

# THE PLACE OF TIME IN COUPLE AND FAMILY THERAPY

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## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss the critical place of time in clinical theory, assessment, and interventions with couples and families. In the family therapy theory and practice literature, surprisingly little explicit attention has been paid to the many temporal challenges couples and families face. Such challenges include managing time demands and pressures issuing from family members' involvement in larger systems such as school and work; coordinating the often dys-synchronous schedules of each member so as to maintain family time and carry out necessary responsibilities and chores; as well as a whole host of potential differences among members in such temporal domains as pace, preferences for how time is allocated, concern with punctuality, degree of focus on the past, present, or future, to name just a few. Given that the original, modernist systemic theories of family function and dysfunction were based heavily on ideas drawn from biology and engineering about the coherent, patterned, circular relationship between elements of a whole (Steinglass, 1987), and given the role of time and rhythm in these systemic processes, it is striking that, with some important exceptions (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Kantor & Lehr, 1975), time has not been placed front and center in understanding family functioning. Similarly, postmodern or poststructuralist theories (c.f., White, 1991; White & Epston, 1990), which take a purely contextual, historical, narrative root metaphor as their base (Pepper, 1942) also have not focused much on time as a key aspect of family experience and identity.

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Over the last decade I have proposed that a focus on time can greatly aid in the therapists' work of assisting couples and families with their challenges (Fraenkel, 1990, 1994, 1996, 1998a, b; Fraenkel & Wilson, 2000). To this effect, work on time and families by research psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, biologists, as well as by those working in the fields of music, theater, literature, and dance can be tremendously useful to clinicians both in developing clinical theory and in guiding interventions with particular couples (Fraenkel, 1994). In turn, the detailed case studies that emerge from careful clinical work are potentially useful in testing general hypotheses and developing new directions for research on time. Thus, in linking "nomothetic" or general concepts and findings with "idiographic" or individual case histories (Fraenkel, 1995), I hope that this chapter will be of interest both to clinicians and other interventionists, as well as to researchers and theoreticians, and that it will stimulate more back and forth between these levels in the study of time in intimate human relationships.

I begin the chapter with a theoretical map of the role of time in couples and families.<sup>1</sup> Although the theory stipulates a number of elements of context that affect families' experience of time, I have elected next to highlight the relatively new and growing impact of technology. I then turn to two case histories that illustrate how time manifests as an issue for families and how it can also be a resource for change. Embedded within these case histories are several techniques I have found useful in helping families with temporal problems. The chapter ends with suggestions for how temporal issues can become more central to the current effort to design interventions meant to help at-risk couples and families prevent the development of more serious difficulties.

### **THE CENTRALITY OF TIME IN FAMILY LIFE: KEY ASPECTS AND THEORETICAL PREMISES**

Time is one of the most basic dimensions in which a life is shared with others. This is true for work relationships and friendships, but most of all in couples and families. Even when adult partners or parents and children are separated by great physical distances, coming together regularly in time (through periodic visits, or when apart by telephone, email, or other forms of electronic communication) can maintain a sense of connection. In contrast, family members may share a home and partners may share a bed yet be temporally separated to such a degree that they virtually never see one another. Therefore, it behooves therapists to attend to the many different ways in which the problems of families are affected or expressed by temporal issues and patterns.

Table 1 summarizes key theoretical premises regarding the relationship between time and family functioning, as well as the core temporal aspects of family experience and endeavor. I will first describe the core temporal aspects, then turn to the broader premises.

*Temporal Aspects of Family Life and Organization*

It is proposed that any action or interaction (by humans, animals, plants, nonliving objects, and whether natural or man-made/mechanical) has five temporal elements: temporal location (in clock and calendar time), pace, duration, frequency, and sequence. In addition, actions and interactions may be one-time events, or may repeat in irregular ways, or may repeat in regular, "rhythmic" ways.

For instance, an extended family may have gathered together once (and only once) to take a long hike together. This hike took place on a certain date and began and ended at particular times (temporal location); began at a quick clip that slowed as some members became tired (pace); occurred for a particular length of time (duration); occurred just this once (frequency); and occurred after a long drive to the mountain and was followed by a family picnic (sequence). Alternatively, such hikes may occur sporadically and irregularly, determined by the whims of one or more family members who call everyone together; or may occur in some regular, yearly rhythm (for instance, every year at Thanksgiving).

Using this example, a number of potential areas of family conflict can be identified. Family members might argue over the temporal location of the hike, both in terms of the calendar/season (some wishing to hike in spring, some in summer, some in fall, some in winter) and in terms of when in the day to hike (beginning just before sunrise, midday, afternoon, or in time to catch the sunset). Members may vary widely in what they consider pleasurable or can physically handle in terms of pace. Arguments could break out around the desired duration of the hike, as well as in terms of how often to go hiking during the time the family has together, or how frequently to arrange such hikes during a year. Some might prefer to eat first and then hike, or the reverse. Some may wish this to be a one-time event and others may want to make it a re-occurring event. Some of those wishing to repeat it may vote for doing so on the spur of the moment, when the weather is good or the spirit moves them to hike; others might want to have a more regular, ritualized event so that they can better plan other events in their lives. All of these differences among family members around the temporal aspects of their conjoint activity typically reveal differences in preferences regarding how they "inhabit" time. Importantly for clinicians, these differences and conflicts around time also typically reveal

*Table 1.* Time and Rhythm in Couples: Key Premises and Concepts.

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Key Premises

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- How couples evolve/organize/experience temporal patterns affects relationship satisfaction
  - Recursive relationship between time patterns and couple satisfaction
  - No single or simple temporal pattern associated with couple satisfaction
  - How couple evolves and maintains rhythms reveals themes of power and closeness
  - Temporal patterns have multiple determinants
    - work
    - technology
    - larger systems
    - multiple caretaking responsibilities
    - biological/health factors
    - divorce and remarriage
    - beliefs from culture and family of origin
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Key Temporal Concepts

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- Single instance versus repeated/recursive events
    - Recursive events either irregularly- (arrhythmic) or regularly-occurring (rhythmic)
  - Temporal attributes of activities
    - position of occurrence: when in clock or calendar time
    - duration: length of time
    - pace or tempo: speed
    - frequency: how often
    - sequence: in what order
  - Three temporal levels or lengths of activities
    - Micro (microseconds to seconds)
    - Molar (seconds to 24 hours)
    - Macro (days to years)
  - Temporal Ideation
    - Time perspective
    - Time valuation
    - Projected life chronologies
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underlying issues and preferences around desired degree of closeness and struggles around who wields the most power in the family.

