

How Rural Low-Income Families Have Fun: A Grounded Theory Study

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This study provides unique perspectives of family leisure activities by developing a grounded-theory model of influences on family fun based on qualitative data from 368 low-income rural women with young children from fourteen states. Mothers were asked an open-ended question about what their families do for fun, allowing them to define family fun. The women reported a variety of activities that they viewed as fun for their families, focusing mainly on simple, inexpensive leisure activities. Models based on the mothers' responses and the extant literatures were developed to examine contextual factors affecting family fun. This study provides insight into low-income rural families with implications for advancing family research, policy decisions, and furthering research about fun in leisure activities.

KEYWORDS: *Family fun, rural families, grounded theory, qualitative research.*

Introduction

Family time together, whether it is a vacation or spring cleaning, has important implications for the family as a whole as well as for the individual family members. Both research and popular culture acknowledge the duality of family time. For example, popular comedy movies such as *National Lampoon's Family Vacation* and *Johnson Family Vacation* were based on the stress in family vacations. Research has concluded that families view leisure as not only involving play and satisfaction, but also involving work and effort (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Despite the stress and effort, however, family leisure and

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play is essential to individual and family well-being (Csikszentmihaly, 1991; Fromberg & Bergen, 1998; Orthner, Barnett-Morris, & Mancini, 1994).

In a study of two-parent families using time-diaries, Shaw (1992) found that 38% of family time was spent in recreational or free-time activities. One of the underlying motives for such activities is fun (Shivers & deLisle, 1997). While most families may want to spend significant time together having fun, not all families have access to common types of fun and leisure activities. For example, community resources such as zoos or museums may not be available to all families such as those living in rural settings. In addition, when families live near or below the poverty line, they are forced to make many difficult decisions about how their limited resources are used. Low-income families may not have sufficient resources (e.g., free time, financial) to participate in available leisure activities that are available and may therefore suffer from a leisure shortage (Bittman, 1998). Since families in poverty tend to experience increased stress, limited access to leisure may put them at increased risk by constraining their ability to ameliorate stress via leisure activities (Orthner et al., 1994).

Based on previous research, we have some ideas about what rural low-income families cannot do for family fun due to limited access and availability, but we know little about what they actually do to have fun together. We need a better understanding of how rural, low-income families have fun together and the contexts in which fun occurs for these families. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to generate a theoretical model that explores what low-income rural families with young children do for fun from the perspective of mothers. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach we asked participants to discuss family fun from their own perspectives and using their own definitions of what they consider to be fun. That is, we did not give existing definitions of leisure and/or play to the families and these definitions were not presumed within the analyses. A family was defined as a mother with children; many of the mothers did have stable partners and when partners were present they were included as part of the family.

The findings from this study can be applied in many different areas. Leisure researchers will gain a better understanding of how rural low-income families have fun and the contexts influencing those choices. In addition, policymakers and rural advocates will gain a better understanding of an important aspect of rural and low-income families' lives. Extension educators and rural community service providers will learn about challenges faced by rural low-income families and strategies used by some families to make fun an important part of their life. Finally, play advocates gain an important understanding about what families with young children see as fun.

Literature Review

This study of how rural low-income families have fun together is informed by our theoretical perspective and the related literature. While this study is about family "fun" as defined from the perspective of participants,

most available literature discusses family "leisure," with fun being viewed as an important aspect of family leisure. Therefore, we discuss leisure throughout the review of literature. However, we acknowledge that the mothers' definitions and connotations of the word "fun" might not be congruent with research-based definitions.

Theoretical Perspective

There is a theoretical consensus that leisure is highly contextual (Henderson, Presley, & Bialeschki, 2004) thereby making it difficult to study. This study approaches fun as a component of leisure from a family studies focus using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory which emphasizes the multiple influences on an individual (or family) thereby placing leisure within the overall family context. The ecological model emphasizes that an individual is embedded within several systems that are simultaneously impacting the individual and being impacted by the individual. These layers extend from the lowest microsystem level in which the individual interacts within an immediate group (e.g., family, church, peers) to the exosystem level in which individuals participate but do not have a direct influence (e.g., community boards, county level policies) and finally, to the macrosystem level that accounts for society-level and ideological influences on individuals. The ecological model has been used in research examining physical activity and policy implications (Brownson, Baker, Housemann, Brennan, & Bacak, 2001), but not specifically with family leisure. This approach is especially useful for examining highly contextual issues such as leisure by allowing the incorporation of multiple simultaneous influences on families. In this study of fun as an important component of leisure, this theoretical perspective was used to examine not only how families have fun, but the different contexts that influence how they have fun.

Family Fun

Very few studies focus on what families do for fun together, but when asked about leisure, parents talk about leisure as a duty or an obligation; activities are goal-oriented, not only intrinsically motivated (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Based on their work, Shaw and Dawson recommend that family leisure should be seen as a form of purposive leisure; planned, facilitated, and executed by parents in order to achieve particular short- and long-term goals. Family leisure is inherently contradictory (Shaw, 1997) and contains both intrinsic motivations and obligations simultaneously (Shaw & Dawson). Research on family leisure has consistently found that leisure time is not solely enjoyable, particularly for mothers (Shaw, 1992, 1997). Mothers are more likely to view family leisure activities as work or as a combination of work and leisure, as an obligation or a duty (Henderson & Rannells, 1988; Shaw, 1992; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Despite these contradictions, fun is an inherent part of leisure. Leisure activities are usually defined by their perceived free-

dom, lack of necessity, and intrinsic motivation (Fromberg & Bergen, 1998; Kelly & Kelly, 1994)—all of which are components of fun.

Women, specifically mothers, place a value on family leisure and derive satisfaction from it; this is tied to their care and concern about the family as a source of positive interpersonal experiences (Shaw, 1992; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Women put considerable work and energy into creating family leisure experiences for their partners and children, even if it excludes the possibility of leisure for themselves (Alston, 1995; Shaw, 1997; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002). Henderson and Rannells' (1988) study of farm women (a retrospective on leisure) found that free time was not necessarily a prerequisite of leisure; work and leisure were infused into daily routines. In this study, we asked the women to discuss family fun as they defined it, therefore emphasizing the positive, enjoyable aspects of family leisure, and within the contexts that they perceived it occurring for their families.

