Unconventional Wisdom: News You Can Use, Volume 6

A Survey of Recent Family Research and Clinical Findings Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families

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April 20, 2014

COUNCIL ON CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI
SCHOOL of EDUCATION
& HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
MIAMI

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April, 2014

Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families' 17th Anniversary Conference, "Families as They Really Are: How Digital Technologies are Changing the Way Families Live and Love" April 25 – 26, 2014 at the University of Miami.

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"Unconventional Wisdom" is a collection of new or under-reported family research and clinical findings issued each year by the Council on Contemporary Families just prior to its annual conference. In preparation for the CCF's 17th Annual Conference, the Council asked conference participants and CCF researchers and practitioners to submit short summaries of new work relevant to the spread of new technology and social media. Our rapidly evolving technology influences family research methods, clinical practice, and the everyday experiences of families themselves, making the intersections of new technologies and families a timely focus. Here, and at the conference, we present new findings about the many ways that contemporary technology is shaping the family in forms that are sometimes worrisome, often reassuring, and frequently unexpected. We include the contact information for the researchers and practitioners so that individuals seeking more information can request the full reports on which these brief summaries are based.

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Let the Gaming Continue: The Value of Computer Games

People think that to benefit from the use of computers, children need to be studying or working on the computer. In fact, time spent playing games on the computer is *more* strongly associated with achievement in reading and applied problem solving than is time spent doing homework or studying.

Children learn from playing games and experimenting with their environments. They are more likely to learn if it is fun. In this context the finding makes sense. So let children play on their computers.

It's good news that children actually learn from playing on computers. But the bad news is that despite large increases in the use of computers, video games, smart phones, and other devices over the past 2 decades, television retains its place as the most popular medium for children. Increased time on electronic devices, with television viewing remaining constant, has produced a sharp decline in non-screen play and outdoor activities over the past decade.

In 2008, girls 10-18 spent an average of 12 hours and 10 minutes per week watching television and boys spent 14 hours and 8 minutes per week. Video game play was next, averaging 5 hours per week for boys and about 1 hour for girls. Computer game play averaged almost 2 hours for boys and less than an hour for girls. Uses of other devices averaged about an hour per week.

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Does Text Messaging Impair the Ability to Read and Write Proper English? Or Improve it?

Looking at the abbreviated language children use when text messaging, many parents fear that their children will never be able to write a proper sentence or ace their high school exams. Our research found just the opposite. Using reading test scores from a national sample of children ages 10-18, we discovered that more time spent texting was associated with better rather than worse scores on a reading comprehension test. It was children who spent more time talking on the phone who had lower vocabulary scores.

Although perhaps not intuitively sensible at first read, this makes sense linguistically. Reading comprehension tests omit words from passages and ask students to infer the missing words and, therefore, to derive meaning from context. This is exactly the same skill that texters need to comprehend very brief messages written in shortened words and phrases. In spite of parents' fears, children who text can spell and use correct

English grammar in the proper context. They can and do distinguish when "textese" is appropriate and when it is not.

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The Gender Revolution Has Added More to the Economy than the Tech Revolution

From the 1970s until today, we have experienced a technological and digital revolution that has changed the way we live and work, with profound implications for the economy and social policy. But the gender revolution in the same period has been equally if not more significant in its economic repercussions.

In a recent study, economists Eileen Appelbaum, Heather Boushey and I used the Current Population Survey to document the steep rise in paid work by women and mothers since the late 1970s. Since 1979, the typical woman has increased her number of hours of paid work per year by 739 (to 1,664 in 2012). Over the same period, the annual hours of paid work by the typical mother increased by 960 (to 1,560 in 2012). By 2012, the majority of women (67.8%) -- and an even higher percentage of mothers (72.0%) -- between the ages of 16 and 64 were working, most working full time throughout the year.

These extra hours of paid work have made all the difference to families—and to the economy more generally. Middle-class households would have substantially lower earnings today if women's employment patterns had remained unchanged. According to our calculations, gross domestic product (GDP) would have been roughly 11 percent lower in 2012 if women had not increased their working hours as they did. In today's dollars, this translates to more than $1.7 trillion less in output—roughly equivalent to combined U.S. spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid in 2012.