The elements and rhythms of family temporal patterns and problems operate at three overlapping levels: micro (seconds to minutes), molar (minutes to hours), and macro (days to years). Table 2 identifies a taxonomy of potential

temporal problem areas based on the temporal elements as they operate at these three levels.

An example of the micro level might be at the family outing, Uncle Fred and Aunt Nancy (brother and sister) once again get into one of their famous spats because Fred, who speaks slowly, finds Nancy's rapid-fire pace of speech extremely annoying, and says so, which insults Nancy. Bad feelings erupt elsewhere at the reunion around a molar level conflict, as the Jones clan once again races ahead of the rest of the extended family on the hike, then wait impatiently for others to catch up while the others arrive out of breath and angry that the Jones's forced them to rush – especially since the Jones family has the only copy of the map. Later in the day around the dinner table, some of the adults get into an argument around the macro-level temporal issue that joint investments made by one member for the benefit of all are not meeting

**Table 2.** Examples of Temporal Issues in Couples: A Preliminary Taxonomy.

TEMPORAL ATTRIBUTES*	Micro	Temporal Unit Size Molar	Macro
Temporal Position	—	when to make love (morning vs. evening)	when to begin putting money in retirement fund
Duration	turn length in conversation	allocation of time to joint vs. separate activities	length of time residing in city vs. suburbs
Pace	speed of speech	speed of completing household chores	speed of progress toward financial goals
Frequency	frequency of a particular facial expression	frequency with which each partner initiates problem solving	frequency of job changes by one partner
Sequence	one partner pauses a long time after the other speaks emotionally	sequence of chores vs. pleasurable activities (e.g., which to do first)	question of whether to finish education before or after having first child
RHYTHMS**	repeated pattern of interruptions in dialogue	not sharing any daily meals	how regularly to visit in-laws

\* Temporal attributes describe non-recursive, recursive-irregular, and recursive-regular types of behaviors and patterns. \*\* Rhythms are recursive-regular behaviors and patterns.

relationship distress can result in family members creating or amplifying temporal "disjunctions," just as temporal pressures or differences between family members (in pace, schedules) can result in couple or family distress. Furthermore, whatever the source of the temporal pattern, once in place it often becomes part of a vicious cycle or recursive loop with relationship distress, such that the temporal pattern creates more distress which leads to concretizing of the pattern, and so on. In systemically-oriented clinical work, it is often more expedient to identify and highlight the connection between the temporal pattern and the relationship's distress and to intervene on either component of this loop to create change in the other component, than to focus more on how the pattern or distress got started.

The third premise is that there are likely few simple correspondences between particular measurable temporal patterns (such as the amount of time family members spend together versus apart, the degree of difference in their paces of walking or talking, the degree to which one partner focuses on the future and the other on the present) and the associated meaning and impact of these patterns. Careful examination of individual families, either through in-depth qualitative research or through the use of the more informal qualitative "research" methods employed in a clinical context, will inevitably reveal a fair degree of variation around the mean. Clinicians need both to be informed of general links between temporal patterns and family functioning identified by research, as well as attuned to the particular meanings ascribed to patterns by families that may deviate from the "norm."

For instance, one family I worked with rose together, returned home at the same time, ate together every night, and shared almost all leisure activities. Upon first description this family sounded like the picture of togetherness. However, it was gradually revealed that the family's tight temporal coordination was enforced through intimidation and threats of punishment by a dominating father/husband. In contrast, a couple I came to know was composed of two prominent performing artists who met in their late 30s, and who were both dedicated to their careers and to a lifestyle of extensive travel. Both had already decided not to have children and the more "settled" life that would require, and had previously found it difficult to form long-term relationships, as their partners inevitably tired of the extended absences and erratic schedules. With one another they felt they had created a relationship that could handle a lot of time apart, while still experiencing themselves as committed to one person and enjoying the times when their schedules brought them together.

The tremendous variability in the meaning of temporal patterns for particular families does not suggest that research findings regarding general temporal issues and phenomena are unimportant in understanding the individual case.

Findings about the impact on families of work schedules (Galinsky, 1999; Hoffman, 1987; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti & Crauter, 2000; Rowe & Bentley, 1992), the particular challenges of the so-called "sandwich generation" of young-to-middle-aged adults responsible for the care of children and their aging parents (Miller, 1981; Neal, Chapman, Ingersoll-Dayton & Emlen, 1993) and other issues affecting many families are extremely helpful to the clinician in anticipating particular concerns and challenges of the particular couple or family in treatment. But what qualitative inquiry and clinical case studies add to theory and research is an important window into the tremendous variability in how families view the link between temporal patterns and levels of relational satisfaction or distress, a point that has also been powerfully argued by Daly (1996).

The fourth premise of the current theory is that time is particularly sensitive to shifts in what numerous theories and studies have identified as the two core dimensions of family relationships: the degree and quality of closeness/connection, and the degree of hierarchy and balance of power (Wood, 1985). Once again, it is instructive to compare the degree of malleability or sensitivity of the temporal versus the spatial context to family disturbances. If one partner wishes more distance from the other, it is certainly easier and therefore more likely that she or he will first find some way to erect a temporal boundary than it is that she or he will erect a new physical boundary. For instance, it is more likely that this partner may begin coming home later from work or spending evenings absorbed in projects that have suddenly become "urgent," or may shift his or her bedtime or wake time even slightly to become out of synch with those of the partner, than it is likely that he or she will put a new wall in the bedroom, or move out of the home. Likewise, when a family member is unhappy with the balance of power between him or herself and another family member, he or she may consciously or unconsciously alter temporal patterns in ways that attempt to shift power. For instance, a teenager frustrated with the lack of privileges afforded him by his parents may challenge them by violating curfew. Or, a partner who feels bossed around by her partner may take longer than usual to complete chores, or may take to coming late to dinner dates. Thus, temporal shifts – in pace, amount of time spent together, schedules and the like – are often the first overt signs of conflict among family members.

