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FOOD IN THE FAMILY: BRINGING YOUNG PEOPLE BACK IN

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Abstract

This article analyzes eating and beliefs about family meals in the qualitative interview narratives of 30 “at-risk” gang-involved young women in the San Francisco Bay Area. We begin our examination of consumption practices with a study of households and identify three major types—extended, single-parent and blended. Within these households, food purchasing and consumption activities are varied, and in many cases, our respondents rely upon extended family members and non-kin relations for support. In examining eating within the family, we identify two sets of practices and meanings: eating alone, and eating with others. Eating alone is symbolic of independence from one’s family of origin, or is the result of familial conflict at the dinner table; however, it does not necessarily change our respondents’ eating patterns. Eating with others in the family remains important, and many of the young women value family meals, although there are significant obstacles to eating regularly with the entire nuclear family. Many of these young women play an important role in the purchasing and preparation of food for family members as well. This paper highlights the importance of understanding family eating practices from the perspective of young people in the family, whose contribution to family ingestive practices has tended to be underestimated in much of available research literature.

Keywords

Food; Eating; Meals; Family; Households; Youth

Introduction

The eating practices of young people have become the focus of much public concern, whether it is their consumption of snacks and fast foods, developing eating disorders, or engaging in unhealthy dieting. Obesity among children and adolescents is also viewed as a major public health issue, with recent studies showing 13% of children and adolescents in the United States are obese (Ogden et al., 2010). In seeking both culprits and solutions for these dietary problems, pundits have pointed accusing fingers at the family, focusing on parental influences and family eating practices and decrying the decline of the family meal. (Sweeting & West, 2005; Davis, 1995, p. 356, cited in Murcott, 1997; Jackson, 2009). Given the importance of the family as a socializing agent, and the important influence it has on food and eating practices, it is not that surprising that a considerable amount of attention has

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²This sample was part of a much larger study of girls in the gang.

³Section 8 refers to a U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program that subsidizes housing costs for low-income families.

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focused on the family as the cause of dietary problems (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Coveney, 2002; Lupton, 1996; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003; Roos, Lahelma, Virtanen, Prättälä, & Pietinen, 1998).

The Family Meal

Two emphases are implicit within much of the writing on family eating practices. The first examines the causes of the decline of the family meal and the second looks at the consequences of this decline. First, the decline of the family meal is examined as symptomatic of a diminution in the overall centrality of the family. The decline of the family meal, in these analyses, is associated with the dominance of fast foods, the necessity for mothers to work outside the home, and increasing societal pressures on the family (Gofton, 1995; Hewitt, 1993; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Schor, 1992).¹ As individualization of post-modern society increases, the likelihood of eating with other family members is reduced. Greater individualization leads to an increase in diverse diets and individualized eating practices within the single household (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 78. See also Fine & Leopold, 1993; Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

The second theme is that the decline of the family meal is associated with a number of serious social and physiological consequences, especially for young people. These have included a serious deterioration in the quality of young peoples' diets (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003; Videon & Manning, 2003), an increase in eating-related disorders (Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2007; Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Story, & Fulkerson, 2004), and a decline in family relationships (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). These developments are associated with a subsequent increase in behavioral problems outside the home, for example problematic school behaviors, early sexual activity, suicidal risk and increased alcohol and drug consumption (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Fulkerson, & Story, 2008; Franko, Thompson, Affenito, Striegel-Moore, & Barton, 2008; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). In these studies, the family meal is portrayed as a protective factor against anti-social behavior (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006; Gillman et al., 2000; Weinstein, 2005).

Regardless of which theme is emphasized, the family is clearly deemed a central component for food and diet research and an especially important factor in influencing young people's diets. Both approaches share a common vision that ascribes to the family a central role as both an institution of primary socialization and a crucial societal foundation stone. Similarly, anthropologists have long noted the importance of food sharing as a ritualized, symbolic gesture to enhance solidarity between the recipients (Douglas, 1984). Food sharing is a vital component of kinship networks and the home; the family meal has a deep emotional and social significance in establishing coherence and solidarity, as well as operating to socialize young members (Lupton, 1996). Bringing family members together around the table is believed to produce cohesion (Fulkerson et al., 2006; Valentine, 1999).

