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Parenting Stress, Dinnertime Rituals, and Child Well-being in Working-Class Families

This study examined the extent to which family dinnertime rituals serve a protective role for families experiencing high levels of stress. Using data from a longitudinal study of working-class couples, the role of dinnertime rituals as a moderator of mothers' and fathers' parenting stress and child psychosocial outcomes was investigated. Greater dinnertime rituals reported by fathers moderated the effect of parenting stress on internalizing problems for girls, but not for boys. Fathers' reports of dinnertime rituals were related to fewer behavioral symptoms, internalizing problems and externalizing problems, and greater adaptive skills for girls. No significant interaction effects for mothers' parenting stress or rituals were found, but there were significant main effects of mothers' parenting stress and dinnertime rituals on child outcomes. These findings suggest that dinnertime rituals can potentially moderate the effects of parenting stress on child outcomes and fathers and daughters showed the greatest benefits of these family practices.

Family rituals and routines are important for enhancing child health and well-being. Fiese et al. (2002) stated that regular rituals and routines contribute to stability and predictability in family life that enhance children's functioning. However, providing consistent, predictable family rituals and routines may be very challenging for the more than 58% of American families with young children in which both parents are employed outside of the home (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Fiese et al. pointed to the importance of family rituals as potential buffers of parenting distress. A moderation model holds that family rituals may serve as a protective mechanism for families in the presence of stress. If family rituals work as a moderator, then interventions focused on enhancing rituals would be a critical method to buffer parenting stress on child outcomes.

In this study, the role of family rituals in the understudied population of working-class families is explored. Rituals may be of even greater importance in dual-earner, working-class families because the work–family challenges facing low-wage workers are often significantly more stressful than for higher income workers. For example, working-class employees are more likely to face stressful work conditions involving mandatory overtime, low autonomy, variable work shifts, time-pressured productivity targets, few sick/personal time benefits, and unpaid family leave than their middle-class counterparts (Perry-Jenkins, 2005). Moreover, these work stressors spill over to affect the well-being and stress of working-class workers, creating unique challenges to family life and parenting (Perry-Jenkins, Smith, Goldberg, & Logan, 2011). For example, more than one third of working-class employees work

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nonstandard shifts or rotating shifts, making it difficult to maintain regular family routines such as family meals and bedtime routines. In addition, mandatory overtime and little job flexibility, characteristics of low-wage work, also affect working parents' ability to maintain consistent family routines. Thus, a significant contribution of this study is its unique focus on working-class parents who face the challenge of managing family life while holding down low-wage and less flexible jobs.

The aim of this investigation is to examine the relationship between parenting stress and children's psychosocial outcomes as children transition to first grade, and to examine whether rituals mitigate the effect of high stress on child functioning.

Parenting Stress and Child Well-Being

Parenting stress has been linked to poorer outcomes in children, as measured by teachers' ratings of behavior problems in the classroom and social competence (Anthony et al., 2005) as well as increased externalizing and internalizing problems (Hart & Kelley, 2006; Rodriguez, 2011). The risk and resilience model supports the notion that risk and protective factors can enhance or undermine children's well-being (Black & Lobo, 2008). Parenting stress is an example of one such risk factor that can have detrimental effects for children's well-being. A family resilience framework extends the notion of resilience to the dynamic interactions of the broader family context and how certain family practices, such as family rituals and routines, can enhance well-being (Walsh, 2003). Based on this framework, this study examines dinnertime rituals as a potential protective factor that may buffer the risk effects of parenting stress.

Nature and Importance of Family Rituals

Fiese (2006) defined *family rituals* as repeated patterns of behavior that facilitate family life, communicate family values, and augment family identity. Fiese developed a self-report measure, the Family Rituals Questionnaire (Fiese & Kline, 1993), to assess family practices across different settings and dimensions to get a holistic measure of family practices that highlights the routinized practice and the symbolic meaning of family rituals. Rituals have a symbolic and affective component, such as dinnertime conversations when family members reflect on their day or discuss sensitive topics (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). In this study, the ascribed symbolic meaning (ritual meaning) and the patterned routine (ritual routine) of family dinnertime rituals are examined.

Mealtime as a Meaningful Family Ritual. Family mealtime rituals encompass the routinized aspects of family rituals, which are the repetition of tasks and roles over time, and the symbolic aspect of rituals, through the interactions that occur between members during the mealtime. Eating together "as a family" may be meaningful to individuals in the family (DeVault, 1994). Family mealtimes increase family connections (Fiese, 2006) and create a sense of family identity and group membership (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Leon & Jacobvitz, 2003). Engaging in family mealtimes has been associated with fewer internalizing symptoms (Fiese, Winter, Wamboldt, Anbar, & Wamboldt, 2010), greater academic success (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007), and fewer adolescent high-risk behaviors (Fulkerson et al., 2006; Sen, 2010). Based on this solid research base, it is hypothesized that family dinnertime rituals are related to better child psychosocial outcomes.

Child Gender and the Effects of Family Rituals. Family mealtimes are a context in which gender roles are enacted and reinforced. Gender socialization research points to the different ways parents interact and socialize with daughters and sons (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). Specifically, the dynamic interactions that take place during mealtimes can be experienced differently for girls and boys depending on how parents socialize their child.