The fifth premise is that family temporal problems can have multiple determinants. Prominent determinants include: the temporal demands of the workplace, the impact of technology, the social institutions or larger systems with which families interact and upon which they may depend (schools, hospitals, legal system, welfare system), multiple caretaking responsibilities, biological and health factors, and beliefs from family and culture of origin.

To illustrate these determinants using the earlier composite case of the extended family on a hiking weekend, the trip had to be reset twice because of major developments or projects in two of the adults' workplaces – a legal case that suddenly developed problems and an unexpected audit (impact of work). During the weekend, one of the fathers was frequently calling in to the office on his cell phone – even making calls from the hike until one of his siblings asked him to please turn it off. Likewise, one of the mothers brought along her laptop and spent most of one day finding a phone outlet that she could plug into to check her email – resulting in her missing the first hike and angering her children and husband, who had hoped she'd leave her work home for a change (impact of technology, work). Meanwhile, two of the teenagers spent most of the day inside playing with their GameBoys, to the great consternation of their parents, who wanted them to spend time outdoors and with their relatives (impact of technology). One family couldn't come at the last minute because the son's school soccer coach threatened that if he missed the practices that weekend he'd be removed from the starting team (impact of larger systems). Another couldn't make it because an ailing, elderly grandmother couldn't be left alone and wasn't well enough to come on the trip (impact of multiple caretaking responsibilities; health). The entire clan talked about how sad it was that this part of the family couldn't come to what might be the last chance for the extended family to spend time together before the elderly woman died. On the other end of the life spectrum, there were a couple of infants on the trip, so the pace of the hike was slowed by the need for periodic breastfeeding and diaper changes (impact of biological needs). One family arrived at the lodge 3 hours late and in a foul mood, and had missed the first collective dinner, which started promptly at 7:00 p.m. Husband and wife had been arguing again about the husband's chronic lateness. The husband, from Brazil, argued that what he saw as his wife's (and her whole family's) "preoccupation" with the clock and with being on time drove him crazy, and that in Brazil families wait to eat until everyone arrives. The wife, an Anglo-American from Connecticut, insisted that it is a sign of disrespect to come late (impact of cultures of origin).

Further examples of these temporal determinants are described in two earlier papers (Fraenkel, 1994; Fraenkel & Wilson, 2000). Here I discuss in detail the impact of technology, as it is the newest powerful influence on family time and relatively little has been written about it in the clinical literature (Imber-Black, 2000). The increasing presence in homes (and on family members' persons) of computers (and the Internet), cell phones, pagers, faxes, electronic organizers and other personal digital assistants (PDAs) such as the PalmPilot, wireless devices such as the BlackBerry that send and receive email, as well as portable and stationery TVs, CD, DVD, and audiotape players, VCRs and camcorders,

digital cameras, GameBoys and other electronic toys, are rapidly transforming how families experience time. As I will discuss, these technologies are creating a range of new problems for families, including further dissolving the boundary between work and home, as well as between family members and a wide range of stimuli and extra-familial relationships; increasing the pace of life, interrupting and fragmenting time spent together; creating new intrafamilial sources of competition for (electronic) resources; changing daily schedules; structuring activities more closely to the clock and calendar; and encouraging families to compress more activities into less time (Fraenkel, 2001; Fraenkel & Wilson, 2000).

Along with creating new problems, these technologies also provide a range of new opportunities for family connection. Family members may together use the Internet to access a wide range of informational, cultural, and educational stimuli (Robinson & Kestnbaum, 1999). Through email, families have an inexpensive way to stay in closer touch with extended family members (grandparents and other relatives) living at distances that prohibit frequent visits. Parents/partners and their children can use email, pagers, and cell phones to stay in touch over the course of the day, either just to "catch up" with one another between their respective activities, or to reach each other more urgently.

However, given the focus of this chapter on temporal issues families might bring into therapy, I will focus more on the "downside" of technology for family life. Although some of my comments regarding these trends are supported by data and news reports, others are based more on observation of couples and families in general as well as in the clinical context.

#### *The Impact of Technology on Family Time*

To grasp the potential pervasive temporal impact of technology on U.S. families,<sup>2</sup> first consider the amount and variety of technology in homes. Fully 98% of families own at least one television (indicating that even poor families own a TV), 97% own a VCR, and 68% own video game equipment (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2000). Television is such a common fixture in U.S. homes that 20% of 2-7-year olds (Gentile & Walsh, 1999) and 65% of 8-16-year-olds (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999) now have TVs in their bedrooms.

According to the most recent government data, in 1998, 42% of U.S. households had computers, and 26.2% had Internet access, up from 24% with computers and less than 1% with Internet access only 4 years earlier (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999). Only one year later in 1999, 69% of families had computers, and 43% of families had Internet access (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). A similar rate of increase in computer ownership and Internet usage was expected for 2000.

The most obvious impact of all this technology on families is in diminishing or changing the nature of family time. For instance, the average U.S. child watches 25 hours of TV per week, typically without parents present. In addition, the average "wired" child plays computer or video games 7 hours a week, and accesses the Internet from home 4 hours per week. Adding up TV and computer time, 2–17 year olds spend an average of 4 and a half hours per day in front of electronic screens at home (Gentile & Walsh, 1999). Given that the earliest most school-aged children come home is 3:00 p.m., and that the above estimate doesn't include time spent with the computer for doing homework (beyond searching the Internet), there simply aren't many hours left for non-screen family time.