Contextual Factors Affecting Leisure in Families

We have approached this study of rural women focusing on the context of where they live and the factors surrounding their lives. Research on the multiple contextual factors that influence leisure is not new. Leisure constraints is considered a distinct subfield of research (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997) and often focuses on understanding variation in leisure choices and experiences, especially for different populations. Our theoretical perspective (i.e., ecological theory) leads us to examine influences on family fun based on a family's position within the ecological model, considering both exosystem-level (in which a family participates, but does not directly influence) and microsystem-level (in which a family directly interacts) influences. For example, the exosystem variables of both location (urban versus rural) and community resources available (e.g., zoos, museums) influence family leisure activities but are outside of the control of the family. The existing literature does not contain many exosystem-level factors that influence family leisure. However, it is likely that these factors assume important roles in defining family leisure. For example, an individual family has minimal impact on what recreational activities are available but availability exerts a significant influence on family leisure activities.

Location [i.e. a broad conceptualization of place of residence (e.g., urban versus rural) (Dwyer, Chait, & McKee, 2000; Warnick, 2002)] and community resources are factors that influence leisure. Warner-Smith and Brown (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with 5 rural women and found that the women saw their situation as very different from women living in large towns; the town "dictated" what they could and could not do. Warnick's study of recreation in rural areas showed clearly that rural residents participated in different types of activities than urban residents, especially activities such as hunting, snowmobiling, and freshwater fishing. Rural families also reported that they preferred spending time with their family more than urban families. Families living in rural settings may also experience additional bar-

riers to engaging in leisure activities such as limited community resources and increased distance to participate in community activities.

The microsystem-level contextual factors influencing family leisure found in previous research include personal attitudes, socio-economic status, social support, and age of children. Personal attitudes are those ideological values about leisure which influence families' choices (Brown, Brown, & Hansen, 2001; Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 1998). Socio-economic status and family employment (i.e., employed or not employed, amount of time working) are significant contextual factors impacting leisure by limiting available funds and time (Bittman, 1998; Brown et al., 2001; Harrington, 2003; Hawks, 1991). For example, the socioeconomic status of the family leads to different types of leisure activities with middle-income families spending more time in family-based sports, playing games and reading than lower-income families (Harrington, 2003; Hawks, 1991). Families in which multiple adults are employed may also have less time for leisure activities simply because the adults are not available for those activities.

Research also has documented the influence of social support (Brown et al., 2001) and age of children/family structure (Bittman, 1998; Hawks, 1991; Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 1998) on leisure choices. For instance, previous research has found that compared to men, women's leisure activities experience more constraints such as the age of children and employment status (Bittman, 1998; Brown et al., 2001; Hawks, 1991; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002) in addition to various structural (time, money, and energy) and ideological (e.g., sense of commitment to others) influences (Brown et al., 2001; Kay, 2000). As another example, Mactavish, Schleien, and Tabourne (1997) found that the recreation activities of families with children with developmental disabilities were constrained by family schedules, the need for pre-planning, and accommodating differences in age and ability among children. This study examines family fun for families constrained by location (rural), socioeconomic status (low-income), and family structure (families with young children).

Gaps in the Literature

While previous approaches using an ecological perspective have provided a general framework to understand the influences and contexts of family leisure, there are a number of gaps left unaddressed in the literature. Little previous work has examined family fun from the perspectives of participants. This study is unique in that it focuses specifically on family fun and not directly on family leisure activities. Because the participants were allowed to define fun this study informs our understanding of this important aspect of family leisure. Second, there has been a lack of research investigating the impact of exosystem factors on family activities (whether considered as fun or, more broadly as leisure). In addition, very little of the family leisure research has focused specifically on rural low-income families, in particular rural low-income families with young children. This study addresses these

gaps utilizing qualitative methods to understand what rural low-income families with young children do for family fun.

Methods

An interpretive, constructivist perspective guided this study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Neuman, 2000). This means that we assumed that multiple views of reality exist, we were interested in learning about ordinary experiences in people's daily lives, and that we openly explored participants' perceptions and experiences and the contexts in which they occur. We wanted to construct and interpret patterns and meaning from the viewpoints of participants.

This study also used a grounded theory approach, which is a qualitative procedure for generating a theoretical model grounded in the views of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Charmaz, 2000). The grounded theory approach was chosen for this study because it fit our constructivist perspective and the study's purpose to inductively build a model of rural family fun grounded in the perspectives of participants.

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger multi-state, longitudinal study of low-income rural families with children. The overall study was approved by the United States Department of Agricultural Experiment Station Systems, as NC-223 "Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking their Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform." The overall purpose of the national research project is to assess changes in the well-being and functioning of rural families in the context of welfare reform. The overall collaborative study consisted of states with interested researchers and rural populations. That is, the 14 participating states were purposefully selected as a convenience sample to facilitate the collection of a rich dataset, not to emphasize generalizability. There were no efforts to recruit specific states within the larger collaborative project. Detailed descriptions of the methods used in the larger study have been published elsewhere (Bauer, 2002; Katras, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2004; Olson, Anderson, Kiss, Lawrence, & Seiling, 2004; Walker & Reschke, 2004). The following sections describe the methods for this qualitative study.

