

## Family Rituals in New Zealand Families: Links to Family Cohesion and Adolescents' Well-Being

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This research examined the longitudinal links between perceptions of family rituals, family cohesion, and adolescents' well-being in 713 adolescent–parent/caregiver dyads in New Zealand. Parents (86% mothers) assessed family ritual meaning and family cohesion, and adolescents (10 to 16 years old at Time 1) reported on family cohesion and well-being at two times of measurement with a 1-year interval. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to assess stability coefficients, cross-lagged effects, and to test a multistep mediation model. Results showed longitudinal bidirectional effects between perceptions of family ritual meaning and family cohesion (for parents), and between perceptions of family cohesion from parents/caregivers and adolescents. In addition, family ritual meaning was found to be linked to adolescents' well-being indirectly via parents' and adolescents' family cohesion. Results support and expand previous research on the direct and indirect effects of family rituals in family and individual positive outcomes.

*Keywords:* family rituals, family cohesion, well-being, adolescence, longitudinal

Family rituals are at the core of family life (cf. Bossard & Boll, 1950). In the face of the challenging schedules that characterize fast-paced contemporary living, families still gather for dinner, plan holidays together, and acknowledge life cycle transitions such as weddings or funerals (Fiese, 2006). These activities are the settings for the development of family rituals, special events that are meaningful and carry a symbolic meaning shared by the family as a whole (Fiese et al., 2002). Both adults and children easily recollect these occasions, include them in narratives about families (Fiese & Pratt, 2004), and associate them with “family time” (Daly, 2001). While present in families of all types, family rituals are also unique to each family; they include meanings that are only fully understood by individuals with a shared identity built over time.

These family events are inevitably embedded in the larger ecological context (Fiese, 2006). New Zealand is a culturally diverse society shaped by the coming together of two main cultures (New Zealand European and the indigenous Māori people) and a strong tradition of im-

migration. It is increasingly common to see new families being formed by individuals from very different families of origin; these may vary by socioeconomic status (SES), religion, and ethnicity, as well as family values and attitudes (Pryor, 2006). The blending of different family traditions calls for changes. One way to foster these changes is through explicit rituals that incorporate important aspects of both family cultures (e.g., Māori and western components of weddings). The rise of secular rituals associated with rites of passage such as weddings and funerals is also particularly evident. New Zealand is a more secular country than, for instance, the United States, and does not have universally nationally shared ritual occasions, such as Thanksgiving. In sum, rituals of New Zealand families are often diverse and innovative, mirroring the diversity and multiplicity of this society (Pryor, 2006).

Family rituals have captured the attention of both clinicians and researchers. A growing body of knowledge shows that family rituals are assets for healthy development of individuals, couples, and families (Fiese, 2006; Imber-Black, 2002). Nonetheless, there are important gaps in this research about family interactions at ritual events. First, although links between family rituals and positive measures of family functioning have been found, no study has examined this relationship across time and disentangled the directionality of influence. Do well-functioning families promote stronger investment in rituals or does investment in rituals lead to better family functioning? Second, although research has shown links between rituals and adolescents' well-being, it has not explained the processes underlying these connections.

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### Functions of Family Rituals for Families

Literature has suggested that family rituals have important functions for families, such as promoting group membership and a sense of belonging (Fiese, 1992; Fiese et al., 2002; Mead, 1973; Roberts, 1988). According to Fiese (1992, 2006), the symbolic component of rituals fosters group identity through the development of shared meanings across time. Rituals convey messages about the family's values and beliefs about the world, other people, and the family itself, which are passed down through generations (Fiese, 2006).

Along with building a shared family identity, rituals promote a positive sense of belonging to the family as a group (Fiese, 1992; Wolin & Bennett, 1984), a process which resembles the dynamic of family cohesion, defined as an emotional bonding among family members (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983). Research has found positive cross-sectional associations among meaning of family rituals (Fiese & Kline, 1993), satisfaction with these events (Eaker & Walters, 2002), and perceptions of family cohesion. However, to our knowledge, no study to date has examined the link between family rituals and family cohesion/belonging over time. Although most of the literature refers to the role of rituals as promoters of family belonging and cohesion, Fiese et al. (2002) have pointed out that rituals might be markers of cohesion; this view suggests that family cohesion may be the foundation for stronger investment in rituals. Both explanations are plausible, mirroring what could be a positive feedback loop between positive family functioning and engagement in rituals. One of the goals of the present study was to advance this research by clarifying the temporal associations of rituals with cohesion in families with adolescents.

