

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

