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## The Sociology of Family Dinners: Planning, Shopping, Preparing, and Serving

### INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, including my parents' lifetimes and likely their parents' as well, the notion of families gathering at the end of each day to share a homemade sit-down meal has been seen as the ideal. While that can't always be the case for every single family on every single day, I'm sure that even those who rarely have family dinners have the idea of it nagging them in the back of their minds. This enduring cultural ideal reflects broader societal values about family cohesion, the role of shared rituals in fostering intimacy, and how modern life complicates the realization of such traditions amidst changing work and social dynamics.

Family dinners are incredibly significant in society because of their innate connection to family dynamics, gender roles, and socioeconomic factors. As someone who has experienced a plethora of different family dynamics, I know their impact is strong. With such busy lives, often dinnertime is the only point in a day when all members of a family are together. In terms of gender roles, family dinners often reflect traditional ones, as women are disproportionately responsible for the planning, shopping, and preparation of meals, even in households where they work full-time. This common and unequal division of labor highlights how domestic responsibilities remain gendered, reinforcing societal expectations of women as primary caretakers and nurturers within the family. Looking at socioeconomic factors, family dinners are

deeply influenced by them, as families with limited financial resources often struggle to afford healthy, nutritious food or the time needed to prepare meals. Economic constraints, such as food insecurity and lack of access to grocery stores, create significant barriers that prevent low-income families from achieving the cultural ideal of family meals.

Family meals are often seen as a cornerstone of family life, fostering connection and tradition around the dinner table. However, the ability to provide these meals is shaped by larger social forces, including economic pressures, gendered expectations, and time constraints, which place uneven burdens on families. Through extensive research and one interview with my mom, this paper aims to address the process of planning, shopping, preparing, and serving family meals and how it reflects and reinforces systemic inequalities, particularly around class, gender, and time, making food a central site for understanding broader social dynamics.

## **THE SOCIOLOGY OF PLANNING FAMILY MEALS**

Planning family meals involves a complex balancing act of time, labor, and social expectations. For many families, organizing meal planning means navigating the competing demands of work, school, and extracurricular activities. When I interviewed my mom, she described creating “a master list of meals our family enjoys,” and she then plans out “the weekly menu from Saturday to Friday,” consulting with her partner to incorporate his input. This kind of planning requires careful time management, particularly when one partner works fewer hours and takes on more responsibility for shopping and preparation, as is the case for my mom. Research by Fielding-Singh (2021: 131) highlights that, in the United States, mothers spend

three times as many hours preparing meals as fathers. As Fielding-Singh writes about food-related work, "...traditional gender norms dictate that mothers undertake that work." She continues, "Many dads told me that moms were inherently better at cooking all things nutrition-related" (Fielding-Singh 2021: 133). My mom explained that although her partner occasionally assists with shopping, she often ends up doing the majority of the work due to his longer hours and his aversion to certain mainstream grocery stores. This reflects broader trends in which mothers not only do more but also face added stress from ensuring meals align with family preferences and dietary needs.

Cultural and economic factors further complicate meal planning. Many families, like my own, navigate preferences and aversions among children while adhering to specific dietary restrictions, such as being pescatarians. Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott (2020) describe how financial constraints force families to adopt strategies like budgeting, creating detailed shopping lists, and seeking cost-saving tips. For low-income families, these pressures are amplified by physically demanding jobs, which limit the time and energy available for cooking (Fielding-Singh 2021: 143). One mother interviewed by Fielding-Singh reported struggling to make homemade meals after 10-hour shifts in a supermarket, a scenario that underscores how economic inequities shape access to the idealized family dinner (2021: 142). The disparity between cultural expectations and economic realities becomes particularly stark for these families, who must often choose between convenience and the perceived moral value of a home-cooked meal.

Time and labor management in meal planning also involves addressing the logistics of food preparation and ensuring that meals meet the needs of all family members. A master list, like the one my mom uses, helps streamline the process by identifying meals that satisfy

everyone's tastes. However, even with such systems in place, the responsibility of catering to diverse preferences often falls disproportionately on mothers. Fielding-Singh (2021) emphasizes that this dynamic reinforces traditional gender roles, as mothers are expected to bear the emotional labor of ensuring their children's happiness and nutritional well-being.