### Family Rituals in Families With Adolescents

The way families organize and experience rituals is distinct for families in different stages of their development. Individuals in different developmental phases also have different roles in ritual events and experience them in unique ways (Erikson, 1966). One of the main systemic tasks for families with adolescents is the shifting of parent/children relationships to allow adolescents to move in and out of the family system, requiring an increased flexibility of family boundaries (Carter & McGoldrick, 1998). The time adolescents spend with family decreases as they get older and are more involved in activities outside the family and more engaged with peers (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Despite this move toward autonomy, a growing body of research shows that adolescents not only want their families to be close (Feldman & Gehring, 1988), but they also continue to benefit from a cohesive and supportive family environment (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Laursen & Collins, 2009; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). During adolescence, emotional ties are manifested through shared activities and self-disclosure (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Family rituals can provide the setting for both: A family dinner is an opportunity for the family members to engage in a joint

activity and also a time to disclose and discuss, in a safe setting, events that happened outside the family (cf. Fiese, 2006). Rituals also have the potential to be a vehicle for the renegotiation of the roles of young people in the family (Eaker & Walters, 2002). For instance, the gradual taking over of more responsibilities in organizing family celebrations (such as birthdays or Christmas) by the younger generation (Cheal, 1988) allows parents and adolescents to transform their relationship, setting the stage for less hierarchical interactions when children reach adulthood (Laursen & Collins, 2009). In developmental terms, while parents, and especially mothers (Fiese, 1992) are active agents of ritual promotion, adolescents are still learning their role as future ritual makers (Erikson, 1966). Accordingly, Friedman and Weissbrod (2004) found that the amount of ritual interaction adolescents observed in the same-sex parent predicted their own reported desire to initiate ritual interactions in the future.

### Family Rituals and Adolescents' Outcomes

Research has also focused on how family rituals contribute to adolescents' development and well-being. Large-scale studies (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Fulkerson et al. 2006) found that adolescents' attending of family meals was linked to a reduction in a wide range of negative outcomes (substance use, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, among others). Fulkerson and colleagues (2006) suggested that family mealtimes may help adolescents to deal with daily stress and may act as a protective factor, by providing a sense of connectedness, structure, and identity. Other authors have supported this idea, pointing out that sharing a meal on a regular basis is an important way to maintain parent-child bonds (Fiese, 2006; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Research also shows that adolescents generally enjoy eating meals with their family (see Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Although these studies are informative in pointing out the importance of family time for adolescents, they focus on family meals only and do not allow us to discern whether the benefits are because of the quantity of time spent with family or due to the special meanings ascribed to these occasions. In this regard, Fiese (1992) found positive correlations between family ritual meaning scales and self-esteem, lovability, and identity integration in a late adolescent sample. In addition, Compañ, Moreno, Ruiz, and Pascual (2002) reported that adolescents who experienced more family rituals were less likely to attend mental health services, strengthening the findings that link family rituals to adolescents' psychological adjustment. Assessing individual perceptions of adolescent girls' satisfaction with rituals, Eaker and Walters (2002) found these had a positive relationship with psychosocial development. Finally, besides individual outcomes, family rituals were also found to be linked to relationship outcomes, such as adult attachment. In a study with young adults, Homer, Freeman, Zabriskie, and Eggett (2007) found that the meaning they perceived their family of origin ascribed to rituals was negatively related to anxiety in their present relationships,

even after controlling for parental attachment. These results add further empirical support to studies which identified the protective role of rituals via anxiety reduction and security (Fiese, 1992; Fiese & Kline, 1993).

### The Present Study

This research examined whether family ritual meaning predicted adolescents' well-being over time. In line with the shift from risk models to a strengths-based approach to the study of adolescence, we also assessed adolescents' subjective well-being perceptions. We proposed that family cohesion might operate as a mediator between family rituals and youth well-being. Drawing on the systems theory approach (Minuchin, 1985) and the transactional model of development (Sameroff, 2009), we utilized a longitudinal design with data from two family informants. We collected self-report data from young people and one of their parents at two times of measurement, separated by a 1-year interval. We assessed perceptions of family ritual meaning (from parents), family cohesion (from both parents and young people), and well-being (from young people).

Five major hypotheses were posed. We predicted that the longitudinal links between family ritual meaning (parents' perceptions) and family cohesion (both parents' and young people's perceptions) would be positive and bidirectional (H1). A concurrent positive association between family ritual meaning and cohesion has been documented in the literature (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Fiese & Kline, 1993; Fiese et al., 2002), but the possible bidirectional relationship across time has not been examined thus far. Our hypothesis derives from the systemic perspective that conceives of family processes as interdependent (Minuchin, 1985). More specifically, we predicted that: (H1a) Family ritual meaning would positively predict parents' perceptions of family cohesion, and parents' perceptions of family cohesion would also positively predict family ritual meaning one year later. We also made the same prediction for adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion (H1b). Although family ritual meaning was assessed in the parents' sample only, the reports refer to perceptions about whole family functioning and, thus, we hypothesized that they would have an impact on adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion. In addition, based on the transactional model's assumption that both parents and children are active agents who continuously influence each other (Sameroff, 2009), we expected that adolescents' perceptions of how cohesive the family was would be a driving factor for the family to engage in meaningful rituals and, thus, would positively influence the parents' perceptions of family ritual meaning 1 year later. Following the same rationale, we expected that parents' perceptions of family cohesion and adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion would predict each other over time (H2).

