

‘Because we can spend quality time together’: Year 10 Students’ Experiences and Perceptions of ‘Family Meals’

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study investigating beliefs and practices surrounding the ‘family meal’. Using data from a sample of 415 Year 10 students, the paper challenges current media driven concerns about the loss of the ‘family meal’, instead finding that while, for some, it may look rather different from the traditional ideal, for a vast majority, meals are: eaten together, rather than in isolation; are home made, rather than store bought or fast food; and are the sites for conversation. While television watching is a common practice, it does not appear to preclude conversation. For these young people, opinion was equally divided on the value of the ‘family meal’, with those who saw it as important regarding its value as in the opportunity for family communication. The findings of the current study go some way to dispelling the myth that traditional notions of the family meal no longer exist. It also suggests that socialisation can still occur in non-traditional meal practices.

Introduction

The image of the ideal family meal pervades our everyday life from television advertising and programming to literature and beyond. This image presents a ‘family’ sitting down at a table being served food by a mother wreathed in smiles. It is a traditional, nostalgic

image of a cocooned family, safe from the disorder and uncertainty of the outside world. This image is continually validated by a media focus that gives credence to the importance of family meals as a cornerstone of society, connecting individual/s with community and effecting socialization.

Nevertheless, despite these enduring images, there is growing national and international concern regarding the apparent demise of the family meal. Moral panic, whereby the loss of the family meal has come to be presented as “a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1972:9), has erupted as eating moves from being a social to a more individual practice (Fischler 1980: 947). The loss of the family meal has been linked to psychological, social and physical effects resulting in, for example, low self esteem, family dysfunction, social unrest and obesity. However, little research exists on the continuing significance, or otherwise, of the family meal as a site where ‘community’ and communication occur.

This paper presents preliminary findings from research aiming to address the significant lack of knowledge regarding the family meal and its role in the current Australian context. This research indicates that concerns about the demise of the family meal are premature, although the form it takes may not necessarily conform to the nostalgic image to which we are exposed.

Just as definitions of ‘family’ have become more fluid and inclusive, so too has the definition of ‘meal’ (Mäkälä 2000). What it is, how it varies with different life phases and what impact this has on the social fabric of our communities is unknown. Most studies are based on white, American, middle-class families and the few Australian studies which exist have produced contradictory findings (Skatssoon 2003). Campbell and Crawford (2001: 23) suggest that ‘in the Australian context we have few insights regarding the family food environment in which our children learn their food habits, or how this might differ across social groups’. There has been no attempt to bring together findings on food and family research from a range of disciplines, despite the fact that ‘such an integration has the potential to throw light on a number of issues from different methodological angles’ (Coveney 2002: 114).

Part of the definitional problem in identifying the 'family meal' involves the conflation of actual practice with ideal representation. Murcott (1997) argues that representations of the family meal reflect an ideal to which people aspire, rather than a reality, and suggests we need 'to separate reports of frequency from articulations of an idealised image' or 'actual activities' from 'images of family living to which people aspire' (Murcott 1982:693).

The current research is undertaken by a multidisciplinary team consisting of a psychologist, two sociologists and a nutritionist to try to begin answering some of these questions: What, where and how are people eating their evening meals? How is this related to age, class, ethnicity, gender, family composition, and employment status? What is considered to be a 'family meal'? Who prepares and cooks food in the household? Does food intake differ between those who do and don't engage in 'family meals'? Is eating 'family meals' related to psychosocial well-being?

Research Plan, Methods and Technique

After considerable deliberation about the most appropriate methodology, a compromise position was arrived at which saw Year 10 students from 7 secondary schools in the Perth metropolitan area invited to participateⁱ. Being at a critical stage of development in terms of their own nutritional choices, eating habits and health/obesity concerns, the adolescents constitute a relevant sampleⁱⁱ. Schools were selected to provide a range of socio-economic backgrounds. For convenience of application and to ensure all students (regardless of access to computer and internet access at home) were able to participate, schools were asked to include the survey as part of the Year 10 Health or Science program. Participants were encouraged to complete an online questionnaire designed to determine actual family practices as well as the ideal 'family meal' (see Website at www.familymeals.com.au). Measures of family connectedness, health and well-being were also included. It was anticipated that at least 1,000 students would participate (results in the current paper report the data collected from April-June 2005)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Sample

The current sample consists of 220 males (53%) and 195 females (47%), making a total of 415 Year 10s, 90.4% of whom completed the web-based version and 9.6% the paper-based. We estimated the socioeconomic status of the participants generally through SES bands based on median weekly household income by suburb (2001 ABS data). 31.3% of participants were from schools in suburbs in the high band, 20.5% in the medium and 48.2% in the low.

