This exploratory study investigates how low-income rural families celebrate children’s birthdays, using interview data from 128 mothers residing in five states. Findings from a qualitative content analysis show that the mothers make special efforts to have birthday celebrations as other families do despite their financial constraints. Making the birthday child feel happy and “normal” is the central goal of the birthday celebrations. Many of the mothers desire big parties and expensive gifts, which are socially expected characteristics of birthday celebrations. These mothers adopt various strategies to acquire, create, and allocate resources they need, including reducing expenditures, planning, changing priorities, pooling resources, and receiving assistance from their social networks. However, some mothers cannot celebrate birthdays the way they want because of financial constraints and may feel unsatisfied with their celebrations.

**Keywords:** birthday celebrations; birthday gifts; birthday parties; family ritual; low-income; resource management strategies

Childrens’ birthday celebrations have been important family rituals in many American families since children became more of a focal point of family (Pleck, 2000). The celebration of a child’s birthday is a multifaceted family event that involves various aspects of family life. For example, how much a person’s birthday celebration is valued in the family often reveals the significance of the birthday person and his or her life stage in the family. Who participates in the celebration is associated with the characteristics of the family’s social networks. In addition, the consistent or
unique patterns of this socially prevalent ritual across families can illustrate the similarities and differences of family cultures. Similar celebration patterns across families may indicate social expectations that lead families to celebrate birthdays in certain ways. Finally, most families need extra monetary and nonmonetary resources when planning to celebrate a child’s birthday. To do so, some families may experience a major reallocation of resources if the celebration takes up a considerable portion of family expenditures of time, energy, and money.

The commercialization of birthday celebrations has contributed to the growing prevalence and significance of children’s birthdays. Spending money for parties and gifts has become a central activity for birthdays in U.S. families. Most parents today are able and willing to spend more financial resources on children’s birthdays but have less time to invest in these celebrations (Otnes, Nelson, & McGrath, 1995; Pleck, 2000). Consequently, the birthday business as well as public discourse on children’s birthdays has grown rapidly in the United States. For example, hosting a party at a paid location is more popular than ever, and many Web sites cater to families by offering attractive party ideas. The media also portrays elaborate birthday parties, extravagant party locations, gifts, fantasy themes, and goody bags.

The implicit assumption in these popular descriptions of birthday celebrations is that affluence in contemporary society has enabled parents to overindulge their children on their birthday. What is missing in this assumption is that not all families have adequate resources for these types of parties and also may not believe in this degree of indulgence. The emphasis on consumption for children’s birthdays can result in difficulties for families with limited financial and human resources. Low-income parents may not be able to afford expensive celebrations or may not have sufficient time and energy to prepare birthday parties and gifts in ways that they desire. The manners in which low-income parents manage their resources for birthday celebrations are likely to be qualitatively different

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from those with sufficient financial resources. These parents, however, would not want to pass over their children’s birthday celebrations, which are considered a parental responsibility in today’s American culture (Doherty, 1997). Therefore, learning how low-income families celebrate children’s birthdays can provide new insights and implications for current discourse on consumption-oriented birthday parties as well as on family rituals in these families.

The purpose of the present study is to explore how low-income rural families celebrate children’s birthdays based on the mothers’ lived experiences. Three specific research questions guide the investigation: (a) How do low-income rural families celebrate children’s birthdays? (b) What constraints do low-income rural mothers experience during this ritual? and (c) What strategies do low-income mothers adopt to acquire, create, and allocate resources they need for children’s birthday celebrations? The qualitative exploration began with the first overarching question, whereas the two subsequent questions emerged through the research process.

Related Literature

Children’s Birthday Celebration as a Multifaceted Ritual

No study in the family field has exclusively investigated children’s birthday celebrations although birthdays are widely celebrated family rituals. Likewise, children’s birthday celebrations have received minimal attention in other fields, and only a small number of studies have been found to date. The foci of these studies are dissimilar. Some studies have examined birthday parties in kindergarten settings (Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1991; Weil, 1986), and others have studied celebrations organized by parents with interests in children’s socialization (Otnes et al., 1995; Otnes & McGrath, 1994), interactions in gift-openings (Good & Beach, 2005), or consumer culture in birthday celebrations (Clarke, 2007; Schoonmaker, 2006).

