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A Paragon of Family Ritual: The Zimmerman Family Reunion

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A case study of a family reunion ritual is showcased in this analysis. Fifty-nine members of one multigenerational family were interviewed and answered questions about their most meaningful family reunion memories. The author integrated the interview data, reunion observations, and family documents to answer research questions about the construction of meaningful reunion rituals, the meaning attached to ritualizing activities, and the transformation of the ritual over time. Three metaphorical phases—labeled allegro, legato, and decrescendo —describe how family members described changes in the family reunion ritual over time. The findings show that members of this multigenerational family reported alignment with the properties of family rituals theorizing – transformation, communication, and stabilization.

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The inception of family reunions in the United States began in the mid to late 1800s as a way to reconnect kin after civil war and westward expansion (Ayoub, 1966; Taylor, 1982). The prevalence of family reunions was strong until the world wars and Great Depression occupied the minds and efforts of the nation. After World War II, reunion activity surged and continues to function as a way to fortify the family as an important social institution (Taylor, 1982). In modern times, nearly 72 million adults, or one third of the US population, travel to a family reunion according to a 2009 report from the US Travel Association (Kluin & Lehto, 2012). Research on family reunions would be beneficial because of their contributions to identity development, dis/continuity with the past, and stress management (Baxter, 2014).

Family reunions have been shown to function to "re-engage in face-to-face interaction" to "keep alive both family ties and memories of family, and to reinstantiate and celebrate their concept of family" (Sutton, 2004, p. 243). They are important to "meld the past and present" and provide "indications of how individual lives are tied into and affected by the world in which they live" (Seltzer, 1988, p. 652). Reunions are meaningful because new family members are introduced, family histories are shared, and connections are recalled (Ayoub, 1966). Attendees at family reunions stipulated that "knowing your family is knowing yourself" (Sutton, 2004, p. 253). Individuals reported their motivation to attend family reunions as family history and togetherness, cohesion of the immediate family unit, family communication, and family adaptability (Kluin & Lehto, 2012). Despite claims of the importance of family reunions, searches for relevant literature yield a dearth of studies to extend our understanding of these rituals. The case study presented forthwith portrays a family reunion ritual, interprets values laden within ritualizing events, and chronicles ritual transformation with the passage of time.

Family Ritual Theorizing

Wolin and Bennett (1984) purport three properties in their family ritual theorizing: transformation, communication, and stabilization. The property of transformation describes the physical and mental changes undertaken by family members to initialize each ritual performance. These anticipatory preparation activities have also been called deliberateness, and they moderately correlate with affect and the quality of symbols (i.e., Fiese & Kline, 1993). The symbols used during family rituals often hold meaning and the ritual events are symbolic activities. The meaning-laden, symbolic nature of rituals links to the second property of family ritual theorizing–communication.

The communication property distinguishes between affective and symbolic forms of communication, noting that ritualizing events generate affect among members and that meaning is attached to the events themselves. The communication property is thereby evinced through the spoken and nonverbal interactions enacted during family rituals and the symbolic, meaning-laden moments and artifacts included in ritual performances. Jewish family members poignantly describe the Shabbat ritual by the closeness felt as well as the connotations of the meal, special attire, and candles (Marks, Hatch, & Dollahite, 2017). The symbolic form of communication emanates with repeated and systematic enactments that hold special meaning (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). These enactments equate to "symbolic acts in which homage is paid to some sacred object such as the family" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 141; Goffman, 1967). Within the family context, rituals are ''voluntary, recurring, patterned communication event[s], whose jointly enacted performance by family members pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family's identity and its web of social relations'' (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, pp. 262–263). Family rituals are seen in celebrations, traditions, or patterned

interactions, of which the least is known about traditions (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). The family reunion has been identified as one form of tradition-as-ritual (Baxter & Clark, 1996). As a tradition, family reunions "revolve around a family's temporal identity with its past" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 267). As a ritual, family reunions satisfy several criteria, such as *social, voluntary, regularly occurring*, and *performance based* (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006).

Family communication scholarship on reunion and ritualizing has reinforced these criteria with limitations. For example, Korean adoptees' reunions with birth mothers showed that exchanging gifts, touching, or outings, among others comprised the ritualizing activities (Docan-Morgan, 2014). These activities qualify as social, voluntary, and performance-based, but not regularly occurring. The interaction elements of narrative, gratitude, advice, or expressions of love identified during these encounters seem to be likely behaviors evident during family reunion rituals, but the scant research on family reunions has yet to examine specific family communication attributes. Military couples also engage in reunion after deployment, but their reunion is between two people and moves toward reintegration, whereas family reunions occur among networks of individuals who have much less interdependence. Regardless, military couples were found to revise family roles and responsibilities after reuniting (Knobloch, Basinger, Wehrman, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016). Similarly, such revisions could be evident among members at family reunions because of changing family membership and health situations. An examination of the family reunion ritual satisfies all criteria for ritual and subsequently benefits family ritual theorizing.

