

MAPPING SPACE: A MEAL IN THE MAKING

By Bonnie Sunstein

(Taken from the CARTS Newsletter, Fall 1997 issue, page 5)

This is a version of a mapping exercise we completed in our own training as fieldworkers and have since adapted for our classes. The point of the exercise is to record and gather observations during a half-hour of an everyday routine. We suggest watching people making a meal, but you can choose any daily routine that involves at least two people. It is best to work collaboratively so that you and your partner can collect a range of data. For example, one person can focus on body language and use of space while the other focuses on spoken language. You and your partner can compare the preresearch assumptions you bring to the site and discuss possible conclusions as you work through your data together. Here are some things to consider:

1. **Obtain access.** Choose a site in which at least two people are engaged in the daily mealtime routines -- children and parent, housemates, spouses, friends. Choose people who will feel comfortable being watched, as this exercise demands such close observation that you will not be able to help make the meal or set the table. Of course, if your informants choose to invite you to eat it with them that's another choice. Be sure, as any good guest would, to offer something in return. You might bring flowers or dessert.
2. **Record your assumptions.** Speculate on what you think you'll see. What do you already know about these people and their relationship? Their kitchen? Their lifestyle?
3. **Take notes on the overall setting.** What details of place seem relevant? How does the eating area fit into the overall plan of the home? Is it casual or formal? Be sure to be specific with relevant details. Note "8 hand-painted Deft plates" rather than "pile of plates."
4. **Map the space.** Draw a diagram of the kitchen or the place where the meal is being prepared. Use it to show where your informants move within the space. Colored markers or pencils can be useful to designate each informant's movements.
5. **Describe the activities.** Develop a system for recording the movements of each informant. What are the meal makers doing? Pay attention to what's going on: phone interruptions, neighbors' and children's visits, other incidents that break the flow of the activity. What utensils and objects do they use? How do they use them? Make a time line, noting how long each activity takes.
6. **Tape-record the conversation or take notes by hand.** How much of talk is related to the meal-making interaction itself? How much is everyday talk? What talk is related to power relationships among the meal makers? Who initiates talk? Who is silent? Who interrupts? Who gives directions and who follows? If males and females are involved, are there gender-related issues or differences?
7. **Talk with your partner.** Expand your fieldnotes together, talk about your findings, and speculate on what your conclusions might be. What do you agree on? What do you see differently?
8. **Write up the data collaboratively (two or three pages).** Attach to this description the fieldnotes, the manuscripts, your map, and notes from your discussions with your partner. It is rewarding to see the amount of data two researchers can collect in a half-hour's time.

RESPONSE

While she was researching her Photo Phantasies project, Karen did this exercise to learn more about observing and mapping space. The first part of the exercise represents the data Karen and her partner gathered in the field. Her written commentary represents the reflexive analysis they did away from the field.

With a colleague, Liesl, Karen spent a half-hour at a time at the home of Ellen Friar, watching Ellen and her daughter, Paula, prepare dinner. Together, Karen and Liesl gathered over 12 pages of fieldnotes, transcripts, and maps. After their observation, they collaborated the following set of notes. In looking over the data, they found that their map provided the most important information about the use of space.