Some research suggests that a number of families engage in lively interaction around the television (Kubey, 1990). However, more recent data suggests that for children age 8 and older, parents watch television with them only 5% of the time; thus much of TV time does not involve such family interaction (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). In addition, what is not yet known is whether this kind of family activity, involving as it does substantial periods of non-interactive time during which the show or movie is watched, differs from activities such as reading, storytelling, singing together, and doing arts and crafts together in its impact on perceived family cohesion, as well as on children's emotional and cognitive development. Some research that controls for socioeconomic standing and education level shows that families that use electronic media less and read more, play games, and do activities together have children who do better in school (Gentile & Walsh, 1999). Likewise, children who play video or computer games less generally do better in school (Gentile & Walsh, 1999). Furthermore, families in which parents have less education (high school diploma or less) and are less well off financially (yearly income of \$25,000 or less) watch much more television than families in which parents are more educated (4-year college degree or higher) and have higher incomes (yearly income of \$75,000 or above) (Galinsky, 1999). And a national survey conducted by National Public Radio in conjunction with the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government (National Public Radio, 1999) found more than half of respondents (58%) reported that computer use has led them to spend less time with family and friends.

Although some families report positive interactions around electronic screens, parents' work-related time on the computer or telephone presents a further challenge to preserving family time. By 2000, it was estimated that 21 million people work at home (Ruhling, 2000), and by 2020, it is estimated that at least 40% of the American workforce will be telecommuters or home office workers. Although advertisements for everything related to home offices always depict

smiling parents working away with their kids happily looking on (or working on an adjoining desk on their own computer), many parents working at home describe even more intense issues around balancing work and family time than when they worked in out-of-home offices (Belkin, 1999). Whereas the physical boundary and commute between the workplace and home previously allowed a greater degree of regulation of the work/family boundary, when the office moves to the home the temporal boundary becomes increasingly central. Yet it can be extremely challenging to maintain this boundary when pressure mounts to complete projects or to make "just a few" more phone calls. With employers always pushing for more productivity and expecting employees to "give back" the time they save from commuting (Galt, 2000), it can be argued that the move toward home offices creates the conditions for temporal exploitation of workers (Friedman, 2001). And the problem of temporal regulation of work can be as severe for those who are self-employed and working from home.

Thus, despite everyone being in the same physical space, ever-present work demands of home office workers may create dyssynchronous life rhythms, temporal boundaries that keep telecommuting partners apart from each other and kids apart from working parents. As sociologist Norman H. Nie (2000) writes,

Telecommuting may be the first social transformation in centuries that pulls working fathers and mothers back into the home rather than pushing them out for longer and longer periods of time . . . But the strong bonds of the agricultural family were based on mutual involvement in common work from an early age until the end of life. In the pending world of telecommuters, it would not surprise me to find, at the end of the day, mother in her study and father in his, both connected to the office servers, while a caregiver is with the children in another part of the house (p. 52).

In addition to reduced amount of time for family connectedness, the plethora of technology in the home may also lead to a sense of fragmentation of the time families might otherwise spend together.<sup>3</sup> The advent of email – with its potential for almost instant response – has created a general expectation that we *should* respond immediately; otherwise, we are somehow not taking advantage of or honoring the wonders of this new technology. One new advertisement for a mobile keypad that allows unwired Internet access asks, "When was the last time you checked your email?" This expectation of rapid response results in people feeling compelled to check their email repeatedly throughout the day. Thus, parents and kids alike may skip out on what might otherwise be family time in order to carry out this email function. When fax machines, cell phones, regular phones, pagers, and other communication devices are added to the mix, it becomes apparent that there are many potential sources of interruption and fragmentation of family time.

Unfortunately, vacations – which used to hold out the promise of work-free times for families to re-create – now often include parents chained to their laptops or cell phones, or trying to get the island resort's ancient fax machine to send crucial documents. In a recent survey by Andersen Consulting, 63% of vacationing workers had contact with their main office through cell phone, pagers, voicemail, and laptops (O'Brien, 2000). One article on this phenomenon quoted Tom Davenport, director of Andersen's Institute for Strategic Change, as saying that workers "may be more productive, but they are deprived of the stress-free environment vacations are meant to provide . . ." (O'Brien, 2000). Given that the U.S. is the world's leader in shortest vacations provided by companies (average of 9 days after first year of work; 16 days after 25 years of work, Robinson, 2000), this trend towards working on vacation made possible by technology results in ever decreasing time exclusively for family.

Aside from the crunch and fragmentation engendered on family time, another effect of having so much technology in the home is that it creates more opportunity for family conflict. Struggles can ensue over who gets to use the family computer (Belkin, 2001), or who gets last year's model cell phone or computer versus a new one (Wolfe, 2000). For families with more than one computer, conflicts can erupt over who gets to log onto the Internet when and for how long, as most families have one account with several screen names. Internet provider companies have apparently become aware of these struggles, and are now providing capacity for multiple users to sign on simultaneously.

A recent advertisement for this service depicts two children and a father, each with their own laptops, each happily engaged in their own cyber worlds (although sitting in the same room), with mom sitting back for a moment (laptop comfortably positioned on her knees and ready for use) to survey the newfound peace. The implication is clear and pertinent: with mothers typically in the role of managing family conflict and cohesion, the influx of technology into the home may provide her with one more job – Chief Information Officer (Wolfe, 2000). Numerous studies have found women, including those working full-time, continue to shoulder more of the housework and childcare than men (see reviews in Daly, 1996; Daly & Holmes, 1999; Fraenkel & Wilson, 2000). The need to keep family members coordinated around technology use and to keep these machines up to date may become yet another task to add to women's load.

Late night teen Internet use is also contributing to an epidemic of teen sleep deprivation (Martin, 1999). Parents and teens have always struggled around curfew, but it's fair to say these struggles have reached a new pitch given the range and ease of access of reasons to stay up. And with third graders now online, the curfew issue has moved developmentally downward. Thus,

technology can result in increased conflict around family sleep-wake rhythms. One of the cases I present below centered in part around this struggle.

Another temporal effect of technology on families is that it promotes further the hegemony of chronological time over event time (Levine, 1997). Chronological time is structured by clock and calendar; the beginnings and endings of events are then shaped by the conventions of these time-keeping tools. In contrast, event time is structured by the natural desires and needs of the human gathering. In the former, time shapes the event; in the latter, the event shapes time. With the growing popularity of electronic organizers and PDAs (personal digital assistants), it can be expected that families have begun to schedule time together increasingly by hourly and five-minute chunks, provided default by the technology, if for no other reason than the rest of family members' lives are scheduled this way and family time must fit in to the rest of their ongoing schedules. Teenagers are increasingly scheduling their activities and social engagements in the same way (Greenman, 1999). The notion of just getting together in the evening or on the weekend to "hang out," without specific start and stop times, and with the duration of the event determined by what the family creates together as an experience, appears to be increasingly rare. Indeed, technology has become one of the most powerful "zeitgeber" (external sources of our biological and social rhythms, either natural as in cycles of daylight and night, or artificial, such as clocks; Moore-Ede, Sulzman, & Fuller, 1982) organizing our daily lives.