These studies have viewed children’s birthday celebrations as multirutined events that include structured ritual elements, symbols, and meanings (Good & Beach, 2005; Otnes et al., 1995; Otnes & McGrath, 1994; Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1991). Parents, via children’s birthday celebrations, seem to promote family relationships by spending time with children, simultaneously accept and criticize consumer culture, pursue sameness with other parents by practicing culturally appropriate celebrations, and teach children about ritual-related knowledge and behaviors
(Clarke, 2007; Otnes et al., 1995; Schoonmaker, 2006). Otnes and associates (1995) noted that the cake presentation symbolizes love and indulgence by singularizing the birthday child. The birthday child may feel special by realizing the celebration is primarily for him or her (Otnes et al., 1995; Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1991; Weil, 1986).

Previous studies are not only limited in number but also restricted in terms of data and scope of research. Most data came from observations of birthday parties (Good & Beach, 2005; Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1991; Weil, 1986) or interviews with young children (Otnes & McGrath, 1994), except for three studies that interviewed parents (Clarke, 2007; Otnes et al., 1995; Schoonmaker, 2006). All studies reviewed used a very small number of participants and paid little attention to the diversity of celebrations. Researchers tended to assume that all families celebrated birthdays in similar ways even though they lacked supporting information about the overall patterns of celebrations. Previous research predominantly included middle- or upper-class families and neglected low-income families, ignoring the challenges these families face and the strategies they use to allocate necessary resources. This article will highlight the general patterns of children’s birthday celebrations and related resource management strategies from a larger number of low-income parents.

### Children’s Birthday Celebration as a Family Ritual

A ritual refers to “a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time” (Rook, 1985, p. 252). A ritual is composed of four components according to Rook (1985): (a) ritual artifacts, materials that accompany or are used in a ritual, (b) a ritual script, the behavioral sequence and the usage of artifacts, (c) ritual performance roles, scripted roles such as the host(ess) or planners, and (d) a ritual audience, those who observe the ritual, like party guests.

Scholars have cited children’s birthday celebrations as a primary example of family rituals (e.g., Fiese, 2006; Pleck, 2000). A family ritual is defined as “a highly stylized cultural performance involving several family members that is repeated, has a formal structure, and involves symbolic behavior” (Pleck, 2000, p. 10). Prior research has noted that family rituals like birthday celebrations contribute to family well-being. It has been suggested that family rituals enhance family members’ sense of identity and continuity (Fiese, 1992; Newell, 1999) and family cohesion (Gobeil-Dwyer, 1999). Researchers have also found that family rituals protect family members from
feelings of loneliness and uncertainty (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) and help couples manage marital dissatisfaction in the early stages of parenthood (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993). See Fiese (2006) and Fiese et al. (2002) for more comprehensive reviews of family rituals.

Typically, family researchers have explored family rituals as a whole, paying less attention to individual rituals. The exception to this tendency has been several studies that focused on family mealtime (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006; Speith et al., 2001), weddings (Kalmijn, 2004; Oswald, 2002), or religious holidays such as Christmas (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). To date, however, family researchers have not looked solely at birthday celebrations.

Some family ritual research has studied certain groups of families—for example, single-parent families (Bauer, 2001; Moriarty & Wagner, 2004), blended families (Schrader, 1997), and families with a history of alcoholism (Haugland, 2005). These studies have documented that satisfactory practice of family rituals could strengthen these families even when rituals are disrupted by the absence of a parent or problems in the family. However, few studies have investigated family rituals in low-income families (e.g., Schuck, 1998) even though researchers who have discussed comprehensive issues concerning poverty have noted that family rituals are associated with the resilience and strength of low-income families (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004; Seccombe, 2002). Previous family ritual literature has not paid attention to specific rituals that may exist in families across different populations, keeping our knowledge at a cursory stage. The exploration of birthday celebrations in low-income families will lead to more complete knowledge of family rituals.

**Resource Management Strategies in Low-Income Families**

Low-income families may need additional resources for various family rituals like birthdays celebrations. *Resources* are defined as “anything that can be used to attain desired ends or goals” (Rettig & Leichtentritt, 2000, p. 160) and in the context of this study, refer to services, goods, and money that enable families to celebrate their children’s birthdays. Obtaining extra resources may be challenging to low-income families because of their already restricted resource base. Therefore, these families may develop unique strategies to acquire, create, or allocate resources that they need for such celebrations.