To put this revolution of women's work in context, consider that the 11 percent increase in women's contribution to the GDP is almost twice the 6 percent contribution to GDP of the information, communications and technology-producing industries combined in 2012.

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A Majority of Couples Say Technology Has Minimal Impact on Their Relationship, And Most Say That the Impact Is Positive

Despite widespread fears that social media isolates people or pushes them apart, a majority of couples in marriages or committed partnerships do not think the internet has a big impact on their relationship, and those who do feel an impact mostly say it is positive. Digging deeper, we see that couples report both positive and negative experiences with technology: the technology allows for intimacy-building even as it also supports distraction. While 21 percent say they have felt closer to their partner because of

online or text messaged conversations, another 8 percent have had an argument with their spouse or partner about the amount of time one of them was spending online.

Young adults ages 18 to 29, who are already the most frequent users of these technologies, are also the most likely to report that the internet has an impact on their relationship, with 45 percent of partnered young adults saying it has an impact. Young people are also more likely to say that they experience both the positives and the negatives of technology's involvement in their committed partnerships, with 41 percent of online couples aged 18-29 saying that they have felt closer to their partner because of an online or text-based conversation, and 18 percent report arguments about the amount of time one of them was spending online.

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What Do Avatars Reveal About Us?

Does the Mask Govern the Mind?

Avatars – digital and graphical representations of people in online environments – constitute a popular means for self-representation in computer-mediated environments. Although features may vary, most avatars allow users to engage in self-representation that exhibits physical characteristics of certain social categories. Many avatar-based environments provide users with customization options for their avatars, enabling them to change their gender or race. In popular online games (e.g., World of Warcraft) or virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life), gender-bending is not an uncommon practice. Avatars in such environments function as "identity masks," allowing users to represent themselves with a virtual gender identity that may or may not correspond with their "actual" gender identity.

Previous research has shown that game players' behaviors in multiplayer online gaming environments tend to conform to stereotypic expectations associated with the virtual gender identity of their avatars, regardless of players' actual gender. For example, individuals using male avatar are more likely to engage in killing, while players using female avatars are more likely to engage in healing activities. But this research left open the possibility that individuals chose the gender of their avatar because they wanted to engage in such behaviors.

To understand whether arbitrary gender representation influences stereotyped cognitive performance, we conducted an experiment in which college student participants, arbitrarily represented by either a male or female avatar, performed an arithmetic task either competitively or cooperatively with two other avatars whose gender was opposite to that of the student's own avatar. The results showed that participants who were

represented by a male avatar and competed against female avatars performed better than the rest, whatever their actual sex.

Our findings demonstrate that the "identity masks" associated with stereotypes can influence cognitive performance of those who wear the "masks." As computer-mediated interactions are increasingly becoming embodied with avatars, further investigations on how social stereotypes translate into avatar-based online environments will provide valuable insight into understanding the challenges and opportunities arising in the virtual realm.

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Are Avatars Also Racially Biased?

Many studies have shown that people are less likely to help minorities than non-minorities. We found that these same prejudices carry over into the virtual world. Our study was conducted in There.com, a relatively unstructured online virtual world where users can hang out with friends and explore a large and unusual landscape. We employed the door-in-the-face technique (DITF) where an unreasonably large request, to which the responder is expected to say no, is followed by a more moderate request. In our study, the avatar's moderate request: "Would you teleport to Duda Beach with me and let me take a screenshot of you?" was preceded by a request of the avatar to have screenshots taken in 50 different locations (requiring about two hours of teleporting and traveling). As in the real world, avatars were more likely to comply with the moderate request when it was preceded by the large request than when it was presented alone. However, we also found that the effect of the DITF technique was significantly reduced when the requesting avatar was dark-toned. The white avatars in the experiment received a boost in compliance from 55 to 83 percent but the Black avatar received a much smaller boost, from 52 to just 60 percent. The study suggests that users in online environments routinely extend their social selves and prejudices to inhabit their online avatars.