Equally important to rendering these studies alongside the criteria of rituals, is to recount symbolic, ritualizing events. For example, the marriage vow renewal ceremony includes vow exchange, an officiant, an audience and a post-renewal celebration (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002).

Likewise, remarriage rituals materialize as the white wedding, adhering to traditional American wedding norms; the modified white wedding, similar to the white wedding but with less formality and fewer attendees; the civil ceremony, separating the legal and celebratory components in both space and time; the casual event, a highly informal affair; elopement; or a family-centered ceremony, with homage paid to the stepfamily rather than the couple (Baxter et al., 2009). The portrayal of ritual events describes the milieu where the communication-oriented task of ascribing meaning transpires. Indeed, rituals are symbolic events that hold meaning for many participants. Family reunion rituals also reinforce values (Seltzer, 1988), yet the nature of these values and how they are conveyed is unknown. Of course, there are participants at ritual events who have a negative experience or attach no meaning, what scholars call an empty ritual (e.g., Baxter et al., 2009; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). To be sure, the same event can be perceived as both meaningful and empty depending on the participant (Baxter et al., 2009). However, if ritual event organizers have not reflexively considered the meaning ascribed to specific activities or the needs of family members, then the ritual may, over time, lose its symbolism and subsequently, its very existence. Such a concern was noted in a family of Caribbean descent, specifically the sacred homage given to the geographic location of the reunion (Sutton, 2004). The current study incorporates description and the interpretive task of ascribing meaning to the family reunion ritual with the following research questions:

RQ1: What family reunion ritual events hold special meaning for members?

RQ2: What meaning is embedded in symbolic, family reunion ritual events?

The property of stabilization acknowledges the predictability generated by the patterned and recurring nature of rituals. Such stability with the symbolic quality of family rituals was shown to positively relate to self-esteem and negatively relate to anxiety (Fiese & Kline, 1993).

With these positive outcomes in mind, it is noteworthy that much of the family ritual theorizing relies on data collected from two-generations of family members, even though theorists acknowledge that ritualizing applies to multiple generations of kin. Further, extended family relationships may be perceived as inconsequential but hold relevance nonetheless (Floyd & Morman, 2006). Extended family relationships in multigenerational families provide a unique site for communication scholarship because of their complex networks of interactions and infrequent interactions. Additionally, this study selectively confronts not only the property of communication, but transformation, as well, which is lacking within the family rituals literature (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006), by asking:

RQ3: How do multigenerational family reunion rituals transform over time?

Method

Case: The Zimmerman Family

This project relies on the case study method to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 2005, p. 2). Case study benefits the research process by submitting context-dependent, intensive examinations of real-life situations as they occur (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006). Case studies are thorough analyses that yield detailed, rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Flyvberg, 2013). A single-case design (Yin, 2005) is employed because of the uniqueness and representativeness one, specific family can provide. Additionally, the family in this case qualifies as an extreme/deviant case (Flyvberg, 2006, 2013) because the multigenerational interactions push the boundaries of family ritualizing findings, which have been based on two-generational accounts (see Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

The specific case for this project is the family of Christian (Chris) and Florence Zimmerman, which consists of 189 direct descendants as of April 2017 (13 children, 43

grandchildren, 82 great-grandchildren, and 52 great-great grandchildren) of whom 16 are

deceased (see Figure 1). Chris and Florence's children were born between 1927 and 1946 (age

range of 19 years) and the oldest and youngest two never lived in the same house. Christian died

in 1962 at the age of 59, and Florence died in 1991 at the age of 86. This family typifies a

Midwest farm family, particularly those who survived the Great Depression, by their hard-

working quality (Thompson, Kellas, Soliz, Thompson, Epp, & Schrodt, 2009). The twelve

children who reached the age of maturity (referred to as "The 12") participated in considerable

manual labor, and the older siblings recall the poverty of the Great Depression with clarity.

Despite poverty, these family members recognize Chris and Florence's industrious practices that

helped them survive the Depression. As each of The 12 left home, ten of them ventured to larger

communities for military service, advanced education and/or employment. One son farmed the

family farm while also serving as an elected, county official. One daughter married a local

farmer and lived in a nearby community.