Study Participants

The 14 states included in this study are: California, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Wyoming. Each participating state research team selected 1-2 counties that had a rural-urban continuum code of 6, 7, or 8 (Butler & Beale, 1994), for inclusion in the study. These codes, developed by the Economic Research Service USDA, indicate the rurality of the county. For example, a county with a code of 6 indicates that the county has an urban population of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metro area and a

county with a code of 8 indicates that the county is completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population adjacent to a metro area. To be eligible for participation in this study, families had to have at least one child 12 years old or younger and be eligible for food stamps or within 200 percent of the Federal poverty line (i.e., approximately \$25,000 or less a year for a family of four). Preference was given to families with at least one preschool child resulting in a sample that emphasized families with young children (age of 12 years and younger). This is a unique sample in that perspectives about family fun may differ in families with young children compared to those with only older children. Young children are likely to be more involved in family-based fun activities (as opposed to adolescents who more likely participate in activities outside of the family context). Therefore, in this study we sought to understand family fun from the perspective of rural families with young children.

A convenience sample was taken from each state. Several families were recruited by persons working in programs that serve eligible families (e.g., Head Start, Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children [WIC]). While the larger study (Bauer, 2002) and our qualitative study examined family contexts, family data were collected through the recruitment of mothers as representatives of their families. Mothers were chosen to participate in the study because they offer a unique insight into family life. Mothers are often responsible for planning and initiating activities in which the whole family is involved. The sample for this qualitative study included 368 women who participated in the larger study and provided responses about how their families have fun. Quantitative demographic data indicate that 44.7% of the sample were married and 64.6% were non-Hispanic White, 21.5% Hispanic/Latino, and 8.8% African-American. (This is congruent with national statistics of rural samples.) The mean number of children is 2.29 and the mean age of the youngest child is 3.56. About 50% of the mothers were employed in 1 to 3 jobs for an average of over 32 hours per week and have a median yearly income of \$15,526 ($sd = \$10,404$).

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected in each state by investigators and staff during the time period of May 1999 through March 2001. All participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and completed informed consent documentation before completing data collection. Each low-income rural mother participant completed a one-on-one interview (1.5 to 2.0 hours per interview) that included both quantitative closed-response items and open-ended qualitative questions. As part of the longer interview protocol, 368 participants responded to the open-ended question "What does your family do for fun?" and follow-up probing. The quality and quantity of probes varied within each state and by interviewer, but together they combined to form a rich database of individuals' perspectives on family fun.

Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative portions of the one-on-one interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim and entered into a MAXqda database for analysis. MAXqda (www.maxqda.com) is qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the storage, retrieval, and coding of unstructured text data.

We employed a grounded theory approach to analyze the open-ended responses. Grounded theory analytic techniques promote theory development that is grounded in the viewpoints of participants rather than preconceived codes and categories from the researcher (Charmaz, 2000). The steps of a grounded theory analysis begin with open coding to form initial categories that represent the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Next, the researcher examines the categories and identifies contexts and conditions that influence these categories. Finally, the researcher develops a theory, often in the form of a conceptual diagram, that interrelates and explains the data. Throughout this process, the analyst compares the emergent theory to new data and writes memos to keep track of idea development.

In this study, the first two authors separately coded the mothers' responses using grounded theory strategies to identify themes and patterns from the data. The coding followed an inductive process where we started by reading the data and identifying codes from the data. We then built sub-categories from the codes and developed thematic categories from the sub-categories. The initial coding resulted in the identification of a core category (i.e., what rural families do for fun). Then, consistent with our ecological theoretical perspective and grounded theory procedures, we reanalyzed the data to identify the thematic categories that influence what rural families do for fun (i.e., contexts influencing family fun and attitudes about family fun). During the coding process, we made comparisons between the codes and the new data and between the coding of the two researchers to ensure that the codes came from the data and that they fit the data well.

As the thematic categories emerged from the data, we proceeded to the step of theory development. We continually refined the organization and interrelation of the thematic categories during the coding process and a conceptual visual model was developed based on the qualitative findings of this analysis (Figure 1). Memoing about the categories and findings facilitated the development of ideas and comparisons between analysts and between the emergent theory and the data. Once the conceptual model was developed from the data, we examined the literature with the intention of developing a literature-based model of family fun. We then compared our data-based model with the literature. From this comparison, we developed an integrated model (Figure 2) that captures both the model built from participants' views as well as helpful constructs derived from the literature. This integrated model shows how our data help to refine and expand what has been previously discussed in the literature.

We used several validation procedures to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Validation strategies in