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Risks for Youth and Families

One in Four Dating Teens is Abused or Harassed Online or Through Cellphones by their Dating Partners

Social networking sites, texts, and e-mails have given abusers tools to control, degrade, and frighten their partners, even when apart and at all times of day and night. Such digital harassment warns of a deeper pattern of abuse offline. Victims of digital abuse are 2 times as likely to be physically abused, 2.5 times as likely to be psychologically abused, and 5 times as likely to be sexually coerced. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are more vulnerable to digital abuse and harassment compared to heterosexual youth, and female and transgender youth are more vulnerable to this type of abuse than male youth.

Digitizing Abuse is an Urban Institute project (by Drs. Janine Zweig and Meredith Dank) studying the role of technology in teen dating abuse and harassment and in teen bullying. Knowing more about such abuse can inform strategies to prevent and address this problem. For more information see: http://www.urban.org/digitizingabuse/.

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Technology and Gaming: Wrong Lessons for Boys

In recent years, there has been a surge in media content that glorifies risk-taking behavior. The message conveyed is that it is hip and cool to engage in risky driving, extreme sports, and binge drinking. These risky behaviors are also consistently and explicitly depicted as being "manly." Sophisticated research has shown that exposure to such media depictions increases risk-taking. This link is strongest for interactive media – like video games – which are played primarily by boys. Boys spend 4 times as much time playing video games as girls, which increases the likelihood that these boys will engage in risk-taking behavior.

Besides risk taking, studies consistently show that male characters in computer games and other online media are far more likely than female ones to be portrayed demonstrating a variety of poor health behaviors such as using tobacco, drinking alcohol, using drugs, eating poorly, and fighting or engaging in other violent behavior. Making matters worse, they are rarely shown suffering the consequences of these behaviors, suggesting that boys and men are immune to risk. Aggression and violence are depicted as both exciting and rewarding for men and boys-– an effective means for them to get what they want. Female characters, by contrast, are more likely to get injured or die as a result of their unhealthy or risky behavior.

Eighty-eight boys under age 20 die each day in the United States – one and a half times the number of girls who do. Tragically, nearly all of these boys die violent, preventable deaths. Limiting our young males' exposure to television, movies and video games can be a highly effective way to improve their safety and well- being.

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How Young is Too Young for Parents to Start Teaching Internet Safety?

Internet use, nearly ubiquitous among US youth, carries the risk of cyberbullying, privacy violations, and unwanted solicitation. Internet safety education may prevent these negative consequences. However, it is unclear at what age this education should begin and who should be responsible for teaching this topic.

Our findings suggest that it is important to begin teaching online safety at a younger age than most people realize. The commonly suggested age range of 6 to 8 years would begin internet safety education in early grade school, around 1st or 2nd grade. However, given our current society's focus on technology, it is likely that children are being introduced to computers at ever-younger ages. Data from 2010 suggests that almost 20 percent of 8 to 10 year olds spend time on social networking sites daily. It seems likely that this percentage has grown in the past three years. Timing safety education with the onset of internet use may allow for the concomitant development of computer skills and safety skills.

There is a general agreement among key stakeholders, parents and teachers alike, that parents should take primary responsibility for internet safety education. But while all parents in our survey reported that they regularly or sometimes teach internet safety, only 75 percent of adolescents reported hearing from parents on this topic.

As with many health teachings such as nutrition or sexual behavior, providing education to children before dangers can arise is a key strategy to help youth integrate these lessons into their lives and prevent negative consequences.

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Unfriended: The Role of Social Media in Perpetuating Family Conflict & Estrangements

The advent of social media has meant evermore creative ways for family members to connect quickly via images, video, audio, and text. Most families feel happy to be able to maintain contact and connection in these ways. However, not all families feel this way. For parents who are excluded from the lives of their adult children and grandchildren, images of those family members can be a source of ongoing torment. Parents who learn from Facebook or other forms of social media that their child is newly married, pregnant, has a new child, promotion, or college graduation are exposed to their child's lives in ways that create strong feelings of grief or anger. In addition, an estranged child can change his or her online status to replace a mother or father with a stepparent, mother-in-law, or father-in-law. And, a parent can be blocked from having *any* access to the adult child's Facebook page, which may have been their one window into the lives of their child or grandchildren.