Investigators have found gender differences in the effects of family rituals on children and adolescents although the findings are inconsistent. Levin, Kirby, and Currie (2011) found that frequent family meals were associated with the reduced likelihood of risk behaviors for girls but not boys. In one of the few studies that considered gender and ethnicity, more frequent family rituals were found to protect Latina adolescent girls from cumulative risk factors (Loukas & Prelow, 2004). Additional studies have found family rituals to be related to higher math ability and social competence with peers (Churchill & Stoneman, 2004); lower odds of adolescent risk behavior and depressive symptoms (Eisenberg,

Olson, Newmark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Levin et al., 2011); and decreased likelihood of initiating drinking in girls, compared to boys (Fisher, Miles, Austin, Camargo, & Colditz, 2007). In contrast, family rituals have been found to be more strongly related to boys' outcomes than girls, including greater social competence (Ferretti, 2011) and better academic and physical health outcomes reported by teachers (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986). Discrepant findings for gender differences in the experience of family rituals make it difficult to conclude whether there are consistent differences in the benefits of family rituals for boys and girls. Overall, there appears to be a pattern of evidence indicating greater benefits of family rituals for girls compared to boys. In this study, a similar pattern is expected to show a stronger benefit of family rituals for girls compared to boys.

Parent Gender and the Effect of Family Rituals. Although women typically spend more time preparing and performing tasks involved in the mealtime (DeVault, 1994), it is unclear whether family mealtimes have differing meanings (i.e., how one feels about the activity) for mothers and fathers. Mothers are typically held to be keepers of family rituals and therefore mothers have most often been recruited as the primary respondent in studies of family rituals, leaving little known about fathers' enactment and meaning associated with family rituals. Empirical studies of family rituals using reports from both parents can illuminate how the experience of family rituals may differ as a function of gender.

Family Rituals as a Moderator of Parenting Stress and Child Well-being

Although research has demonstrated that family rituals are directly related to better child and adolescent outcomes, there are no existing studies that have tested family rituals as a moderator between parenting stress and child outcomes. In one related study, Jacob, Allen, Hill, Mead, and Ferris (2008) found that dinnertime routines buffered the effects of long work hours on work – family conflict. They also found that women were more sensitive than men to the protective effects of dinnertime routines when work – family conflict increased (Jacob et al., 2008). This study aims to address this gap in the literature by testing family rituals as a moderator of the relation between parenting stress and child outcomes.

The Current Study

The proposed study makes a number of significant contributions to the literature. First, it includes reports of family dinnertime rituals from mothers and fathers. The unique and potentially different experience of fathers is measured to provide a more accurate picture of how family rituals are related to parenting stress and child outcomes. Second, this sample was drawn from a larger longitudinal study examining the experiences of working-class, dual-earner families across the transition to parenthood. Few studies have explored family rituals in low-income, dual-earner households who face greater financial stress and have fewer resources than their middle-class counterparts (Perry-Jenkins, 2004). Moreover, this study examines the potentially protective role of family rituals in households pressed for time and resources as parents must juggle the demands of work while caring for young children. The study examines families as their oldest child is entering school when family rituals may become destabilized while parents learn to manage children's schedules. The transition into school has been deemed one of the developmental "sensitive periods" when children may have positive or negative transitional experiences. The presence of stable rituals has been found to protect children against the challenges of this transition (Wildenger, McIntyre, Fiese, & Eckert, 2008). By using teachers' ratings of children's behavior, the study incorporates a unique perspective on the psychosocial and behavioral outcomes related to the presence of family rituals as children transition to the first grade.

The ecological model highlights the importance of the acknowledging how multiple systems, including family and social class, interact to influence children's outcomes. Because the families in this study are working-class families, the experiences of parenting stress and family dinnertime rituals may differ from families of other social classes. Parent – child interactions can be unique given some individual-level factors such as child or parent sex. Additionally, the risk and resilience framework provides a way to understand how family practices such as family

dinnertime rituals can play a protective role in the presence of parenting stress. Using a sample of working-class families, this study addresses the following research questions and tests the corresponding hypotheses:

1. Is there a direct relationship between parents' report of dinnertime rituals and teachers' reports of children's psychosocial outcomes? It is hypothesized that greater family dinnertime rituals are related to better psychosocial outcomes in children.
2. Is there a direct relation between parents' report of stress and teachers' reports of children's psychosocial outcomes? It is hypothesized that greater parenting stress is directly related to poorer child psychosocial outcomes.
3. Is the direct relation between parents' report of stress and teachers' reports of children's psychosocial outcomes moderated by parents' report of dinnertime rituals? It is hypothesized that family rituals work as a moderator lessening the negative effects of parenting stress, because theoretically family rituals create a sense of stability and identity for families.
4. Does the relation between parenting stress, family rituals, and child outcomes differ by sex of either parent or child? Based on trends pointing toward greater benefits of family rituals for girls, it is hypothesized that more family rituals are related to better outcomes for girls than boys. Based on what is known about women's greater invested time and effort in family rituals, it is hypothesized the relation between parenting stress and family rituals is stronger for mothers than fathers.