Next, we expected that parents' perceptions of stronger family ritual meaning would predict higher well-being for young people one year later (H3); we also expected that higher family cohesion (parents' and young peoples' perceptions) would be a predictor of adolescents' well-being one year later (H4). These predictions arise from past re-

search that consistently shows that a positive family environment and a sense of connectedness is one of the main factors in adolescents' well-being (e.g., Barber & Schluterman, 2008) and with cross-sectional research linking family rituals and adolescent's positive outcomes. Finally, we hypothesized that parents' and young people's perceptions of family cohesion would mediate the link between family ritual meaning and young people's well-being (H5). This hypothesis was derived from the idea that family rituals will not guarantee benefits for everyone in the family, but that positive outcomes are contingent on how these events are experienced by individuals within the family context. As Laursen and Collins (2009) have observed, adolescents' relationship perceptions are an important lens via which they interpret their environment. According to these authors, this idea suggests an indirect effects model of parent-child relationships, in which perceived relationship quality (represented, in this case, by family cohesion) mediates links between parent behaviors (parents' perceptions of family ritual meaning) and adolescent outcomes (well-being).

We used SEM (AMOS 16; Arbuckle, 2007) to analyze the data, which allowed a simultaneous analysis of variables' relationships both within and across participants (parents' effects on young people and vice versa) over time and the control of two important aspects: the shared variance to be expected in participants who are members of the same family unit and the concurrent links between the study variables and their stability coefficients over time.

## Method

### Participants

This study is part of a larger New Zealand longitudinal study, known as the Youth Connectedness Project (YCP). Of the total YCP sample, only dyads that participated in the project's last two waves and provided answers with no missing items were selected. A total of 713 dyads of young people and one of their parents were included<sup>1</sup>. In regards to young people, 51.1% were male and 48.9% were female, with ages ranging from 10 to 16 years old at Time 1 ( $M = 12.85$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). Sixty-nine percent of young people identified themselves as New Zealand European, 18% as solely or partly Māori, and 11% reported other ethnic backgrounds (including mainly Pacific Islands and Asian). Parents were, at both Times 1 and 2, mostly mothers (86%), followed by fathers (12%), and other members of the family (2%). Ninety-seven percent of parents confirmed, at Time 2, that they were the same person who had completed the questionnaire the previous year. The majority of parents were working, either full time (43% at Time 1 and 49% at Time 2) or part-time (41% at Time 1 and 38% at Time 2) as opposed to 4% (Time 1) to 5% (Time 2), who were not working; the remaining (10% at Time 1 and 7% at Time 2)

<sup>1</sup> The term "parent" is used here to denote the main caregiver although 2% were members of the family other than a parent.



identified themselves as full-time parents. Sixty-nine percent of the families were intact (i.e., biological or adoptive parents and their children in the same household). Seventeen percent were lone-parent households, 10% were step-families, 1% were extended family households, and for 3% of this information was missing. These proportions are similar to the New Zealand population of households although percentages of lone-parent households here are slightly lower than the national levels.

### Procedure

The YCP followed young people over 3 years starting in 2006. Participants were recruited from 78 schools located in New Zealand's North Island in a stratified random sampling approach. Schools of diverse SES and geographical location (urban, suburban, and rural) were approached in a systematic way. The means and ranges of schools' decile (representing average SES rank of contributing families) and geographical location were similar to New Zealand's national figures. In the first year of data collection, schools' deciles ranged from 1 to 10, the average being 5.2, very near the average for the country. In terms of geographical location, 61% of the schools were located in an urban location, 15% in a suburban location, and 14% in a rural location. Parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained prior to the survey administration. Assessments were made once a year at the participants' schools. The survey was completed using laptop computers in the presence of a teacher and research assistants. Of 2,174 individuals who initially agreed to participate, 1,774 completed the survey for all of the project's 3 years. Parents were sent a separate questionnaire together with a stamped envelope: 57% were returned at Wave 2 (Time 1 for the present research) and 46% at Wave 3 (Time 2 for our study).

### Measures

**Family ritual meaning.** Family ritual meaning was assessed with the Family Ritual Questionnaire's subscales for dinner time and for annual celebrations (Fiese & Kline, 1993). Parents answered 10 items (each subscale is composed of 5 items assessing ritual meaning for each setting) presented in a forced-choice format. For both settings, five pairs of descriptions addressing dimensions of family ritual meaning (occurrence, attendance, affect, symbolic significance, and deliberateness) were presented. For the dinner setting, for example, the first pair of descriptions was "Some families regularly eat dinner together" and "Other families rarely eat dinner together". For annual celebrations, for example, the third pair of descriptions was "In some families, annual celebrations have special meaning for the family" and "In other families, annual celebrations are times of strong feelings and emotions." First, participants were asked to choose the description which best represented their family and second, they were asked if that description was *really true* or *sort of true*. The four possible answers correspond to a 4-point Likert scale format, with higher scores indicating perceptions of stronger family ritual meaning.