In addition, social media has an enormous ability to hurt, vilify or humiliate family members from any part of the world. Some estranged adult children choose to shame their parent through blog posts, or mass emails to other family members. In my practice, which partially specializes in helping parents reconcile with their adult children, I have

found that social media, once an ally pre-estrangement, is now the parent's tormentor. Parents need a lot of help in learning how to manage not only the pain of estrangement, but all of the various ways that their estrangement may be displayed for the world to see.

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The Case Against Parent's Monitoring Children's Online Behavior

Many have argued that parents ought to protect their children online by monitoring or tracking their children's on-line activities. While parents may have a legal right to monitor their minor child's Internet use, it does not follow that they have a moral right to violate children's privacy.

Respecting children's privacy fosters their children's future capacities for autonomy. The sense of being the rightful author of one's beliefs and actions is central to being a person who is a "self-determining" being. Only by giving children privacy will they come to see their thoughts as something that belongs to them—to which they have an exclusive right. In addition, such privacy is necessary in order to protect children's current capacities for relationships and to foster their future capacities for relationships. Lack of respect for children's privacy undermines the trust that is essential for children's development and safety.

Prior to the internet, parents did not have the technological means to listen in on every conversation the child had or see every magazine or book their child looked at. Indeed, we would think it very inappropriate for a parent to insist that they listen to every conversation a child has with her friends. Engaging in monitoring of online information exchanges is tantamount to eavesdropping on their conversations and, thus, conflicts with preexisting norms of information flows in the context of the parent-child relationship.

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Gender, Work, and Relationships

South Asian-American Women: "Marrying" the Traditional with the Modern

Asians are the fastest growing population among all major "ethnic" groups in the country, and South Asians make up one of the largest Asian American groups in the country. The South Asian community in the United States includes individuals who trace their ancestry to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Over 3.4 million South Asians live in the United States (Census 2010), an 81% increase over the past decade (Census 2000 & 2010).

Contrary to the clash of culture thesis, "second-generation" South Asian-American women are not abandoning older cultural traditions. For example, while approximately one-in-four white American women now meet their future spouse by advertising or answering an ad online, second-generation South Asian-American women are far more likely to have parents and kin arrange a meeting with a prospective mate.

But my respondents reject the Orientalist stereotype that such marriages are forced upon passive females. As one woman I interviewed put it: "It's not like within a couple of days you decide if you want to marry him and then there is an engagement… If it were two Americans meeting through their parents, it wouldn't be arranged. It would be…a blind date!"

Second-generation South Asian-American women prefer to meet potential mates through family not because they blindly accept tradition, but because they want to integrate their contemporary lives with their cultural and familial heritage. Most therefore express a preference for another American-born and raised South Asian rather than an immigrant -- someone who is familiar with the language, food, mannerisms and rituals of their parents but also knowledgeable about contemporary American culture. They want someone who can participate in a *puja* and relate to jokes and experiences that most white people would find foreign, but who also gets American cultural references. As another of my informants put it: "I need my husband to know who Gilligan is. That's kind of how I foresee the difference of someone who's been brought up and grown up here and has the same background and the same thought processes as I do. When they see that red shirt, they should go, 'Oh, my gosh, that's Gilligan!'"

Unfortunately, cultural prejudices lead many non-Asian Americans to misunderstand the nuances of these choices, leading my informants to feel they cannot confide in them. As another women I interviewed explained: "None of my friends know the story of how I got married [...] Rather than an explanation, I gave people a totally alternative story, because I didn't think that they could understand the explanation."

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Love-Hate Relationship with Technology in Transnational Lives of Indian Immigrant Women

The U.S. offers non-immigrant H-1B visas to its professional migrant workers and H-4 or dependent visas to their children and spouses. The "dependent visa" puts many restrictions on the spouses of skilled workers. It does not allow dependent visa holders to work for pay until the lead migrant has gained permanent residency in the U.S., a process that can take anywhere between five and fifteen years. This restriction forces some highly educated women who would otherwise be pursuing careers to become stay-at-home housewives. In these circumstances, social media become both a welcome source of social contacts and an unwelcome reminder of their circumscribed lives.