Previous studies concerning the management strategies of low-income mothers have focused on daily living or making ends meet. Receiving help from informal networks, primarily family, is the most frequently documented strategy in the literature (Edin & Lein, 1997; Mistry, Lowe, Benner,
& Chien, 2008). Recent qualitative analyses have also identified other management strategies, including resource borrowing, pooling, and transferring; expenditure reduction; saving; planning; prioritizing; and alternative creating and weighing (Hogan, Solheim, Wolfgram, Nkosi, & Rodrigues, 2004; Katras, 2003; Mistry et al., 2008).

Researchers have not paid special attention to low-income families’ strategies for family rituals except for Mistry and associates (2008). Given the need for additional resources along with the significant role of family rituals, there is a need to study the strategies used by low-income families. The exploration of these strategies will contribute to a greater understanding of the unique patterns of resource management of children’s birthday celebrations.

Method

Rural Families Speak Project

The current study is a secondary qualitative data analysis using a sub–data set from a multistate, longitudinal research project, Low Income Rural Families: Tracking the Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform, commonly known as Rural Families Speak. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 413 mothers who participated in interviews at least for one of three waves from 17 states across the United States. Mothers were recruited in rural counties based on three inclusion criteria at the time of the initial interview: (a) At least one child was under 13 years old, (b) their household income was no more than 200% of the poverty guidelines, and (c) preference was given to families with at least one preschool child. Participants were identified through programs serving low-income families given the mobility of low-income rural families and the low reliability of the phone lists.

Semistructured interviews took place in participants’ homes, at state Extension Service offices, at community libraries, or at the mothers’ workplaces. The interviews averaged 2 hr and dealt with various topics, including family economics, parenting, support networks, and home and neighborhood environments. Some interviews in three states were conducted in Spanish. For more information about the Rural Families Speak project, see the project Web site (http://www.ruralfamilies.umn.edu).

Participants

Data for the present study came from Wave 2 interviews of the Rural Families Speak project, which included questions about children’s birthday
celebrations. The overall Wave 2 data were collected from 315 low-income rural mothers in 13 states between 2000 and 2002. To better accomplish the qualitative purpose of this study, the data from five states were chosen based on the quality of the interview, such as rich, specific, and relevant answers (Kvale, 1996).

The participants of this study were 128 mothers residing in 11 rural counties of Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, and New York. Mothers were appropriate informants for the research questions because mothers are typically the organizers of children’s birthday celebrations (Otnes et al., 1995; Pleck, 2000). The mean age of the mothers at the time of interview was 30.27 years (range = 17 to 58, SD = 7.79), and the number of children living in the household averaged 2.36 (range = 1 to 7, SD = 1.39). In terms of marital status, 39% were married, 28% were single, 18% were living with a partner, and 15% were divorced or separated. The majority of the mothers were Caucasian (77%) whereas 16% were African American and the remaining 7% were Hispanic, multiracial, or Native American. All interviews from the selected five states were conducted in English.

Interviews

The specific question relevant to this study was “Did your family celebrate your children’s birthdays?” If the family celebrated birthdays, they were asked to describe how the family celebrated their children’s birthdays. If they did not celebrate, the interviewer inquired about the reason. These questions were included in the interview protocol because the project researchers were aware of the prevalence and pressure of birthday celebrations and were interested in resource use for a special occasion. In addition to responses to these questions, other parts of interviews were searched using the keyword to analyze all relevant comments about children’s birthday celebrations. A birthday celebration, birthday party, or birthday gift, in this article, refers to anything that the mothers perceived as a celebration, a party, or a gift.

Analysis

The qualitative content analysis method was adopted, given the relatively large number of participants. Content analysis, in general, refers to analyzing qualitative data to identify recurring patterns or themes (Patton, 2002). A specific type of qualitative content analysis, suggested by Morgan (1993), was chosen to provide interpretive meanings of contexts as well as the descriptive pattern of the data by counting the frequencies of particular
Kvale (1996, pp. 196-199) called this type of quantification process “meaning categorization.” This method was appropriate because it used the content frequencies as a guide for a deeper exploration of low-income rural mothers’ experiences.

Figure 1 shows the analytic procedure of this study. Themes and code categories emerged from the data in the process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and they were continuously revised. The unit of coding was meaning segments, which consisted of a sentence, a group of sentences, or a paragraph relevant to children’s birthdays. When it came to counting, multiple statements under the same code category were calculated only once to capture the descriptive pattern of the data. The code categories and counts guided deeper interpretations of the contexts. The first author conducted coding using MAXQDA 2, a computer software for qualitative data analysis, and had extensive weekly meetings with coauthors who were interviewers in one state. This debriefing process allowed checking the accuracy of the coding, discussing themes, and concurring on interpretation of findings.