**Family cohesion.** We assessed family cohesion with 5 items generated for the Youth Connectedness Project and influenced by the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES II) by Olson, Portner, and Bell (1982). In order to assure the scale's relevance to the New Zealand context, focus groups with young people and consultation with local experts were the basis of the selection, adaptation, and construction of the items. These were presented on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never/almost never" to "always/almost always," e.g., "My family ask each other for help" and "We like to do things as a family."

**Well-being.** Young people's well-being perceptions were measured with 11 items adapted from the Ryff Well-being Scales (Ryff & Keyes, 1995): 4 items assessed aspirations (e.g., "I am serious about working hard now so that I have a good future"); 4 items assessed confidence (e.g., "I feel confident and positive about myself"); and 3 items assessed positive relations with others (e.g., "I find it easy to get on with other people"). These items were presented on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Construct validity of the Well-Being Scale has been demonstrated (e.g., van Dierendonck, 2004), and it is rapidly becoming one of the most commonly used measures of well-being among adolescents.

### Results

We divided the analyses into two parts. We first addressed the concurrent and longitudinal links among study variables (Hypotheses 1–4) by presenting the zero-order correlations and the proposed SEM model. Second, also using SEM, we constructed a multistep mediation model to examine Hypothesis 5.

#### Concurrent and Longitudinal Links Among Study Variables

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all of the measures at times 1 and 2 are presented in Table 1. We first analyzed the fit of linear and quadratic regression models with family cohesion (parents and young people's reports) as an independent variable and well-being as the dependent variable. We ran stepwise regressions with the quadratic term of the centered cohesion variable included in the second step and verified it was a non-significant predictor both for the concurrent links (Times 1 and 2) and across time (well-being at Time 2 regressed on family cohesion at Time 1). These results indicated that the link between cohesion and well-being was better explained by a linear relationship. In regards to the correlations results, for parents, stability coefficients across the two times of measurement were high for perceptions of family cohesion ( $r = .65$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and family ritual meaning ( $r = .65$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The association between these two variables was also positive at each time point ( $r_s = .35$  and  $.36$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ) and between Time 1 and Time 2 ( $r_s = .31$  and  $.32$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ). For adolescents, stability coefficients across the two times were also high for family cohesion ( $r = .67$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and for well-being ( $r = .56$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Associations between adoles-

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Matrix of Intercorrelations Among Study Variables at Both Times of Measurement for Parents and Young People*

	Parents				Young people				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>Parents</b>									
1. Family rituals (T1)									
2. Family rituals (T2)	.65**								
3. Family cohesion (T1)	.35**	.32**							
4. Family cohesion (T2)	.31**	.36**	.65**						
<b>Young people</b>									
5. Family cohesion (T1)	.18**	.17**	.37**	.35**					
6. Family cohesion (T2)	.21**	.20**	.38*	.37**	.67**				
7. Well-being (T1)	.06**	.05	.20**	.14**	.45**	.35**			
8. Well-being (T2)	.05	.02	.18**	.17**	.35**	.43**	.56**		
9. Age (T1)	-.02	.03	-.11**	-.15**	-.23**	-.22**	-.19**	-.20**	
Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	3.38 (.51)	3.35 (.52)	3.88 (.66)	3.83 (.64)	3.59 (.83)	3.49 (.87)	4.10 (.54)	4.09 (.57)	12.85 (1.73)
Cronbach's alpha	.71	.71	.87	.85	.89	.91	.88	.90	

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

cents' ratings of family cohesion and well-being were high and positive cross-sectionally ( $r_s = .45$  and  $.43$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ) and longitudinally ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In regard to the links between parents and adolescents, there were positive correlations at both times of measurement and longitudinally between family cohesion from both family members ( $r_s$  between  $.35$  and  $.38$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ), between family ritual meaning (parents) and adolescents' family cohesion ( $r_s$  between  $.17$  and  $.21$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ), between family cohesion and adolescents' well-being ( $r_s$  between  $.17$  and  $.20$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ). However, the family rituals variable was not linked to adolescents' well-being, with one exception at Time 1 ( $r = .06$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

We built an auto-regressive cross-lagged path model (Model 1) to test our main hypotheses. Analysis of raw data with the maximum likelihood estimation method was used. We adopted a model-generation application of SEM (Jöreskog, 1993, described in Kline, 2005): after examining the results for the predicted model, we trimmed the model by removing non-significant paths. Figure 1 depicts the final trimmed model. Using guidelines proposed by Kline (2005), the overall fit of the model was found to be good:  $\chi^2(6, N = 713) = 8.01$ ;  $p > .05$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .99; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .02. Stability coefficients between time points were significant and high for all the variables. In regard to the cross-lagged paths, we verified that, confirming H1a, the links between parents' perceptions of family ritual meaning and family cohesion were positive and bidirectional, i.e., family ritual meaning at Time 1 predicted family cohesion at Time 2, and family cohesion at Time 1 predicted family ritual meaning at Time 2. We followed up this analysis by comparing this base model with a model where both these paths were constrained to be equal. The difference in the models was non-significant,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .12$ ,  $p > .05$ , supporting a bidirectional link between family ritual meaning and family cohesion reported by parents. However, against prediction (H1b), the same result was not verified for adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion: only one positive (albeit marginal) link was found between parents' perceptions of family ritual meaning at Time 1 and adolescents'