The current project came about when a grandson of Chris and Florence requested that

someone in the family record the stories the aunts and uncles told about their lifestyle while

growing up on a farm in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. Three of Chris and Florence's four

daughters had already passed away at the time of the request and a sense of urgency silently

weighed on the family because of the recent and significant health declines of two sons. One son

passed away during data collection, adding urgency to its completion. Two granddaughters of

Chris and Florence volunteered for this effort, one of which conducted this analysis. The author

is an interpersonal and family communication scholar who saw potential for new insights about

family communication in multigenerational families and extended family networks, and she is

one of 40 living grandchildren of Florence and Chris.

Data Collection

Progonoplexia, or the "deep obsession with ancestry" (Zerubavel, 2012, p. 4), incites

many people to invest time and resources into searches for family members both deceased and

living. Ancestry work builds the scaffold for a family, yet the family identity, family stories, and

other qualitative aspects of the family intensifies a deep development of the family's history. The

current case study captures these elements from the living using the data collection tools of

interviews, documents, archival records, and participant observation (Yin, 2005) and offers a site

of kinkeeping to preserve the rich, ancestral meaning of a particular, yet typical, Midwest farm

family. IRB approval was obtained from "University" with a special stipulation that

confidentiality could *not* be maintained because participants were from the same family.

Interviews. Interviews (see Appendix A) of consanguine or legally adopted family

members began at the 2013 family reunion. A total of 118 family members made an appearance

at some point during the 3-day affair. Twenty-four interviews were conducted at the reunion,

which is a three-day camping affair located at the Zimmerman family farm. These interviews

were held in or near campers, in automobiles, or at a picnic table. This natural environment

meant that family members were engulfed in the reunion milieu, partaking in customary

activities, including eating, drinking, smoking, relaxing, and bantering with others. In September

2013, 12 additional interviews were conducted in Omaha, NE over two days at the home of the

author's cousin. Later, family members who had not been interviewed were invited to do so via

e-mail and/or Facebook. Twelve additional interviews were conducted over the telephone. In

February 2014, four of five cousins from one sibling group were interviewed together.

Interview questions asked family members to describe what it means to be a Zimmerman,

what makes membership in a large family unique, what function the annual reunion serves for

them, and memories or stories about Chris and Florence, their children, and the reunion. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 20 minutes to an hour and yielded 225 pages of single-spaced, transcribed data. Thompson and colleagues (2009) recommended incorporating multiple generations into interview protocols, and this study heeds that recommendation. Fifty-nine family members from three generations were interviewed, of whom 42 completed the informed consent form. Of these 42, 8 were the children of Chris and Florence (G1), 25 were grandchildren (G2), and nine were great-grandchildren (G3). Participants ranged in age from 7 to 83, and there were 23 males and 19 females. Five interviews were with children between the ages of 7 and 18 who completed an assent form and whose parents granted consent. All family members who participated are Caucasian.

Documents. Family legacies add character, richness, and identity to a family's ancestry and require effort by kinkeepers (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996) to capture, edit, and disseminate information. The efforts of previous Zimmerman family kinkeepers provided two types of documents: a notebook with genealogical information on the descendants of Chris and Florence, and minutes and attendance lists from the annual reunions and business meetings. These documents provided the factual information for the case study, specifically the number of descendants (living and deceased) and the number of people who attended the reunion each year.

Analysis and Interpretation

Miles and Huberman (1984) argue that "we should make explicit the procedures and thought processes that qualitative researchers actually use in their work" (p. 22). This section, therefore, explicates the procedures for analysis and interpretation. Data analysis began using Lindlof and Taylor's (2011) procedures to interpret themes emanating from the data. Data management and reduction occurred early in analysis and conceptual development evolved with

analytical development (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Specifically, the data for this study were managed by first sorting transcripts by family generation. The children of Chris and Florence were identified as first generation, their grandchildren as second generation, and their great-grandchildren as third generation. Data reduction involved an initial reading of transcript printouts and selecting excerpts that coincided with the purpose of the project. When a term, phrase, or story awakened a sense of significance, this fragment was located in the word processed version of the transcript, copied, and pasted into a new computer file, which was named with a code word or phrase. In this way, the same excerpt could be placed in more than one category. Some of these file names included farm life, Grandma and Grandpa, meaning of a large family, motivation for story-telling, or reunion memories. Within each file, asides were added as needed to explain, clarify, or interpret a particular detail from the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Commentaries were also recorded by following a short excerpt with noteworthy aspects, such as nonverbal cues or hesitation. Categories aggregated similar "covering" ideas or concepts together as they emerged from the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 246).

Eleven categories emerged during early data analysis. The data compiled in the *reunion memories* category were used for this study. This category contained recollections of participants' enduring memories of reunion experiences and conversations. Continued analysis of the data in this category adhered to the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2013) by reading, classifying, describing, and interpreting the data. Coding occurred "incident to incident" rather than word-by-word or line-by-line (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54). In this way, constant comparisons (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were made from family member to family member. Repeated *in vivo* codes, such as 'old folks dinner' or 'talent show' revealed salient themes. The analysis and interpretations are represented as themes in the findings and discussion section below.