Method

Participants

Participants were part of a larger longitudinal project examining the transition to parenthood among 153 dual-earner working-class couples, with a follow-up family interview when children were in first grade ($n = 121$). For this study, data came from the final time point and was collected from mothers, fathers, and teachers when target children were in first grade. Out of these 121 families, 20 were excluded who were no longer married or cohabiting, 6 families for whom teacher reports were missing, and 2 families who were missing both parents' reports of rituals, leaving 93 families for this study. In comparison to the 60 families not included, the families in this study were more likely to have been married prior to the birth of the target child and had significantly higher household incomes prenatally and when the target child was age 1 year than families lost through attrition. Mothers in this study also worked significantly more hours outside the home when children were age 1 year than mothers who were excluded. No differences were found in fathers' work hours, years married or cohabiting prior to the target child's birth, parents' education level, or in parents' race. Couples were recruited from prenatal classes at hospitals in the New England area during their third trimester of pregnancy. Couples had to meet the following criteria to be included in the study: (a) both members of the couple were employed full-time (35 hours per week or more), (b) both members of the couple planned to resume full-time work within 6 months of the baby's birth, (c) both members of the couple were "working class" as defined by educational attainment of a 2-year associates degree or less, (d) both members of the couple were expecting their first child, and (e) the couple was married or cohabiting for at least one year prior to participation in the study. By the time of the final interview, when target children were entering the first grade, families had an average of 2.1 children, with the majority of target children (87%) having younger siblings and 13% having no siblings. More than one half of the children were female (57%) and children were, on average, age 6.9 years.

Defining and measuring *social class* is a complicated issue; educational level (i.e., no more than an associates' degree), job characteristics (i.e., no supervisory responsibilities, hourly wage), and income were used as screening criteria for the working-class sample in this study. Education was chosen as the primary focus for two reasons. First, education is a precursor of job advancement, and those with low levels of education are likely to remain in low-wage work. Second, income alone is less representative of social class status because many of the fathers hold more than one job. For 16% of women and 28% of men, the highest degree held was a high school diploma or Graduate Equivalency Diploma during the prenatal interview; a majority of the sample (53.8% of women and 55.9% of men) had some

type of additional schooling or vocational training after high school (e.g., beautician's school, refrigeration mechanic training). During the prenatal interview, only 28% of women and 15% of men held a 1- or 2-year associate's degree. None of the parents had a college degree when the target child was born; however, 4% of mothers and 5% of fathers had earned a bachelor's degree when the child was entering first grade. Mothers and fathers worked an average of 32 and 44 hours, respectively, at the final interview.

The majority of the sample were dual-earner families, with 83% of families having both partners working at least one job at the final interview. The remaining families relied solely on men's (11%) or women's (6%) earnings. The median self-reported gross individual salaries were $35,725 and $22,100 for men and women, respectively, and the median family income was $59,900 (range $18,304 – $134,640). Based on a household of four, 20% of families' household income fell below 200% of the poverty line and would be defined as low-income. Importantly, these estimates represent gross income, thus, after taxes take-home pay is considerably less. Few of these families were in poverty; however, the loss of one partner's income would have moved many families close to or below the poverty line. The most common types of jobs held by men were factory worker, truck driver, and food service worker. Women were employed most often as food service workers, factory workers, and beauticians.

Measures

Parenting Stress. Parenting stress was assessed using the short form of the Parenting Stress Inventory (PSI; Abidin, 1995). This measure assessed mothers' and fathers' levels of stress related to their roles as parents. Mothers and fathers completed the 25-item PSI and the Total Stress Score was used as overall level of parenting stress. Sample items include "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent" and "I find myself giving up more of my life to meet my children's needs than I ever expected." Responses on the scale range from 1 (*strongly agree)* to 5 (*strongly disagree*), with a higher score signifying higher levels of parenting stress. The range of scores for mothers was 36 to 130 and for fathers was 38 to 117. Cronbach's alpha for mothers was .94 and for fathers was .94.

Family rituals were assessed from mothers and fathers using the Dinnertime subscale of the Family Rituals Questionnaire (FRQ; Fiese & Kline, 1993). The FRQ assesses rituals across seven settings and eight dimensions; the dinnertime scale is one of seven settings that are assessed in the overall measure and the subscale used in this study. The FRQ includes eight items that assess eight different dimensions: occurrence, roles, routine, attendance, affect, symbolic significance, continuation, and deliberateness. For more specific definitions of each of the settings and dimensions of the FRQ, see Fiese and Kline (1993).

In this study, the total Dinnertime Ritual subscale represented the sum of the Dinnertime Ritual Meaning and Dinnertime Ritual Routine scores. Ritual Meaning and Ritual Routine were calculated by summing the individual dimension items (e.g., symbolic significance, routine) that correspond to each respective factor. An example of an item that captured ritual meaning is, "In some families people feel strongly about eating dinner together," and an item reflecting the ritual routine is, "In some families, dinnertime is flexible. People can eat whenever they can." Each respondent was asked to indicate how true the statement was for his/her family. Responses on the scale range from 1 to 4, with a higher score endorsing more of the particular dimension of the dinnertime. The range of scores for mothers was 10 to 31 and fathers was 11 to 30. Cronbach's alpha for mothers was .79 and for fathers was .68.

Child Behavioral Outcomes. Children's internalizing problems, externalizing problems, adaptive skills, and behavior symptoms were measured using the Behavioral Assessment System for Children – Teacher Report Scale (BASC-TRS; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992) for the age group 6 to 11 years. The BASC-TRS is a 131-item comprehensive rating scale that assesses a broad range of psychopathology in children age $2\frac{1}{2}$ years and older. Teachers were asked to rate on a 4-point scale (*never, sometimes, often, almost always*) the degree to which each item described the child. The teachers' reports of child outcomes were collected an average of 3 to 4 weeks after the parent interviews and self-report measures were collected.