Reappraising the Family Meal

However, in spite of the importance given to the family meal and its cohesive role in the family, researchers have begun to challenge key aspects of this perspective (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Notions of the family meal as a significant component for maintaining household and family unity may under-estimate the extent to which the family meal can also operate as a center of conflict and a divisive element within the household (Coveney, 2002). Researchers have shown how gender conflict around food-related issues can lead to

¹However as Gillis (1996) notes, worries about the eclipse of family time have also occurred before, for example in both the 1920s and the 1940s.

domestic violence in some cases (Dobash & Dobash, 1980; Beardworth & Keil, 1997). Moreover, strained relationships between adult and adolescent family members may result in fragmented family eating practices where children avoid family meals and instead choose to eat with other family members outside the home or with friends (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ackard, Moe, & Perry, 2000a&b). Such studies illustrate the extent to which the sharing of food can either play a role in developing unity within the family, or highlight and enhance pre-existing divisive elements within the home.

Existing research on the family meal may also have under-estimated the extent to which variations in contemporary families including different family types (single-person household, nuclear, extended and step families) and differences in social class and ethnicity may result in significant variations in the way that individuals structure family meals and organize relationships around them (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). Such variations lead us to question the extent to which the family can be viewed as “a single unit of consumption” (Campbell, 1995). Rather than viewing the home as functioning as a single unit in which the food consumption practices are examined as a whole, it may be more useful, as Delphy (1979) has suggested, to conceptualize it as more like a distribution center for its members in which a wide-range of decision-making processes are made by different members of the household (see also Valentine, 1999). Questioning notions of a unitary family household allows us to examine the decision-making processes that take place within the home, highlighting the agency or capability of making purposeful actions of family members, including children (Giddens, 1984), and the meanings associated with those decisions.

In this paper, we will attempt to uncover the heterogeneity of eating practices within the households of a small sample of ethnic-minority girls and young women. We will highlight the wide range of domestic arrangements within which these girls live and the variety of eating practices that take place. Our work on this topic arose out of a wider study of gang-involved women, in which food- and family-related issues began to emerge from qualitative interviews. We focus specifically on young women in gangs because gender is a “key organizing tool” in the gang (Messerschmidt, 1995, p. 174), shaping involvement in violence, delinquency, or substance use (Miller, 2009). Differences in gender composition within the gang also affect the sexual division of labor within the gang, especially around child care and food preparation. In many gangs, for example, women always prepared the food served at gang meetings (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Campbell, 1984; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991). While much of the existing research on girl gang members has adopted a criminal justice perspective, our own research primarily examines the public-health consequences of their high-risk behaviors, including violence, drug and alcohol consumption, drug dealing and teen pregnancy. In pursuing this emphasis on health issues, we conducted a series of in-depth exploratory interviews on the role of eating in the lives of these young women, and examined the relationships between eating practices and their activities in the gang. We expected that an overwhelming portion of their eating practices would take place in the “surrogate family” context of the gang (Miller, 2009). In analyzing the resulting narratives, we saw the extent to which these gang girls, while often alienated from their families, talked extensively about eating in the home as well. These young women were involved not only in consuming food within the home, but also in the purchasing and preparation of food. Furthermore, it became clear that the girls came from a range of households and domestic arrangements with diverse eating practices and patterns. These findings led us to realize the extent to which the characteristics of their family meals differed from the portrayal of family meals often described in the research literature on eating in white, middle-class, nuclear families. In the rest of the paper, we examine the types of households within which these girls and young women live and their different types of eating arrangements. Our objective is to consider more explicitly both the context and meaning of food in the lives of these young people, and the relationships between their

family relations and eating practices, thereby increasing our understanding of the complexity of intra-familial processes that occur around eating in the home.

Methods

Participants

The data for this article, as noted above, are drawn from a large qualitative study of high-risk behaviors of adolescent girls and young women who are gang-involved and living in the San Francisco Bay Area. While scholarship on at-risk girls has increased, little of this research has focused on health-compromising behaviors, and even less on the eating practices of these “at-risk” girls (Arcan, Kubik, Fulkerson, & Story, 2009; Harris, 2004), such as girls in street gangs, who are at the nexus of a variety of different high-risk behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1997). These girls grow up in marginalized communities, often in troubled families, and participate in a high-risk peer group; thus they experience, in an extreme way, significant risk factors for dietary health problems experienced by many poor, minority youth (Miller, 2001; Miranda, 2003; Nurge, 2003; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003; Valdez, 2007). While gang-involved girls may be seen as “too specific” or unrepresentative, we believe that research on the diet and eating practices of these at-risk girls can highlight issues related to diet and eating faced not solely by gang girls, but by low-income, ethnic-minority girls in general, who live in similar high-risk neighborhoods and face many of the same dietary issues as gang girls.