My new research shows that highly qualified Indian women who are in the U.S. on dependent visas have a love-hate relationship with social media and communication technologies like Facebook and video-chatting platforms (Skype, Gchat e.g.). On one hand they use these technologies to maintain close transnational ties with their immediate families (mothers, female siblings) and close friends on a regular basis. These quick and free mediums of communications become therapeutic in helping the women cope with their frustrations, boredom and loneliness that come with being on dependent visas. They chat and communicate with their families and close friends in India for hours on end after their husbands leave for work. On the other hand they also are wary that these technologies reveal their dependency on distant relatives, in-laws, friends and past co-workers. One of the women in my study told me, "I wouldn't want my ex-boss to know that the ex managing head of her team is now a stupid housewife in the U.S., but because I'm always online its hard to keep my ex-colleagues out of my life."

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Will Technology Allow Women to Have it All?

Despite the raging debates about whether women can "have it all" and need to "lean in," my research with workers in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley shows that the answers can't, and shouldn't, be that simple. We're entering a new economic era, where the boundaries between work and home are blurring, careers are no longer linear, and men as well as women want and need the flexibility to blend earning and caretaking. In practice, however, contrary to early hopes that telecommuting and other technological changes would allow people to achieve this new gender ideal, many of these changes have made work-life balance even more elusive.

Instead, the women and men I interviewed are forced into a variety of less appealing ways to cope with the demands of work and family. About a third are "neo-traditionalists," where fathers sacrifice family time to manage time-intensive jobs, while another 15 percent are "reversed traditionalists," where women are providing the bulk of financial support even though they face barriers at work. An additional third are "going it alone" because financial insecurities make relationships difficult to sustain. The remaining 15 percent are "egalitarian, but exhausted" as they struggle to combine two demanding jobs with equal sharing at home.

All these options entail significant drawbacks for men as well as women. They frustrate hopes of having a balanced life with predictable work and secure relationships. Since the erosion of job and relationship security is a new normal with which everyone must contend, we need to jettison the notion that "having it all" is an unrealistic goal that only women want and to lower the obstacles to combining work and caretaking for everyone.

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Love Letters Lost? Gender and the Preservation of Digital & Paper Communication from Romantic Relationships

It's a staple scene in romantic novels and films -- the box of treasured love letters, tied together with a ribbon, in a woman's drawer. But what happens to cherished romantic exchanges when they arrive in digital form, and are there differences in the way men and women preserve mementos of romantic relationships? Quantitative and qualitative results of a 618 person survey reveal that men and women are both more likely to save and intentionally revisit handwritten love letters, cards, and notes than digitally saved emails, texting conversations, captured snapchats, or Facebook messages, and do so for similar reasons. But, perhaps surprisingly, men are not only more likely than women to save a cherished communication on e-mail or a computer, but also are more likely to display the physical versions of their romantic communications on surfaces (whereas women are more likely to store these inside of drawers and boxes). Men also report revisiting these saved communications more frequently than do women.

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What Google Searches Reveal About the Family Calendar

The Google correlate tool (available here: https://www.google.com/trends/correlate) allows analysts to examine temporal patterns in how people use Google. This includes the timing of searches over the year, as well as what searches occur during the same periods. For example, the tool will tell you that, since 2004, the frequency of searches for "food stamps" and "Can I get unemployment?" have risen and fallen together with a correlation of .94 on a scale of 0 to 1 (where 1 is perfect correlation).

What about family-related events and plans? Google Correlate shows surprisingly regular periodicity in some common family-related behavior. Going back to 2004, the following trends are clearly apparent:

Engagements: Each year, searches for "engagement rings" have peaked in the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It seems that announcing engagements and launching proposals around Christmas and New Year's remains a common practice.

Wedding plans: Not surprisingly, searches for "wedding invitations" show a strong peak in January. Some people are getting to work right after their announced engagement. However, a smaller peak occurs each June, perhaps among late-summer planners, older couples or those who are planning smaller summer weddings.

Baby showers: Searches for "baby shower gift ideas" (and related searches) are fairly constant throughout the year, except for a big drop in December each year. If baby showers are not something everyone feels compelled to do, maybe people who have births in December are more likely to forego a shower because of busy family calendars.

Daycare and women's work: Each August and January there are upward spikes in searches for "daycare" and related terms (such as "home daycare," "kindercare," and "early learning center"). Interestingly, in those same weeks there are jumps in searches that might reflect parents (probably mothers) looking to start paid work or vocational school, including "county jobs," "beauty school," "online classes," "free resume builder," "executive assistant," and "paraprofessional."