Household Characteristics

The average number of people living in respondents' houses was 4.7; 89.9% were living with mothers and 1.9% with stepmother, 66.8% with fathers and 10.6% with stepfathers. 10.8% had relatives other than siblings living in the house. Father/stepfather was employed in 89.5% of households, and mother/stepmother employed in 66.5%. Of respondents, 42.2% were the eldest child in the family, and 34.9% the youngest.

The cultural diversity of the sample broadly reflects that of the population in general. 78.3% were born in Australia; 5.2% of these were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The top five of 86 'Other' countries of birth were England, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore and the Philippines. Language spoken at home was predominantly English (74%), with the top five of 44 'Other' languages being Serbian, Vietnamese, Macedonian, Italian and Cantonese.

Family meals: experiences and expectations

In terms of general eating habits, a majority of respondents reported that they eat and drink whatever they want, although almost as many were a little careful about eating habits (See Table 1). Few reported that they were 'sometimes' or 'always' on a diet.

Table 1 **Distribution of responses regarding usual eating habits (N=415)**

I eat and drink what I want, whenever I want	195 (47%)
I am a little careful about what I eat and drink	175 (42.2%)
I am sometimes on a diet	34 (8.2%)
I am almost always on a diet	11 (2.7%)

Just over half reported that they always ate breakfast on weekdays with just over 80% eating breakfast on the weekends.

We asked participants to provide as much detail as they could about the meal they ate the previous night. 3. When coded for the type of food eaten 72% ate "home-made" meals, 10% instant meals at home (such as instant noodles or frozen complete meals) and 22% fast food such as McDonald's, Hungry Jacks, fish and chips, Chicken Treat etc. Interestingly, over a quarter (27%) of the adolescents reported that they had decided what they were going to eat that night. 15% prepared their own evening meal, but for the majority it was the mother (50%) or father (14%) who had prepared the meal.

Participants were asked to provide more detail about the meal they ate the previous night – what it consisted of, where it was eaten, and whether all household members ate it in the same place.

Meals consisted of a wide variety of foods eaten – from the well balanced to the less nutritional (e.g. 'ice-cream' as a meal). The art of 'home cooking' does not seem to have disappeared, with meals including 'veggie bake and lamb chops'; 'freshly baked pasta with cheese sauce, fried pork schnitels [sic] with a cream sauce, freshly baked capsicum [sic] with a bit of garlic and oil'; 'crumbed fish, mashed potato, fresh peas, fresh corn, fresh carrot, salad'; the ubiquitous 'spaghetti with meat sauce'; and more exotic options such as 'stir fry (noodles, chicken)'; 'satay chicken (sauce from packet) and rice with onions capsicum and carrots'; 'lamb curry with potatoes in it and rice with saffron [sic] in

it'; and the eclectic 'chicken [sic] curry with rice salad n fries' or 'rice, scrambled eggs with pepperoni, bok choy with potato'. There were also the more traditional 'chops, chips, salad and 2 rolls' and 'sausages mashed potatoes and peas'.

Of the 384 responses to the question, 'Where did you eat your meal last night?' almost half at a dining room table, with another fifth eating in the lounge room (See Table 2). A possibly troubling 7% ate in their bedrooms.

Table 2 **Distribution of responses regarding eating site for last night's meal (N=384)**

Dining room table	178 (46.4%)
Lounge room	71 (18.5%)
Kitchen	33 (8.6%)
Family room	30 (7.8%)
Bedroom	27 (7%)
Car	3 (0.8%)
Backyard	2 (0.5%)
Park	1 (0.3%)
Other	39 (10%)

74.5% reported this was at the same place as everyone else, and 80.7% that the meal was eaten at the same time as everyone else.