Date: February 13

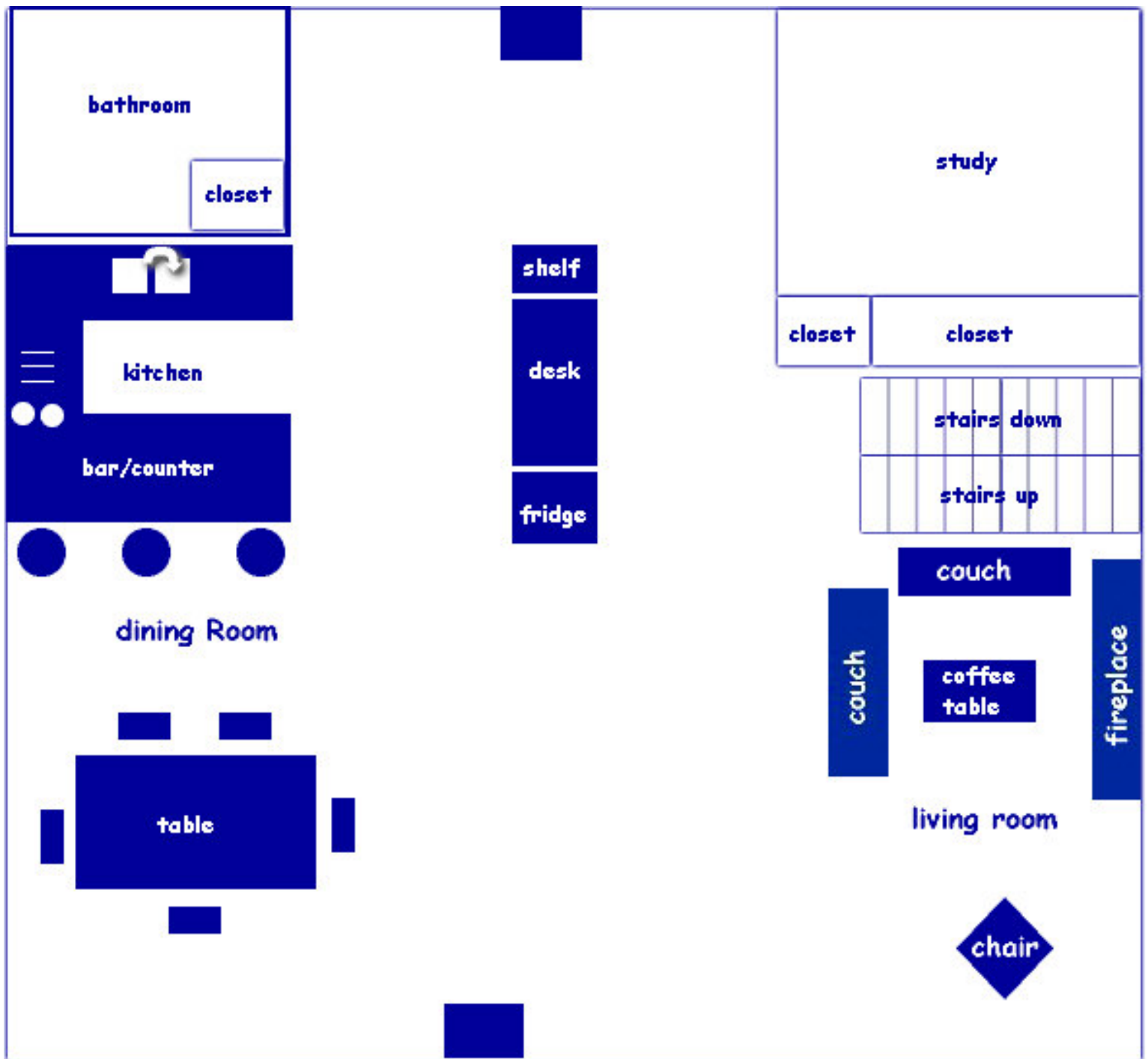
Time: 5:45 P.M.

Participants: Ellen (E) -- mother, Paula (P) --20 year old daughter.

Nonparticipating characters: Bill (B) -- Ellen's husband and Paula's father, Frank (F) --

Paula's boyfriend, Liesl (L) and Karen -- observers.

- 1. Obtain access.** We called Ellen and explained the dinner exercise. She was curious and willing to allow us to observe. She explained that her husband, Bill, and Paula's boyfriend, Frank, would not be part of the preparation but would be eating the dinner. She asked us to come on a Wednesday, when Paula was home from work and would be teaching Ellen how to make fajitas, a meal she had learned from a family in Arizona. "It will be a nice change for me to let Paula cook." She told us, inviting us to eat with them afterward. On Wednesday afternoon, we stopped at Dot's Flower Shop to pick up some red carnations as a small gift of appreciation.
- 2. Record your assumptions.** We entered with very different assumptions because Liesl knew the family and Karen didn't. Liesl assumed that Ellen would prepare most of the meal. Liesl also felt that Ellen would be very curious about our observation because she's a teacher herself. Karen felt she would make a good collaborator as she carried no preconceptions about the family, but she had more speculations. Karen wondered, though, how much their researcher presence would affect the preparation. She speculated about how typical this half-hour would be. Would sitting in their kitchen with a tape recorder and two notepads make the family self-conscious? Would the mother and daughter behave normally with two researchers watching their every move?
- 3. Take notes on the overall setting.** The house is about three years old, and the Friars are the first family to live there...We note that the kitchen is an alcove, or c-shaped room, that opens to the dining room. It includes a counter or bar area with stools that look into the kitchen from the dining room side...The kitchen has green marble-patterned countertops and light pine cupboards. Appliances are all white (refrigerator, stove, microwave, dishwasher, coffeepot) and match the white wall paint and white floor tile. A matching green rug is placed to one side. The electric griddle, chicken, onions, condiments, and utensils ready and waiting on the counter space suggest that they have prepared for us. On the desk near the fridge, a small portable radio is tuned softly to National Public Radio. E wears a red sweatshirt with valentine hearts, matching sweatpants, socks, and slippers. She is small (approx. 5'3"/110 lbs), thin face, dark brown hair. P is dressed in a navy blue sweatshirt and stretch pants with socks. She is a larger than E (approx. 5'6"/160 lbs), full face, blonde hair.
- 4. Map the space (see Map A next page).**