Findings

This study lies between the positivistic and the interpretive paradigms of research. It takes advantage of the interaction between qualitative and quantitative analysis, because of the categorical nature of codes and its reliance on counting. Table 1 shows code categories that emerged from the data as well as the number of participants who mentioned experiences relevant to these categories. The table should not be interpreted as being equivalent to frequencies of quantitative analysis because each interview for this study used unique probing questions about the participant’s responses. The table, however, provides good descriptive tendencies of findings that are interpreted below.
Birthday Celebrations Just Like Other Families

The low-income rural families had fairly typical birthday celebrations for their children, which did not separate them from other U.S. families. The majority of families had a party and gift(s) whereas others could not or did not celebrate children’s birthdays. The main activities for the birthday celebrations were eating food together, singing “happy birthday,” blowing out candles, and giving children presents like many other families.

Table 1
Main Code Categories and Number of Participants
Mentioned (N = 128)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code categories</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Code categories</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birthday party</td>
<td></td>
<td>Economic aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of party size</td>
<td></td>
<td>平均支出礼品</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not big or small</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>≤$50</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party participants</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>&gt;$50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family living in the household only</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family living outside of the household</td>
<td></td>
<td>≤$50</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>&gt;$50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s parents or siblings</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Overall financial difficulties</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s friends</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Timing or season of birthday</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ friends or neighbors</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Child’s age</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party place</td>
<td></td>
<td>What the child wants</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>What the child needs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative’s home</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Parents’ value of birthdays</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial place</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Resource management strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public place</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Selecting low-cost food, gift, place</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party food</td>
<td></td>
<td>Setting aside, buying ahead of time</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cake</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Setting a consumption limit</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice cream</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Using layaway or credit card</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cookout or barbeque</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Combining parties</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other homemade food</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Making food instead of buying</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store bought food</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Sacrificing living expenses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthday gifts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Receiving informal social support</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun and tangible</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Using formal social support (food stamps, food shelves, and Earned Income Tax Credit)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical and tangible</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>stamps, food shelves, and Earned Income Tax Credit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intangible</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Income Tax Credit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers of statements do not add to 128 because some transcripts did not contain data regarding a specific category.
Aspirations for “big” parties. The size of the party often played an important role in the mothers’ description of the birthday celebrations. Their statements about the party size revealed their desire to have a “big” party as well as the social expectations about how the birthday party should be. For instance, some mothers commentated that their party was “small,” “little,” “simple,” “nothing special,” or “not much” even though they invited guests and prepared party food. Many of the mothers believed that an ideal party should include a large number of people, abundant food, expensive gifts, or fancy decorations. This social norm of a big birthday party sometimes resulted in the mothers’ dissatisfaction with their actual celebrations. The following interview with Marilyn, a 28-year-old mother of three children, implies the underlying notion of what defines a “big party.” Despite the fact that the party was “big” in terms of the number of people, she did not think that the party was “big” in comparison of today’s standards:

> Usually we have a cookout and invite everybody over, like our family and friends. We just have a little cake, ice cream, and presents. Nothing real fancy and major, just an at-home little thing. We have July, August, and September birthdays. They’re nice months that you can have a cookout, hang out with your family, and just have a little party. [italics added]

Some mothers, in contrast, emphasized that their families threw “big” parties for children’s birthdays despite their financial hardships. These families spent a considerable amount of money on the parties relative to others in the study. Birthday parties that Birch, a 23-year-old mother of two children, described below illustrate typical large-scale parties. The mothers who held big parties like Birch tended to perceive them in a positive way by using expressions such as “fun,” “laughter,” or “good time.”

> They’re [birthday celebrations] usually pretty big. We’ll pick out a theme. . . .
> This year, Dalton’s was [a professional football team]. So, we had the chip bowls, wore [the team’s] helmets, and put up purple and gold streamers all over the garage. We had tons of food, cake, and stuff and invited everybody we could think of. . . . We always did a huge party. . . . We had fun. . . . She [Birch’s daughter] had so much fun.

Most mothers hoped to have large parties because they believed that party size symbolized how much they valued their children’s birthdays. They said that a child’s birthday was “special,” “important,” “his/her day,” or “only once a year,” and wanted it to be “something the child could remember.” Aspirations for special parties were associated with high levels of consumption. For instance, Kellan, a divorced mother of four children, mentioned:
I took his [Kellan’s son’s] friends to a movie. To me, they’re very expensive birthdays. But, I just feel like his [birthday] is so important to me. And, I just feel like I wanna give them [Kellan’s children]. They’ve already got a dad who just ran off on them without a backward glance. I wanna do what I can to more than make up for that.