perceptions of family cohesion at Time 2. We also found that family cohesion perceived separately by parents and by adolescents predicted each other over the one year period, confirming the bidirectional link predicted in H2. Finally, against predictions (H3 and part of H4), family ritual meaning and family cohesion perceived by parents did not predict adolescents' well-being one year later. Adolescents' well-being at Time 2 was predicted by family cohesion perceived by adolescents themselves, partially confirming H4. Furthermore, we examined if this model was equally valid for adolescent boys and girls and for the two main ethnic groups. We ran two separate two-group analysis with structural weights constrained to be equal (Byrne, 2001) and assessed the difference in model fit. With regards to gender, the difference,  $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 11.10$ , between the unconstrained model,  $\chi^2(12, N = 713) = 12.86$ ,  $p > .05$ , and the structural weights constrained model,  $\chi^2(22, N = 713) = 23.96$ ,  $p > .05$ , was nonsignificant, supporting the view that the model yielded an equally good fit for both adolescent girls' and boys' data. With regards to ethnic group, the difference between the unconstrained model,  $\chi^2(12, N = 713) = 11.29$ ,  $p > .05$ , and the structural weights constrained model,  $\chi^2(22, N = 713) = 21.09$ ,  $p > .05$ , was also nonsignificant,  $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 9.80$ , indicating that this model was equally valid for New Zealand European and Māori young people.

### Indirect Links Between Family Rituals and Adolescents' Well-Being: The Role of Family Cohesion

To investigate our final hypothesis, we constructed a multi-step mediation model (see Hayes, 2009). The design of this specific model drew on the previous model's results combined with the assumption that an independent variable must be significantly associated with the mediator variables. Although we initially predicted that parents' and adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion would both mediate the links between family rituals and well-being, given the absence of a direct significant link

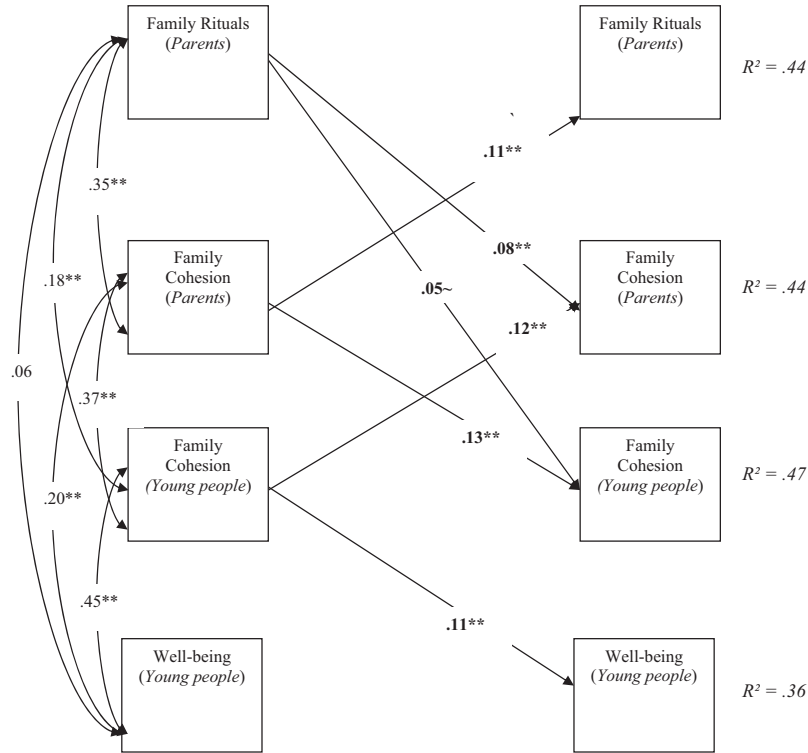


Figure 1. Model 1: Structural equation model testing the cross-lagged effects of family investment in rituals (parents), family cohesion (parents and adolescents), and adolescents' well-being over a 1-year period. Bold figures represent standardized coefficients; nonbold figures represent Pearson correlation coefficients. Fit indices for the model were:  $\chi^2(6, N = 713) = 8.01; p > .05$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .99; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .02. For simplicity, stability coefficients and error terms are not shown; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; ~  $p = .06$ .