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eHarmony, Coffee mating, and GPS Dating: Has personal advertising replaced our old ways of meeting and mating?

Modern personal advertising has become both a multibillion dollar industry and a normative way to meet and mate. One in every 10 Americans has used an online dating site or mobile dating app to meet prospective dates or mates. Whether this matchmaking is set up through an online advertisement, video clip, or a rotating foray in a bar or community center, these activities often lead to 'transitory moments,' where people may meet for a single date, cup of coffee, or just a five-minute speed dating session.

The latest of these innovations is GPS dating, where cell phone Apps locate potential partners in nearby locations. Location-based dating gives new meaning to the term "transitory moments" as users download Apps, create a profile, upload a photo (optional), and answer questions about themselves (also optional). Phone alerts provide introductions and the rest is up to users.

Personal advertising has not replaced traditional ways of meeting people, such as finding mates through friends and coworkers, joining health clubs, patronizing bars, and taking up hobbies. But in my interviews, women reported several unique benefits to personal advertising. On the one hand, personal advertising is a social activity, one in which friends are relied upon to assist in presenting the self and managing risk. Nearly a third of female online daters ask friends for assistance in creating or refining their profile. Yet personal advertising frees women from the constraints associated with impressing a friend of a friend -- or answering to that friend in case they fail to impress or be impressed. Personal advertising thus offers an expanded population of candidates for intimacy while retaining the woman's power to pick and choose -- or to reject. This is appropriate for a market driven consumer oriented and highly individualized society— one where technology allows us to specify exactly what is wanted and, at least in the case of GPS dating, to find love, literally around the corner.

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Online Dating

The Internet and Poly Intimacies

The Internet has greatly increased the possibility for members of marginalized and/or disadvantaged groups to find partners for intimate and sexual encounters, as well as to create and sustain community. Non-monogamous and poly communities have embraced the Internet as a forum for finding romantic partners and for communicating with like-minded individuals.

Poly is a colloquial term for polyamory or the practice of maintaining concurrent, multiple romantic and/or sexual relationships, with the full knowledge and consent of all the people involved. Polyamory can be but is not necessarily a form of polygamy, which is defined as maintaining multiple spouses at the same time. The most traditional and common form of polygamy—polygyny—involves having multiple wedded wives. While these various forms of intimacy remain either unrecognized or illegal in North America, the online presence of these communities reflects growing interest and opportunities for choosing non-monogamy.

Some online dating sites, such as PolyMatchmaker and Polyamorous Passions, match individuals seeking ethical non-monogamy and open relationships. Other online dating sites target more traditional polygynous arrangements, such as SisterWives.Net, 2Wives.com, and Soulful Harmony. OkCupid, one of the fastest-growing free online dating sites, offers an option for those interested in polygamy as an umbrella term for both polyamorous and polygynous matches. Plenty of Fish, another free online dating website, does the same.

Searching Facebook I have found 137 online English-speaking community sites dedicated to connecting members with others who are interested in polyamorous communities, lifestyles, and relationships and an additional 73 online community sites on Facebook that focus on polygynous communities, lifestyles, and relationships.

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Race and Online Dating

Approval of interracial marriage has risen from less than 5 percent 50 years ago to more than 75 percent today. Yet when it comes to people's actual behaviors, rather than self-reports which so easily fall prey to desirability effects, online dating sites show strong racial patterns, with clear winners and losers. White men and Asian women receive the most attention, while black men and women receive the least. Black women have the lowest response rates. White men respond to Black women 8.5% of the time, but respond to Asian women 17.6% percent of the time. Black women receive more attention from Black men than they receive from any other group (16.4% response rate), but remain ten

percentage points behind Asian women, who have a 26% response rate from Black men. Although Black men receive the most attention from Black women (9.3%), they, like their female counterparts, have the lowest response rates from all other racial groups.

Other research confirms that across the board, those who use online dating sites prefer within-race coupling, rather than across-race coupling. This is not set in stone, however, as those who receive interest across races are likely to respond and initiate cross-race contact in the near future.