The BASC-TRS demonstrates good reliability and validity with school-age children,

with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .89 to .97 for girls and .90 to .96 for boys (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992). The use of teacher reports was an important strength of the study design as much of the past literature has relied solely on parent reports of child outcomes. *T* scores (based on general, not gender-specific, norms) for the Externalizing (37 items), Internalizing (26 items), and Adaptive Skills (39 items) composites and the Behavioral Symptoms Index were used. The Externalizing composite includes subscales that measure aggression, hyperactivity, and conduct problems. The Internalizing composite includes subscales that measure depression, anxiety, and somatization. The Adaptive Skills composite includes subscales that measure adaptability, leadership, social skills, and study skills. The Behavioral Symptoms Index is a combination of hyperactivity, aggression, anxiety, depression, attention problems, and atypicality scales from the clinical composites, reflecting overall levels of problem behavior "in much the same way as the overall composite score of an intelligence test measures the underlying dimension of *g*" (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992, p. 52), and overlapping to some extent with the externalizing and internalizing clinical composites. The range of *T* scores for externalizing scores was 40 to 69, internalizing scores was 39 to 81, adaptive skills was 35 to 73, and behavioral symptoms was 37 to 62.

Child Sex. A dichotomous variable indicating child sex (0 = *boy*, 1 = *girl*) was included as a predictor in order to examine the different effects by child sex.

Control Variables. All control variables were measured at the final interview, when the target child was entering first grade. The number of children in the family was included as a control variable, as it is related to parenting stress (Warfield, 2005) and was correlated with mothers' reports of dinnertime rituals in this sample. A dichotomous variable indicating whether parents worked the same shift as his/her partner, and the total number of hours the parent worked at all of his or her jobs were included as control variables because they were correlated with children's outcomes in this sample, and research has suggested they are related to dinnertime rituals and parenting stress (Jacob et al., 2008; Joshi & Bogen, 2007), with nonstandard work schedules also related to children's behavioral outcomes (Joshi & Bogen, 2007).

Child Care Involvement. Preliminary analyses were run to test whether the relationship between fathers' stress, dinnertime rituals, and child outcomes could be attributed to differences in father involvement in child care. Fathers' and mothers' childcare involvement were measured using the 7-item Daily Childcare Involvement subscale of the Childcare Involvement Scale (Bouchard & Lee, 2000). Parents were each asked to estimate their own and their partner's level of involvement in activities requiring direct interaction with their child, such as putting the child to bed. Participants reported their involvement using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*almost always [7 times a week]*) and items are averaged to obtain a mean score. Parents' reports of their own involvement were used. Father's scores on this measure ranged from 1.86 to 6.71 ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.04$, Mode = 4.0), and mothers' ranged from 3.14 to 7.00 ($M = 5.27$, $SD = .91$, Mode = 4.14). Cronbach's alpha was .79 for fathers and was .66 for mothers.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among mothers' and fathers' reports of parenting stress and dinnertime rituals, and the four subscales of teachers' reports of child outcomes, are shown in Table 1. Casewise deletion was used, resulting in sample sizes ranging from 81 to 91 for analyses. There were no significant differences between mothers' and fathers' reports of parenting stress and family dinnertime rituals. When comparing parents' reports of parenting stress and dinnertime rituals by child sex, ANOVAs revealed a significant difference in dinnertime rituals, with mothers' reporting more family rituals with girls than boys. There was no significant difference in fathers' reports of family dinnertime rituals depending on child sex. Bivariate correlation analyses (Table 1) revealed a positive correlation between spouses' reports of parenting stress ($r = .49$, $p < .01$), and a positive correlation between spouses' reports of family dinnertime rituals ($r = .44$, $p < .01$). Fathers' parenting stress was positively correlated with child externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and behavioral

Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Parent and Child Study Variables*

	Mean	*SD*	*N*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Predictors											
1. Mother parenting stress	73.09	19.97	92	—							
2. Father parenting stress	69.83	18.86	90	0.49**	—						
3. Mother dinnertime ritual	21.97	4.86	92	−0.16	−0.15	—					
4. Father dinnertime ritual	21.40	3.86	90	−0.13	−0.10	0.44**	—				
5. Child externalizing problems	46.47	6.80	91	0.20+	0.29**	−0.35**	−0.15	—			
6. Child internalizing problems	48.98	9.20	93	0.09	0.30**	−0.10	−0.09	0.20+	—		
7. Child behavioral symptoms	46.91	7.21	93	0.23*	0.33**	−0.32**	−0.20+	0.79**	0.64**	—	
8. Child adaptive skills	55.64	8.84	85	−0.23*	−0.23*	0.21+	0.25*	−0.42**	−0.36**	−0.65**	—

Note: Parenting stress and dinnertime rituals were all mean centered.
$+p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

symptoms, and was inversely related to child adaptive skills, whereas mothers' parenting stress was only positively related to child behavioral symptoms, and negatively related to child adaptive skills. Mothers' reports of greater dinnertime rituals were correlated with lower child externalizing problems and behavioral symptoms, whereas fathers' dinnertime ritual reports were correlated with higher child adaptive skills. Child outcomes were highly intercorrelated, with the exception of internalizing and externalizing problems, which were not significantly correlated.

The moderation of the relationship between parenting stress and teacher reports of child outcomes by dinnertime rituals was tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach of hierarchical linear regression analyses, controlling for the number of children in the family, the couples' work shift schedule, and the total number of work hours and including main effects and hypothesized interactions. Interactions with child sex and parenting stress and child sex and rituals were also examined. All of the continuous variables were mean centered prior to being entered into the model so the conditional effects of each variable can be interpreted as the effect of each variable at the mean of other variables. For significant interaction effects, further probing of these interactions was tested using PROCESS, a macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2013), using three conditional values of the moderator: at the mean, one standard deviation below and above the mean value of the moderator.

