CHAPTER ONE

A Journey Through Busyness

Bill Allen was coasting along in his truck on the way to a softball game, with two boys seated beside him, when he suddenly realized that one of them wasn't his. Bill's biggest fear had come to pass, forgetting one of his boys. He turned around and raced back to day care to retrieve his misplaced son. The concerned staff chided him, adding to his anxiety and embarrassment.

Why was Bill transporting these children in the first place? He and his wife, Sophia Rodriguez, a data entry clerk in a public sector organization, were committed to providing extra structured activities for the two sons they were adopting, despite the additional commute that it required. Believing that these activities were important for their children's development and demonstrated that they were good parents, they therefore squeezed another commute into a schedule that already was so varied, tight, and hectic that the slightest miscommunication or delay led to disaster.

Each day started with worries, since Bill and Sophia had carefully rehearsed the night before who would transport each of the children to and

from school. Who was picking up the children? Who was looking after Sophia's elderly mother, Alicia, who was in declining health and possibly afflicted with Alzheimer's disease? Who was monitoring Alicia's brother and her son, who were both disabled? At whose house were they meeting for the next gathering of their circle of nearly twenty relatives?

Recurring medical issues disrupted their dreams of a happy family. Some of these interruptions were trivial, though stressful, such as finding out that Alicia had not renewed her prescriptions, taking her to buy some more medicine, and finding that she had forgotten where she got it. Others were as distressing as the collapse from a stroke of an uncle at a New Year's celebration, or the unexpected death of a young niece from a brain hemorrhage.

These sudden crises shattered Sophia's relentless schedule. She was unable to relax. She constantly worried about where she was supposed to be, what she should be doing, and what surprises might derail her plans. Unlike her husband, she was the one with the flexible job, making her the person who had to take corrective action when the unexpected happened.

Bill and Sophia's daily lives were tightly scheduled already, and yet they took on even more obligations because of their sense of moral commitment to family and community. Despite his busyness, Bill dreamed of starting a small business to provide employment for "good" people who just needed a break. Their identities as responsible people rested upon seeking out opportunities to act, and it was precisely these activities that plunged them into busyness.

Bill and Sophia are not alone. For many Americans, busyness is like water to a fish; the context in which life is lived that is so obvious that it often passes without comment. This book is about families who are busy because they do lots of things. The demands of jobs fuel their sense of busyness, but this work often merges with the demands of family and community. People get work done wherever and whenever possible, including at home and in their cars. Family chores and personal tasks can also become interspersed at work, making it difficult to tell where work, family, community, and personal realms begin and end.

Millions of Americans spend countless hours coping with various forms of busyness that permeate their everyday lives. For some people, the focus of their busyness is family; for others it is job and career, or church and religious activities. For still others, busyness involves a combination of deeply held val-

ues or desired social activities. Sometimes, busyness results from a big event, like the catastrophic illness of a family member or a major reorganization at work, but much of it is the accumulation of many small, seemingly inconsequential demands on time, which collectively can be overwhelming. We search for the best ticket prices on the Internet, are "partners" with teachers in our children's education, and employ a battery of devices that promise to save labor if only we can learn to use and maintain them. Whether it is managing our careers, portfolios, or health, all of us have assumed more and more responsibilities in managing our lives. If shifts in how we spend our time portend change in society, then these busy lives are indicative of deep changes in American society over the past few decades.

Busyness is so deeply ingrained in many of today's families that people often take it for granted. It may seem so obvious as hardly to be worth analyzing. The activities that make up busyness may seem unimportant, but the phenomenon of busyness is anything but trivial. It consumes the lives of countless families. It is transforming America. Busyness reveals issues that reach to the heart of who we are and what we wish to become.

Busyness is at once ordinary and remarkable. Many of us seek ways to develop efficiency in our lives. However commonplace this may seem, we can also see in it something remarkable. Our busyness is more than how to fit everything into the scarce time available. Although we may experience busyness as a lack of time, or as life somehow speeding up, it is about much more than time.[1] A closer look at what we do reveals that many of us put considerable effort into managing our many commitments, and that we try to create buffers of technology and people, which we hope will help us cope. All of this coping and buffering creates hidden work, which we do in addition to everything else.

Busyness is also associated with meaning in our lives. The ways in which we see ourselves are inextricably wrapped up with busyness. Issues of meaning may derive from religious faith, but may equally arise in the context of our hectic days. Busyness involves time, but it is also about creating ourselves as moral beings who live in communities with other people, many of whom are also busy, albeit in varied ways and with different consequences.