These electronic scheduling tools also contribute to what can be thought of as the "myth of infinite perfectibility" (Fraenkel & Wilson, 2000): the notion that with better time management skills, every desired activity and responsibility can be seamlessly arranged into a coherent schedule. As a result, family members often stuff more and more into less and less time, rarely scheduling in time to decompress and transition (psychologically or physically) from one activity to another. Once again, women in families typically find themselves the primary organizers and keepers of the family schedule, contributing further to their levels of stress, which may overflow in marital or parent-child conflict.

Finally, the emergence of high-speed technologies of all sorts has contributed to a general speeding up in our society (Gleick, 1999). This speeding up contributes to a sense of hecticness and rushed pace that spills over into couple and family life, resulting in increased stress and conflict (Sotile & Sotile, 1998). In addition, the capacity for high-speed transmission of information has resulted in a growing expectation that emotional intimacy as well as problem-solving can also proceed at this quicker pace in couple and family relationships (Fraenkel & Wilson, 2000). However, empathy for the emotional experience of one's spouse, or the grasp that a parent develops for the peer troubles of his

or her teen, must still proceed at the pace of human emotion and understanding, not at the breakneck speed of transmission of digitized information.

## TEMPORALLY-INFORMED CLINICAL WORK WITH COUPLES AND FAMILIES

The title of this section expresses a critical point: Clinical work with couples and families rarely revolves solely around temporal issues, and the theory of time in couples and families outlined above does not constitute a complete theory of family functioning nor an exhaustive guide to assessment of family problems. Concepts about temporal phenomena and temporally-based interventions are simply one more important focus and resource for therapists, not a substitute for existing clinical theory and practice. Temporally-informed clinical work relies upon tried and true systemically-oriented practices, which from an integrative approach include engaging the family *to observe and talk about itself and its patterns*, both of problems and resiliency; exploring the *meaning of the current difficulties* to all members of the immediate and extended family, as well as to persons and institutions from larger systems involved with the family; hosting a conversation about *preferred alternatives* to the problems; coming to enhanced understanding of the *beliefs* that guide family members' preferences, actions, and reactions, and tracing the sources of these beliefs in family and culture of origin; and *coming to consensus* among family members about how they might alter their ways of responding to and viewing one another so that the preferences of all members are honored and promoted (see Fraenkel, 1997, Fraenkel & Pinsof, 2001, Sheinberg & Fraenkel, 2001, for discussion of such integrated approaches to systemically-oriented therapy).

Temporal concepts and interventions are useful in three clinical situations (Fraenkel, 1994):

1. when families present with explicit temporal difficulties, such as differences in pace, schedules, punctuality, and preferences for how to allocate time;
2. when families' desired improvements in communication quality, intimacy and connection, or balancing of power and responsibility are blocked by unrecognized or under-appreciated temporal constraints, such as having no time together or irregular schedules determined by work demands, or by differences in beliefs about time, such as differences in projected life chronologies or in concern about how efficiently to use time;
3. as a means of "reframing" or redescribing conflict attributed by family members to each other's negative intentions or traits, such that conflict is

one of the cars for repairs. She noted sadly, as Jim nodded in assent, "Lost is time spent on us, just talking. We have a lot in our life and to maintain it needs a lot of communicating." Jim noted that although they seemed to have the same goals it often felt like they're on "different teams, battling it out."

The second temporal theme to emerge was that of differences in how they defined and preferred to spend time together and time with the children. Sandra expected that when they finally finished their list of obligations they would spend time talking with each other. For her this felt crucial to keeping their connection and handling their joint stress. However Jim said he needed time to read magazines about his favorite hobby, fly fishing, in order to relax; more interaction, even with Sandra, felt to him too much. A note of frustration entered his voice when he asked why Sandra couldn't just find something to read so they could enjoy each other's silent company. "It's almost like she feels abandoned if I read instead of talking to her," he noted with more irritation than empathy. Sandra shrugged her shoulders and retorted, "You just don't know what it means to be intimate."

Likewise, Sandra's idea of spending time with the kids meant playing and interacting with them constantly; she especially wanted to see Jim do so, as he worked full-time (she worked part-time) and she felt the kids needed more "focused time" with him. Although Jim adored his children and enjoyed playing with them, he felt strongly that they could play with each other much of the time while he puttered around the garage or gardened, keeping an eye on them at all times. He believed this was both a good way to get some additional chores done, and an important model to present to kids "so that they will take an interest in fixing things around the house."

The third set of temporal themes that emerged were differences in time perspective and, relatedly, in beliefs about the proper use of time. Sandra prided herself on her great organizational abilities ("I can do 12 things at once," she boasted with a smile; Jim agreed, with a sad sigh) and she believed adamantly in future planning. She found it "incredibly frustrating" when she and Jim failed to plan for the weekend and ended up with nothing definite to do. "I often feel we're constantly treading water, just riding the waves in the week, in our life," she moaned. In contrast, Jim felt it important to have unplanned time, that they not schedule every minute and just "cool out" when they finally got a chance.

The fourth temporal theme was the partners' pace differences. As can probably be surmised from the description so far, Sandra was much faster-paced than Jim, at both the micro level (she spoke more quickly) and molar level (she generally got things done more quickly and held an expectation of great efficiency).

The fifth temporal theme centered on work schedules and the role of technology in simultaneously facilitating and challenging the balance between

instead viewed as resulting from unrecognized but honorable differences in beliefs, needs, or real constraints imposed upon by the larger context in which the family is embedded.

With any particular couple or family, these three clinical situations are often simultaneously present.