Dinnertime Rituals and Child Sex as Moderators of Parenting Stress and Child Psychosocial Outcomes

Multiple hierarchical linear regressions were conducted with control variables entered in Step 1, followed by main effects of child sex, parenting stress, and dinnertime rituals entered in Step 2, two-way interaction effects of each predictor in Step 3, and finally the 3-way interaction of child sex, parenting stress, and dinnertime rituals in Step 4. These predictors were regressed on each individual child outcome including externalizing and internalizing problems, behavioral symptoms, and adaptive skills. The results are shown separately by each parent (Table 2 for mothers' predictors, Table 3 for fathers' predictors).

Mothers' Reports of Parenting Stress and Dinnertime Rituals. It was hypothesized that regular dinnertime rituals would buffer, or reduce, the effects of parenting stress on child psychosocial outcomes. Mothers' greater reports of dinnertime rituals significantly predicted fewer externalizing problems and fewer behavioral symptoms. Mothers' reports of parenting stress were significantly associated with poorer adaptive skills, and greater externalizing problems and behavioral symptoms. There was also a

Table 2. *Hierarchical Regression Models Predicting Children's Outcomes from Mothers' Reports of Parenting Stress and Family Rituals*

	Externalizing Problems		Internalizing Problems		Adaptive Skills		Behavior Symptoms Index	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Variable	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)
# of children	−1.56 (1.29)	−1.06 (1.27)	1.62 (1.76)	2.16 (1.92)	0.50 (1.71)	0.78 (1.77)	−0.56 (1.38)	−0.13 (1.38)
Work hours	0.01 (0.05)	−0.004 (0.05)	−0.09 (0.07)	−0.08 (0.07)	−0.04 (0.07)	−0.01 (0.07)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.05)
Couple shift[a]	0.40 (1.60)	−0.20 (1.51)	0.72 (2.17)	0.17 (2.27)	−0.12 (2.17)	−0.36 (2.15)	0.98 (1.71)	0.41 (1.62)
Child sex[b]		−3.69* (1.39)		−0.15 (2.08)		4.42* (1.99)		−3.71** (1.49)
Parenting stress		0.06+ (0.03)		0.02 (0.05)		−0.10* (0.05)		0.07+ (0.04)
Dinnertime		−0.31* (0.15)		−0.24 (0.23)		0.13 (0.21)		−0.32+ (0.16)
ΔR^2	.02	.20	.05	.02	.01	.13	.01	.19
F for ΔR^2	0.66	6.87**	1.52	0.56	0.21	4.00*	0.14	6.51**
R^2	.02	.22**	.05	.07	.01	.14+	.01	.19**

Note: Parenting stress, dinnertime rituals, work hours, and number of children were all mean centered.
[a]Couple shift: 0 = same shift, 1 = opposite shift. [b]Child sex: 1 = girl, 0 = boy. $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

main effect of child sex, such that girls had greater adaptive skills and fewer externalizing problems and behavioral symptoms, compared to boys. When testing for moderation, no significant interactions between mothers' reports of dinnertime rituals and parenting stress predicted children's outcomes.

Fathers' Reports of Parenting Stress and Dinnertime Rituals. It was also hypothesized that associations between fathers' reports of stress and child outcomes would be moderated by dinnertime rituals. Fathers' parenting stress was related to greater externalizing problems and behavioral symptoms, and marginally related to greater internalizing problems, for boys. There was no relation between fathers' parenting stress and child adaptive skills.

Second, there were significant interactions between fathers' reports of dinnertime rituals and child sex predicting several outcomes. Fathers' dinnertime rituals were related to greater adaptive skills (Figure 1a), fewer behavioral symptoms (Figure 1b), and fewer externalizing problems (Figure 1c) for girls, but not for boys.

Finally, the hypothesized three-way interaction of parenting stress, dinnertime rituals, and child sex was supported for internalizing symptoms. As shown in Figure 2, dinnertime rituals moderated the association between father's parenting stress and internalizing symptoms for girls, but not for boys. A closer look at the three-way interaction revealed that there was a significant positive association between fathers' stress on girls' internalizing symptoms at low levels of fathers' dinnertime rituals. However, the relation between fathers' parenting stress and girls' internalizing symptoms became nonsignificant and changed direction at high levels of dinnertime rituals. In other words, greater dinnertime rituals reported by fathers nullified the effects of high parenting stress on girls' internalizing symptoms.

Exploratory Analyses

One potential explanation for why results only emerged between fathers and daughters with no relationships for sons may be that fathers are generally more involved with sons. Researchers have suggested that fathers' involvement with sons is more expected and scripted (McHale et al., 2003); thus dinnertime may be one of the few, or only, scripted family interactions

Table 3. *Hierarchical Regression Model Results Predicting Children's Outcomes from Fathers' Reports of Parenting Stress and Family Rituals*