Although our sample cannot be considered representative in the way that a random sample would be, a true probability sample would not be feasible for this study population. Because of the “hidden” nature of our target population, standard probability-sampling methods are ineffective for accessing participants (Fagan, 1989; Howell, Moore, & Egley, 2002; Joe, 1993; Kelly, 2010; Klein, 2006). Instead, qualitative methods and targeted sampling strategies are best suited to recruit this group. We believe our exploratory study of eating practices and family meal patterns in the lives of gang girls highlights many of the issues experienced by other ethnic-minority youth in low-income, high-risk neighborhoods. We drew on the techniques of targeted sampling (Bluthenthal & Watters, 1995; Peterson et al., 2008) that comprised devising sample targets and recruitment procedures through ethnographic mapping of neighborhoods where the population was expected to be found (Watters & Biernacki, 1989). Chain-referrals allowed us to access respondents who may not have been accessible via direct recruitment (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005). In addition to providing each respondent with a \$75 honorarium for participating, we provided respondents \$35 for each gang-involved female peer they referred to the study.

Interviews

The in-depth interview was a two-step process involving a brief quantitative questionnaire, followed by an in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interview. In the quantitative portion, the respondents answered a series of questions pertaining to eating behaviors including types of foods eaten, shopping location, food costs, and use of food assistance packages as well as questions on substance use, and criminal activities. During the semi-structured interview participants were asked to reflect on questions about their life experiences and specifically their eating practices both in and outside the home. Although we have drawn upon our quantitative data to produce a description of our sample, the majority of this article is focused on the findings from the qualitative interview.

The interviews took place in a variety of settings, including respondents’ residences, youth centers, public libraries, and our field offices. All interviews were conducted in English, and lasted two to three hours. We took several steps to address validity and reliability issues. At

different times in the interview, questions were rephrased to detect inconsistencies and ensure truthfulness. Interviewers were also required to assess the respondent's veracity at the end of the interview.

Qualitative Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and the semi-structured portions were transcribed verbatim. Once the interviews had been transcribed, the material was entered into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo and coded. This sort of analysis is an iterative process that involves reading and re-reading text to produce successively more abstract and refined ideas about domains of interest (Goetz & Le Compte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interviews were read by the project manager and the senior author to get a sense of the interviews as a whole and to develop categories or "nodes" for analysis—corresponding to issues such as eating location, sources of food, attitudes toward health and nutrition, shopping and cooking practices, and child-feeding practices. After repeated reading of the text, more fine-grained codes were developed and linked to the larger domains (Kelle, 2004; Schmidt, 2004). All of the interview transcripts were then reread and coded using the established categories.

Results

Sample

As shown in Table 1, our sample of thirty young women was diverse with respect to ethnicity. The vast majority of the respondents were born in the city of San Francisco, and all but two were born in the United States. Ages ranged from 15–26, although the majority were under the age of 18. The distribution of age within our sample reflects the patterns that other researchers have identified among populations of gang-affiliated young women; the onset of female gang affiliation begins in the early teens with the most active female gang members falling into an age range between 16 and 20, with female affiliation tending to decrease from age 21 (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Miller, 2009; Valdez, 2003, 2007).

At the time of the interview, all but two of the respondents were currently enrolled in school, in the process of enrolling, or had a high school diploma or GED, although some had previously dropped out or been expelled. Most of our respondents were not legally employed at the time of the interview. Of those respondents who were employed, five worked in entry-level customer service or clerical positions, and seven held part-time positions at local community-based organizations. Only eight respondents listed their jobs as their primary source of income in the previous month. Other frequently-cited primary sources of income included family, friends, government assistance, child support, and illegal sources. Eight had sold drugs in the previous month, four had income from shoplifting or boosting, and one received income from prostitution. Nearly half received income from an illegal source in the month prior to participating in the interview.

Although it is difficult to get a precise measure of our respondents' socioeconomic status, since many still reside with their families of origin, a number of factors indicate that many of our respondents' households are relatively low-income. Two-thirds were receiving some sort of public assistance at the time of the interview including Section 8 housing or food stamps. Of the nine who were mothers, six were receiving WIC.⁴ Many of our older respondents, however, considered themselves to be largely self-sufficient: of the thirteen

⁴WIC is a federal food assistance program that provides aid to low-income pregnant and breastfeeding women, babies, and young children under age 5. To qualify a household must earn less than 185% of the official poverty level. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/aboutwic/wicatlance.htm>

respondents aged 18 and over, eleven listed themselves as primarily or solely responsible for paying their family's rent or mortgage. However, as we will discuss in the section that follows, their strategies for providing for their households were complex and varied, and often relied on family members and friends for food assistance and childcare.