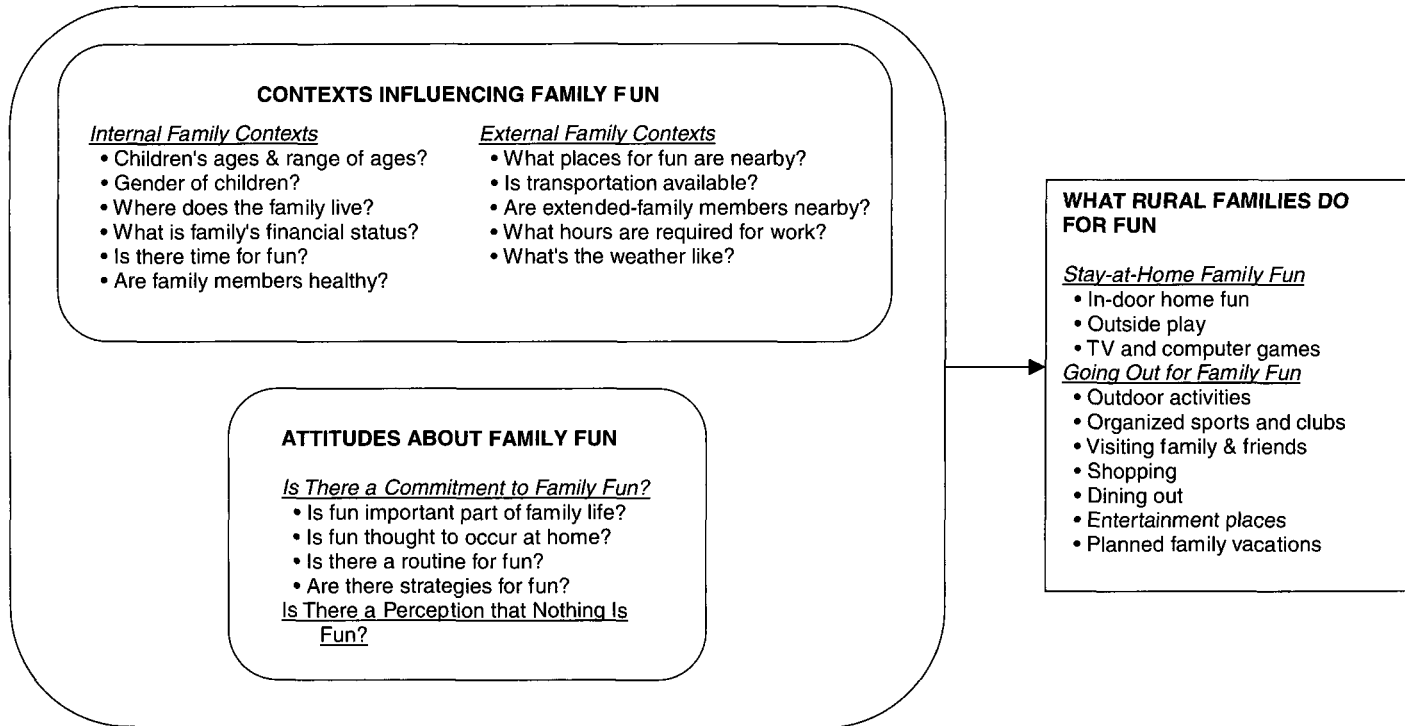


Figure 1. Conceptual model of family fun as reported by mothers of rural, low-income families.

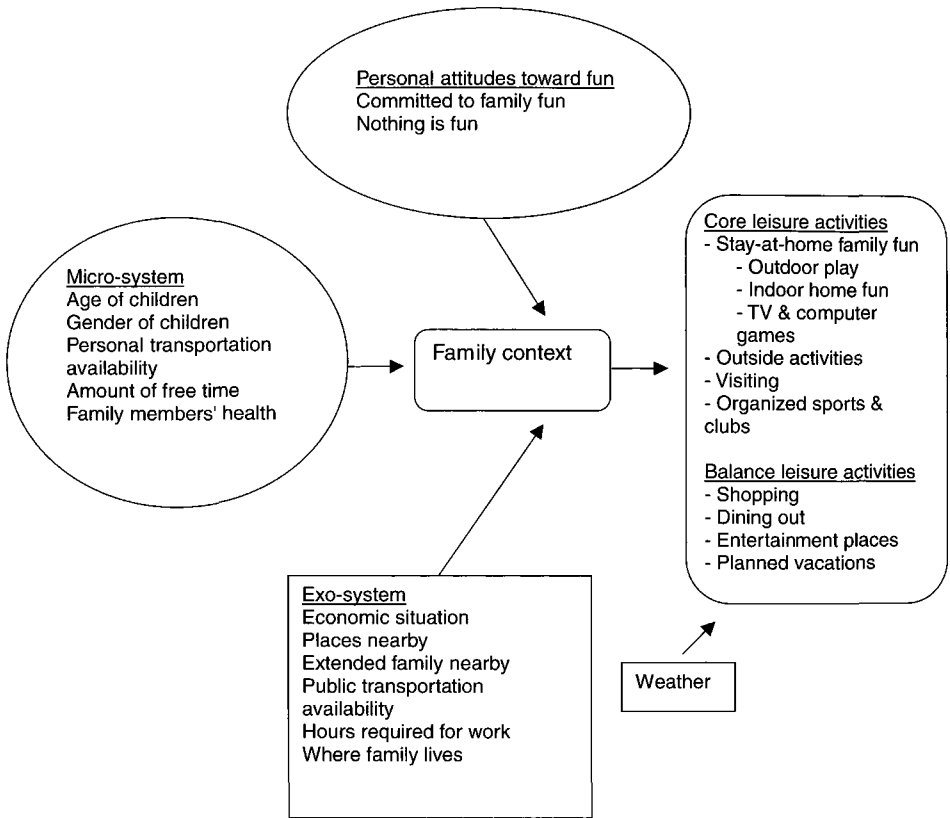


Figure 2. Visual model showing how our qualitative model of family fun for rural, low-income families relates to existing theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003).

this study included purposefully selecting a wide range of participants representing different rural, low-income families. Also, peer debriefing occurred throughout the project through frequent discussions and comparisons about the analytic process and findings. Finally, each of the categories is described in rich detail, using actual participant quotes as evidence (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Findings

The qualitative analysis of rural, low-income mothers' responses about family fun resulted in three major thematic categories: (a) what rural families do for fun, (b) the contexts influencing family fun, and (c) attitudes about family fun. These categories give insight into how rural mothers describe the activities in which their families engage for fun as well as the different contexts and attitudes that influence how their families have fun. These findings

are discussed in the following sections and are interrelated in the conceptual model depicted in Figure 1.

What Rural Families Do for Fun

The rural mother participants described a wide range of activities that their families do for fun. Listening to these mothers as they discussed these activities, two broad subcategories emerged: stay-at-home family fun and going out for family fun. These two kinds of family fun are the focus of our model in Figure 1 and each played different roles and had different meaning within families.

Stay-at-home family fun. For many of these rural, low-income families, family fun occurs when the family is together at home. One mother explained, "We don't really go out and do anything all together. We just mostly stay home." Others added, "a lot of the stuff we do with the kids is right here" and "we just enjoy each other." The centrality for having fun at home for some families was summed up by one mother who described her family as "just stay-at-home people."