	Externalizing Problems				Internalizing Problems			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Variable	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)
# of children	−1.64 (1.19)	−1.57 (1.14)	−1.11 (1.17)	−1.11 (1.18)	2.54 (1.61)	2.41 (1.61)	3.18* (1.60)	3.34* (1.53)
Work hours	−0.002 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	−0.09 (0.07)	−0.06 (0.07)	−0.10 (0.07)	−0.12 + (0.07)
Couple shift	0.44 (1.58)	−0.25 (1.55)	−0.11 (1.60)	−0.09 (1.64)	0.01 (2.15)	−1.37 (2.19)	−0.71 (2.20)	0.59 (2.16)
Child sex (CS)		−3.83**(1.39)	−3.93**(1.39)	−3.93**(1.40)		0.88 (1.95)	0.78 (1.90)	0.45 (1.83)
Stress (PSI)		0.10**(.04)	0.13* (0.06)	0.13* (0.06)		0.17**(0.06)	0.21* (0.08)	0.15 + (0.08)
Dinner (DR)		−0.10 (0.19)	0.25 (0.27)	0.25 (0.28)		−0.29 (0.27)	0.40 (.38)	0.18 (0.37)
PSI x DR			−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01(0.02)			−0.04* (0.02)	0.001(0.02)
CS x DR			−0.64 + (.36)	−0.64 + (0.37)			−1.14* (0.50)	−0.89 + (0.49)
CS x PSI			−0.04 (0.08)	−0.03 (0.09)			−0.02 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)
CS x PSI x DR				−0.001 (0.02)				−0.09**(0.03)
ΔR^2	.02	.18	.04	.00	.05	.11	.08	.07
F for ΔR^2	0.64	5.82*	1.26	0.003	1.41	3.67*	2.69	7.66*
R^2	.02	.20**	.24*	.24*	.05	.16*	.24*	.31*

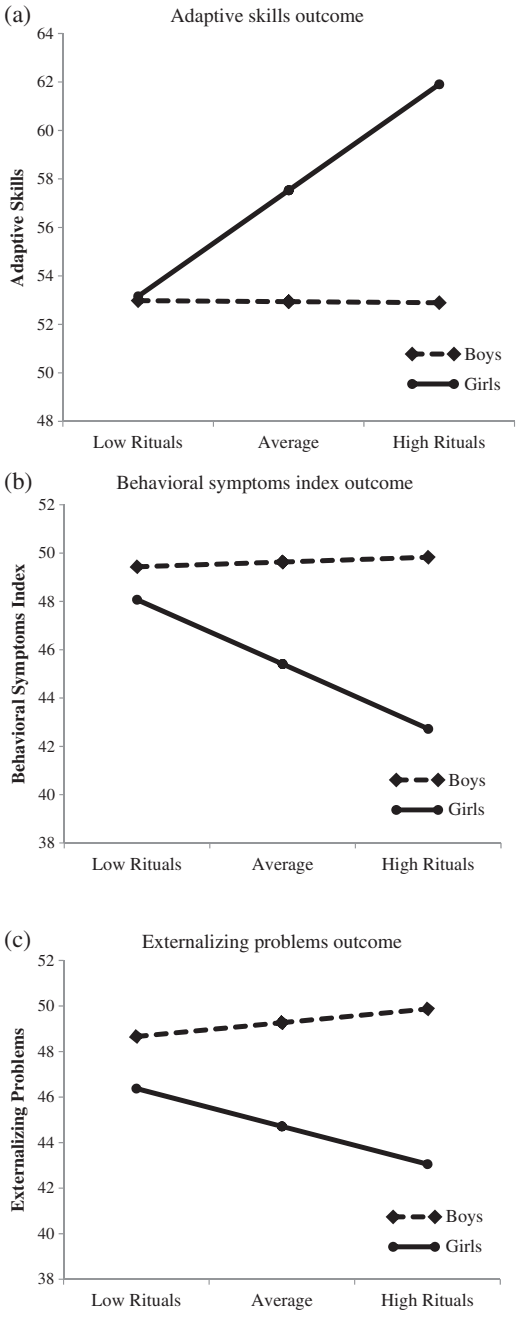
	Adaptive Skills				Behavioral Symptoms			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Variable	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)	*b*(SE)
# of children	0.92 (1.55)	0.15 (1.54)	−0.80 (1.57)	−0.96 (1.57)	−0.52 (1.26)	−0.38 (1.19)	0.22 (1.18)	0.27 (1.18)
Work hours	0.09 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	−0.05 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.05 (0.05)	−0.06 (0.05)
Couple shift[a]	−0.88 (2.12)	0.46 (2.11)	0.55 (2.15)	−0.12 (2.19)	0.90 (1.69)	−0.39 (1.62)	0.02 (1.63)	0.41 (1.67)
CS[b]		3.91* (1.92)	4.35* (1.89)	4.59* (1.89)		−3.38* (1.45)	−3.46* (1.41)	−3.56* (1.41)
Stress (PSI)		−0.07 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.08)	−0.09 (0.08)		0.13**(0.04)	0.17**(0.06)	0.15* (0.06)
Dinner (DR)		0.51 + (0.26)	−0.08 (0.36)	0.01 (0.37)		−0.27 (0.20)	0.25 (0.28)	0.19 (0.29)
PSI x DR			0.01 (0.02)	−0.004 (0.02)			−0.03* (0.01)	−0.02 (0.02)
CS x DR			1.21* (0.50)	1.14* (0.50)			−0.88* (0.37)	−0.81* (0.38)
CS x PSI			0.10 (0.11)	0.04 (0.12)			−0.03 (0.08)	0.003 (0.09)
CS x PSI x DR				0.05 (0.03)				−0.03 (0.02)
ΔR^2	.02	.14	.07	.02	.02	.21	.08	.01
F for ΔR^2	0.64	3.96*	2.05	1.91	0.43	7.19**	2.76*	1.16
R^2	.02	.16*	.23*	.25*	.02	.22**	.30**	.31**

Note: CS = child sex; PSI = Parenting Stress Index; DR = dinnertime rituals.