The following two cases – a more extensive description of a couple therapy and a brief vignette about a family therapy – illustrate how the theory outlined above can be used to conceptualize problems and guide interventions.

*Temporally-Informed Couple Therapy: The Case of Sandra and Jim*

The following case captures many of the temporal problems presented by young to middle-aged middle class and professional couples in therapy. It also represents a good example of a couple struggling with overt differences around time problems underlying other conflicts, and the effectiveness of bringing forth the temporal side of conflicts in reducing mutual acrimony. Guiding my work with this couple were relationship process goals identified in the clinical research literature as key predictors of couple satisfaction and stability. These include assisting partners to provide physiological and emotional soothing to each other, encouraging them to accept influence or direction from one another, rebuilding their fondness and admiration of one another, decreasing negative and increasing positive communication styles, and strengthening mutual understanding (Gottman, 1999; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 1994).

Sandra, a 35-year-old corporate lawyer, and Jim, a 36-year-old landscape architect, lived in a Connecticut suburb of New York City with two preschool children. They sought therapy because despite basic affection for each other and a strong commitment to stay married, they often found themselves bickering so bitterly with one another that they questioned this commitment. Both characterized their main problem as “communication,” and sought assistance learning how to talk less conflictually with one another.

As they continued to describe their lives and conflicts, temporal themes began to emerge. The first such theme was that of overstuffed and complex schedules. Sandra noted that they create “daily To Do lists for each other that would make your head spin.” In a style that came to characterize many initial sessions she then breathlessly rattled off a list of chores and responsibilities that include arrangements with contractors to finish work on their house, shuttling children to and from a variety of preschools, lessons, and play dates, arranging substitute child care for when their regular nanny would be visiting her ailing mother in the nanny’s country of origin, as well as shopping, paying bills, and taking

work and family life. Jim worked full-time (approximately 45 hours per week), and although his job permitted him a flexible schedule within his day, he had virtually no capacity to shift his workday's start and end times so as to share daytime child care responsibilities. In contrast, due to her great efficiency, Sandra had negotiated a part-time schedule (unusual at her firm) in which she worked three days per week at the office and had two days at home. However, to "maintain the illusion to clients that (I) work full-time," Sandra reported that she carries a cell phone constantly at home so that she can make and receive business calls "in the sandbox if need be." Although the cell phone, her computer and email, and a home fax machine had all made her part-time job possible, she experienced much stress about the boundary between work and home. She noted that she rarely feels she is where she should be. When she gets a call from the nanny or school at work, she feels she wants to rush home, and when work starts to pile up it gets harder to set limits when at home and really focus on the children. Although she manages all her responsibilities well, her quality of life often suffers and she feels pressured constantly. She recognized that some of this pressure spilled over into conflict with Jim.

Exploration of their respective families of origin traced the source of their preferences and ways of interacting around time. This exploration also helped the partners recognize the close connection between family temporal patterns and how their emotional and relational needs were or were not met. Sandra described her mother as cold, anxious, preoccupied with herself, and emotionally distant, someone who set up "many boundaries and rules about having contact with me." Her father she described as warm but often unavailable due to frequent business travel, or because he was a bit "hyper" when home, and had difficulty sitting still long enough to really listen to her. Nonetheless, she modeled herself primarily after her father, especially in his capacity to be organized, planful, and fast-paced. She described being unaware of any ways in which she might resemble her mother. Indeed, she came to realize through therapy that her strong belief in "total immersion" when with the children (and her upset with Jim when he didn't do likewise) was her attempt to insure that she and Jim would be available to them in a way that her mother never was for her.

Jim's parents divorced when he was 3 years old, and like Sandra, he described little connection with his mother, who when a single parent was usually busy working and when she remarried several years later, became engrossed in her new relationship and the two children borne from it. Jim's father also remarried and although he maintained weekly visits with his sons, he too had a new family that became his primary focus. As a result, Jim and his two brothers

were largely left to fend for themselves. Jim described his mother as "incredibly disorganized" and "haphazard" in how she structured her and the family's time. "I got used to chaos," he observed.

In this family environment Jim learned how to take care of many of his basic needs. At a young age he and his brothers were often left to cook their own meals, do their homework by themselves, bathe themselves. They were encouraged to be quiet and not interrupt the new family developing in front of their eyes. Because of conflict among he and his brothers, he gravitated towards solitary activities such as reading and taking walks in the woods, and got involved in team sports later in high school. Thus, Jim became accustomed to spending great amounts of time alone, and to soothing himself when upset as best he could. In addition, Jim related that his parents provided barely any guidance about his future; as a result, when he graduated from high school he had no plan and spent a few years working as a ski instructor before a friend encouraged him to go to college.

Reviewing these experiences from their respective families of origin went a good way towards helping Sandra and Jim make sense of their temporal conflicts, and towards replacing mutual irritation with mutual empathy. For instance, while Sandra's attempts to emulate her father led her to value highly order, future planning, speed and efficiency, Jim had no such effective, forward-looking role model. Rather, he had learned to tolerate a great deal of disorganization and inefficiency, and often soothed himself in upset moments by slowing down, telling himself, "I'm OK." While both had experienced a fair degree of emotional neglect from their parents, they translated those experiences into different needs as adults. Sandra longed for a responsive, involved partner who wanted to spend time with her and soothe her in a way that neither her mother or father had done. In contrast Jim had largely given up on the possibility of someone taking care of him in that way, and prided himself (at least overtly) on his self-sufficiency. At the conscious level he wanted Sandra's company but not as much face-to-face interaction time as she desired. In later sessions that further explored his childhood experiences, Jim became quite emotional as he recognized the intensity of his unmet needs. This moment in therapy led him to desire more of the kind of intimacy that Sandra wanted, ultimately resolving their struggle over how much time to spend together and how to use it.