What kind of activities do families describe when having stay-at-home family fun? Often home-based family fun means simple activities that are largely unstructured. Many families described indoor fun activities based on playing at home. This fun time often did not emphasize formal activities, but just the fun of being together. One mother described, "We sometimes just sit and talk because she [child] really likes that" and another referred to "just the little silly things like running around with them and tickling." Indoor fun was sometimes loud and active: "we crank up the tunes and dance around the dining room" and other times it was described as quiet time: "sometimes we just stay home and have a quiet day." Home play often included games such as playing pretend, building puzzles, and playing card games (e.g., *UNO*, Old Maid, or Go fish), and board games (such as *Operation* or *Monopoly*). Some mothers described "learning games" as a way to have fun with their children, such as practicing the alphabet. Many families enjoy reading together and consider this an important way that they have fun. Some families reported having fun with arts and crafts activities, such as coloring or working with *Play-Doh*, cooking together, or creating a family quilt.

Stay-at-home family fun also occurred as outside play in or around the backyard. This outside play was important to many families, who responded that, "we go outside and play" and "we are outside constantly." Outside play generally takes place at or close to home, such as playing in the backyard, going for walks, and going to a nearby park. Participants described their families enjoying a wide range of activities including picnics and cookouts, playing on playground equipment, riding bikes, and playing all sorts of informal games such as kickball, tag, whiffle ball, baseball, and volleyball.

Mothers also identified electronic media such as television watching and computer game playing as a source of stay-at-home family entertainment. A

few families discussed watching television shows like Barney and cartoons together and a few mentioned playing on a computer or with videogames (such as Nintendo) as one of the ways their families have fun. However, many families considered "watching movies" as a primary way to have fun as a family. Families described having access to movies through gifts of videos to the family, renting from video stores, or checking them out from the library. Some families particularly emphasized the aspect of watching together as a family. One stated, "Normally when the TV's on and the movie's in they'll yell for me to go in and sit down and watch it with them, and one on each leg." Other families make it a special event such as when one mother described her family's Friday routine: "When we go grocery shopping, I allow them to each pick out a video. . . we turn off the lights and pop some popcorn and watch one or two movies depending on, you know, how late Mom wants to be Mommy that night."

Going out for family fun. Many families described that they "go out" for family fun in addition to or instead of stay-at-home family fun activities. As one participant explained, "Home is where the home is, but you usually go out to have the fun." Unlike stay-at-home family fun, these activities required travel to go somewhere away from home and ranged from the common and typical (outdoor activities, organized sports and clubs, and visiting) to the eventful and unusual (shopping, dining out, entertainment places, and family vacations).

Participants described outdoor activities such as camping and water-based activities as popular and fun for their families. Water fun occurred at parks, lakes, and on the coasts with favorite activities including fishing and swimming. Water fun was discussed most frequently by families that live in locations where easy access to water was available. For example, an Oregon mother stated: "We play at the bay. It's free, it's fun, there's lots of neat rocks and wood. . . We love to go up river and go camping, swimming, and crawdaddin'." During winter, some families enjoy sledding and building snowmen, but many stated that outdoor activities were limited during the winter months.

Children's participation in organized sports and clubs was seen as an important aspect for young children's lives. As one mother explained, "I think it's important to have kids involved in things." However, for many families this participation was described as a "whole-family" event since parents and siblings often attended games and activities as well. Participants mentioned organized clubs such as 4-H, cub scouts, boy scouts, brownies, and girl scouts. However, more frequently these mothers discussed their children's involvement in organized sports. Sons participated in team sports such as tee ball, baseball, football, soccer, archery, and swimming while daughters participated in activities ranging from softball, volleyball, and swimming to cheerleading, dance class, and gymnastics.

Families also discussed that they "go visiting" as one of the common activities that is done for fun, usually in the context of getting together for barbecues, cook outs, and Sunday meals. Families sometimes visited friends

and neighbors, especially if they had children the same age, but most often participants discussed visiting family members such as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins, etc. Going to visit extended family was often combined with other family events, such as holidays or birthday parties, and often involved food and meals. For many families “going visiting” was a source of fun, but also played an important role “to keep the family together” and ensure that the children develop a close network with extended family.

For many mothers, family fun includes going out together shopping. Shopping at the mall or a local store is a way to “get out of the house and go do something” and was described as more of a social event than an event that requires spending money. Families enjoy walking around and window shopping in large stores even when money is not available. A number of mothers also stated that simply running errands and going grocery shopping is a fun family activity. For these rural participants, the most popular shopping destination mentioned by name was Wal-Mart. One participant described, “That’s our nights out—dinner and Wal-Mart.” Another added, “I don’t care if it was walking up and down the halls of Wal-Mart, you know, I don’t care if I’m totally broke. If I can get to Wal-Mart. . . just to walk around and look, I will.”

Participating mothers described dining out as a way they have fun family. For many of these families, fun was defined as going to McDonald’s to eat and play at the playland. A number of mothers described that their children “love” to go to McDonald’s. Other popular destinations included going for pizza or ice cream. Some participants described that their ability to dine out as a family was limited due to available money. Other families described going out to eat as a special event that is planned every week, such as a Sunday family meal or a Friday evening treat. As one mother explained, “we make it a habit of going on Fridays to eat.”

Commercially-based and community-based entertainment places were also places that families went to have family fun. For example, some families identified going to watch movies at a commercial theater as one of the ways they have fun. Other entertainment destinations included going bowling, visiting a local zoo, going to an arcade, or having fun at a Chuck E Cheese’s establishment. When locally available, some families enjoy going to amusement parks, such as Disneyland or Six Flags, and to museums. In addition to commercially-based entertainment options, some families think of fun in terms of community-based destinations. Community-based locations for fun included libraries, community centers, and churches. Some mothers described that community-based entertainment had the advantages of being lower cost and supporting the values that they felt were important for their children.

Planned vacations involving some distance from home were mentioned the least frequently of the different ways that families describe having fun. A few families described that they take vacations, and for most of those families it was a one-time or unusual event, such as for a family reunion. In most

of those cases, vacations were to destinations within a reasonable driving distance and still in the same general part of the country, such as a California family that went to Reno or a New York family that went to visit Niagara Falls.

Contexts Influencing Family Fun

As the mothers discussed what their families do for fun, they also addressed different contexts that influence the choice of the activities in which families engage for fun. These contexts are also depicted in Figure 1 and they represent influences that arise from internal characteristics of the family and from those that are external to the family system (congruent with an ecological perspective).