Types of Households

Following Rapp (1982), for the purposes of this paper we will distinguish between households and families. Households “are the co-residential units in which people can be found, while” family “is an ideology of relations that explains who should live together, share income, and perform common tasks” (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993, p. 102). An understanding of different domestic groupings is an integral part of understanding food choice within the family, particularly in low-income, ethnic-minority and immigrant communities. A wide range of different household structures can be identified within these communities where the exigencies of daily life in inner-city neighborhoods sometimes dictate “the pooling of resources with a wide network of people that in effect become family” (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993, p. 103. See also Jarrett, 1992; Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1974). Households within these communities vary in their composition, their membership and their available resources. Within these different compositional structures, the meanings associated with food consumption may vary considerably. A variety of different households exist in the San Francisco Bay Area, where our interviews took place. According to the 2000 U.S. Census for San Francisco County, significant diversity in household configurations can be found. One-fifth of all female heads of household, or householders, had no husband present in the household, with highest rates among African American mothers, followed by Latinas, and Asian Americans (Lopez, 2001). Additionally, almost ten percent of San Francisco residents cohabit in extended family situations, with more than 70,000 households containing non-immediate family members in addition to the householder, householder's spouse, and children.

Against this background, the variety of family structures and households we uncovered in our sample is clearly not an anomaly. This diversity has long been recognized in the research on family and household composition (See e.g., Acs & Nelson, 2001; Macklin, 1980), however less work has been done that examines the effect of these variations on meanings of the “family meal.” Following recent research (Jackson, 2009), we identified a number of different types: extended family households, single-parent households, blended/step-family households; non-kin households; and living alone. To examine the food practices within these households we will examine the three most common types below, beginning with variations in food purchasing practices.

Extended-family households are those households that are either multi-generational families, or households containing non-immediate family kin such as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, within the same household. While in many cases, especially among African American families, such households are female-headed, this characteristic was less common among Latino or Asian American extended families. In our sample not only were there many female-headed extended-family households, but the complete absence of any adult males within many of the households was particularly striking; less than 50% of households possessed an adult male.

Within extended-family households “goods, services and emotional support” are often shared and exchanged (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993, p. 119), especially in relation to food buying and preparation. For example, Grace,⁵ 17, Asian/white, lives with her parents, her

⁵All of the names of respondents have been changed to protect their identity

younger sister and her maternal uncle. Although her parents do not own a car, her uncle does and is able to help the family with grocery shopping. This support is particularly valuable because it allows the family to visit discount supermarkets in other neighborhoods that sell food items in bulk at lower prices. In another example, Mai, 17, Vietnamese, lives with her mother, her mother's boyfriend, her grandmother, an aunt, and a cousin. Mai's mother does not work regularly outside the home but does perform the majority of the cooking and shopping for the entire household.

One common form of extended family is that of grandmother, mother (respondent) and child/children: a female-headed multigenerational household. For example, Wendy, 15, Latina, lives with her mother, two younger sisters and her 7-month-old son. Wendy assists her mother by cooking for her sisters when her mother has to work in the evenings. At other times of day, her mother assists Wendy in caring for her son. Although Wendy's mother is the primary provider of groceries, the two share some responsibilities of purchasing food for the household. Wendy contributes to the household food budget in the form of WIC vouchers. In this case, fragmentation of both food purchasing, preparation and consumption takes place. Respondents who are themselves mothers and receiving assistance, may wish to ensure that the welfare money goes solely on their children's food and is not amalgamated into the general household budget. For example, Nita, 18, African American, who lives with her mother and siblings as well as her two-week-old son, is adamant that although she lives with her mother and her siblings, her welfare money is only for her son: "I'm not paying for nobody else to eat...I have a son to take care of, that's the only person I'm about to buy some food for is my son." Such cases suggest that more detailed research needs to examine the decisions made within households on what food is purchased, who pays for it and who decides how the food is distributed.