between parents' family cohesion and adolescents' well-being (in the final SEM Model 1), we examined and found a good fit for a multi-step mediation model where parents' ratings of the family ritual meaning predicted parents' family cohesion at Time 1, which in turn led to adolescents' family cohesion at Time 2, and, finally, to adolescents' well-being also at Time 2. Following the same rationale as used for Model 1, only significant paths were maintained in the final model (see Model 2, Figure 2). This was found to be a good fitting model,  $\chi^2(3, N = 713) = 7.35; p > .05$ ; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .05. Overall, we examined three indirect effects: family ritual meaning on well-being; parents' perceptions of family cohesion on well-being, and family ritual meaning on family cohesion. To assess the significance of indirect effects (Table 2), bias-corrected (BC) bootstrap 90% confidence intervals (CIs) with 5000 bootstrap samples procedure was used (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008). All three indirect effects (Table 2) proved to be statistically significant, and these results suggest that the multiple mediators' model is a good description of the relationships in the data. We have opted here to present the multistep mediation model in this simple version: however we also tested a more complex auto-regressive mediation model (see MacKinnon, 2008), where the same

indirect paths were tested controlling for family cohesion (young people's reports) and well-being at Time 1, and for family ritual meaning and cohesion (parents' reports) at Time 2. All the three aforementioned indirect paths, although smaller, remained significant.

Finally, we compared the fit of Model 2 for adolescent girls and boys. A significant difference,  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 8.74, p < .05$ , was found between the unconstrained,  $\chi^2(6, N = 713) = 8.06, p > .05$ , and the constrained model,  $\chi^2(9, N = 713) = 16.80, p = .05$ . We then performed separate equality constraints for each of the three paths in the model and verified that the gender difference was located in the path linking parents' family cohesion at Time 1 to adolescents' family cohesion at Time 2: this specific standardized coefficient was higher for girls ( $\beta = .46$ ) than for boys ( $\beta = .29$ ). As both paths were significant and in the same direction, we did not build separate models for boys and girls. We also performed a multi-group analysis to see if the model was valid for the two main ethnic groups and found that the difference between the unconstrained model,  $\chi^2(6, N = 713) = 13.05, p < .05$ , and the structural weights constrained model,  $\chi^2(9, N = 713) = 14.66, p > .05$ , was nonsignificant,  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1.61, p > .05$ .

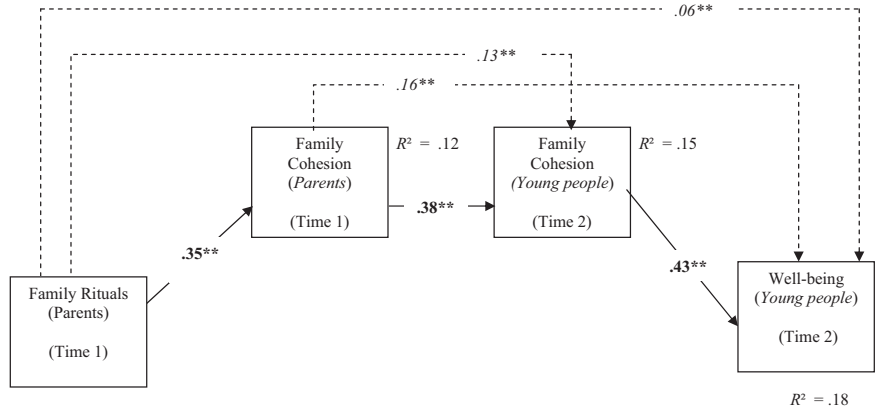


Figure 2. Model 2: Structural equation model testing the indirect effects of family ritual meaning (Time 1) on adolescents' well-being (Time 2) via family cohesion perceived by parents (Time 1) and by adolescents (Time 2). Bold figures represent standardized coefficients; figures in italic represent significant indirect effects (standardized). Fit indices for the model were:  $\chi^2(3, N = 713) = 7.35; p > .05$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .99; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .05. For simplicity, error terms are not shown. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Discussion**

The main purpose of our study was twofold: we aimed to investigate whether family ritual meaning and family cohesion would be linked bidirectionally over time, and if these whole-family variables predicted adolescents' well-being one

year later. Our two main conclusions are that: (a) the longitudinal links between parent-perceived family ritual meaning and family cohesion were bidirectional, and (b) parents' perceptions of family rituals were indirectly linked to adolescents' well-being via perceptions of family cohesion.

Table 2  
Unstandardized Coefficients and SEs for All Parameters in Model 1 and Model 2 and Bias-Corrected (BC) Bootstrap Confidence Intervals (CIs) for Indirect Effects in Model 2