“Family” celebrations. The individuals who attended the birthday parties were mostly family members and sometimes other significant people such as the child’s friends, especially in cases of older children, or the parents’ friends and neighbors. However, celebrations only with nuclear family members in the household were less common than parties with extended family. Children’s birthdays were events that gathered extended family members together, revealing these parties were a “family” ritual for these low-income rural families. Idette, who was the single mother of a two-year-old son, Shaun, had this to say:

[Shaun’s] [b]irthday is like a major holiday. My dad comes. He lives in [city name], Pennsylvania. . . . My aunt, his godmother, comes from [city name], Massachusetts, and my godmother comes. . . . They come from far away. . . . Nobody comes to my party, but Shaun’s is like a major thing. . . . Last year’s party was huge. I didn’t expect all those people.

A large number of families celebrated children’s birthdays at their home, and some families living in small homes held the parties at relatives’ places. Several mothers articulated that they stayed home because dining out was expensive. Yet nearly one fifth of the families chose commercial places such as fast food or family restaurants in order to make the celebration special. A few families went to public places, such as parks, to keep the costs low but still make the birthday special.

No celebration. Approximately 11% of the low-income rural mothers reported that they did not or could not celebrate children’s birthdays in ways other families do. Lack of financial resources was the major reason for not having parties or not giving gifts in these families, and time constraints were also mentioned. For instance, they were unable to celebrate birthdays because they could not afford parties or presents or because the mothers had to work at night. Only four families did not celebrate birthdays because of nonfinancial reasons, including religion (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses do not celebrate any holidays and birthdays) or parental beliefs (e.g., “He doesn’t have to worry about a special day. Everyday is special for him.”). The mothers who could not celebrate
with parties or gifts expressed sadness, like Alberta, a mother of a three-
year-old son:

I have a problem with that [birthday celebration], a very bad problem. My
baby is three years old and I haven’t had a birthday party for him since he
was born. It’s a very hard thing. . . . If I don’t have the money, I just don’t do
it. I feel bad, but I know that he understands mommy doesn’t have the money.
So I just don’t do it. . . . I don’t want to see the baby goes without a party this
year because he’s getting older and older and I don’t want that to happen.

**Expenditures for Birthdays Within Limited Resources**

*Birthday gifts.* Tangible and intangible gifts were often the focus of the
parties. Most presents were tangible, which parents and guests purchased in
advance. Several mothers mentioned activity-focused gifts, including going
to a family picnic or a movie, shopping, and bowling. These activities were
viewed as gifts because of the associated monetary expenses.

Some mothers categorized birthday gifts into needs and wants. For
example, Lee, a mother of three children, said, “If I don’t [have the money],
I just have a little party and give them the basics what they need, like
clothes and stuff like that. Or sometimes, [if I have the money, I give them]
little special gifts, like CDs or something that they want” [italics added].
Buying necessities as gifts may be uniquely relevant to the financial situ-
tions of low-income families. A birthday may be a good occasion for these
low-income families to purchase items the child is in need of while still par-
ticipating in the family ritual of celebrating a birthday.

The cost of the gift(s) for a child’s birthday varied from 0 to 300 dollars in
the present study. About two thirds of the mothers who answered the question
spent 50 dollars or less per child. Several mothers reported that they did not or
could not buy the child a present because they did not have enough money or
spent available money on the party, or because the child would receive gifts
from those who attended the party. In contrast, approximately one fourth of the
mothers spent more than 50 dollars, and gifts for more than 100 dollars were
not rare. They chose to buy expensive presents, not because they had sufficient
money but because they wanted to spend as much as they could to make birth-
days special. Eileen, a 35-year-old mother of four children, had this to say:

She [Eileen’s daughter] got everything she wanted. A birthday only comes
once a year. I’m not saying that we’re well off [emphasized], but we can
afford to spend $100 for a kid’s birthday. . . . It is good. And they deserve it.
It’s a special day.
Situational expenditures. When they were asked the amount of money they spent on gifts, the mothers often responded, “It depends,” instead of providing the exact or approximate cost. The major reason that the families’ consumption on gifts was not stable was their financial hardships. Specifically, the timing or season of the birthday influenced the amount they spent. For example, the families could spend more if a birthday was in tax refund season or after receiving a pay check. Conversely, the budget was lower if the mothers were temporarily out of work or if a birthday was before payday or during the Christmas season. Kellan had to plan birthdays according to her family’s financial situation:

It really depends on how much money I have at the time. My daughter, who’s 10, didn’t get a birthday party this year because that was when I was just catching up. My other daughter just had a birthday a couple months later, when I was doing better. I gave her a party. I promised my other daughter I would give her a party later. We’ve talked about it several times, but she hasn’t [had a party yet].