Internal family contexts. Many internal family contexts influence the choices that families make about how to have fun, such as the age, range of ages, and gender of the children and the personal interests of family members. For example, families with very young children in particular enjoy home play and outside play, but may engage in a wider variety of activities as children grow older.

Families' financial status was perceived as playing an important role in shaping family fun for these low-income rural families. While many participants wanted to engage in special events away from home for family fun, these activities were often limited by the financial status of the family. A number of mothers described that they needed to stay at home for family fun because they could not afford to go out. One stated, "we can't really afford to treat ourselves that much." Another added, "We have to do cheap fun. We play with *Play-doh* and read books and watch Disney movies." Family fun activities that required money, such as dining out or going to a movie theater, were viewed as special events for the family. For some families these activities occurred only rarely and only at times when extra money was available or when the family "can spare a few dollars." For many families, fun activities such as going to amusement parks or taking planned vacations were viewed as too expensive and therefore were not viable options due to financial limitations.

Other family contexts also directly influenced family fun activities. For example, when a parent or child is suffering from an illness, participants described that it limits the types of activities in which the family can engage, particularly activities that occur out of doors. This was true as well in some families when the mother was pregnant. Family fun was also influenced during major family events, such as when parents were undergoing a divorce. One mother explained, "We really haven't done a whole lot cuz of the divorce." The stress and burden of such events may limit the time and motivation for including fun in a family's activities.

External family contexts. Family fun for low-income rural families was also influenced by contexts that were external to the family. External family contexts that emerged from these discussions include the limited availability of recreational facilities, transportation issues, work schedules, and the weather.

Families' choices for fun were constrained by the limited number of activities and recreational facilities that were available within their rural hometowns. The limited options meant that families participated in some activities because they were the ones available. As one mother stated, "We may go bowling once in a while because we have a bowling alley in town." If a leisure facility or type of recreational area was not located nearby, then it was not an option for most families. Many of the mothers commented about the lack of places for fun in their towns. For example, one mother stated, "There is nothing in town for families to do. Nothing at all." Another added, "There's not a lot to do in the community so you just kind of have to think up things." Participants identified the kind of things they were missing, such as having a local library or movie theater or being able to receive more than one television channel.

Transportation issues compounded the lack of fun places when families were faced with no or limited personal transportation due to their low-income status, but also faced with no public transportation within their rural communities. For example, one participant stated, "If we can get a ride we might go out to eat." Another mother explained that they could not go to the movie theater located in another town because "that's too far to drive to go to a show." Many of the activities considered as fun for families require some travel and therefore require the family to have access to some transportation, including outdoor activities, visiting family and friends, shopping, dining out, going to entertainment places, and taking vacations. Without transportation, many families are limited to activities that are within walking distance: "We've got a park nearby down the street where it's in walking distance. So, and with one vehicle [for the family], it's great."

Family fun was influenced by parents' work and their work schedules. If a parent was out of work, then they may have more time for fun, but fewer resources to put toward family fun activities. More often participants described that their work schedules or that of their partners put them on a "tight schedule" that limited the time available for leisure activities. Work particularly affected family fun when adults worked in the evenings, on weekends, or had increased hours due to seasonal demands. Various statements alluded to the impact of work on time for family fun. One mother explained, "We do more in the summer and holidays just because farm work is lighter." Other participants said, "with me working on the weekends, it's kinda hard [to have time for fun]" and "my husband, during cherries, they have to put in more hours so it all depends if he has the time or not." For some families, work limits activities at all times as one participant explained, "with [my husband] working so many hours, there's just nothing that we can do during the week, and then on the weekends, he's tired and doesn't feel like doing anything."

The mothers also described that many of the families' fun activities "depend on the weather." Good weather—"when it's nice out"—encourages families to play outside or go out to do outdoor activities, but when it is too hot or too cold then families tend to stay inside. In hot weather one partic-

ipant described her family as “hiding in the house.” Mothers particularly described worrying about going into the cold with children who are prone to getting sick. However, from another point of view at least one participant described her farm family as having more time for fun in times of inclement weather. She explained, “Our biggest vacation is: you wait ‘til it rains because you are a farmer and if it rains enough, then you are able to turn off the wells and so you can get away for about three days.”

Within this category, participants identified a wide variety of contexts that influence how their families have fun. While many of these contexts relate to specific aspects of individual families, many of them arise from contexts that are external to these rural, low-income families.

Attitudes about Family Fun

In addition to the different contexts that influence how families have fun together, participants shared different perspectives about how family fun fits within the life of their families. These attitudes about family fun combine with the internal and external contexts to influence what families do for fun (see Figure 1). Two contrasting perspectives emerged from the data: those committed to family fun and those that described that nothing is fun.

Committed to family fun. Even when limited by money or other issues, some participants had very positive attitudes about the importance of fun and were committed to including fun as a regular part of family life. For some families, fun is commonplace: “Fun? Oh gosh, what do we do that’s not fun?” Other mothers agreed with statements such as “We just kind of make up things to do.” and “I try to do something with them on a daily basis.” For many families, fun is not limited to special events, but just takes place at home in the ordinary interactions between family members and has become an every-day part of family life.

Other participants voiced strong commitments in terms of fun and their families. One mother explained that she and her husband “always told each other before we had kids, we would do more with our kids. . . unlike what my parents did.” Another added about her family that, “We want to stay in tight with each other.” Many families incorporated certain “family routines” to be sure that fun stayed a regular part of their lives and the mothers reported different strategies to ensure these routines. One family’s strategy was described as “we make it a rule to go out and eat at least once a month.” Another mother explained her family’s routine, “every Saturday is supposed to be our day together that we go do something.” Another added, “every Monday we make it a point to be home and together on that night.” Some families created regular events to give their children the power to set the itinerary for fun. Mothers called these events “date night,” “Kid Day,” or “special days.”