This book recounts a journey through busyness undertaken between 1999 and 2001 with fourteen families, each of which has something to teach us about everyday lives filled with commitments and activities. The impetus for

this journey grew from research we conducted in Silicon Valley beginning in 1992, which suggested that balancing or juggling the demands of work and family are more complicated than typically portrayed. In most scholarly accounts, time spent at work is deemed a measure of the intrusiveness of work. While the number of hours is important, however, so are the characteristics of industries, employers, and jobs. Some people spoke of long hours, with little personal control over when they worked. Others worked fewer hours but were subject to their employer's demand for constant "accessibility." For still others, work affected home life through a rigorous travel schedule, or simply the challenge of working across time zones. The particular dimensions of work were significant to individuals and the others in their lives.

The details of families and households also required attention. Some people spoke of the difficulties of raising children and how these changed as children grew older. The jobs of spouses mattered too. We found that in families with two career builders, each was typically reluctant to constrain the work habits of the other, since the shoe might soon be on the other foot. Other participants in our study lived in families with one career builder, and the other person often alerted his or her partner when work habits threatened family life. In general, we found that the impact of work on home life was subtle and could not be measured just by the number of hours worked or by counting the interruptions to home life. For example, people brought models and metaphors from the workplace into family life. These included talk about efficiency and productivity, various techniques to manage interpersonal relationships, and tools such as total quality management. Furthermore, despite the emphasis on the impact of work upon family, we heard tales suggesting that elements of family and community life were imported into the workplace. Assumptions and values about how men and women should act, the relationships between family and work, and the responsibilities of superiors and subordinates were often products of family life that played out at work.

As the months passed, we learned more about the complex dance between work and family, but what we found remained tantalizingly incomplete. First, people repeatedly told us they had figured out how to manage the demands of work and family by keeping the realms separate.[2] Yet all too often we saw briefcases lugged home and heard of e-mailing or telephoning interrupting the supposedly separate domain of family. One person, for

example, when asked if she and her husband had any rules about working at home, replied, "No e-mailing at dinner." Then she laughed and shook her head. Parents often remarked that they interacted with their children until they could put them to bed and then begin a "second shift" of paperwork to be completed before the morning. Such revelations called attention to the gap between what people said and what they actually did. Second, busy people often told us that their families and friends understood and accommodated to their hectic schedules. We could only imagine what those others really said and how their lives were affected by the busyness of a spouse, parent, or friend. We set out to understand more completely how the juggling act of daily life really occurred.

Our research revealed that busyness was widespread, but it was most transparent among working families with children. Not only did parents have their own obligations at work, but they were also affected by the hectic lives of their children. Children, too, had their own forms of busyness and their own views about it, which often differed substantially from those of their parents.

Our journey with the fourteen families began, as ethnographic ones do, with a commitment to study people on their own turf, doing what was important to them. Although we talked with them throughout the day, we did not interview them using our questions, but rather tried to discover what mattered to them about their lives: we learned *their* questions. The lessons we learned were not always the ones we expected, but they were important to the people in our study.

Our choice was to study a few families in depth, rather than to survey a larger number, so choosing them was critical. We settled on fourteen families whose members said they were middle-class. Within the constraint of a small sample of dual-career families to be studied in depth, we tried to choose ones that would provide a variety of lifestyles. They varied in the number and age of children. Income was a relatively poor criterion of middle-class status in a region where the median house price hovered at about $500,000. Still, the team sought several families whose members expressed middle-class values about lifestyle and education, but who were struggling financially to realize their aspirations. In addition, we sought at least one family whose income and lifestyle placed it beyond the middle class. We also sought families that varied in ethnicity or country of origin.

Our goal was not to seek a representative sample, since this was meaningless with such a small number. Instead, we assumed that a culturally diverse sample of families would increase the variety of strategies used to manage work and family. We also recruited families that included workers from the public and private sectors, as well as from different industries.

We sought to include families who believed that they had found ways to cope with all the commitments of their time, rather than ones who saw themselves as "dysfunctional"—however defined. Our assumption was that the former would teach us about everyday problems and dilemmas, as well as how to handle them, while the latter would only expand the litany of problems. Above all, we needed families whose members were open and would tolerate our presence.

Families participated for several reasons. Many people valued our willingness to spend time with them in order to capture how they saw the world; they contrasted it with the often-glib pronouncements in the media. Many believed that busyness was important, yet overlooked, and they viewed their participation as contributing to their community. Most families, too, contained at least one person who reflected on the family's practices and sought to improve its capacity to cope with complex responsibilities. Although we were explicit that therapy was not part of the study, some people undoubtedly participated in it in order to work through issues within their families.

