.g., never married, cohabitating, divorced) and to better understand how low-income, White single mothers enact family, Nelson constructed a research design borrowing from the traditions represented by both Rubin and DeVault. For example, Nelson (2005) deliberately decided to include all types of low-income, White single mothers in her rural Vermont ethnography. For the *Journal of Marriage and Family* article, she strategically selects four women from the 70 White, rural, single mothers who comprise her broader in-depth study. She zooms in closely on these cases in order to observe the process through which these women and their children continuously craft family as they shift between household structures.

Following in the research tradition of processual accounts, Nelson’s article is an excellent example of how qualitative interviewing can lead to a new understanding of family life in the 21st century, an era in which family proves a remarkably elastic institution, with women and their children moving between households that are also occupied by husbands (child’s father), grandmothers, and mother’s new boyfriend. A fresh definition of motherhood also emerges as love falters or grows between the mother and her adult companions. Nelson uncovers these developments through her adroit and insightful use of in-depth interviews. “Doing family” entails a dynamic of creating social ties while maintaining boundaries. Ties and boundaries emerge through strategic interactions, for example, in these cases, as women and their children shift family households, while retaining a traditional family template. (I return to this idea below.) The processes through which people try to reconcile the images of an ideal family with their daily lives are captured in the women’s own words.

**The Structure of Talk**

In-depth interviewing is as much a skill as it is an art form. The skill of how to conduct an interview may be teachable, but, as I age as a scholar, I become more convinced that there is a great deal of instinct and judgment in deciding what data to gather and, more important, how to write up one’s findings. The best data in the world can lay dormant without the talent and “street sense” Nelson demonstrates in her analysis. She pulls apart these interviews to show how to interpret the various ways these women make meaning from the questions she is asking. Through analyzing a stretch of talk, she gets at the idealization of family life, that is, how women think other adults ought to be involved with and responsible to their child versus how things are at the point of the interview.

She closely attends to the details of talk in order not to short-circuit the problem of meaning. Mishler (1986) addresses the theoretical underpinnings
of how the standard approach to the analysis of interviews abstracts both questions and responses, thus removing the joint meaning making of the interviewer and her respondent. Although Mishler is after a more detailed read of a transcript as a text than I am, I take seriously his caution that respondents often answer our questions by trying to presuppose (second-guess) what we want to know. They want to be helpful by giving us the “right” answer.

Talk is rarely punctuated and often sentences are incomplete. Listening to an audiotape and transcribing it, one hears conversational pauses. There are “ums” and “you knows” or sentence fragments into what appears to be a shift in the conversation. These are important clues as to what it is we are not asking or how respondents take our questions to mean something slightly different from our intent. In short, following this narrative tradition of the interview as an interaction between the interviewer and her respondent, Nelson is mindful of her respondent’s talk.

To do qualitative, in-depth interviewing well, we need to look at transcripts systematically for the differing ways respondents attend to our questions. When we analyze these data, we need to pay attention to the structure of talk as a special quality of in-depth interviewing. We also need to let our readers in on how we uncover and preserve the viewpoint of our respondents.

Nelson’s article offers an excellent example of what we can learn when this is done properly. She offers promising findings about the “nuisances” of the interview. For instance, “Women were asked the question who is the most important person outside of herself in her young child’s life.” If they had taken a written survey, they would likely check their mothers, which would be empirically accurate for the present moment. Nelson lets us in on the complicated reality of this question, however, by picking up on the “I’d say” responses, that is, the wishful desire for that person to be the child’s father (while they tell us it is their own mother at this moment). As Nelson writes, “The ‘I’d say’ represents the gap between reality and her wishful thinking, between the known present and her aspirations for the future, between the family she is experiencing on a daily basis and the ideal construction of what it means to be a family.”

In the hands of a novice scholar, the point likely would have been missed. It is here that the importance of qualitative analysis comes alive. Nelson knows to follow up the “I’d say” with probing questions that capture the analytical point quoted above. It is not simply the pause, the “ums,” or the “you knows” in the interview that signify to the scholar to pay attention; it is as much on-the-spot (in the interview) realizing that something more is going on and following it. Nelson knows that the moment in the interview to ask probes is as important as how she reads the interview transcript.

Qualitative scholars are interested in how people frame their responses. Nelson demonstrates as she writes (letting us into her thinking) the difference between the way family life ought to be and the reality of how it is. Most scholars would settle for this descriptive statement as an achievement. Nelson is exceptional in that she takes this finding to the level of theorizing. She teases out the continued importance of the traditional nuclear family for these single mothers as well as how daily life operates. Because the traditional family is so important to these women, their own mothers move into and out of the mother-child family depending on romance, commitment, and responsibility on the part of fathers and new boyfriends. As a result, she creates an important metatheory of how families morph over time into multiple configurations.

**The Idealized Family**

Nelson expertly explores how single mothers maintain this idealized family. Here, I highlight its implications. Single mothers have unraveled the nuclear family (either through divorce or never marrying the fathers of their children) while simultaneously maintaining its image. As contradictory as this may seem, the two-parent heterosexual family remains the yardstick against which single mothers measure their own families. They adhere to what some scholars call the master narratives (Lyotard, 1979/1984). Even when the ideal is rare in reality, it is the stuff of legend that is at the heart of the master narrative. It is so deeply ingrained in our culture that it is taken for granted and often an unnoticed presence in our lives. Through their daily repetition, master narratives are a powerful form of social control as they insinuate themselves into everyday reality (Romero & Stewart, 1999). One such master narrative about families Nelson focuses on is how the two-parent heterosexual family (what she and Dorothy Smith refer to as the Standard North American Family) shapes these women’s ideal view of family life.
Drawing on my own research (Hertz, 2002), Nelson argues that one way in which women highlight the importance of the idealized nuclear family is how they leave a spot for the child’s biological father (or a stepfather). She argues that the grandmother may be a placeholder for an absent father, but she is not a substitute with the same rights and responsibilities a father would assume. Furthermore, the grandmother is expected to relinquish her involvement (but not her love and nurturing) if a man arrives. Only the presence of a responsible man would bring the family more in line with the idealized template. Women hold out for this ideal vision of the two-parent family as a wish for the kind of family they want. By keeping a spot open for a man, they display to potential men that they would have a place in these families. This spot is also a reminder to their own mothers that they, not their mothers, are in charge. Grandmothers are not equal parenting partners, and the mothers in Nelson’s study do not turn to the child’s grandmother with any expectation that the grandmother will raise her grandchildren.

Mothers, Nelson finds, carve out a niche that lets significant adults in their and their children’s lives know that they are “in charge.” By retaining disciplinary control over their children, this motherhood core also facilitates their movement between living with their children on their own (grandmothers may be nearby), living in multigenerational households, and living with men in their lives. We never hear that a child has too many people loving them (and there is always room for another person to love), but transferring who is in charge (or having competing disciplinary standards) is more tricky.

As much as these women hope for a new partner or that the child’s own biological father might step up to the plate and assume familial responsibility, they have shifted the core of motherhood to establishing moral boundaries in order to shape their child’s character. Whether single mothers will redefine this disciplinarian core of motherhood if a man steps into place remains an interesting empirical question to emerge from this study. “Doing family” is as much about the reconfiguring of family (which adults are allowed in and which are not respectable or responsible) as it is about Nelson’s wonderful conceptualization that “doing families” is about keeping family members “in motion.” This view captures a new dynamic of the multiple families in which women and their children live and function simultaneously and over time.

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