PSI, DR, Work hours, and number of children were mean centered.

[a]Couple shift: 0 = same shift, 1 = opposite shift. [b]Child sex: 1 = girl, 0 = boy. $+p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

Figure 1. Two-way Interactions of Fathers' Report of Dinnertime Rituals and Child Sex Predicting Teachers' Report of Children's Adaptive Skills, Externalizing Problems, and Behavioral Symptoms.



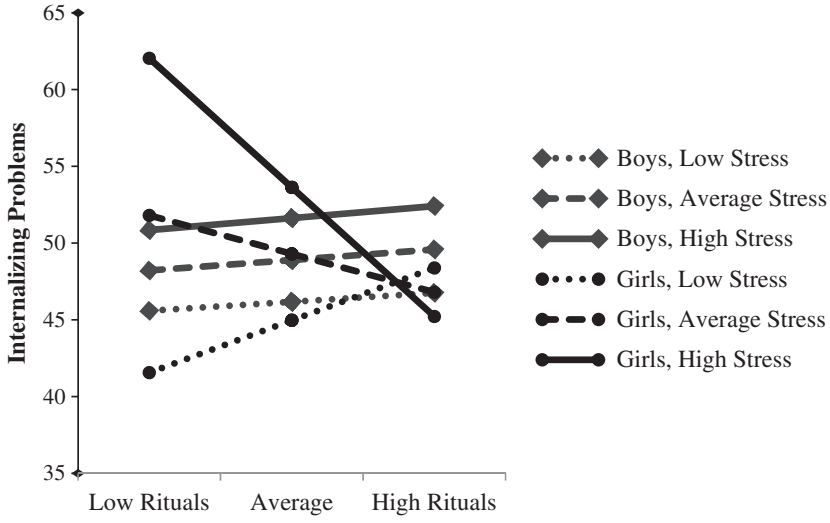
where daughters and fathers have time together. Based on this line of thinking, it was hypothesized that other, less scripted types of parenting involvement, such as shared leisure together, would be higher for fathers and sons than fathers and daughters. One-way ANOVA comparisons revealed that fathers spent more time in child care involvement with sons than daughters, $F(1, 87) = 5.993$, $p = .016$, confirming the hypothesis that fathers spend more discretionary time with sons than daughters. Mothers' reports of involvement revealed a similar sex effect, with mothers being more involved with daughters than with sons, $F(1, 90) = 5.389$, $p = .023$; however, the mean difference between daughters and sons was smaller for mothers (0.435) than for fathers (-0.531) and mothers were, overall, more involved with children of both sex than were fathers, $t(88) = -7.79$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of this study provide support for direct relationships between family dinnertime rituals and child outcomes, and between parenting stress and child outcomes, as well as some evidence for more complex moderated relationships. Only modest relationships linked mothers' reports of stress or rituals to children's outcomes, and the moderation model was not supported for mothers. Fathers' reports of dinnertime rituals were significantly related to more adaptive skills and lower behavioral symptoms, externalizing problems, and internalizing problems for girls, but not for boys. In addition, fathers' higher reports of dinnertime rituals diminished the effect of high parenting stress on girls' internalizing symptoms. Regardless of whether fathers reported low or high parenting stress, parenting stress was no longer related to girls' internalizing symptoms when fathers reported high dinnertime rituals. The effect of parenting stress and dinnertime rituals was not significant for boys.

Our findings support the existing literature that has more often found effects of family dinnertime rituals for girls compared to boys. Researchers have speculated that girls are more sensitive to nuances in family interactions and factors within the home environment (Churchill & Stoneman, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2004). In addition, girls may have greater self-regulatory capacities compared to boys' delayed maturation, making it easier for families

Figure 2. Three-way Interaction of Child Sex, Fathers' Report of Dinnertime Rituals, and Parenting Stress Predicting Children's Internalizing Behaviors.



to establish family rituals with girls (Ferretti, 2011). Another possible explanation for the lack of finding for boys is that household tasks and activities are often sex-typed and boys may benefit from an alternative kind of family ritual other than family dinnertime. Girls tend to spend more time engaged in household tasks and chores than boys, and thus girls may be more engaged in the family dinnertime ritual than boys. The role of context is important when examining gender-specific differences in parent–child interactions (Lindsey & Mize, 2001). Gender-based differences have emerged in the study of parent–child play activities. Fathers' tend to engage in more physical play with boys than with girls and mothers tend to play with their children in a more structured manner with empathic conversations (John, Halliburton, & Humphrey, 2013). This finding poses a possible explanation for how mothers and fathers differ in their behaviors toward their children, and the effect of fathers' engagement with boys may not be accurately reflected in a family ritual such as dinnertime. Another type of family ritual may have gender-specific effects on child outcomes, which can possibly account for the gender differences found in the study. In the future, different kinds of family rituals (e.g., bedtime rituals, family vacations) can be included to investigate whether boys may benefit from a different kind of family activity.

When examining why moderation emerged only for fathers and daughters, it was speculated that family dinnertime rituals represent a major source of scripted time when fathers interact with their daughters. Gender ideology theory posits that parents enact what they view as appropriate roles for men and women, such as paternal beliefs about being more involved and available to sons than daughters (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998). Mothers have typically been found to spend more time with their children than fathers (Harris & Morgan, 1991), and fathers typically spend more time with sons than daughters (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002). Thus, family dinnertime may provide a unique opportunity for fathers to connect with their daughters as one of few family settings in which fathers can regularly be available emotionally and physically for their daughters. In working-class families, fathers may have limited opportunity to interact with their daughters outside of dinnertime, thus making dinnertime rituals particularly important for girls. This explanation of results is consistent with past findings that fathers are more involved in caregiving tasks and more available to sons than daughters (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002). In our sample, fathers spend more time with boys than girls, and mothers spend more time with girls than boys, supporting the notion that fathers are enacting their gendered views

of spending time differently with boys versus girls.