How to study busy families was also a challenge, for sitting in their homes would likely result in many lonely hours. Family members were mobile and dispersed during much of the day. To provide continuity, we decided that only one of us would study each family and, in fact, we each only met the members of "our" families. Initially, our presence constrained how people acted, but we were soon accepted as part of their lives, someone to be taught the family's way of doing things.

We conducted our fieldwork with each family for about one year, but we did not work with all of them at the same time. Instead, we staggered the study of the different families over a span of three years. We divided our fieldwork into phases that were adapted to each family. First, we shadowed individual family members during their days, often remaining with them for 10–12 hours at a time. This meant arriving early at the family home, accompanying a family member at work, and then returning home with him or her at the end of the day, often stopping to collect children or dinner on

the way. When the focus was on a child, we typically accompanied the child throughout the school day and accompanied him or her to after-school activities. Child and fieldworker then returned home together, usually after being picked up by a parent.

This most intense phase of fieldwork lasted two to four months, and we usually spent four complete days with each family member, resulting initially in 140–70 hours per family. During these hours, we took meticulous field notes either on a laptop computer or, if that was too intrusive, in small notebooks. The second phase focused on more collective "family activities." Then we often began our work when one or more family members arrived home after school, work, or errands. We joined families for dinner and after-dinner activities, such as homework, meetings such as Cub Scouts, watching television, or playing video games. We also joined families on weekends in order to observe activities ranging from running errands or performing chores to hosting baptisms or family reunions. Individual members were asked to think about activities or events that expressed something important or distinctive about the family and to notify us when we could observe these. We remained in touch with family members until the end of the year and beyond, asking about changes in the family and the routines of its members and visiting to capture important activities or events. We continued to receive information from the families after the one-year period of shadowing, and on occasion we met with various family members, who updated us on their lives.

Our fieldwork thus took the form of classic ethnographic participant-observation. Sometimes participation dominated, as when a fieldworker joined a family at a party, Easter egg hunt, or holiday dinner. At other times, especially when a family member was at work or school, observation dominated. The interplay of participation and observation was extremely fine-grained. For example, laws, policies, and practices sometimes constrained us, as when Charles Darrah shadowed a fireman or J. A. English-Lueck, a pair of attorneys. English-Lueck was not allowed to be present during client meetings, and Darrah was instructed where to stand and what to say to observers who might not understand his role. Yet the balance could shift abruptly to participation. Darrah, for example, accompanied someone to a corporate board meeting, signed a nondisclosure agreement, and was admonished to remain silent throughout a meeting that

was expected to be tense or hostile. Yet board members soon solicited his opinions about the issues facing the company. Fieldwork often was a roller coaster of involvement and detachment, coolness and intimacy, informality and formality.

Unlike most kinds of social research, ethnographers develop close relationships with those they study. They do not always result in close friendships, but it is difficult to maintain the stance of dispassionate scientist for a year. Initially, families were uncertain about having an ethnographer around, and more than once they asked whether they had to pretend we were not there while they were eating dinner. Even if that had been ethnographically desirable, it clearly violated the rules of hospitality, and we routinely dined with the families. Doing so yielded important data and avoided an awkward situation, but it also meant we broke bread with the people we were studying. Friendships formed, but they were friendships of a special kind and were treated as such by both participants and researcher.

The people we studied were living lives not unlike our own, and it was sometimes tempting to offer advice. For example, a parent might be struggling to find a supervised activity for a child at a particular time, and we might know of a likely possibility because we lived in the same area. If we suggested it, we were helping someone who was helping us, but we would also be shaping the very strategies we were there to observe; so we remained silent. More typical were requests from a family member for advice. A parent might ask us how to improve a child's school performance, because, after all, we typically knew the most about what went on in class, since we spent days sitting in the classroom, chatting with the teacher, and watching kids play during after-school programs. One of us was asked how to respond to negative performance reviews at work, and another to suggest potential nannies for the family.

Underlying the complexity of the relationships is the concept of reciprocity. Although each family was paid a token $1,500 honorarium, this was not intended as payment for information, for what they offered us was beyond remuneration. Besides, once fieldwork began, the logic of reciprocity became evident. While we eschewed the role of family advisor, families often asked us about our own families, and we often answered those questions. Not to do so would have exposed the asymmetry in information about respective lives, and it might have harmed fieldwork in some cases. At the

same time, we avoided making judgments and always explained that our way of handling a situation was just one of many alternatives, as was theirs.