Validation

Triangulation procedures verify findings and support trustworthiness of the interpretations made in qualitative research (Lather, 1986; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Member checks and exemplars serve as the primary techniques to ensure confidence in these findings. Member checks (Creswell, 2013) were completed by six family members. They received a draft of the results section and were asked to read and comment on the interpretation. Examples of family members' responses include "nailed it," "seems very accurate," and "a very nice article." Exemplars (Mishler, 1990) are woven throughout the findings to showcase typical statements by family members that support interpretations.

Secondarily, the factual information was verified at multiple points in time from the family secretary/treasurer. Family members were born and passed away as the data were collected, analysis was conducted, and manuscripts were prepared. Intermittent contact with the family secretary/treasurer verified the factual data about this family. Musical metaphors related to tempo were also employed in the findings section to elucidate the analysis and interpretations. Appointing metaphors boosts descriptive analyses to the level of inference while also integrating varied aspects of the results (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

A brief explanation of my narrative presence may be informative to bolster confidence in the analysis and interpretation. In some ways, I am a negative case analysis for this study. I did not know many Zimmerman relatives because of geographical dispersion. As the reunions burgeoned, I felt a like an outsider, in part because I could not understand my suburban-dwelling relatives' interest in having fun outside. My immediate family farmed and partook of similar activities that Zimmerman relatives found nostalgic. I could not understand the appeal of the

reunion, held outside in the Midwest July heat, to my extended relatives. From this vantage point, the meaning attached to the reunion activities for many relatives differed from my own.

<div align="center">**Findings and Discussion**</div>

Families compose their own rituals, laden with meaning and significance for their members. The first research question asked what specific events at a family reunion hold special meaning for members and the second question asked what meaning was embedded in these events. The third research question asked how the ritualizing events transform over time. The movements in a musical score provide an apt metaphor to reconstruct the Zimmerman family reunion ritual over time. The conception of the reunion and the initial gatherings are depicted as the first movement in a musical score, which began with an allegro tempo. Once the events were routinized, the second movement proceeded at a legato pace as reunion enactments were smooth and fluid. The third movement mimicked a decrescendo as the reunion rhythm de-escalated with the passing of time. A detailed account of each movement and a corresponding analysis follows. First names of family members are used, accompanied by their age at the time of data collection and generational level within the family (G1 for children of Chris and Florence, G2 for grandchildren, and G3 for great-grandchildren).

First Movement: Allegro

Typical features of family reunions consist of a buffet meal and business meeting (Ayoub, 1966). The Zimmermans retained these features in their exposition of the reunion and also deviated from these norms by incorporating special elements. Several of the children of Chris and Florence and their spouses collaboratively composed the inaugural reunion. Most of these composers were deceased at the time of data collection, but the outcomes of their interactions have been performed annually for over 25 years.

The initial decisions for reunion organizers were to select a place, time, and agenda for the gathering. Family elders overwhelmingly selected a piece of family property in rural northwest Missouri colloquially called White Cloud Bottom for the reunion setting. Florence and Chris moved to this 160-acre farm in 1927, one year after their marriage, and lived there for 18 years. It is not surprising that their children selected White Cloud Bottom as the site of the reunion because it was where most of The 12 spent their formative years. Located seven miles from the nearest community, White Cloud Bottom is accessible by highway and gravel roads. Bordered by trees or other farms, the homestead offered privacy and seclusion to its attendees. Connections to place have been shown to bridge gaps to forbearers and with future generations (Bennett, 2015) and may serve a similar function for families who select family properties for reunion locations. Future research could analyze the relationship between place of reunion rituals and family cohesion, or other related variables.

A brief interlude is necessary to describe the physical space of the reunion events as well as the transforming properties (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) achieved at White Cloud Bottom. The gated driveway led family members to the former house and yard area, which became a campground for many family members. A covered pavilion was constructed at the site of the former farmhouse to provide a central gathering space for all-family events. Serving tables lined one side, picnic tables went down the center, and two refrigerators and aluminum benches lined the other side. The vast yard area was ideal for tents, campers, RVs, and parking. Close to the pavilion, a milk separating room had been converted to "the shack" where a stove, two refrigerators, sink, and cabinets were available. City water was hauled in and placed in a tank adjacent to the shack. Rented port-o-potties were placed at the furthest end of the yard area. The re-constructed outhouse was available close to the shack, as well, for the very brave or desperate.