Parameters	Unstandardized coefficients (SE)	p	BC Bootstrap, 90% CI for indirect effects
<b>Model 1</b>			
Stability coefficients			
Rituals T1 → Rituals T2	.63 (.03)	<.001	
Cohesion (P) T1 → Cohesion (P) T2	.55 (.03)	<.001	
Cohesion (YP) T1 → Cohesion (YP) T2	.64 (.03)	<.001	
Well-being T1 → Well-being T2	.57 (.03)	<.001	
Cross-lagged paths			
Rituals T1 → Cohesion (P) T2	.10 (.04)	.01	
Cohesion (P) T1 → Rituals T2	.09 (.02)	<.001	
Rituals T1 → Well-being T2	.09 (.05)	.06	
Cohesion (P) T1 → Cohesion (YP) T2	.17 (.04)	<.001	
Cohesion (YP) T1 → Cohesion (P) T2	.10 (.02)	<.001	
Cohesion (YP) T1 → Well-being T2	.08 (.02)	<.001	
Covariances			
Rituals T1 ↔ Cohesion (P) T1	.12 (.02)	<.001	
Rituals T1 ↔ Cohesion (YP) T1	.08 (.02)	<.001	
Rituals T1 ↔ Well-being T1	.02 (.01)	.10	
Cohesion (P) T1 ↔ T1 Cohesion (YP) T1	.20 (.02)	<.001	
Cohesion (P) T1 ↔ Well-being T1	.07 (.01)	<.001	
Cohesion (YP) T1 ↔ Well-being T1	.20 (.02)	<.001	
<b>Model 2</b>			
Direct effects			
Rituals T1 → Cohesion (P) T1	.46 (.05)	<.001	
Cohesion (P) T1 → Cohesion (YP) T2	.50 (.05)	<.001	
Cohesion (YP) → Well-being (YP)	.28 (.02)	<.001	
Indirect effects			
Rituals T1 → Well-being (YP) T2	.06 (.01)	<.001	[.05, .09]
Rituals T1 → Cohesion (YP) T2	.23 (.04)	<.001	[.17, .29]
Cohesion (P) T1 → Well-being (YP) T2	.14 (.02)	<.001	[.11, .17]



### Family Rituals and Family Cohesion Across Time

Our first hypothesis was partially supported in that we found that links between family ritual meaning and family cohesion were bidirectional for parents, i.e., ritual meaning at Time 1 predicted family cohesion at Time 2, and family cohesion at Time 1 predicted ritual meaning one year later. We also found positive correlations between parents' perceptions of family ritual meaning and adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion both concurrently and longitudinally; however these links did not hold up in the SEM model when other variables were controlled.

The bidirectional association between family rituals and family cohesion is a novel finding in family rituals research. To our knowledge this is the first study to provide empirical evidence for this association that has been frequently theorized in the literature to exist. For instance, Imber-Black (2002, p. 445) stated that family rituals both "shape and express family relationships," indicating that these meaningful interactions can: (a) transform or cause change in the way family members relate to one another, and also (b) provide information about family functioning, such as family cohesion. We will now discuss in more depth how family rituals and cohesion support each other over time. First, how might family rituals lead to higher levels of family cohesion? Drawing on Kelley et al.'s (2002) framework, relationships are based fundamentally on interactions between people. The more frequently people experience strong and diverse interactions that go beyond routine matters, the more likely that the participants will derive meaning from them (Fiese et al., 2002). And the more often these interactions occur over an extended period of time, the more interdependent and close the interactants will feel. Thus, in the realm of rituals, the repetition of these meaning-filled interactions over time will bring family members closer to each other. There is an emotional investment in carrying out and being part of these ritualized interactions (Fiese, 2006), which contributes to building a shared identity and a strong feeling of belonging to a specific group. Involvement in events (rituals) that embody feeling and meaning, then, will encourage closeness that translates to a feeling of family cohesion.

Second, how might greater family cohesion lead to increased use of family rituals? When family members feel connected to each other and to the family as a whole, they are likely to want to engage in frequent and meaningful interactions, such as gathering for dinner on a regular basis and celebrating special occasions such as Christmas, birthdays of family members, and anniversaries of the family's important dates. If the family environment is generally positive and the group is well connected, people will look forward to these events (Fiese, 2006) and make efforts to have them happen in a way that is satisfactory for everyone in the family. Thus, a more cohesive family will be more motivated and, perhaps more skilled, in creating and maintaining family rituals.

In our study, adolescents' reports of family cohesion, unlike parents' perceptions, were not directly linked to ratings of family rituals. Although these perceptions refer to the family as whole, they are, nevertheless, individual perceptions of the way the whole family behaves and feels about rituals (in this case, only from the parents) and may not reflect the adolescents' perceptions (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992). We do not

know how young people in this study perceived rituals in their families, nor how these perceptions might have been associated with their assessment of family cohesion. The present data supported our second hypothesis, that links between family cohesion were bidirectional, i.e., not only did parents' family cohesion predict adolescents' family cohesion one year later but the reverse was also true. Examining these two results together, we suggest that to the extent that the adolescent sees the family in a less positive light, this will affect (or affect more rapidly) parents' perceptions of family cohesion but not (or not so immediately) that group's repeated patterns of action, i.e. rituals, where parents are likely to be the main actors at this particular life cycle stage (Erikson, 1966).