The protective function of family rituals may be attributed to the sense of meaning that it brings to individuals in the family. When trying to explain why moderation only emerged for fathers and daughters, it may also have to do with the amount of meaning these interactions hold, especially for daughters, as this may be one of the few established times fathers get to spend with their daughters. When family dinnertime interactions are characterized by meaningful and genuine interest in children's well-being, children are less likely to experience internalizing symptoms (Fiese et al., 2006). Similarly, fathers' reporting greater family dinnertime rituals, thus more meaningful interactions with their daughters, also reduces the effect of stress on internalizing symptoms. Thus, the dinnertime rituals are serving as an important setting for positive and meaningful emotional exchanges with their fathers.

It is difficult to reduce the amount of stress that parents experience, especially low-income parents who must work long hours to support their families. Findings from this study show that families with stable rituals, like a set dinnertime, may protect some children from the adverse effects of stress. From the risk and resilience framework, family dinnertime rituals are an example of one important protective factor that can promote resilience even in the face of parenting stress within a working class context. The fact that fathers' time and emotional investment in a meaningful regular family activity can help protect daughters from internalizing problems sheds light on the unique dynamic that may be taking place between this dyad. Although there are parenting interventions targeting fathers' involvement in their children's lives, father involvement can matter in unique ways depending on child sex. Creators of parent interventions and father involvement programs should consider what specific activities can be implemented to best cater to the unique gendered dynamic between parent and child. Although this study examined family dinnertime rituals in particular, what may really matter most is time set aside for fathers to be involved in their daughters' lives in a way that is meaningful and consistent. Future research studies should incorporate a wider range of family rituals, and ask specific questions that can expand upon the gendered nature of parent–child dynamics that is taking place during dinnertime rituals. Also, future research should focus more attention on the role of fathers in promoting better outcomes for their children as well as how and why fathers' involvement may differ by child gender as the results of this study found that the relation between fathers' dinnertime rituals and stress were not the same across both girls and boys.

It is interesting that dinnertime rituals did not moderate the relationship between maternal stress and either sons' or daughters' outcomes. Revisiting the traditional gender roles and socialization of children, mothers are typically thought to be the ones assigned to organizing, preparing, and carrying out the dinnertime ritual, so dinnertime rituals may not buffer their parenting stress as it does for fathers. What may be considered as unique time together for fathers and daughters may not be unique for mothers and their children. Furthermore, mothers are more likely to compensate for stress by doing their best to have quality time with their children whenever they can, possibly explaining the lack of interaction for mothers' reports and child outcomes. Fathers may be more likely to allow work stress to detract from the quantity and quality of their time with their children, again making the dinnertime ritual a special opportunity to benefit the family, particularly between the father and his child. It will be important to learn more about how mothers and fathers differ in terms of their experiences with family dinnertime rituals – if mothers feel these family rituals add to their level of stress because of how much they are responsible for carrying out the ritual, or if there is something else that contributes to the lack of buffering effect of dinnertime rituals for mothers' stress on child outcomes. In this study, the focus was on the effect of family dinnertime rituals on child outcomes, however, future research can explore if dinnertime rituals may moderate the relationship between parents' stress and their own psychosocial outcomes. The positive benefits of family dinnertime rituals may extend to multiple family members, and it will be important to empirically examine this relationship.

Limitations of This Study

Our findings should be interpreted with caution given several limitations. The sample size was small and limited to working-class and low-income families, therefore the

generalizability of the findings are limited. The small sample size gave modest power to detect significant effects. Future studies should examine families in other cultural contexts, as values about gender roles may change the dynamic between parents and children. Also, though the data are from a larger longitudinal study, the analyses are cross-sectional. However, within the one time point of data collection, teacher reports of child outcomes were collected after the parents' report of parenting stress and dinnertime rituals. Therefore, the presence of the time lag, albeit a small one, and multiple sources of data (mothers, fathers, and teachers) help reduce the possibility that the associations between parenting stress and child behavior problems could be in the opposite direction. Although casual attributions cannot be made, the importance of the effects found should not be discounted as there was some time sequence and multiple sources of data. It will be useful to replicate this study with longitudinal data to investigate change over time in the relationship between parenting stress and child outcomes. Dinnertime rituals are but one example of family rituals, and there are other settings of family rituals that should be considered in the future such as weekends or bedtime rituals.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the study, our findings suggest that for fathers experiencing stress, family rituals serve a protective role for girls' psychosocial outcomes. The families in this study exist within a social context of having multiple jobs and having limited financial resources. Despite these contextual risk factors, it is evident that when fathers reported more family dinnertime rituals, this family practice significantly buffered the negative effects of stress on their daughters' psychosocial outcomes. Importantly, family dinnertime rituals, as a protective and stabilizing mechanism in family life, may be especially important for fathers and daughters, as this could be the only time fathers get to routinely interact with their daughters. The findings of this study add to the limited literature on the protective moderation relationship between parenting stress, family rituals, and child psychosocial outcomes. Future research should expand upon these findings to dig deeper in terms of the unique dyads that exist within family systems, and the role of meaningful and predictable family time together.

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