MAP A

5 and 6. *Describe the activities and record the conversation.*

5:48 p.m.

E asks "What do I do?" She stands idly waiting in the middle of the kitchen for Paula to give her directions.

P points to the chicken and E begins to slice it very thin with an enormous knife.

P begins chopping onions on plastic cutting board, away from E.

E says "We don't usually cook this way --you know, make this food like this. I just didn't cook when you weren't here, not just for Bob and me. Now that you're here, we're cooking more." E explains that it is hard to plan ahead. She stops chopping and waves the knife. She turns to P, "I come home

from work, feed the dog, then get dinner -- it's rush rush. You know, rush in, rush out." E begins chopping again. "I want you to notice that your father scrubbed the burner and got all that gunk off." E points to the burner. P does not respond. "He did a good job. It's pretty clean. Can you see?" P does not respond.

5:55

P puts tortilla chips on table and returns to kitchen, where she throws the chicken onto the griddle .

"It's almost done." E says, "Hmmm, good."

E is cleaning all utensils, cutting boards, and dishes. E rinses everything thoroughly and places it all in the dishwasher.

6:03

E says "OK, I think we're about ready." She takes six brown dishes from the cupboard and sets them at each place at the table.

F enters the kitchen and whispers something in P's ear. P rolls her eyes, and F leaves the kitchen-dining area.

E says "Maybe we should have some salad, or could cut up some fruit?"

P says "Mom...no, it's fine"

E says "Well, the table looks so sparse! There's hardly a thing on it! Oh! Wait! I do have some fruit bars!" E takes a small plastic container from the cupboard. She removes some lemon squares from it and places them on a plate.

P asks "When did you make those?"

E laughs "That's right! If you had known about them, there would be none for dinner!"

Talk with your partner. Afterward, since there was such little talk, we wondered how each person knew what duties to perform. We thought P and E negotiated the tiny space fairly well without getting in each other's way or being confused over their duties. E remained mostly stationary or in one immediate area, while P moved about. Were we imagining tension between P and E? E seemed to be the outgoing director of the action and P the quiet subversive follower. There seemed to be real control issues between them. Even though P was teaching E how to make dinner, E seemed to control P's actions. As Map B shows, P moved in and out of the kitchen twice as often as E, who worked mostly in one place. E seems concerned about neatness and cleaning up after a mess is made. The kitchen may be a haven or sanctuary for her. E struck us as a great talker, a facilitator of conversation but not the best listener. What did F whisper to P that caused her eyes to roll? Would he have done that if we weren't there? Or would he have spoken instead of whispered? We wondered what E really thought about P's live-in boyfriend. Did our presence seem to interrupt any of their movements? Our follow-up questions would consider the themes of power relationships and spatial ownership.

8. Write up the data collaboratively.

DINNER EXERCISE -- FINAL DRAFT

Liesl Fowler and Karen Downing

Families are complex systems that operate with many unstated rules and roles for their members. We each know this from our experiences within our own family units. Familiar familial settings often reveal the most about family members because feelings of comfort and safety are inherent in an intimate setting. Perhaps no more comfortable setting exists for this group than the dinner table.

An aspect of family that is a continual issue is power and control among the various members of the group. Simple dinner conversation can be very telling about the roles each plays in the family unit. Dinner preparation also can distinguish between real and perceived control of the family. This moment of preparation is where we focused our study.