### Family Rituals, Family Cohesion, and Adolescents' Well-Being: Direct and Indirect Effects

Family ritual meaning reported by parents was positively related to adolescents' well-being concurrently only at Time 1. The lack of a systematic and longitudinal link between these two variables (against predicted in H3) might be explained by the role of the more global perceptions of family environment, such as family cohesion. Even if parents engage in rituals and assess them as meaningful, this does not necessarily mean that all members of the family share this view. For instance, if the family does not adapt to the adolescents' developmental changes, rituals might be perceived as rigid or hollow events and, thus, be irrelevant to adolescents' well-being (Roberts, 1998).

Hypothesis 4, stating that young people's well-being would be predicted by family cohesion (both parents' and young people's ratings) was partially supported. As expected, we found a positive link between family cohesion assessed by adolescents and their own reports of well-being. This is a well-documented finding in the literature: adolescents benefit from perceiving a sense of connectedness to their life contexts, of which family is arguably the most important one (see Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Laursen & Collins, 2009). Family cohesion assessed by parents was, however, not significantly related to adolescents' well-being in the final SEM model (Model 1). These findings contributed to the further elaboration of our fifth hypothesis (see Results section). We examined and found a good fit for a multi-step mediation model where parents' ratings of the family ritual meaning predicted parents' family cohesion, which in turn led to adolescents' family cohesion, and, finally, to adolescents' well-being. Our findings suggest that when parents attribute more meaning to family rituals, they also perceive their families in a more positive light (higher cohesion), which leads to stronger adolescents' sense of family cohesion; this sense of family cohesion, in the present case, led one year later to positive feelings about themselves, their lives, and their future (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). For girls, the links between family cohesion perceived by parents at Time 1 and their reports of well-being at Time 2 were stronger than for boys, suggesting that girls might be more attuned to parents' views of the family and/or are more influenced by them (cf. Leaper, 2002).



### Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study was the absence of adolescents' reports of family ritual meaning. We can speculate that adolescents' own perceptions of family rituals would be directly and more strongly linked to their own reports of well-being. Also, in our study we relied exclusively on self-reports, which raises concerns about single-method response bias. In addition, we are aware that the self-report format might have been especially challenging for some of the younger participants (at the onset of adolescence) who, even with the help of research assistants, might have found it difficult to understand all of the items. Future research incorporating more than one assessment method, for instance, including ratings of family functioning by external observers, would be beneficial. Another limitation is that the ideal statistical examination of the indirect effects of family rituals on adolescents' well-being would require three measurement occasions, and only two were available here. Finally, we assessed one mediating variable (family cohesion) and one specific adolescent outcome; there are probably other variables that explain why and how family rituals are important for adolescents' development. Finally, given that rituals are but one of many aspects of family life (Fiese, 2006; Howe, 2002), it is possible that our findings can be explained by a third, more general overarching construct, such as, for instance, family competence (Beavers & Hampson, 2000). Families who are more adaptive, flexible, and able to negotiate interpersonal relations (i.e., all are characteristics of family competence), are more likely to derive and hold strong meanings to special family events and to promote a sense of belonging among their members. Thus, this third variable could explain the mutual links between rituals and cohesion and their connections to young people's well-being.

### Conclusions

Despite the necessary caution in interpreting these results, this study has several strengths. First, it provided empirical support for the existence of bidirectional links between family rituals and cohesion, and it illuminated how parents' family ritual meaning is linked to adolescents' well-being over time. Taken together, these are important findings showing that parents' investment in these occasions can contribute to: (a) more positive views of the family (directly to their own and indirectly to their children's) and (b) to their adolescents' overall well-being in the near future. The fact that these findings come from a sample including both parents and their children in pre-adolescence and early stages of adolescence is especially informative, as so far, most studies about family rituals have used samples in late adolescence. Because strain in the parent-child relationship seems to occur at the onset of adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), our results show that family rituals, even at this stage, are relevant to young people's well-being by increasing feelings of family cohesion in parents, which, in turn, are related to adolescents' feelings of family cohesion. Despite common assumptions about adolescent tendencies to avoid family time, we found that daily interactions such as dinner time and family annual celebrations are important to families as a whole and to adolescents individually, so long as they hold meaning for parents.

The fact that the results were valid for New Zealand's two main ethnic groups in our sample is important. Despite different family organization and cultural heritage, likely to show in the way family dinners and annual celebrations are enacted, the underlying meaning parents attribute to these events might have similar function, therefore, although their content may vary, the salience of family rituals appears to apply to both cultures. However, as these results are preliminary, a thorough investigation of the nature and role of family rituals across cultures is yet to be undertaken. In conclusion, this research combines Fiese et al.'s (2002) two pathways for the impact of family rituals, illustrating how rituals can have both longitudinal direct effects on families (namely, on family cohesion) and indirect effects on adolescents' well-being via perceptions of whole family cohesion. The findings suggest new directions in longitudinal research, addressing stability and change in family rituals over a longer period of time in adolescence, expanding the assessment of family rituals to more than one family member, and, finally, examining other family processes that might mediate the links between family rituals and positive adolescent development.

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Received August 27, 2010

Revision received January 31, 2011

Accepted February 1, 2011 ■