Composers also selected dates for the reunion and activities to do during the reunion. They wanted some scheduled events that brought family members together for shared experiences. To that end, the exposition of the reunion itemized an eclectic agenda that coincided with the weekend of the first Sunday of July. The reunion festivities kicked off with an Old Folks Dinner on Friday night. On Saturday afternoon, family members gathered for a private mass with a local priest, which was followed by a hay rack ride, weanie roast, talent show, and fireworks display. On Sunday, a potluck dinner was held, followed by the reunion business meeting and then an auction, which served as a fundraiser to cover reunion expenses. The gaps between these events were filled by exploring the farm, visiting, resting, and myriad other activities emerging from the collective imaginations and interactions of the campers.

The early years of Zimmerman reunions were filled with activity, laughter, commotion, and energy, which coincides with the musical term *allegro*, meaning to play the musical score lively and fast. Each event was performed with both routinization and improvisation. Everyone at the reunion knew what to expect, yet there were twists here and turns there to make each year's rendering unique. The most meaningful reunion events, as mentioned by nearly all family members during their interviews, harmonize excerpts from the interviews with an interpretation of the meaning linked to each activity.

The Old Folks Dinner. This meal served as the opening ceremony to proclaim the assembly of members. The menu featured deep fried liver and gizzards prepared by The 12 as the main course, while other family members provided the sides and desserts. Steve's (G2, age 62) exemplar below indicates that this event was memorable enough that he included it when describing the reunion to his friends.

I like to tell about the things, the rituals that we have. If I tell people about them, they go,

'Oh my God, I wish OUR reunion was like that,' you know, with the hayride, and it used

to be the weenie roast and the old folks dinner.

This meal is likely memorable because it featured liver and gizzards, which are for many the

least palatable pieces of chicken. Brian (G2, age 51) confirmed this sentiment in his interview

when he commented, "And none of us ever liked it." Prepared by The 12, the selection of liver

and gizzards gave them a means to convey the value of vigilant prudence with resources. The

deprivation experienced during the depression era and the austerity of mid-20th century farm

families led to the judicious utilization of every possession and resource. Liver and gizzards were

an available resource that Chris and Florence would not squander. The adult children of Chris

and Florence seemed to be sending a message to their offspring that careful consumption and

conserving resources were meaningful values, and the ample possessions they were able to

provide ought to be appreciated.

Mass. This religious ceremony symbolized the importance of faith and religion that Chris

and Florence bestowed to their children. A priest from the local abbey was chauffeured to the

reunion site to lead the mass celebration. Family members volunteered to take on familiar roles

such as keyboardist, song leader, lector, server, and Eucharistic minister, just as they would have

done in their youth. After all, Chris and Florence attended mass weekly and observed the holy

days of the Roman Catholic Church, sang in the church choir, and participated in other charitable

actions organized by the church. The family congregated in the living room every evening to

pray the rosary. By the time of the reunions, co-descendants of Chris and Florence had varying

degrees of religiosity. Regardless, The 12 recognized this event as an essential action to show

deference to their parents. Susie's (G2; age 55) exemplar supports this event as meaningful when

she recollected, "I used to love having mass out here. That was a special time." Her simple statement acknowledges the sentimentality affiliated with the intimate worship experience. The private mass enacted the family's Catholic heritage and conveyed respect for Chris' and Florence's faith.

The Hayrack Ride. After mass, an uncle pulled up near the pavilion driving a tractor with lowboy attached and bedded down with straw bales. Family members hopped on for the journey through the pastoral surroundings of White Cloud Bottom. Passengers experienced the dusty air and bumpy gravel roads; they saw tassling corn and canopying soybeans; they waved away pesky bugs and felt the seething July sun. Family members viewed the vastness of agricultural land, imagined the working conditions of their ancestors, and heard the silence. Along the way, the siblings and older grandchildren chimed in with stories of their youth. Jane's (G2; age 54) exemplar highlights this meaningful event:

> I like going on the hayrack ride and hearing 57 times that this is the school that we walked uphill both ways in the snow, with no shoes on, to attend, with our guns so we could shoot rabbits on the way and roast for lunch if we need to.

Stories are embellished over time, and Jane's knack for humorous sarcasm further exaggerated the lived experience of her aunts and uncles. Yet, the enactment of the stories and the hayrack ride commemorated the agricultural and rural heritage of Chris and Florence and paid homage to the physical labor that was necessary for their livelihood.