Indeed, in reflecting on what first drew each to the other, Sandra and Jim were surprised to realize that some of the very temporal differences that came to cause strife were central to their initial mutual attraction. As in many couples, each partner was in part drawn to the other based on the conscious or unconscious hope that the other would provide the "antidote" to the emotional and relational struggles inherited from their respective families of origin. Thus, Jim

found Sandra's efficiency, orderliness, and future-planning abilities initially appealing and admirable, but over time came to resent when these skills resulted in her ordering him around. In turn, Sandra found Jim's unhurried pace relaxing, except when it interfered with getting things done at her accustomed speed. Likewise, Jim's self-sufficiency signaled to Sandra that he was a "take-charge kind of guy" – she just wished he would take charge quicker. Initially she also admired and wished to emulate his emotional self-containment and ability "to make time for himself even when things need doing," but felt angry when it translated into spending little time with her and not completing household chores. In turn, Jim found Sandra's expressiveness and desire for intimacy appealing but also overwhelming, and that led him to insist on regular time to pursue his hobbies alone. It was only when he became conscious of his suppressed longings for closeness that he softened his insistence on time apart.

Recognizing the positive, appealing aspects of each other's troubling temporal patterns further renewed the partner's enjoyment and admiration of one another, and strengthened their faith that they had a solid "platform" of shared respect upon which to build the relationship further. Further useful in interrupting their mutual blaming was my observation that, like most couples, their temporal differences had entered into a circular pattern in which the more Sandra pushed for speed, the more Jim pulled back and tried to slow things down, which led Sandra to push him harder to speed up, and Jim to slow down further, in a spiraling vicious cycle. As a result, their initial differences became magnified and polarized such that Sandra ended up taking all the responsibility for doing things quickly while Jim held all the responsibility in the relationship for slowing and calming down. This explanatory frame helped them recognize each other as "teammates" who could each contribute something important to managing their daily lives, while freeing Sandra up to gain access to her own latent capacity to invoke slowness in the relationship and Jim's ability to step up the pace.

Over the ensuing weeks the partners began experimenting with trading the roles of increasing and decreasing the tempo of the family's activities. It became apparent that although both were capable of a range of paces, it might be more practical and realistic just to recognize that Sandra would typically represent the need for speed and Jim would represent the need for slowness. However, with their new insights, now they would work with rather than against each other. For instance, Sandra was so fast to realize when something needed to be bought or fixed that Jim just couldn't get a jump on her. Instead, it became acceptable to both that she would most likely be the first to identify a certain need or problem, and then they would share responsibility for making a plan to resolve it. Likewise, with all her focus on home and family management, Sandra often needed Jim to guide her into periods of "cooling out."

The couple also worked out a more equitable parenting schedule that allowed Sandra time apart from the kids to pursue hobbies that helped her relax. However, before she was willing to do so, the couple needed to reconcile their different beliefs about the degree of involvement needed during parent-child interaction time. As with their pace differences, I noted that each of their beliefs held merit – that kids profited both from playing with their parents as well as from playing alone or with one another – and encouraged them each to create a mix of both styles, rather than leaving one parent to be the “interactive one” and the other to be the “autonomous one.” As Sandra experimented with less and Jim with more proximal parenting, they each relaxed about the other’s styles (particularly Sandra about Jim’s style) and Sandra felt free to leave Jim alone with the kids and get some time for herself, which she spent taking an aerobics class.

A few other specific temporally-oriented interventions assisted this couple to resolve their difficulties. Explaining and normalizing much of their daily stress as common to couples at their stage of life (with two careers, a one hour commute to and from work, and two young children) helped them see the larger temporal context of their conflict and stop blaming one another. In addition, I noted the special stresses experienced by Sandra, shared by many working women, as she attempted to juggle parenting with a demanding career. Jim also expressed empathy for her situation and offered to take over certain daily tasks, such as dressing the kids and getting their lunches ready, relieving some of Sandra’s morning time pressure. They also worked out a better system for communicating about changes in the daily To Do list so that both could plan their days better. In addition, as Sandra came to rely more on Jim as a co-parent and began allowing herself to pursue her own hobbies, she felt less obligated to respond immediately to all work-related phone calls when at home. A major step for her came when she left her cell phone at home during the hour and a half she spent at the playground.

In order to keep the To Do list from dominating all their contacts with one another, and to begin to build more fun and sensuality into their relationship, they used a technique I call the “Sixty Second Pleasure Point” (Fraenkel, 1998b). In it, the partners first make a list of all the fun, pleasurable, and/or sensual activities that they can imagine doing in which the activities last only sixty seconds or less. The therapist encourages the couple to generate some activities they can only do when physically together (kiss, hug, a backrub, share a quick glass of wine, light a candle), and others they can do when physically apart (use email, phone, or fax to send a joke, a love note, an interesting piece of information or gossip, leave notes in each other’s wallets to be read later). The couple is then asked to distribute six of these minute-or-less pleasure points across the day – two in the morning, one or two during the day when apart,

and two or three when reunited in the evening. Drawing on the analogy of "connecting the dots" in a coloring book, the therapist then suggests that even though objectively the partners are spending six minutes or less daily on these pleasurable moments, their minds will automatically "connect the dots" of their experience, resulting in a subjective sense of closeness that far exceeds the actual amount of time invested.

As typically occurs with couples that do this exercise, Sandra and Jim found it provided a "low cost, high yield" means of increasing their intimacy. This motivated them to create more extended periods of pleasure by reinstating a weekly "date night." I emphasized that, in my experience with other couples, the regularity of this special couple time seemed more important than its length or what couples did during it. By creating a regular rhythm of couple time over weeks, months, and years, irrespective of how happy they are with each other in any particular week or whatever else may be going on, couples come to rely on this time as a resource that rejuvenates them. This "sacred time" serves to reaffirm their relationship and helps them stand back from the inevitable ups and downs of couple and family life.

Sandra and Jim also tried another time-based technique, the "Decompression Chamber" (Fraenkel, 1998a) to help them with their sense of being "out of synch" with each other's needs when they returned home after the workday. In this exercise, each partner first lists what he or she needs in order to "decompress" or "depressurize" after a long day. They can list activities done alone, as well as with each other and with the children. Typical items include taking a shower, changing clothes, returning calls to the home answering machine, running on a treadmill, reading the newspaper or watching an hour of TV, talking to one's partner about the day's events, playing with kids. Often, partners conflict about what they want, in what particular sequence, and how to balance relaxing with doing household chores and child care. By examining their separate lists and then creating a joint "decompression ritual" that weaves together their respective desires and responsibilities, couples can create a mutually-satisfying sequence that brings them into synchrony through this transition from a day apart to the remainder of the evening.