Single-parent-family households are characterized by a single parent and children. However, a single-parent-family household does not necessarily mean that only one food provider exists within the household, even if the other household members are adolescents. Although many of our respondents were not legally employed at the time of the interview, many had access to illegal income as a result of their gang activities, which in some cases allowed them to contribute to the family budget. For example, Stella, 17, African American/Latina is legally employed on a part-time basis but derives most of her income from drug selling and shoplifting. Stella lives with her mother and three younger sisters and describes how she contributes to the budget by purchasing snacks that her sisters like:

My mom ... gets all the food. But usually if--like different snacks and stuff, I'll get for my sisters and stuff, 'cause, you know, my mom she just gets healthy stuff... but they [the sisters] ... like Trix and Cap'n Crunch and stuff, so I'll get that stuff.,

Another variation of the single-parent family are those cases where our older respondents are themselves heads of household. For example, Keiana is African American, 22, and a mother of two children, ages 3 and 1. They live in a Section 8 duplex without any other family members. Her boyfriend occasionally stays with her, but does not reside with her permanently. Keiana purchases all the food for her household, and while she is the head of her own household, her household is not an isolated unit. She also receives assistance from, and gives help to a number of other friends and family members. For example, while Keiana purchases all the food consumed in her home, her children spend most days at her mother's house, and often eat breakfast and lunch there. Because of this, she does little cooking for her own children; however, she often cooks for her boyfriend and cousins who happen to drop by her apartment. This family arrangement reflects the research done by Sharman (1991) and Stack (1974) which highlights the extent to which African American households, while seeming to be isolated, are in fact interconnected with other kin-related households in the neighborhood. Although Keiana is the head of her own household, and responsible for

food purchasing, she continues to receive a substantial amount of support from other family members in the form of childcare and feeding.

Blended or Reconstituted Families, created as a result of divorce or remarriage (Cheal, 1991) is the third type of household found in the sample. In these households, only one of the parents is the respondent's biological parent and siblings within the household may be step-siblings. This type of family arrangement is becoming increasingly widespread (Nelson, Clark, & Acs, 2001) and it is not uncommon to find cases where both adult partners have children of their own, who live with them in reconstituted family households. For example, Honey, 15, African American, lives with her mother and her mother's fiancé. She has a total of 8 half-siblings, five on them on her mother's side and 3 on her father's side. Of these she lives with five half-siblings from her mother's side as well as 2 additional step-siblings, who are the children of her mother's fiancé. While spending the majority of her time with her mother and fiancé, she is still close to her father and several times a week spends time at his house his new wife, and her other 3 half-siblings. Although she does not contribute financially to buying food in either household, Honey emphasizes that both she and her siblings help to decide what types of food are bought.

Just as different types of household types exist, there are also diverse eating patterns within these households. Two patterns can be identified: eating alone and eating together.

Eating Patterns at Home: Eating Alone

Although for many of our respondents, breakfasts, lunches and between-meal snacks were consumed outside the home with their friends or fellow gang members, a significant proportion consumed their evening meal at home. However, this meal was not necessarily consumed with other family members. In fact, more than half of our respondents currently living with family consume the majority of their evening meals alone. Major reasons for eating alone include a desire for independence, a decision to avoid the conflicts that family meals often produce, as well as the conflicting schedules of multiple household members (see also Fulkerson et al., 2006; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ackard, Moe, & Perry, 2000b). The act of eating on one's own also did not necessarily mean that food preparation was done separately or independently.

Given the extent to which the research on girls in the gang has emphasized their often strained relationships with their families (Brotherton & Salazar-Atias, 2003; Miller, 2008; Moore, 1994, 1999; Valdez, 2007; Vigil, 2007), it is not surprising to uncover the extent to which our respondents noted their desire to avoid conflict as a major reason for eating on their own. For example, Grace, 17, Asian/White, in explaining why her family of mother, father, younger sister and maternal uncle never sat down together at the table said: "I don't know, like we all thought it was just awkward, and we all kinda just wanted to do our own thing. We can't like sit at a table without just mugging at each other or like being super quiet or like, you know, talking shit. For Grace eating with her family is not comfortable and hence not worth doing. The potential for conflict at the family meal is echoed by other respondents. For example, Mai who lives in a multigenerational, extended family, explains that she stopped eating at the table with her mother and grandmother when she and her mother began fighting with one another.

Mai: I only eat dinner at home, 'cause that's the only time when I'm home. I go to my room and eat.

Interviewer: Who do you eat with when you're at home, if you're not in your room?

Mai: No one. Because I don't eat with anyone...I don't get along with them... They eat together. But I don't eat with them... I don't really wanna see them.

However, although she refuses to eat with her family, Mai nevertheless described how her mother typically left dinner for her in the refrigerator so that Mai can warm it up when she was ready to eat. Moreover, in spite of her dislike of communal eating in the home, she noted that she preferred her mother's cooking to food consumed outside the home: "I liked eating at home, 'cause then like, the food is like, it fit my taste."