Economic constraints further shape the types of meals families plan. Budgeting is a central concern, especially for low-income families who must carefully allocate resources to meet dietary needs while minimizing costs. Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott (2020) note that strategies such as shopping with a list and adhering to money-saving tips are critical for managing limited finances. Yet, even with these strategies, the burden of planning and preparing meals can be overwhelming. For mothers working long hours in physically demanding jobs, like Delfina in Fielding-Singh's (2021) study, the exhaustion of the workday often precludes the possibility of cooking a homemade meal. This reality highlights the intersection of labor inequalities and foodwork, where economic and time constraints disproportionately affect working-class mothers.

The cultural ideal of the family dinner remains a powerful symbol of togetherness, yet it is often unattainable for many families due to the structural challenges they face. For higher-income families, flexibility in work schedules and access to resources can make it easier to achieve this ideal. In contrast, lower-income families must navigate rigid work hours, limited access to fresh and affordable ingredients, and the physical toll of demanding jobs. These disparities illustrate how economic privilege influences the ability to fulfill societal expectations around meal planning and family life. Ultimately, the sociology of planning family meals reveals the intricate ways in which time, labor, gender roles, and economic factors intersect to shape the daily lives of families.

## SHOPPING FOR FAMILY MEALS

The process of shopping for family meals is shaped by various factors, including socioeconomic status, geographic location, and access to transportation. These elements often create significant disparities in how families acquire food. For instance, families living in food deserts—areas with limited access to fresh, affordable groceries—face challenges that others do not. A lack of nearby grocery stores or reliable transportation can force these families to rely on convenience stores or fast-food options, which often lack healthy and affordable choices. In her interview, my mom described driving “30 minutes to a food co-op for high-quality, organic produce and bulk items,” highlighting the extra effort required for those who prioritize healthier options but live far from ideal shopping locations. While this co-op offers superior products, its distance, and higher prices make it less accessible for families with limited time or financial resources.

Socioeconomic status also plays a significant role in shaping grocery shopping behaviors. Families with limited budgets often have to make strategic decisions about what to buy. One mother, Ashley, is a very prepared shopper. Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott said, “If there were a competition for smartest shopper, Ashley would be a contender. She never goes to the grocery store without her black three-ring binder, stocked with coupons, arranged carefully by store section” (2020: 133). She also “... compares prices for different items and tries to avoid buying things that aren’t on sale. When she finds a particularly good deal on something, she buys extra so she won’t have to buy it again next month” (Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott 2020: 134). Similarly, my mom noted that “making meals from scratch helps cut down on costs,” though this approach often requires more time and effort. For low-income families, balancing cost and

nutrition can be particularly challenging, as processed foods are often cheaper than fresh, healthy options. This financial pressure underscores the intersection of economic inequality and access to nutritious food.

Decision-making in grocery shopping extends beyond cost to include considerations of convenience, nutrition, and even personal values. My mom explained that while she enjoys shopping at her local co-op for its high-quality produce and sustainable products, she also frequents Trader Joe's and Big Y for convenience and affordability. Her decisions reflect a balancing act between her ethical priorities, such as supporting local and organic producers, and the practical need to save time and money. Fielding-Singh (2021) observed, "Store prices and proximity were certainly part of the calculus. But so too was whether a store felt right or wrong, whether moms saw themselves reflected in the clientele or noticed cars like theirs in the parking lot" (Fielding-Singh 2021: 113). At the end of our interview, my mom insisted that she added, "I've started boycotting Whole Foods because I can't stand supporting a corporate oligarchy!" For some families, shopping at certain stores becomes a way to signal social status, with choices reflecting class identity and political values as much as dietary needs.