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Remarriages and Stepfamilies

How Stepfamilies Can Utilize Digital Technology

There are literally hundreds of thousands of websites on various topics related to stepfamilies (e.g., stepparenting, remarriage, stepchildren, stepsiblings). A new stepparent or parent who is about to remarry is likely to be very confused if they search the web seeking solid, evidence-based information about the new family form he or she is about to enter.

Most of the websites seem to be written by therapists or stepfamily members. The tone is often prescriptive, with a lot of advice about what to do or not to do, and there are many websites with chat rooms, abundant opportunities to be coached by someone who claims to be an expert on stepfamilies, and a lot of unsubstantiated "facts" (often the sources of these facts are vaguely identified or unstated).

The two "best" sites are the National Stepfamily Resource Center (www.stepfamilies.info), housed at Auburn University, and www.SuccessfulStepfamilies.com, a site run by Ron Deal, a family therapist who is also on the National Stepfamily Resource Center Board of Directors. This latter site is particularly aimed at Christians, and would be recommended for individuals reluctant to seek secular advice about their families. We include this because Mr. Deal stays in touch with researchers and practitioners who specialize in "blended families," and we think his material is reliable and evidence-based.

For most people, the NSRC site is the go-to place for solid wisdom from therapists, where they can research evidence presented in language that lay audiences can understand, and find other resources with an NSRC "stamp of approval" geared toward stepfamily members (e.g., books, podcasts, educational programs, workshops, websites).

There are a few apps for divorced parents, designed mostly to make it easier to plan children's activities and make decisions about money and childrearing. These apps do not provide anything that parents can't do on their own. Most parents and stepparents use

texting, emails, google calendar; children and stepchildren use Facebook and perhaps other social media to communicate with family members, regardless of where they live. Almost all divorced coparents use technology to communicate sometimes, even when they get along well and can talk face to face.

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Remarriages: Happy for Adults and Empty for Kids?

While remarriage following divorce is a happy event for adults, it is often challenging for children. Young adult stepchildren looking back and telling the story of the formation of their stepfamily report little involvement in the courtship and the parent's decision to marry, and felt they did not have sufficient time to adjust. Children described a range of wedding types from traditional "white weddings" focused on the couple, to elopement where they had no involvement, save receiving the news via phone or social media. Most of the marriage ceremonies the children described centered on the marital pair, and they found these weddings to be empty for them, even when children were involved in the wedding itself. The exception was stepchildren who described a family-centered ceremony--one that celebrated the whole stepfamily, both the marital pair and all of the stepchildren. Stepchildren want to be in the loop as parents decide to remarry and meaningfully involved in the formation of the new family.

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Fertility and Sterility

Children and Sperm Donors: Which Children Want to Meet the Donor Parent?

No one knows how many children are donor-conceived, although we do know that 12 percent of women of child rearing age have used an infertility service and more than 40,500 people have registered on the Donor Sibling Registry website to search for donors and donor siblings. We also know that all children conceived via sperm donation are curious about the donor: they want to know what he looks like and they believe that even minimal contact will help them understand themselves better.

Offspring from lesbian-parent families are less likely to want to have contact with the donor than are those from heterosexual-parent families. For offspring from lesbian-parent families, donor conception is considered a normal and accepted part of family life and the donor is deemed irrelevant to the family's construction.

Offspring who live with two heterosexual parents want to know the donor because they believe he holds the key to important information that their legal (or social) father cannot provide. However, they are also ambivalent about contact with the donor because they worry about the feelings of the legal (or social) dad who raised them.

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Do Men Have a Biological Time Clock for Conceiving?

The media often write of older new fathers and their much younger wives, perpetuating a common idea that men can wait until their 60s or even 70s to have children without adverse genetic consequences for the offspring. However, recent research published in the JAMA Psychiatry reported that children born to fathers of 45 years and older, compared to those born to fathers between 20-24 years old, face a 25 times greater chance of having bipolar disorder, a 13-fold higher risk of developing Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and a 60% higher chance of failing a grade. In addition, their offspring face twice the risk of psychosis and substance abuse. The risks of autism, suicide attempts and low educational attainment are also higher. Researchers controlled for numerous factors that may account for these risks. The findings support the hypothesis that genetic mutations can occur in the sperm of older men.