While all families were limited to some extent due to their low-income status, a number of the participants described strategies for having fun within their financial limitations. For example, one mother described saving up money to go to Chuck E. Cheese’s and setting “a certain price limit” for

what each of her children could spend while they were there. Many families discussed finding “cheap” options for having family fun, such as going to the free outdoor skating rink or having cookouts instead of going to a restaurant. Other relatively low-cost activities include going out for fifty-cent ice cream cones or swimming at local pools. One family described a strategy of cutting back on junk food in order to save money to buy a computer. Planned vacations were considered too expensive by many families. As one described, “money is probably the biggest drawback” when considering taking a vacation. However, one family described their strategy for vacations. They kept a “vacation jar” all year where they put all extra money (including “pennies on the floor”) and then they used that money to plan and budget their annual vacation by limiting what they spend to what had collected in the jar.

Nothing is fun. In contrast to the participants that were committed to the importance of family fun and voiced strategies for making fun an important part of family life, a small, but noticeable set of participants ($n = 23$) described that their families do “nothing” for fun. A variety of responses to the question of what the family does for fun expressed this perspective. One mother responded, “We don’t do anything ever.” Others stated, “Nothin’. We don’t really do anything. We don’t have a way to go and do anything.” And “Well, we haven’t really done anything for fun lately.” Unlike families committed to fun, many of these participants reported feeling constrained by circumstances—lack of funds (“I wish there was more to do. Living on the income that we live on, even going to McDonald’s is something we don’t do very often.”), young child (“[I just] sit here with her—what I have to do.”), lack of transportation (“Nothing right now because he can’t go anywhere and transportation-wise and everything else.”), or educational demands (“My life has been so consumed with my education . . . that it really has not allowed me to have much of a life.”). They varied in how accepting they were of these constraints, but did not express using strategies to overcome them as did the committed families. They seemed to emphasize the constraints on going out for family fun to be entertained and did not seem to value stay-at-home family fun.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored what a rural low-income sample of women with young children considered fun for their families. These women described a variety of family activities and discussed many of the contextual influences on these activities. As described by participants, these activities fell within two categories: activities that occur at home and those that the family goes out to do. The activities were influenced by contexts that are both internal to and external to the family system, as well as by the personal attitudes held within the family.

The model developed from this qualitative study (Figure 1) can be examined from the ecological theoretical perspective and compared to the existing leisure literature. Although this study examined family fun, the par-

ticipants' descriptions of their families' fun activities are congruent with other leisure activity definitions (e.g., Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). This comparison helps us to relate this model to the literature and to interpret how this study helps to refine and expand on the family leisure literature. We found that the contextual factors described by participants could be divided into microsystem and exosystem influences as suggested by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model and other research focusing on structural and ideological constraints on leisure activities. In addition, the ways that families describe having fun give insight into the core and balanced activities discussed within Zabriskie and McCormick's research on family leisure.

In order to visualize how our data-based model fits within an ecological perspective and expands upon the previous literature, we developed a second model of influences on family fun. This model, based both on our data and the literature, appears in Figure 2 and attempts to integrate the richness of our model with the different theoretical perspectives. The following discussion highlights how this model of rural, low-income family fun expands upon and differs from previous studies.

Examination of The Model Within an Ecological Perspective

Using an ecological perspective, we frame this discussion of influences with the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem-level influences the mothers discussed were: age and gender of children, transportation availability, amount of free time, and family members' health. These are similar to issues discussed in the literature, except for transportation availability and family members' health. Researchers have explored constraints on leisure due to physical disabilities (Mactavish et al., 1997), but little has focused on family leisure constraints due to a parent's or child's health status. Transportation availability is an issue that may be unique to this rural population. Most of these rural areas do not have public transportation, thereby limiting family's access to many activities due to lack of access to personal transportation.

The exosystem-level influences that the women mentioned were economic situation, lack of places nearby, extended family nearby, hours required for work, and where the family lives. Although employment is most often considered a micro-level system, these families viewed employment and work hours as something that was mostly beyond their control so we included it as an exosystem-level influence. Exosystem-level influences were mostly discussed by the families in terms of their constraints on family fun, not as facilitating factors. For example, their work hours often constrained their leisure activities and a lack of available resources constrained their options. The micro-system variable of transportation availability is tied to the exo-level influences of places and extended family nearby. This is consistent with previous literature which identifies available community resources as a leisure constraint (Nadirova & Jackson, 2000). For rural families in particular, community resources are often lacking and therefore limit their leisure activities.

The weather was also mentioned as a factor which influenced family leisure choices. This variable was not expected in our model (and does not fit easily into Bronfenbrenner's model) and would not be unique to low-income or rural families, although its effects may be more pronounced due to rural families' reliance on outdoor activities for fun. Although an "obvious" variable influencing activities, it is not explicitly addressed in many studies, likely because it is outside of family control and unrelated to the family system.

The unique experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study reflect a wide range of influences on their families' lives and family fun. Some contexts are simply traits of the family and are equally diverse and influential across all families (such as the age and gender of the children, stress related to parental marital status). However, some contexts are clearly tied to the low-income status of these families. That is, their financial status and the limited availability of money for fun activities, the lack of reliable family transportation, and their extended work hours all relate to their overall family financial status.

In addition, some contexts were uniquely rural. The places where families lived and the limited availability of options are directly related to their rural locations. In addition, while issues with transportation are partly related to having a low income, for these families they were magnified by the fact that no forms of public transportation were available in their rural communities and that very few places could be found within walking distance. Even the weather, while a context for all families, played a significant role for these families due to their reliance on activities that take place outside for family fun.

An interesting finding in this study was the women's personal attitudes toward fun and its impact on their core leisure activities. When stating positive and resilient attitudes about family fun, participants seemed to be able to use their attitudes and strategies as buffers against many of the identified constraints. These personal attitudes toward fun provide an intriguing aspect to the leisure constraints literature although the existing literature has explored ideological constraints including the individual's attitudes. For example, it is interesting to note that some mothers reported doing nothing for fun. This type of ideological view has rarely been explored in the literature on play and leisure.