The birthday child’s age also affected the amount of expenditure. Some mothers stated that young children would not understand the monetary value of gifts or might not remember what they received. These mothers spent less if the children were infants or toddlers. For instance, Lone, a 30-year-old mother of four, adjusted expenses according to the child’s age:

They are still at the age where they really don’t know how much is spent on each gift. So, it’s more of just something they would like versus spending a lot of money on it. So we just get them one gift each, and it may be $5 or $10.

Another factor associated with their expenditure was related to what the child needed or wanted. Several mothers said that the amount depended on the cost of the items the child needed. The mothers, however, when deciding what to buy, put more weight on gifts the child wanted. They hoped to make the child feel that her or his day was special. Shonda, a 23-year-old mother of two children, stated that her family celebrated birthdays in ways that the child wished:

[Birthday celebrations] depend on what that person wants. Like my oldest daughter, she’s seven. She’ll be eight. She doesn’t really like birthday parties. She wants sleepovers or she wants to go shopping or to go like [amusement park] or something like that, just me and her, or just us, just the family. That’s what she wants. . . . [I spent] maybe about $100. I wouldn’t go with anything less than that on her birthday because I want to let her get what she wanted.
Making the birthday child feel happy and “normal” was the core principle the mother had in mind even though their expenditures for celebrations depended on various situational factors. Emeline, a 29-year-old mother of two children, summarizes this sentiment:

(Interviewer: How do you decide which comes first if you don’t have the money for them all?) I know this is sad, but it goes back to sometimes you just gotta. And my kids come first. I know in a way that’s sad, but in another way that’s good. I want my kids to be happy. On their birthday, their birthday is very important, I don’t want them feeling like I let them down, you know.

The mothers had to develop several strategies to acquire, create, and allocate resources to be able to follow this basic principle of birthday celebrations despite their financial constraints.

**Resource Management Strategies for Birthday Celebrations**

*Reducing expenditure.* One of the most frequently used strategies was selecting low-cost food, gifts, or party places such as choosing to shop at discount stores and looking for sales. Several mothers substituted time and other resources for money. For example, they had parties at home or at parks instead of going to paid locations and made cakes or other food instead of purchasing them in order to reduce the cost. Tracy, a 21-year-old mother of two children, illustrates how she saved on the cost of a birthday cake:

A lot of times, I buy the cheapest cake considering it’s just four of us. We don’t need a big cake. So a lot of times, I just may actually go and buy a cake and make it myself . . . because it’s cheaper. I usually go to the Dollar Bazaar . . . instead of buying each individual candle, I just buy the number.

*Planning, changing priorities, and pooling.* Planning ahead was a common strategy. The mothers saved money for birthday celebrations, purchased gifts when money was available, and set a limit of expenditure before shopping. The following quote from Ellen, a 40-year-old mother of three children, exemplifies how the mothers allocated resources in organizing birthday parties:

I’ve been in crisis mode forever. But I buy him some presents. I didn’t start very early this year, but a lot of times, I usually start plenty of time before birthdays and Christmas. I have October and two December birthdays, and then there’s Christmas. So, I usually start in June. I just buy things when I see them [gifts] that are right for all of these.
A few mothers without sufficient money changed priorities for resource allocation by putting items on layaway or credit cards and delaying bills or rent payments. One strategy unique to birthday celebrations was pooling resources by combining birthday parties with another child, such as the child’s sibling or relative. For instance, Inocencia combined her family’s resources with another mother in order to have the type of party they wanted for their children:

His [Inocencia’s son’s birthday] and my niece’s are four days apart. We always do it together. The idea was, her mom was working and I wasn’t. She had a job and I didn’t. I got food stamps and she didn’t. So she bought the stuff, and I bought the food. That’s how [it worked].