Reciprocity thus swept us into the lives of the families. Often the requests were blatant and humorous in their self-interestedness. Sometimes, people scheduled days to be shadowed because they needed another person to get them into a carpool lane during a particularly horrific commute, and the ethnographer would serve. "You might as well be good for something," they would joke. Darrah agreed to meet with a colleague of Eleanor Flaherty's and eventually to serve on an advisory board for an organization she was founding. Eleanor was pleased at being able to "deliver" someone, since it helped build her professional network. She explained that this was how she had built a successful career.

What these and many other incidents show is that, just as we used other people for our purposes, and so had an obligation to protect them from harm, so too others used us. How they did this taught us lessons about how they juggled work and family obligations, and capturing this insider's perspective is one reason for doing ethnography. Each family member understood in his or her own way what we were doing and why we were doing it. Many of them considered what we found out about them to be important and interesting. They, of course, brought their own perspectives to bear. One child, for example, explained to her friends that the researcher was writing her life history for a book, while a middle-school boy from a troubled background explained to friends that the ethnographer was his bodyguard. When Darrah explained to a teenager that the boy himself could choose when he was to be shadowed, so as not to embarrass him, he responded, "There is nothing you can do that won't embarrass me."

The families sized us up and decided what to reveal to us. One man said his family was alone in the region, and only later did we discover that his brother's family lived a few blocks away; he was embarrassed by the latter's success. A child in another family had a criminal record that was not initially revealed. Family members thus sought to control how their lives were represented, and their understanding of what was ethnographically interesting seldom corresponded exactly to how we saw their family. Our individual characteristics also entered into the equation, often in ways we could only see in retrospect. James Freeman, for example, had done his original doctoral research in a temple town in India and for many years taught courses

on anthropology and religion. Coincidentally or not, notes about his four families reveal much about their religious beliefs. Darrah and English-Lueck had long studied information technology at work and home, and their notes contain descriptions of personal digital assistants and cellular phone use.

The interpersonal dynamics of ethnography with families could sometimes seem overwhelming, but the unfolding dramas and dilemmas taught profound lessons. Arguably, they were why we were there in the first place, participating in the messiness and ambiguity of daily life, rather than handing people surveys they could quickly answer. Of course, people might lie, but even lies can open the door to deeper conversations about why the lie was told, and why it took the form it did. While it can be tiresome guarding against offering advice or being used in others' agendas, the very fact that people tried to involve us in their lives on their own terms gave us the chance to discuss those lives with greater sensitivity.

As ethnographers, we thus view the very difficulties and limitations of fieldwork as providing additional sources of data. Reciprocity need not be achieved by offering answers to life's imponderables, but rather by providing an opportunity for a particular form of dialogue that is otherwise largely missing from the lives of busy families. Indeed, many families asked at the onset of fieldwork if they would receive a "report card" at the end, but none actually asked for it when the time arrived. Through the reflections and conversations about their practices that they had engaged in over the months, there was no need.

We try in these pages to provide glimpses into the daily lives of ordinary people. While our goal is to be faithful to those lives while using them to develop the idea of busyness, we do not claim to be describing the totality of their lives. We do not provide charts tallying the minutes and hours spent at work or home. Doing so would give the reader both a false sense of precision, while distorting the central lesson our journey taught us: busyness is about our activities and what they mean to us.

We suspect that many readers may have been motivated to pick up this book because busyness is a concern or annoyance in their own lives. Many of the people who contacted us about participating in the study were similarly motivated. We tried to avoid thinking of busyness as a problem unless a family saw it that way. We promise readers neither glib answers nor universal solutions to enhancing their efficiency or productivity, much less how to

create a good family or life. But in following the journey of our study, you may come to appreciate why it is so difficult to slow down or pull away from busyness.

Through the stories of the ordinary people in this book, we try to engage the reader in a conversation about the activities in his or her own life. This is a challenge for both you and us, but arguably the result will be more valuable than another set of admonitions about what to do. Anything else would be a betrayal of what "our" families taught us: the dilemmas of busyness are in the details, and so "one size fits all" solutions are irrelevant at best, harmful at worst. Accordingly, we are led to a mindfulness about our obligations and how we fill our days.

In the remainder of Part One, we elaborate the concept of busyness and ask what drives it in the lives of so many people. Then, in Part Two, we explore how people cope with busyness and how that coping comes to constitute a hidden or tacit work that further complicates our days. Coping, however, has its limits, and so in Part Three, we look at how people create buffers of technology and other people that enable them to better cope. Finally, we close our journey with a look back at where we have ventured, as well as ahead to what all this portends for the society in which we live.