The Friar home is less than three years old, they are the first family to occupy it. Inside, the décor was white and utilitarian. Everything has a purpose and place -- newspapers are folded and put inside a basket by the couch and a blanket is squarely folded and placed symmetrically across the back of the couch. The downstairs consists of a small bathroom across the main entry from an unused study. The kitchen, dining room, and living room are open air rooms in an L-shape arrangement. Ellen (51) and her daughter Paula (20) prepared the evening meal in the small C-shaped kitchen. Paula, a college student still living at home, was wearing an oversized Yale sweatshirt and white stretch pants. Her mother was dressed similarly, although Ellen's red sweats outfit matched her earrings, socks, and slippers, with a Valentine theme. Upon first appearance, the two look strikingly different.. Paula's long blonde hair and large size is contrasted by Ellen's short, dark hairstyle and slight frame. Two family members not present were Bill, Ellen's husband and Paula's father, and Paula's boyfriend, Frank who shares a bedroom with Paula in their family home.

The main dynamic that we observed was a dichotomy of power. Overly, Ellen attempted to dominate the advance preparations for the meal: she had fewer duties during the meal preparation, but those duties were essential; she maintained a constant level of talk during the preparation; and she kept her work in the focal point of the kitchen. Covertly, Paula controlled the conversation through passivity. While she moved from the kitchen to the dining room during the meal preparations, Paula's contributions were extraneous. The wrestling back and forth between mother and daughter over control was central to their relationship. Although this would seem to be a conflict, their interaction was synchronized and familiar. The differences between mother and daughter serve as the foundation for their relationship.

"We're having FRA-heat-as" Ellen announced as the preparation began. The fact that she mispronounced the dish shows that, although she made the decisions about the meal, she wasn't familiar with what was being prepared. In fact it was Paula who discovered this recipe when she stayed with her uncle. However, when asked who had decided what they would eat, Ellen commented, "Well,...I guess, I did." Ellen also did the shopping for the grocery items needed, although Frank did accompany her to the store, against his wishes. She laughs, "I made him go," again exhibiting her desire to control family situations.

Paula and Ellen navigated the small kitchen despite their size differences and the many preparational tasks. Neither ever stated who was going to undertake each task. Peripheral duties -- cutting onions, taking food out of the refrigerator, setting the table, transferring food from container to serving dishes -- were Paula's responsibilities. Paula was in constant motion from kitchen counter to sink to refrigerator to dining room. Ellen cut the chicken carefully and deliberately, each piece was nearly identical in size. Her chopping of the lettuce was done in much the same fashion. Ellen remained very much in one section of the kitchen cooking the chicken in the skillet and the onions on the stove. She frequently cleared Paula's workstations with a damp dish cloth as Paula moved on the other tasks. They seemed to never be in each other's way. If Paula entered Ellen's "space," Ellen silently shifted to another area momentarily, and vice versa.

The conversation between mother and daughter floated from tasks before them to work and family. The dialogue was dominated by Ellen's questions about Paula's job and friends and boyfriend. Paula's responses were either short or nonexistent. Paula made no verbal response to statements her mother made about Frank but met the remarks with eye-rolling and sighing behind her mother's back. Ellen either seemed oblivious to this behavior or accepted it as characteristic of the way they communicate. Ellen functioned as the vehicle for conversation keeping the spaces filled with speech. On the rare occasion that Paula would verbally respond, Ellen responded vaguely or in a noncommittal way:

E: So you don't work all week?

P: All week?! I work on Sunday! With the high school chick. I'll have to do everything!

E: Hmmmmm...Paula generated only one topic for discussion.

P: They [onions] aren't cooking, it isn't hot enough here.

E: [Exerting her control] Yes it is now. But I'll move them over to the smaller burner.

Our final excerpt is the only example of unmasked tension. Ellen's desire to control the meal preparations, her brush-off of

Paula's comment and Ellen's joking assumptions about Paula's potential behavior indicates the struggle between mother and daughter.

E: [Gesturing toward the table] Maybe we should have some salad or I could cut up some fruit?

P: [Rolling her eyes] Mom, no, it's fine.

E: Well, the table looks so sparse. There's hardly a thing on it...Oh, wait! I do have some bars!

[Ellen takes a small plastic container from cupboard and removes several dessert-like bars and places them on a plate.]

P: [Whirling around with the glasses in her hands] When did you make those?!

E: [Laughing] That's right! If you had known about them, there would be none for dinner.

P: [Rolling her eyes and quickly turning her back on her mother] You mean, if ANYONE had known about them!

At that point in the conversation, Paula's boyfriend entered the kitchen and the focus switched to his being in the way when he dropped his backpack in the middle of the meal preparation.

From our observations of the Friars' meal preparation, we feel that the synchronized wrestling of power between the mother and daughter is indicative of their complex relationship.