The emotional and social dynamics of grocery shopping further complicate this seemingly mundane task. For some, it is a source of stress. My mom described mainstream supermarkets as "unpleasant environments," citing issues like "poor lighting, unfriendly staff, and the overwhelming size of the stores." Such experiences can make grocery shopping feel like a burdensome chore rather than an empowering or enjoyable activity. On the other hand, shopping can also serve as a means of family bonding or personal empowerment. For parents, providing healthy meals for their children can be a source of pride, a tangible way to demonstrate care and responsibility. As Fielding-Singh notes, writing about an upwardly mobile mom named

Latisha Jenkins, "...their kids' diets were tangible evidence of their success in ascending the social hierarchy. Latisha helped me see how more privileged moms used their kids' diets to lay claim to their place in society. Food was about more than nourishment—it was about embodying and displaying a class identity" (2021: 115). This perspective illustrates how grocery shopping and the food it provides can carry deep emotional and social significance.

In the end, the act of shopping for family meals is shaped by a complex interplay of access, decision-making, and emotional factors. Families must navigate the constraints of geography and socioeconomic status, balance cost and convenience, and contend with the emotional weight of providing for their loved ones. Whether grocery shopping is experienced as a stressful obligation or an opportunity for empowerment, it reveals a lot about the broader social structures that influence family life.

### **PREPARING FAMILY MEALS**

The preparation of family meals is shaped by the division of labor, constraints on time, and the skills and knowledge available to those cooking. In many families, the division of labor reflects traditional gender norms, intersecting with class and cultural expectations. For example, Rosario García, a Mexican immigrant living in North Carolina, spends significant time preparing traditional homemade meals for her husband and three children. As Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott observe, "Rosario usually starts preparing dinner almost as soon as she wakes up" (2020: 51). Despite her efforts, Rosario's labor often goes unrecognized, and she adjusts meals for each family member without complaint, eats quickly, and cleans up by herself. Her story highlights

the unequal distribution of household responsibilities, with women often bearing the brunt of meal preparation.

This gendered dynamic is not unique to immigrant families. As my mom explained, “Usually, one of the two adults is the main chef of a dinner, and the other helps with chopping, setting the table, or an extra pair of hands.” However, in many households, the primary responsibility often falls on one individual, typically the woman. This reflects broader societal patterns where women disproportionately take on food-related work, reinforcing traditional gender roles. These expectations intersect with class, as lower-income families may have fewer resources or less time to share responsibilities equitably. For many women, the cultural expectation to prepare meals is not just a practical task but also a way to nurture their families and maintain cultural traditions.

Time poverty further complicates the preparation of family meals, especially for working families. Limited time often forces families to choose between homemade meals and fast or processed food. As Brueggemann (2023: 137) emphasizes, “Eating is the one basic biological act that we have fully integrated into public life.” Mealtime holds cultural significance, but the constraints of modern life frequently undermine its importance. My mom reflected, “We like our dinners to have -some- labor to them because it feels more special and more a labor of love, and it tends to be healthier, too.” Yet, balancing this ideal with busy schedules is challenging. For instance, Rosario García must manage her time carefully to accommodate her family’s needs, often sacrificing her own leisure or rest. Similarly, my mom’s comment about relying on one adult for meal preparation while the other assists demonstrates how families adapt to time constraints by delegating tasks.

The skills and knowledge required for meal preparation also play a critical role. Generational knowledge, as well as access to cooking education, shapes how families approach cooking. Traditional recipes, passed down through generations, often serve as a connection to cultural heritage. For Rosario García, preparing traditional Mexican dishes every day is a way to maintain her cultural identity while nourishing her family. However, not all families have access to this knowledge. A lack of cooking education can lead to greater reliance on processed or convenience foods, particularly for families with limited time or financial resources. As my mom noted, involving children in cooking could be beneficial but is often impractical in small kitchens or when parents are pressed for time. “Our kitchen space is cramped, and while it would be better if we had their help, it can be annoying to have too many people needing direction in a small space,” she explained. This highlights how logistical challenges can hinder the transmission of cooking skills to the next generation.

Ultimately, the preparation of family meals reflects broader societal structures, including gender norms, time constraints, and cultural values. Many families strive to balance the demands of daily life with the desire to create meaningful mealtime experiences, but these efforts often fall disproportionately on women. Still, the act of cooking remains a powerful expression of care and connection, underscoring the enduring importance of mealtime in family life.