We were also interested in activities undertaken during mealtime (or while eating). As Table 3 indicates, talking was engaged in by almost eight out of ten participants, and while the TV was on in 60% of households, only three quarters of these respondents were actually watching it.^{iv}

Table 3 Activities while eating (total numbers and percentages)

	Yes	No
Did you talk with others while you were eating? (N=382)	300 (78.5%)	82 (21.5%)
Was the television on while you were eating? (N=384)	231 (60.2%)	153 (39.8%)
If the TV was on, were you watching television? (N=225)	169 (75.1%)	56 (24.9%)

70% of the sample perceived their meal the previous night as a ‘family’ meal. Their reasons, as provided in Table 4, were mainly based around the sociality of the event – that everyone was collected for the meal event (48.68%). However, almost 40% used a nutritional definition of the family meal, suggesting it was a family meal because it was home cooked or included meat and vegetables.

Table 4 Previous night’s meal was a family meal because (respondents could tick more than one option; N=645 responses)

Everybody was there	195 (30.2%)
We were all sitting at a table	119 (18.5%)
The meal was cooked at home	141 (21.9%)
The meal included meat and veggies	117 (18.1%)
The television was off	47 (7.3%)
Other	26 (4.0%)

Of the 30% who felt it was not a family meal, again the focus was on the social aspect of not everyone being together, with the meal not being cooked at home not a major factor (although a number of the 'other' answers indicated that since different family members were eating different foods, this was what precluded it from being a 'family meal') (See Table 5).

Table 5: Previous night's meal was not a family meal because (respondents could tick more than one option; N=164 responses)

Not everybody was there	58 (35.4%)
We were not sitting at table	35 (21.3%)
The meal was not cooked at home	17 (10.4%)
The meal did not include meat and vegetables	9 (5.9%)
The television was on	12 (7.3%)
Non family members were there	13 (7.9%)
Other	20 (12.2%)

Of course our aim had been to identify not only current eating patterns, but the degree to which these reflect ideals of the family meal and whether having family meals was important to adolescents. In response to the question, 'Is having family meals important to you?' 52.8% of the 415 gave affirmative answers, and 47.2% negative. This almost equal split is fascinating, and we suspected that it reflected a gender difference, but of those who said that family meals were important 50.2% were male and 49.7% were female – almost equal proportions.

Of the 215 who said yes, the most common theme in their explanations in the qualitative section of the question, was framed around the opportunity provided by the meal for communication with other family members. This was related to the second most frequent

theme—that of spending time together (See Table 6).

Table 6: Why family meals are important (N=215)

Discussion/talking	91 (42.3%)
Time together/ relationship	70 (32.6%)
'Catching-up'	15 (7.0%)
Food aspects	21 (9.8%)
Other	18 (8.4%)

The following few examples of written responses indicate the overwhelming similarity of the discourse.

Yes, because it's the only time everyone gets to sit down and catch up especialy [sic] during the week.

Yes because you can discuss problems to [sic] your parents.

Because we can spend quality time together and talk about what is on our mind.

Because we all sit down and talk.

It gives us a chance to converse and communicate as a family.

Because you van [sic] talk about the events that took place in that day and have some family time together.

It's comfy and nice to have the family all together. Having a family meal in the evening is very important to me because I get to talk to my family all together at the same time. We also try and solve problems we may be having. We have a good time and we can all relax while enjoying a good meal.

Those who did not feel the family meal was important gave answers which clustered around the general theme of not caring, or not seeing the point, although one in ten found mealtime an opportunity to take a break from the family or to enjoy their own solitude

(See Table 7). One in ten found they had other opportunities for family time or to talk, and that the family meal itself was less important for this aspect of family life.

Table 7: Those who felt it was not important (190 responses)

Don't care or like	21.1%
Not bothered/don't see the point	11.1%
Need break from family/prefer others	12.1%
Just food	10.5%
Not everyone there/too busy	9.5%
Other family time or time to talk	9.5%
'Because'	6.8%
Other	5.3%
Uninterpretable	14.2%

The qualitative responses for the negative were far less forthcoming with many providing single or a few words in answer. Some examples follow:

No it doesn't [sic] matter.

Because.

No.

Why is it important.

Because it's [sic] nothing just eating dinner.

Because I see my family members during the day and I need some space which is at dinner time.

Not really because you get annoyed [sic] with your family. They ask to [sic] many questions.

Because I dislike my sister.

BECAUSE IT IS JUST EATING.