Not all respondents speak unfavorably about conflict at family meals, however. For example, Nita grew up with her parents and her four brothers and sisters. While growing up, her parents often called family meals at a time when there was conflict in the house. These meals were an opportunity for family members to "express their emotions."

My mom or dad would be like, "I'm about to cook dinner tonight, we're having a family talk at dinner." So like everybody's all whispering and stuff like, "Oh, yeah, if she tell on me with this, I'm gon' tell on her with that." "... So then we at the table talking, everybody going around like, "OK, Nita, it's your turn."

Although they initially arose out of moments of conflict, Nita did not dislike these family occasions. In fact, she said that she liked them because:

We expressed our feelings like...we was a family like, you know. Like, that was cool, like that's how we--everybody get out their feelings or, like if we was mad at each other... brothers and sisters became cool again.

In asking our respondents why they wanted to eat alone, they gave a wide range of reasons. Whereas some respondents simply were not at home at the same time as other family members, others preferred the privacy of their own bedrooms or liked to watch television while they ate. For many of our respondents who eat apart from their families, the desire for independence clearly influences their eating-locations. Eating in their rooms allows them to choose the time at which they eat, the foods they want, the activities to engage in while eating, and most importantly, the individuals they want to interact with.

While separate eating patterns are common, this does not mean that food preparation is also accomplished individually by each household member. In many cases, the food for household members is still prepared by the mother or grandmother for the entire household. The food is then consumed individually, either in the kitchen or different places in the house or at different times. For example, Natalie, 18, Latina, describes how her grandmother prepared different foods for each of the grandchildren:

At my grandma's house, she had, like I said, a lotta grandkids. And we're all picky, like... so she just asks all of us what we want, and she'll just make different dishes for us....That's how it's always been. 'Cause we don't really sit at the table and eat... we never really done that when we were growing up nothing, we'll just take it to our room, like we don't all eat at the same time.

Other respondents describe how their mothers would make a large pot of food for the evening meal, or for the whole week, and then individual family members could consume the food whenever they wanted. This accommodates busy family schedules, and gives people the opportunity to choose where and when they want to eat, while also providing a home-cooked meal. As Caitlin, 17, white, living in a single-parent family, explains:

Well, like my mom cooks... And then it's like, the TV's on like, we would just all like make our own plates and just watch TV, or either like I would come to my room and eat... we don't really just sit down for dinner, we don't, we never did that.

While eating apart from the family clearly plays a large part in many of our respondents' daily lives, many respondents also discuss eating together with family members. However, their definitions of what constitutes a family meal are as diverse and nuanced as their household structures. Therefore, we now move on to a discussion of those occasions in which our respondents eat with their families.

Eating Patterns at Home: Eating Together

In spite of the fragmented nature of family eating, our respondents, on occasion, did eat together. Some of them had family meals on a regular basis with their families of origin, or with their own families. For example, Romika, 24, African American, lives with her partner and her 1-year-old child. Her household is one of the examples of a nuclear family and she is intent on creating a family environment that includes a family meal. Every night she sits down with her spouse and son for a home-cooked meal. "I try to make a home-cooked meal every night." Romika notes that at times she had enough money to eat meals out, but since the birth of her son she has not had the money to do so, except on special occasions. This change has led to a drastic shift in her attitudes towards the importance of eating at home, and the value of the traditional family meal. Romika describes what she enjoys about cooking and eating at home with her family:

I like to share the fact that I have something good and nutritional...instead of giving you something bad or something that's bad for you. And I'd rather, you know, feed a person that's in need, because they need food, you know, rather than to give them something that they want. So, I think that it just says a lot about me being a home person, who likes to, you know, cook and spend time in the house, you know.

In this description we see Romika's belief that in cooking for her family, she is doing more than merely preparing food, she is providing her son and spouse with something nutritious and necessary for sustaining life. She draws a distinction between the good, nutritional foods that she serves at home that you *need*, and the "bad" foods that one eats out that she describes as something you *want*. As Lupton (1996) has remarked, preparing the family meal is not solely a domestic task, it is also an act of love that can be seen in this example.

Stella, also believes in the importance of cooking for her family. She lives with her mother and her 3 younger sisters in a single-parent-family household. Although her mother does the majority of the cooking, Stella feels that her mother often needs a rest from cooking so often she cooks special dinner on the weekends. However, while wanting to do something for her mother and recognizing the importance of the family eating together, she realizes that her cooking is not as good as her mothers and she often has to ask for help.

