# Time Diary Data and Research - Example

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Full video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuwzxK8RTtg>

Welcome to the second video of the NCRM online resource on time diary data and research.

In this video, I will draw on my recent research on family time and digital devices to further exemplify the uniqueness of time-use measures that can be constructed with time diary data. The research I will discuss has been published in the Journal of Marriage and Family in 2019 and the lead author was my colleague Killian Mullan, who is also a time-use expert.

The starting point of our research were the ongoing concerns surrounding the widespread diffusion of mobile devices and their impact on face-to-face interactions and quality time. Several studies sought to contribute to the ongoing debate about the impact of technological change on family time, which is very often assumed to be negative. So, we had small-scale qualitative studies that found mixed evidence but also lack generalizability. Multi-disciplinary social surveys have sought to include screen time measures in questionnaires, but these do suffer from a set of drawbacks. To start with, such surveys often rely on parent proxies to measure children’s screen time. As you can imagine, this is likely to produce very inaccurate estimates of screen time. And at the same time, such survey questions treat screen time as a “main” activity; so they disregarding the fact that browsing the web or using social media often takes place during other activities such as eating or travelling, and this actually the calculation task for respondents even more difficult. Time-diary studies had shown that family time had increased over time, but there was no research on screens, and the measure of family time that was used was unidimensional, basically these studies focused on the time parents reports spending with children – so they actually used the co-presence column I showed in video 1).

Our research took a different approach. We produced different measures of family time using three diary columns that you can see noted in this picture. We showed the main activity column, the location column, and the co-presence column.

We drew on the two latest UK Time Use Surveys as we were interested to conduct a comparison over time. These surveys were household, which means that they collected diaries from everyone aged 8 and over in the household. So, we started by matching diaries of different family members. We actually constructed 5 different measures of family time: an overall measure of family time measured the time that parents and children spent together at the same location – we constructed this one solely by looking location diary column. We then used info from the co-presence column to decompose this measure into two other measures; we constructed a measure of co-present time, which refers to the time children reported being co-present with their parents and we also constructed an alone-together time measure which refers to the time children do not report being co-present with their parents. This decomposition had not been done by previous research. We also constructed a shared activity measure, which refers to the family time members were doing the same activities while being at the same location – for example, when all members were in the family home, and they were watching TV. And we specifically examined shared time in 3 activities of interest as well, those were leisure, television viewing, and eating.

This is a table from our paper that you can fully access online. You can see that total family time increased from 2000 to 2015. However, if you look at trends in co-present and alone-together time, you will see that this increase was due to an increase in alone-together time, that is, time that children and parents were at the same location, but they were not interacting, as they reported being alone. This suggests that an increase of total family time found in different pieces of research does not necessarily more interactions between family members and/or higher quality time. We also found that, contrary to discussions in the media, time in shared activities has been remarkably stable over time, while time in the 3 activities of interest (eating, television, and leisure) has only shown minor changes.

We then asked whether mobile devices have colonised family time, so to speak. To do this, we used the smartphone diary column that I showed you in Video 1. This column was only available in the 2014-2015 survey, so we were only able to conduct a cross-national analysis to explore the presence of smartphones in different aspects of family time.

And so, we were able to document this, with our time-diary data. This table shows estimates for different types of time –it is this type of information that was missing in existing evidence on screen time and family time. Our paper discussed that the presence of smartphones may actually lower quality time by potentially making interactions between family members less satisfying. However, we also emphasized that we need more information on how smartphones are actually used during family time– as the effects may be different if they are used to contact other family members or watch videos together.

I have used this short example to show that the use “location” and “who with” columns allowed us to capture varying levels of togetherness among family members that were possible by conventional social surveys. And that diaries provide a more comprehensive picture of internet enabled mobile device use. I would argue that the “device use” column is more in line with “real life” use of screens, and it recognizes that internet use takes place as a background activity nowadays.

If you are interest in time-use research, I invite you to engage with literature that has used time diaries to explore innovations brought about by this method.

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