## **SERVING AND EATING FAMILY MEALS**

The act of serving and eating family meals carries profound social significance, functioning as a cornerstone of family bonding, communication, and cultural practice. The dinner

table has long been idealized as a site for connection, where family members share their experiences, strengthen relationships, and resolve conflicts. However, the dynamics of these interactions often vary based on who is present and the broader context of the family's structure. My mom highlighted the variability in our blended family's mealtime interactions: "The family interactions depend on who's present—as a blended family, not all of the kids are always there at the same time. If all three kids are there, there's banter and louder chatting; if it's the two adults and one kid, the conversation tends to be more focused around that kid and what she brings up." This adaptability reflects the evolving nature of family structures and the ways mealtime adapts to accommodate these shifts.

At the same time, the rituals of serving and eating together can reveal broader societal power dynamics, particularly regarding gender. Traditionally, women have been tasked with the labor of preparing and serving meals, a practice deeply embedded in cultural norms. Even when this responsibility is shared, it often remains asymmetrical. In the words of my mom, "Food (planning, shopping, cooking, cleaning) is very much my love language, as inherited from my mother, my former mother-in-law, and my mother's mother. I find making and serving food to the people I love incredibly rewarding." While this sentiment underscores the emotional fulfillment derived from meal preparation, it also illustrates how entrenched gender expectations continue to shape the division of labor within families.

Societal changes, including shifts in work schedules, individualization, and the rise of technology, have significantly altered the traditional family meal. Screens have, for many families, disrupted the cohesion of mealtime. Yet some families strive to preserve the tradition. For example, one parent noted, "We basically try to have breakfast and dinner together," adding, "I would say that 95 percent of the time we're able to do that. Which, I feel, is extremely rare for

families today. But it's important to us. And sometimes challenging, for sure" (Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott 2020: 58). This commitment reflects the enduring value many families place on shared meals, even as they face the pressures of modern life.

Additionally, mealtime rituals are shaped by the blending of cultural practices and individual preferences. My mom described the challenges of merging distinct family traditions in our blended household: "In our early years, sometimes we ran into clashes between our two 'camps' about things like how long dinner should take (his usual was shorter than mine), and how 'elaborate' meals should be." Over time, these differences were reconciled, illustrating the adaptability required to maintain the practice of shared meals in diverse family settings.

The family table remains a powerful symbol of community and connection. Despite the decline of the "traditional" family meal, families continue to find ways to adapt this practice, recognizing its importance in fostering bonds and preserving cultural identity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of planning, shopping, preparing, and serving family meals reflects and reinforces systemic inequalities, particularly around class, gender, and time, making food a central site for understanding broader social dynamics. Throughout this paper, it has become evident that family meals are shaped by deeply entrenched societal structures. The division of labor in meal preparation often mirrors traditional gender roles, with women shouldering the majority of the responsibility despite the growing presence of dual-income households. This unequal distribution of labor intersects with class, as working-class and low-income families face

heightened challenges due to time poverty, limited access to affordable and nutritious food, and physically demanding work schedules. These dynamics highlight how the act of preparing and sharing meals—something often romanticized as a symbol of family unity—can also perpetuate inequalities and stress.

Understanding these processes is crucial for sociology because food is not only a basic human need but also a cultural and social construct. Examining the inequalities embedded in family meals sheds light on the broader patterns of oppression and privilege that permeate daily life. From the unequal burden placed on women to the disparities in food access based on socioeconomic status, the study of family meals reveals how structural inequalities manifest in ordinary, intimate spaces. Moreover, these insights are essential for informing public policy. Efforts to support families through subsidies for nutritious food, investments in urban planning to reduce food deserts, and programs that promote equitable labor distribution in households could significantly alleviate the pressures tied to meal preparation.

Future research should explore how technological advancements, such as grocery delivery services or meal kits, impact the inequalities surrounding family meals. Additionally, policymakers could benefit from further studies examining the intersection of race, ethnicity, and food traditions, as these factors add another layer of complexity to the dynamics of family meals. By addressing these issues, we can take meaningful steps toward a more equitable food system and foster a society where the act of sharing a meal truly embodies unity and care.

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