In discussing his wishes regarding the day's end, Jim surprised Sandra (and even himself to a degree) when he spoke of wanting more family dinners during the week. As it stood, the couple typically returned home after the nanny had given the children dinner. In thinking more carefully about his preferences, Jim now realized that he deeply desired the kind of family dinners that as a child he had only experienced when he visited friends. The couple reviewed their schedule and figured out how to add one full family dinner night and two other nights when the kids had dessert while the parents ate dinner.

Probably the most challenging temporal problem for this couple was their sense of having too much to do and manage each day, a sense that their lives were overstuffed with activities. Many of these activities centered around the children – getting them to and from preschool, karate, swimming, and music lessons, religious classes, and play dates. Given that both Sandra and Jim had felt ignored by their parents, both felt a deep commitment to give their children every possible opportunity for enjoyment and enrichment. Yet this commitment was running them (and the children) ragged. Parts of several therapy sessions focused on their realization that they needed to cut back these activities in order to create a less frantic schedule, but both felt reluctant to act on these insights. It wasn't until they went on their first family vacation in two years and experienced the pleasures of unplanned time that they became truly committed to dropping some of the kids' lessons. Shortly upon their return home a natural event reinforced their new commitment to creating more space in their schedule. A severe winter blizzard left them housebound for three days, during which time they just enjoyed each other's company. Sandra reflected that as a child, "snow days" always meant no school and no need to do anything productive. Jim concurred. I suggested they use the notion of "snow days" as a metaphor to create a day off from activities whenever the family felt stressed and overextended.

As the couple learned to utilize rather than struggle with their temporal differences and created more blocks of uninterrupted time together, both partners found they needed practice in taking care of each other emotionally, having had little modeling of this behavior in childhood. In one particularly powerful session, Jim finally opened up and spoke with tears about his longing for Sandra to understand how lonely he felt growing up, and Sandra responded impatiently and stiffly. Likewise in another session, Jim had difficulty listening empathically and uncritically to Sandra's worries about a recent medical procedure. In the crucible that is couple therapy, the partners worked at responding openly and supportively to one another. As they gained more skill in "being there" for each other, emotionally they created and "rhythmicized" more time in which to be there *with* each other.

#### *Temporally-Informed Family Therapy: The Case of Josh and his Parents*

The next (brief) clinical vignette illustrates the impact of technology in shaping a teenager's daily sleep/wake patterns and the struggles that ensued between him and his parents. Josh was a bright but socially awkward 15-year-old with severe acne, about which he was extremely self-conscious. A self-described "computer geek," he spent essentially no time outside of school with his

classmates or age mates in his neighborhood, although he reported (and a teacher concurred) that he was friendly with a number of peers. Rather, he had developed a powerful persona as the manager of a website for a computer magazine. In this role many people looked up to him and depended on him – none of whom he had ever actually met nor was likely to meet. The lure of this aspect of his identity was so powerful that he regularly stayed up all hours managing the site, to the neglect of his homework and sleep. As a result, he was frequently late for school and not prepared for class, and his grades were suffering. His parents were frantic, unable to regulate his hours and activities without removing his computer or Internet access altogether, which in turn would interfere with his getting schoolwork completed. Josh and his parents frequently got into shouting matches as they insisted he get his work done and go to bed early, and he refused. Josh often comforted himself after these conflicts by going online.

I started my work with this family by creating a space for conversation in which Josh, for the first time, told his parents what his Internet identity meant to him, and in which they empathized with his shyness while also expressing more calmly their concerns about his sleep, schoolwork, and social life. Josh and I then met several times to work out a daily routine in which he balanced his Internet activities with his school responsibilities, which he now recognized as critical to his goal of becoming a computer scientist. Eventually, he warmed to the idea of inviting some of his schoolmates over and letting them in on his Internet life. Through this activity Josh's Internet identity served as the "real" him that formed a base of self-esteem and confidence, from which he was able to venture out and develop the less secure aspect of his social life in flesh-and-blood relationships.

### **CLOSING COMMENTS: THE BROADER PLACE OF TIME IN FAMILY-BASED INTERVENTION**

As I hope the above case vignettes demonstrate, time belongs in a central place in couple and family therapy theory, assessment, and intervention. Much research is needed to examine the relationship between families' temporal patterns and problems and other central aspects of family life, such as how they handle emotion, communicate, shape individual and collective identity, and cope with challenges and transitions. In addition, the effectiveness of temporally-based interventions such as the Sixty Second Pleasure Point and the Decompression Chamber need to be tested empirically.

However, temporal concepts and techniques need not be limited to use in treatment of already-distressed families. Over the past thirty years a burgeoning empirical literature on the predictors of marital stability and satisfaction (and of family functioning) (c.f., Emery, 1982; Gottman, 1994, 1999) has provided the scientific basis for a movement towards development and implementation of programs designed to prevent couple and family distress and dysfunction (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Fraenkel & Markman, 2001; Fraenkel, Markman, & Stanley, 1997; Markman et al., 1994). These programs are delivered in the form of courses or workshops for couples and families that are nondistressed (primary prevention) or in the beginning stages of distress (secondary prevention). The programs provide research-based information and skills that can assist couples and families to strengthen their relational assets and detect and correct patterns associated with conflict. Given the omnipresent potential for problematic time-related patterns and stresses in families' lives, the next generation of prevention programs should include greater emphasis on teaching families temporal concepts and techniques that can aid them in identifying and coping with these temporal challenges. In short, it is time for family interventionists to recognize the value of focusing, at least part of the time, on time.

## NOTES

1. To decrease wordiness I will hereafter refer to both couples and families with the more inclusive term, "families." Doing so also honors as families those adult couples that either are unable or choose not to have children. I will use the term "couple" when making specific points about the adult couple within a family.
2. Data are presented for U.S. families only. Similar effects of technology on families are expected in other post-Industrial countries.
3. Some authors (Lagerfeld, 1998) have argued that the pervasive sense of decreased time and increased hecticness among families is due more to the fragmentation of time than to increased hours of work.

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