The Talent Show. This Saturday night entertainment review displayed the many talents of family members, where the term *talent* was used very loosely. The variety show began with singing a patriotic hymn and raising the flag by one of the veterans in the family. Then, the designated emcee would call up different acts, which included guitar playing, singing, dancing,

gymnastics, skits, joke telling, poetry reading, hot dog eating contests, or magic tricks, among

others. Barb's exemplar epitomizes (G2; age 58) the special meaning of this activity:

> When the siblings would get together for the talent show and the funny acts that they
>
> used to do, they were hilarious and all the laughter in the audience. That is, more than
>
> anything—Helen and the goofiness she would show when she would dress up and do her
>
> routine, and that is one the fondest memories.

Barb and many of the co-descendants had positive, memorable comments about the talent show.

The most memorable reunion for many members was the year Norbert's (G1, deceased) five

children, who formed their own band, drove to the reunion from California. Danny (G1; age 66)

described, "When Norbert's kids all came back and played in the band together that was really

neat to see that they could come all the way from California, get their equipment back here, and

do that." The talent show was likely so meaningful because it passed on Chris' love of music and

some of his playfulness. Chris not only sang in the church choir, he also played the banjo in a

music group at the local dance hall on Friday and Saturday nights. In this way, he could cut loose

after a hard week's work. He had a lively, good-natured playfulness that radiated from many of

his offspring and grandchildren. Mary Jo's (G2; age 42) exemplar described the meaning of

togetherness that the talent show instilled: "You know the talent shows are hilarious to watch,

just being together and participating in all the fun things that we do," Even 11-year-old Ben (G3)

had already experienced the rewards of this event when he said, "The talent show is always fun."

Family members experienced the meaning of playfulness at the talent show.

  Fireworks. Saturday evening ended with a fireworks display after sunset. Taylor's (G3,

age 12) exemplar showcases the special meaning this activity held for her and the pleasure other

family members derived from the show.

Um, getting, setting off fireworks mostly because I would go up with my dad and a few

of my cousins and we go there and just light them all off. And it was so much fun to hear

everybody down here just screaming and yelling for more and it was just so much fun.

This elaborate fireworks show not only celebrated the national value of freedom, but it likely

symbolized the freedom of rural living. The 12 may not have always felt free while growing up,

working under difficult conditions for long hours with Chris or Florence. However, once the

work was done, these siblings and their parents found ways to relax and were relatively

unrestricted in the liberties they could enjoy in a rural setting.

The old folks' dinner, mass, hayrack ride, talent show, and fireworks events are the

aesthetic moments most meaningful to the descendants of Chris and Florence. The Sunday

dinner, business meeting, and family auction were rarely mentioned with the same frequency or

forcefulness, which underscores the entrenchment of meaning attached to the primary activities.

Brian (G2; age 51) encapsulated the sentiment of many cousins about the gestalt of the reunion:

Man, you don't understand, this is not just a family reunion, it is a whole different type

event. We have a farm that has been converted into a camp ground. We have a stage,

sound system. Some of the relatives every now and then will come back with their band

and we will have concerts. It is not just a get together, have a luncheon type family

reunion and just visit for a little bit, for one day, and you're gone.

Brian used the talent show to highlight the essence of the family reunion ritual, composed by his

aunts and uncles over 25 years earlier.

In brief, the composition and compilation of these events into the objective reality known

as the family reunion illustrate symbolic construction processes of introducing new stocks of

knowledge, reciprocating ideas through a sign system, and establishing patterns through

crystallization and institutionalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Overt interactions were also necessary to transform the reunion into being. The seminal idea of a reunion was shared by one family member, reciprocated by others, and eventually brought into fruition. Each development of the reunion agenda required interaction characterized by sharing ideas, discussing time and place, establishing norms, and delegating tasks. These patterns were negotiated in the early years, and decisions crystalized the routinization of the reunion itinerary. The findings presented here also describe the transforming property (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) that occurred at White Cloud Bottom to create the environment for the reunion ritual. Moreover, the findings confirm the symbolic communication property theorized by Wolin and Bennett (1984). The most meaningful ritual activities embedded unique values and sentimentality for family members.

Second Movement: Legato

Legato signals musicians to progress in a smooth, flowing manner. The Zimmerman family reunion proceeded every year in like manner. The attributes of smooth and flowing describe the reunion as it stabilized into an intersubjective event, reified by the physical presence and interactions of family members with each passing year. According to reunion records, 50-125 family members reserved this time slot in their calendars, organized their reunion preparations, and arrived feeling assured by the events that orchestrated the milieu. The annual reunion produced a recurring site of family interaction and relational maintenance. Without the reunion, family members would not know each other or would maintain loose kinship links.

Indeed, family members recognized the reunion as the unequivocal opportunity to maintain extended kin relationships as the *in vivo* codes of *connect*, *see people*, *hang out*, or *catch up* indicated. Many relatives clearly understood they wouldn't know some of their relatives if it were not for the reunion as a few quotations from members of every generation illustrate.