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Individual and Family Benefits

Families who use Facebook are Happier

More than 60 years of research on family communication reveals that the number one predictor of family satisfaction and family functioning is the type and quality of family communication. Research also suggests that large and small routines or rituals contribute to family strength, the creation and maintenance of family identity, and other positive family outcomes. With families logging onto Facebook in record numbers to maintain family ties, we wanted to study whether the use of Facebook increased communication or diluted it, and whether it supported or undermined the role of rituals in families.

In our self-report study of 359 participants (227 female, 132 male; average age 30; age range 18 to 80), we measured family satisfaction and family cohesion using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES), and asked participants a series of open-ended questions about their use of FB with other family members. Using quantitative analyses, we found a strong positive correlation between the use of FB with

other family members and the degree of family satisfaction. In other words, families who use Facebook also tend to be happier families. Facebook use between family members was also positively associated with higher quality of communication and amount of time spent together.

Families use Facebook to maintain and enhance relationships with immediate and extended family members through six types of rituals: updating each other, supporting each other, regularly just expressing "Thinking of You," reminiscing about past family events or memories, joking/playing/having fun with each other on FB, and monitoring each other's behavior and life. Such rituals increase the enjoyment of families interacting with one another and expand people's knowledge of other family members without the obligation of reciprocity or information-sharing.

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Grandparents: Staying in Touch with Social Media

The first rule of grassroots organizing, "go where the people are," can be applied to family relationships. Young people are on social media and are texting. When grandparents learn how to use these electronic communication methods, they not only exercise their brains (perhaps as well as playing bridge or Sudoko); they have yet one more way to communicate with their grandchildren. These communications might be briefer than they would like such -- consisting of a "thx" instead of a thank you note on Crane's high quality paper, perhaps -- but they do keep the generations connected. This connection feels comforting to grandparents and forges a bond that can be accessed in times of need. A student might text "partied last night" and a grandparent might respond with "Me too!" or "hope u had fun and r studying now :)." This brief interaction lets the generations share a bit of their lives with each other and gives them a basis to talk in real time at some future date,

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An Online Intervention Program Can Benefit Couples

Clinical trials of couple therapy, such as Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy, have shown that even very distressed couples can benefit from treatment. However, the treatment is expensive and lengthy, involving up to 26 hours of face-to-face contact with a professional therapist. In an effort to make treatment more accessible, Brian Doss at the University of Miami and Andrew Christensen at UCLA obtained a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to translate IBCT into a web-based intervention and test the effectiveness of that intervention.

Following the principles of IBCT, couples move through a three-stage process in the program: 1) viewing tailored feedback and identifying a core relationship problem, 2) developing a new, less blaming understanding of that problem, and 3) deciding on solutions to that problem. Partners work separately to view content and complete activities in each of the three stages and then have a conversation with their partner at the end of each stage to share what they've done in the program. Additionally, couples have four 15-minute Skype sessions with project staff as they progress through the program.

Although the clinical trial is ongoing, results from the first 50 couples to complete the program show substantial improvements in relationship satisfaction. The program is available at www.OurRelationship.com.

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The Tone at the Table: What Happens at the Dinner Table May Be More Important Than Who's There

Few settings convey the security and comfort of hearth and home more than the family dinner table. For decades, researchers and policy makers have touted the family dinner as an inoculation for children against a range of social ills from obesity to psychological distress, drinking and drug use. However, much of what makes the family dinner seem like a magical salve is the good parent-child and family relationships that underpin it in many of the families that manage to pull it off on a regular basis.

Family dinners are protective against adolescent depression and delinquency when children report good relationships with parents and family but offer few benefits when relationships are strained. In fact, at very low levels of parent-child relationship quality, increases in family dinners were associated with increases in depressive symptoms. While few adolescents report relationship quality this low, it suggests that family dinners may be counterproductive in families with very strained relationships.

Little is known about what actually happens around the table, but our findings from a recent national survey show that nearly half of all people use electronics during mealtime (television, Game Boys, iPads, laptops, etc.). Therefore, the quality of family relationships appears to set the tone at the table, and there may be many other forces altering what good (or bad) may come of the meal.

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