Using informal and formal support. Receiving social support was a central strategy for many low-income rural families. Assistance from informal networks, especially from the mother’s extended family, was pivotal to birthday celebrations. For instance, they shared the costs of the party or gifts and helped with party preparation, such as providing transportation for shopping. Idette’s story illustrates how her father offered financial help as well as emotional support:

My father’s helping me with that [birthday celebration], because the one I was getting him was only 70 something dollars. He said, “Well, let’s get something bigger. Something he can grow into.” I said I don’t get that money. He said, ‘I’ll help you out. Shaun is the newest thing in our family.”

Like Inocencia, several mothers accessed benefits from formal assistance, such as food stamps, food shelves, and Earned Income Tax Credits. They reallocated resources that were intended to support their daily living to help pay for the party. This strategy seems to be unique to the low-income families who are eligible for in-kind public assistance programs. Food Stamps were useful to Sue, a 34-year-old mother of six children, who had an unpredictable income. Sue said, “I normally go all out. Like yesterday, I celebrated my son’s birthday. I did manage to get the food for the picnic because I did have food stamps. They did come on time this month.”

Discussion

This study explored how low-income rural families celebrated children’s birthdays, using the data from semistructured interviews with 128 mothers...
in five states. Findings show that most of the families have typical celebrations like other families, but these celebrations require special efforts and strategies because of their lack of resources. The findings are expected to provide researchers with preliminary understandings of birthday celebrations as well as to reveal the broad picture of family rituals among low-income families.

Rook’s (1985) four components of ritual experiences can be applied to the patterns of birthday celebrations found in this study. The main ritual artifacts of children’s birthday celebrations are food, especially cakes and ice cream, and gifts. A ritual script exists in terms of how to prepare celebrations (e.g., purchasing food or gifts, inviting people) and what to do during the celebrations (e.g., eating together, singing “Happy Birthday” and blowing out candles, and opening gifts). Mothers perform leading roles throughout the celebration process, as well as other family members. Finally, the most common guests at a child’s birthday celebration are nuclear and extended family members, revealing that children’s birthday celebrations are truly family rituals.

Variations in celebrations and the use of associated resources are important to note as well as the overall patterns. Some families attempt to hold large parties or to purchase relatively expensive gifts whereas others are unable to celebrate birthdays in the way they want because of insufficient resources, particularly financial difficulties. The mothers who perceive the gap between the ideal and the actual celebration may feel unsatisfied. This finding is in line with Mistry and associates’ (2008) recent work that documented the importance of being able to afford modest extra items for children for low-income mothers’ sense of being a good provider.

This study reveals that the low-income rural mothers want to show their children that they are important via birthday celebrations and that their families can celebrate their birthdays just like other families. That is, making children happy is at the core of these celebrations. For example, the mothers’ aspirations for big birthday parties, relatively high consumption despite financial hardships, and celebrations according to the child’s wants indicate the mothers’ emphasis on their children’s enjoyment. This finding shows that a birthday may be a time when these mothers spend money on “luxuries” for their children, which supports previous studies showing that low-income mothers intentionally spend money on nonessential goods and services to infuse their children with a feeling of normalcy (Edin & Lein, 1997; Mistry et al., 2008; Seccombe, 2007). This result is also consistent with other research that points out “children come first” when it comes to low-income
mothers’ decision making (e.g., Scott, Edin, London, & Mazelis, 2001). These mothers want to celebrate their child’s birthday, symbolizing love and normalcy, even though the cultural standard of big parties conflicts with their limited resources.

These mothers use different strategies to acquire, create, and allocate the resources they need for the type of celebration they desire for their child. Frequently practiced strategies are reducing expenditures, substituting time and energy for money, planning ahead of time, changing priorities for family expenditures, pooling resources, and using social support. The active use of these strategies reveals the mothers’ efforts to maximize their limited resources for children’s birthday celebrations. Unlike most strategies involved in the careful preparation for this family ritual, changing priorities for resource allocation such as delaying household bill payments or using the layaway system may appear to be last-minute decisions. These potentially risky strategies might mean that past experience with these strategies has been successful or the mothers are unable to plan ahead because their lives simply focus on day-to-day survival.