Discussion of a Typology of Family Fun Activities

Results from this study provide support for Zabriske and McCormick's (2001, 2003) typology of core and balance activities. As described by families their core (frequent, low-cost, accessible) activities were: outdoor play, home play, television and computer games, organized sports, and visiting with friends and family. Their balance (novel experiences) activities included: entertainment places, shopping, dining out, and planned vacations. We based our identification of activities on how families talked about the activities and

their participation in them. Overall, balance activities were discussed less frequently than core activities. Since balance activities do occur less frequently, this is to be expected. The contextual factors limiting family fun activities were most often mentioned within the context of these balance activities. This study expands Zabriske and McCormick's typology by emphasizing that whether an activity is a core or balance depends upon how the participant views the activity. Core activities, by definition, are accessible and families participate in them frequently. It would be expected that there are fewer constraints on these types of activities. The attitudes of the families toward fun, however, did seem to make a difference in the core activities. On the one hand, the families who were committed to fun showed a special creativity and commitment to core activities. They focused on everyday activities which they made fun or set aside specific time for fun activities. On the other hand, the families that reported nothing was fun appeared to value balance activities and thus focused on the constraints that kept them from engaging in these novel activities.

Outside play and outdoor activities were very popular among these rural families. In their typology, Zabriske and McCormick (2001) describe outdoor play as a balance activity, yet these families used their outdoor fun as a core activity. These families played close to home and on a regular basis. Zabriske and McCormick included outdoor activities such as boating and skiing in their definition. These families rarely mentioned these type of activities, but instead focused on outdoor play close to home (e.g., playing in leaves), which Zabriske and McCormick do include as balance activities.

The rural sample in this study is likely to have influenced this difference. These families had easy, safe access to appropriate outdoor places. For urban families, outdoor activities may be balance activities (Zabriske & McCormick, 2001) because they do not get to engage in them often. For these rural families, however, outdoor activities were core activities. They engaged in them frequently, as part of the family routine. The importance of their geographic location or "place" was key in the types of activities in which they engaged. This is congruent with other research that finds that leisure activities differ by geographic location. The importance of place to these families can also be found in their access to activities. Their rural location often made some activities very difficult or even impossible.

Research on rural policy in recent years has emphasized the importance of "place" in making policy (e.g., Rural Policy Research Institute). This study highlights the importance of place in the lives of these families. Constraints on family fun activities were often due to exo-system level factors—e.g., availability of activities, places, lack of funds due to underemployment. Similar to Warner-Smith and Brown (2002), many women felt constrained by where they lived; the town influenced what they could and could not do. Families with easy access to entertainment places (and with available funds) were able to take advantage of those. However, lack of transportation or access greatly limited some families. Warner-Smith and Brown (2002) found that women "appropriated public space" (p. 51) such as a local café as a social gathering place for themselves and their children. In our sample, window shopping

and/or going to Wal-Mart seem to serve the same function. Those services available in the community are absconded for other use. "Going to Wal-Mart" as a form of family fun is an activity not found on typical questionnaires about leisure activities. This study highlights the creative ways that families participate in leisure. When they are constrained by exo-system level circumstances, families will use the available resources to create fun in a variety of ways.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that must be considered. A "standard" definition of leisure was not used within this study. While this limits the direct comparisons that can be made to other research studies of family leisure, it also represents a strength of this study because we were able to learn from participants' definitions and perspectives. In addition, as the intention of this study was not to generalize to all rural families, the sample was not random. However, women from fourteen different states were included which helps make the sample more representative. The interviews were conducted by numerous researchers across the included states increasing the variability in how questions were asked and the type of probes used. In addition, the grounded theory analysis was limited because the qualitative database that was collected as part of a larger study, limiting the extent of the follow-up probing to the question about family fun. However, this initial exploration into the phenomenon of rural family fun has identified many important areas that can now be further studied. The findings of this study only included mother's perceptions of family fun. Mothers, however, are often the primary informants for family research and they are also often more involved with the children during family leisure activities.

Future Research

Future studies could further explore the unique ways in which these families constructed fun (e.g., going to Wal-Mart). Such an examination would be an interesting addition to the leisure and play literature, especially for families in rural areas in which the only major shopping experience is a Wal-Mart store. In addition, other family members' perspectives (such as those of fathers/partners and children) on what is fun would expand our understanding of rural family fun. The transcripts of participants who indicated nothing was fun suggested to the researchers potential depression in these individuals. Future studies should also examine how attitudes toward fun relate to depression. This information would be valuable to aid individuals working with families to facilitate leisure activities. Participation in leisure activities could also be used to help alleviate depressive symptoms.

Conclusions

While focusing on family fun, this qualitative study validates and broadens the existing literature on leisure and the contextual factors affecting fun

activities within leisure. The unique perspective of rural, low-income women with children also expands the existing literature. For those who are helping to make policy related to recreation areas, this study emphasizes that inexpensive access, close to home is important for rural families with young children. A small neighborhood park may serve these families as well or better than a larger more inaccessible area. For those working with families in applied settings, the family attitude towards fun can be used as a way to establish connections among the family and with other families. A neighborhood barbeque, for example, would be a good context in which to convey information (e.g., parenting classes). Recent discussions of the importance of outdoor play for children (Beach, 2003; Rivkin, 1995; Wellhousen, 2002) make these findings important for those working with young children. Children in rural areas are more likely to be engaged in outdoor activities on a regular basis. For those researchers interested in the development of environmental attitudes based on outdoor experience, this suggests that there are subsamples of the population more likely to develop those attitudes.

Most importantly, this study has provided a detailed description of how rural low-income mothers perceive family fun for their families with young children. While some mothers emphasize what they are unable to do, most mothers discussed a wide variety of activities in which they participate with their families. While there are many influences that constrain their choices of fun activities, this study has identified that families enjoy many fun activities within these constraints.

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