On the weekends, like Sundays we'll cook for her. Sundays is like a surprise day. Like we'll just make, just make anything. So, I ask them like, "What y'all wanna cook for Mommy?" It'll be like, they'll say something like some roast or something. Like roast is, I always burn it, every single time....my mom just makes it so right, and I just, like, "Can you help me, please. I need help here with this roast."

However, in examining examples of eating together, we discovered that eating together did not necessarily mean that all members of the household were included. For some respondents, eating with siblings or in smaller household sub-units may arise as a matter of practical constraints, but it is nonetheless something that they come to enjoy and appreciate. For these respondents, even though their responsibilities to their siblings and other family members do not necessitate their sitting down to a meal together, they chose to do so.

Wendy, 15, Latina, whose mother works most evenings, explains why she feels it's important for her to eat dinner with her younger sisters every night:

Cause that's like a place where we're like all together, and we spend time together even though like when mom's busy with work...we can just sit down and eat. My little sisters like to talk a lot, so it's like, "Oh, I did this today, and this happened with my friend" ... I see them growing up...It's nice listening to their stories.

In the case of Gabby, 17, Latina, we witness the way in which one of the daughters takes on the responsibility for food preparation after her mother dies of cancer. Before becoming ill, her mother would cook a three-course meal for the entire family every night. Since her mother's death, Gabby has become responsible for doing much of the cooking. However, today, unlike when her mother was alive, the family meal is fragmented, due to conflicting schedules. Furthermore, Gabby's father never eats with them, preferring to eat in his bedroom while watching sports on television. Even when her elder sister comes for dinner and her father asks Gabby to prepare a special, traditional meal for the whole family, he still eats on his own, while the rest of the household eat together at the table. Examples such as this also raise the question of what happens to the purchasing and preparing of food within the family household if a central player dies or leaves the household. In this case the next eldest woman in the home took over the responsibilities.

Finally we return to the example of Nita. She no longer eats meals with her mother or siblings, desiring her independence from them (although she still lives with and is partially financially dependent on her mother). She does however pay for her daughter's food. Instead of eating on her own, she now prepares food for herself, her child and the father of her child—who, incidentally, does not live in her household—and they eat in her bedroom. Her bedroom is important because it is "her space" within her mother's home.

Like I got my own little space in the house. So I'll do, I'm hungry, I go and cook something. He'll watch the baby, I can bring the food back in the room, close the door, watch TV, listen to music. We do our homework then as a little family.

Using their current definition of a "family meal" as comprising "all or most of the family living in the house" (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003, p. 318), we might conclude that this eating arrangement did not fit the definition as Nita is eating not with the members of her household, but with her boyfriend who lives outside the home. However, as Eldridge and Murcott (2000) have shown from their research on family meals "household members may still invest much in the notions...although this does not always happen in a self-evidently conventional way" (2000, p. 40). For Nita this arrangement of shared eating allows her to maintain the idea of a family meal while also asserting her growing independence and creating her own family.

Deondra, 23, African American, who eats have her meals on her own in her bedroom attests to the importance of the family meal:

I think it's important, you know. 'Cause sometimes it's good to sit down at the table and eat with each other, so you know how each other's day went, what's going on... cause we do so much moving during the day that, you know, we don't really too much see each other... So....when we do sit down, like last, yesterday we sat down at the table together for Easter dinner, and it was real nice... 'cause we got to talk and catch up with everybody....Like I'll like to do it. That's how my family, when I have my kids, we gon' be sitting down to the table till they 30-years-old.

Discussion

From our examination of eating at home, we see that “traditional” family dinners do not take place regularly. Therefore, our own research, albeit from a small sample, would seem to support the work of those researchers who point to the decline of the family meal. However, in spite of the absence of the family meal it would be erroneous to assume that our respondents did not see the family meal as important. It was not uncommon in the interviews to hear respondents reflect fondly on the holidays and special occasions at which times their families ate together. Furthermore, many respondents, who did not currently have meals with their families, hoped to establish family meals with their own children.

From the available research on young people, and eating in the home, the impression provided is one of young people reluctantly eating the food provided while preferring to eat fast food with friends (Chapman & Maclean, 1993; Contento, Williams, Michela, & Franklin, 2006). While this portrayal may reflect an aspect of young people’s eating practices, it provides little insight into the extent to which eating together, albeit often fragmented, occurs within the home or the active involvement of young people in food-related activities within the home. Furthermore, even in this sample of high-risk girls and young women, who live in families which exhibit high degrees of family stress and disorganization leading to alienation and a lack of attachment to family members (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Harris, 1988; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Vigil, 1988), we find a significant attachment to eating at home and in many cases to the family meal.