5RY5RTYR5TY5RT.^v

Discussion and Conclusion

Our preliminary conclusion from this research is that the moral panic about the demise of the family meal is premature. Our findings fall in between a recent poll by a pasta sauce manufacturer which indicated, ‘meal times have become a recipe for food rejection, stress, stand-offs and bribery’ with 95% of children rejecting home-cooked meals (Skatssoon 2003), and a Meat and Livestock Australia commissioned study (2003) which indicated that 86% of families sit down to an evening meal and the television is switched off 60% of the time. Similar to Neumark-Sztainer and co-workers’ (2003, 2004) focus group based research on family meal patterns of adolescents attending seventh and tenth grade in the US, we found a great diversity in family meal patterns, including both the ‘sit down regular meal’ and the ‘eat and run’ scenario. We were surprised that almost half of the respondents reported eating around a dining room table, a more traditional image of family interaction than many might expect. Likewise it appears the gendered division of labour is still common, although significant proportions of fathers and of adolescents themselves were preparing meals (one in three of our sample). Home made meals were common, with almost three quarters of our sample reporting eating a meal cooked at home the previous night.

Our findings also support Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues’ conclusion that watching television is a relatively common, though by no means universal, activity while eating a meal. Concerns about the impact of television watching suggest that if everyone’s eating is done in front of the television set without the scrutiny of adults, children may learn basic social skills (Visser 1991: 55). Our study indicates that while the television may be on, not everyone is watching it, and for those who are, this does not preclude

communication – 80% reported talking during the meal. It is this communication aspect which seems to define it as a ‘family meal’ for the majority of adolescents. While Neumark-Sztainer and co-workers (2003, 2004) found that key reasons for not eating a family meal were busy schedules, dissatisfaction with family relations and a dislike of the food being served at family meals, many of our respondents challenged the value of the ‘family meal’ itself .

Our findings appear to support Otnes’ (1991: 105) argument that meals potentially assemble groups and ‘may signify unity and sharing’, with almost 75% of our sample indicating that they ate in the same place as other family members on the night in question, and over 70% reporting they ate together 4 or more times a week. Certainly many valued the family meal as an opportunity to come together and share with other members of their families. However, for almost equal numbers, the ideal of the family meal meant little, and was seen as unimportant to them.

The family meal has long been considered a strong marker of, and a vehicle for, promoting family connectedness, being an opportunity to develop a sense of family belonging and a site for transferring not only a food heritage (Soliah et al 2003), but other aspects of socialisation. The findings of the current study go some way to dispelling the myth that traditional notions of the family meal no longer exist. It also suggests that socialisation can still occur in non-traditional meal practices.

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Footnotes

ⁱ The initial approach to schools was made via the principal, in accordance with our ethics approval with Murdoch University's HREC. The schools sent a letter home to parents advising them of the survey. While this survey is a pilot for a proposed national study, the questionnaire was initially tested on a small sample

of Year Ten students for ease of use, time taken, and difficulty in understanding questions. Furthermore, aware of the issues surrounding the use of web-based surveys, (for example, non-response, coverage errors, access to computers and technological problems), and given the methodological debates about the use of web-based surveys, we wanted to test the efficacy of on-line data collection for this demographic (see forthcoming paper).

ⁱⁱ The 1995 National Nutrition Survey indicated that significant proportions of adolescents' food intake occurs outside of the home, and thus this survey provides a snapshot of some, but not all aspects of eating habits of this age group (See <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/1173b761b1662ae9ca2568a900139371?OpenDocument>)

ⁱⁱⁱ A number of methodological issues arose including the length of time it took some students to complete the survey, differences between those who completed it online as opposed to hard copy (some schools did not have facilities for students to complete online), problems with the website server and maintenance, motivation and validity issues. The current paper reports simple descriptive statistics; more fine-grained analyses will be undertaken when all the data has been collected.

^{iv} We also asked about daily TV watching, and found that respondents reported watching on average close to 4 hours of television a day. But students also overwhelmingly (89.1%) reported undertaking some physical activity such as Phys Ed classes, walking, running, football/soccer/hockey, netball/basketball over the past week, averaging an hour on week days and two hours on weekends. This indicates that students are not simply sedentary television and video game viewers.

^v This answer indicates the methodological difficulties of inviting adolescents to participate in a school setting where the question of their consent is perhaps a moot point, since teachers agreed that their classes would participate. Since this was one of the compulsory questions, past which students could not move on the WEB based survey until they had entered something, this student simply hit random keys on the keyboard in order to move through the questionnaire. The various methodological issues arising from the research design will be taken up in a separate paper.