Informal networks often play an essential role in birthday celebrations of low-income rural families. They appear to have a large amount of human resources to draw from despite their limited financial resources. Many of the mothers rely on family members for help with the cost of the party or gifts that they cannot afford, and some also pool resources and combine birthday parties. Moreover, children’s birthday celebrations seem to be important opportunities to develop and maintain human resources by exchanging support. This finding is in line with Pleck’s (2000) comment on the function of children’s birthday parties as occasions to strengthen the solidarity of extended kin of U.S. families who do not participate in enhanced consumerism.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study has several limitations because of the nature of the secondary qualitative data and the lack of existing research. The data for the present study were gathered before the researchers actually designed data analysis. The interview questions of this study did not reflect researchers’ insights from data analysis even though most qualitative research methods value simultaneous interaction between data collection and analysis. Consequently, the data may not include a broad range of information that could have resulted in additional findings. For instance, the role of fathers in children’s birthday celebrations and how their involvement differs between resident
and nonresident fathers may provide useful knowledge about fathering and rituals in low-income families, but these issues were not asked during the interviews. Likewise, regional or racial and ethnic differences in birthday celebrations might exist but may not have been articulated in this study partly because these issues were not considered at the interview stage.

Another, yet similar limitation is uneven data across interviews even though quality criteria were used to select states for the data analysis. Because of the use of different interviewers in the multistate research project, some interviews were more in-depth and specific than others or the focus of the interview questions was not always the same. For example, some interviewers paid more attention to the general descriptions of birthday celebrations whereas others asked more questions about resource management strategies. Multiple interviewers could reveal various aspects of birthday celebrations, which might not have been possible with a single interviewer, but it resulted in a broad scope rather than what consistent interviewing would have allowed.

Suggestions for Practice

The negative impact of social expectations and financial constraints on birthday celebrations in low-income families has useful implications for family practitioners and policy makers. It is helpful for others to understand the importance of rituals and celebrations for low-income families. Most of our policies that support or help low-income families ignore the significance of family differences and deal only with the economic environment of minimum day-to-day living. This study shows that all families have desires for rituals and celebrations regardless of the level of living.

Community support can help low-income families celebrate children’s birthdays without additional financial stress. Most of these families already use formal resources, including food stamps and food shelves, but these types of assistance do not usually consider special family rituals like birthday celebrations. Some community nonprofit organizations have ongoing efforts that should serve as best practices for other communities to preserve this important family ritual. Birthday Wishes in Massachusetts is a good example that provides birthday parties and gifts to children at homeless shelters (http://www.birthdaywishes.org). Food pantries in some communities have available birthday supplies such as cake mixes, candles, as well as small presents for children.

Local governments and public agencies have great potential to provide helpful assistance. Public libraries, for example, could offer party supply rentals or mobile birthday party service. Government-owned facilities
could provide free admission to a zoo, a museum, and a swimming pool or free public transportation for the birthday child. Programs like Head Start could develop a birthday club and plan a special event each month for children with birthdays in that month. Schools could educate parents to consider low-income families when they have birthday parties. One mother who participated in the Rural Families Speak project mentioned a five-dollar limit for birthday gifts in her child’s class. This is an example of how schools and parents can deal with the social expectation of expensive birthday celebrations.

Not only the public sector but local community businesses could partner with community organizations to offer free products for the birthday boy or girl: for instance, a free meal or dessert at a local restaurant, or a coupon for a box of crayons and coloring books from a local drug store. Community groups could work together to identify such families. Activities at the community level such as these will help families with limited income and resources celebrate children’s birthdays and help preserve this important family ritual.

Finally, efforts to change consumption-oriented birthday celebrations into meaning-oriented rituals have implications for all families regardless of their income levels. Recently, community action to raise awareness of the societal pressure of children’s birthday parties became more visible. For example, a group of parents and professionals in Minnesota has started national and local conversations about out-of-control birthday parties (http://www.birthdayswithoutpressure.com). This kind of grassroots movement will bring more beneficial outcomes by careful consideration of low-income families that have to deal with the social expectation of celebrating birthday parties coupled with the economic reality of their cost.

**Suggestions for Research**

This study also points to directions for future research on family rituals including children’s birthday celebrations. First, we need more refined descriptions about specific family rituals in diverse types of families. Quantitative investigation using large-scale, representative samples will enable researchers to understand how celebration patterns are similar and different across the overall population. Qualitative research exclusively designed for a particular ritual will also provide rich descriptions of families’ ritual experiences. Second, researchers need to uncover more accurate and dynamic information from multiple family members’ perspectives because the family ritual is constructed together. Input from fathers and children would be especially valuable. Lastly, future research on
children’s birthday celebrations needs to incorporate family theories. For example, how each level of the family’s environments influence birthday celebrations in low-income families can be studied using human ecology theory. Symbolic interactionism can lead to research questions like how family members internalize the social expectations for birthdays or how they create the meaning of birthday celebrations through family interaction.

References