For example, Esther (G1; age 70) said, "That is one thing that makes these family reunions so important because they all come back and you get to catch up and find out what everyone has been doing, what their kids have been doing." Mark (G2; age 57), commented, "Just all the stories and reliving the past. I mean, that is what family reunions are all about." Jamie (G3; age 36) shared her experience and that of her young son: "It's nice to see people, to have fun…Colin loves going to the family reunion." Even among some of the youngest family members, the sentiment echoed. Taylor (G3; age 12) noted, "The way that the family reunion will just bring everybody close together, it is hard to put into words" (19).

Family members also distinguished the salient interactions they experienced. Maggie's (G2; age 35) exemplar, for example, described the content of reunion conversations and which ones were most important to her:

I perk up and I just want to listen, and I tend to remember it. It's nice to sit and commiserate about our daily lives and what's going on in our lives, but when they talk about–there used to be a house here, or this used to be here, this is what it looked like way back in the day, so I perk up in interest.

These quotations, like many comments from family members, signify that much of the reunion conversations comprised routine relationship maintenance interactions (see Canary & Stafford, 1994). The conversations throughout the reunion complemented the symbolic, ritual events with emergent improvisations. Family members shifted conversation groups, leaving behind one conversation to join another. These frenetic fluctuations continued throughout the weekend. Conversations demonstrate the affective and symbolic communication that Wolin and Bennett (1984) included in family ritual theorizing. These findings also extend Wolin and Bennett's application of communication by showing that maintenance communication is also a

meaningful aspect of family rituals. Future research on family rituals should more closely

analyze reunion narratives and ascertain ways they contribute to communication scholarship.

Third Movement: Decrescendo

A decrescendo is a gradual reduction, which characterizes the Zimmerman family ritual

in recent years and illustrates the transformation of a ritual over time. Family reunions have been

recognized as ritual events that diminish or transform with the passage of time (Ayoub, 1966).

The activities at the Zimmerman family reunions explicate such a metamorphosis. Specifically,

the Old Folks Dinner no longer features liver and gizzards prepared by The 12. Instead, a large,

community grill unites the grill masters around one location, while others visit or prepare side

dishes for the meal. Sharing liver and gizzards with all has been replaced with the contemporary

practice of separate-together as family units prepare and consume food with their immediate

members. As some of The 12 passed on, the Old Folks Dinner slowly lost its appeal. Family

members still eat near the pavilion and around the same time such that some camaraderie lingers.

The talent show similarly supports a diminuendo in the family reunion ritual as there are fewer

acts than there were in previous years. Esther's (G1; age 70) observation supports this

transformation: "The talent shows, they used to be a little bit more talent than what we have

now." The living first generation members rarely participate in the talent show and few of the

second generation family members stepped out to replace them. Mass was discontinued when the

Abbey would no longer support a priest attending the reunion. Then, the family adjusted by

attending the mass at the local church. Yet even this event disbanded, and individuals now attend

to their spiritual needs as they wish.

The most drastic decrescendo tapered in 2013, the summer of primary data collection,

because the seven siblings who maintained the family corporation agreed to sell the farm at

auction. Surprisingly, Deb (G2; age 53) and her husband purchased the farm. The 2014 – 2017 reunions proceeded, but with much lower attendance than in previous years. Danny (G1; age 66) predicted the 2013 reunion would be a significant turning point.

> The reunion, if the farm is sold, the reunion will have to take on a different, some sort of different nature, and I don't know what that will be. I would like to see some sort of connection maintained between, here. Again I'll say the people in California or the people in Pennsylvania or wherever, wherever all the nieces and nephews and grandchildren end up being, great grandchildren. It would still be nice if there were some type of way, and I know it is probably not ever going to be like it has been the last 25 years, 30, whatever it is, but I think it is great that this family at least has the connections we have, and you know, again like I said, I have kind of come to the point and accepted that maybe the end is here. And if that is the case then so be it, it is has been a great run.

The musical metaphors of allegro, legato, and decrescendo resemble the transformation property of family ritual theorizing. The allegro moments highlight the co-constructed conceptualization and inauguration of the reunion. The legato moments foregrounded the interactions at the reunion that coincided with the ongoing, symbolic ritual events. The decrescendo moments hastily mention significant activities that were discontinued or changed. The 2013 reunion will likely be recognized by family members as the turning point toward decline, despite the mutual experience of transforming events prior to 2013. As with military couples reuniting (Knobloch et al., 2016), members of this multigenerational family will need to consider changing roles and responsibilities. The findings introduced here lend a platform for future research. This transforming aspect of rituals over time would benefit from collecting data and/or observing rituals at various time points to thoroughly understand their transformation.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study portray the meaningful activities of a family reunion ritual, interpret the meaning attached to these ritualizing events, and provide a purview of transformations in ritualizing events over time. This case study aligns with previous studies that describe the meaningful activities of rituals (e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Baxter et al., 2009). This study extends the research by interpreting the meaning and values embedded within these symbolic activities. While the meanings and values are unique to this specific family, the findings stress the importance of meaning-making that is conveyed through symbolic activities.

Members of the Zimmerman family co-constructed a family reunion ritual comprised of events that paid homage to prevalent values held by the progenitors. The Zimmermans instituted a unique, extensive family ritual where symbolic events held special meaning for many of its members. Other families who aspire to maintain multigenerational kinship relationships can apply the principles used by the Zimmermans. Specifically, families can orchestrate symbolic events that impart special meaning for their members, in addition to or rather than duplicating typical practices of a meal and business meeting. In this way, attendees can see their reunion ritual as a special event with particular meaning rather than an empty ritual. This analysis also supports family ritual theorizing by aligning the reunion ritual events of a multigenerational family with the properties of transformation, communication, and stabilization.

This study confirms that extended family relationships hold relevance (Floyd & Morman, 2006). However, there were family members in this case study who were non-participants in the family reunion ritual. Perhaps these family members were practicing resistance, a component of Baxter's (2014) theorizing on the construction of family. The absence of these members at an annual event curbs interaction that maintains relationships. Future research should explore the

rationale for non-attendance by members who do not participate in family rituals. Baxter and colleagues (2009) underscored the importance of the negative attributions to family rituals. In a similar vein, those who do not attend reunions may have negative reasons for non-attendance such as the perception of empty rituals, economic limitations, or family disputes, among others.

This analysis also responds to Baxter and Braithwaite's (2006) call for research that shows how rituals change over time. The themes of allegro, legato and decrescendo illuminate the transformation of a ritual. The geographic and relational diffusion of multigenerational families may create challenges to identify and name new and existing family members. Commitment to family rituals was theorized at the 'family' level (Wolin & Bennnett, 1984). However, individual commitment level may have a stronger sway in the stabilization or decrescendo of participation in ritualizing events.

The decrescendo may also reflect how burgeoning third and fourth generations may not identify with the meaning conveyed to the same extent as first or second generations. In this way, the reunion organizers may have neglected to consider the receptivity of descendants to the activities orchestrated and the meaning aligned with them. The property of stabilization is highly precarious for the Zimmerman family at present. Other families can anticipate the potential for a decrescendo in their family rituals and evaluate the relevance of reunion performances as families evolve. Kinkeepers (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996) have an important and perhaps challenging role for the perpetuation of family rituals.

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Appendix A

Zimmerman Legacy Project
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What does it mean to you to be a Zimmerman?
2. Where did these ideas come from? How did they develop?
3. What does it mean to you to be part of a large family? How does that make you unique? What do you have that people in smaller families don't have?

Children of Florence and Chris

1. Tell me one of your fondest memories from childhood? Another?
2. What do you remember about Florence? Christian? (Grandma/Grandpa) OR What do you remember hearing about Florence? Christian?
3. What stories have you told your children about growing up here? Why those stories? What do you hope to accomplish with these stories?
4. Tell me a story about one of your siblings. Another.
5. What do you want your kids and grandkids to remember about Chris and Florence? About your time on the family farm?
6. How would you describe Aunt Esther's role in the family? Tell me a story about Aunt Esther. Another?
7. Why do you come to the reunion? What do you like about being here?
8. What are some of your fondest reunion memories?
9. What didn't I ask that you'd like to share about the Zimmerman family?

Grandchildren and Great-Grandchildren over 18

1. What do you remember about Grandma Florence? Grandpa Chris? OR What do you remember hearing about Grandma? Grandpa?
2. What stories were you told about growing up at White Cloud Bottom or the other farm? Who told you these stories? Why do you think these stories were told? What do they mean to you?
3. What do you remember about any of the aunts and uncles? What is a memorable story about him/her? Others?
4. What do you want your kids and grandkids to remember about Grandma and Grandpa Zimmerman?
5. Do you remember Aunt Esther? How would you describe her role in the family? Tell me a story about her.
6. Why do you come to the reunion? What do you like about being here?
7. What are some of your fondest reunion memories?
8. What does it mean to you to be part of the Zimmerman family?

9. What didn't I ask that you'd like to share about the Zimmerman family?

Great Grandchildren between 6 and 18 years
These three questions only:

1. Why do you come to the reunion? What do you like about being here?
2. What are some of your fondest reunion memories?
3. What does it mean to you to be part of the Zimmerman family?