Furthering Research on the Family Household and the Family Meal

Despite increasing concerns about the family meal, research on the precise characteristics and nature of contemporary eating in the home, with the notable exceptions of the work of Neumark-Sztainer and her team, is relatively small. Consequently, powerful claims about the family meal have been made by commentators with little detailed evidence (Short, 2006). This relative absence of research has been compounded by a tendency to underestimate the variety of eating practices and food preparations within non-nuclear family households and especially low-income, ethnic minority households. Given the research done by sociologists and anthropologists on the contemporary family, it is likely that a wide variety of different forms of meal preparations and consumption patterns exist (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). Given this heterogeneity of household arrangements and the possible variety of different eating practices, it is important that research begins to focus more specifically on the details of this variety, if we are to understand the complexity of the household as a site of food preparation and consumption (Valentine, 1999).

While from one perspective, we can argue that the data reveals the absence of the traditional family meal, it is nevertheless the case that communal eating still occurs on a regular basis. Members of the household do still eat together, albeit on a fragmented basis. Moreover, in spite of the fragmentation of communal eating, or maybe because of it, many of our respondents tried to recreate the ideal notion of a family meal. As we saw in the case of Nita, while wishing to separate herself from other household members, she nevertheless sought to reproduce the family meal for her own new family. As family researchers have long noted, the notion of the nuclear family operates as “an ideological concept that imposes a mythical homogeneity on the diverse means by which people arrange their intimate relationships” (Stacey, 1998, p. 269). This may also be true for notions of the family meal. Whereas in practice the living arrangements and societal pressures may strongly hinder the possibility of household members sitting down as a single unit to eat, the notion of the ideal family meal may live on, even in low-income communities where the exigencies of daily life force households to adopt a series of strategies in order to survive that disrupt the possibility of them coming together as a communal unit.

Bringing Young People Back In

Bell and Valentine (1997) argue that research on food and the family, besides focusing on the traditional nuclear family, has also tended to concentrate on one life-stage experience within the family—that of adults with young children. In so doing, researchers have ignored “the way household and gender identities and food consumption practices are renegotiated and reproduced throughout multiple stages which make up an individual’s life course” (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 76). Specifically the authors pinpoint the absence of research on children and adolescents’ understandings and experiences around food and eating practices. With a few exceptions, research on eating practices within the home has tended to downplay the role of young people and their experiences around food and eating practices. In downplaying the role of children and adolescents as actors within the home, the social and cultural context of young people’s eating experiences and the meanings associated with these eating practices have also been neglected (Valentine, 1999; Watt & Sheiham, 1997). Although some survey researchers (Boutelle, Lytle, Murray, Birnbaum, & Story, 2001; De Bourdeaudhuij 1997; Fulkerson et al., 2006; Larson, Story, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006) have examined adolescent perceptions of and involvement in meal times, these studies have tended to ignore the possible relationships between either the meanings of eating in the home for young people and their relationships to other household members, or the relationships between their eating practices within the home and their identities outside the home (Valentine, 1999). Researchers have shown that during this stage in the life course, young people increasingly consume food on their own, or outside the home (Brannen, Dodd, Oakley, & Storey, 1994; Guthrie, Lin, & Frazão, 2002). Adolescents are involved in creating for themselves a life separate from their families (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2000a&b). Food consumed outside the home becomes inextricably tied to notions of identity, friendship, security and independence (Prättälä, 1989; Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002; Story & Stang, 2005; Watt & Sheiham, 1997). Nonetheless, many studies on the eating practices of adolescents have tended to portray young people primarily as passive agents within a socializing environment as opposed to active participants in decision-making around food choices.⁶ For example, while nutrition research has been concerned with detailing the food items that adolescents eat, researchers have given much less attention to analyzing the processes of negotiation that young people engage in around what they wish to consume, where they wish to consume it and with whom.

As a possible correction, and using data from our exploratory study, we have begun to examine the extent to which young people are actively involved in food and eating practices within the home. We have attempted to highlight the extent to which young people are involved in food purchasing, as we saw in the case of Stella, who contributed to the family food budget and buying the snacks so desired by her sisters. While in many of the families, the mother or grandmother still play the central role in preparing the food, some of our respondents are also significantly involved. Seventeen-year-old Gabby, since her mother died, has taken on this central role within the family and now does all the cooking. Although not having to fulfill their mothers’ role all the time, both Wendy and Stella assist them in feeding other members of the family.

The agency of our respondents can also be seen in the choices they make concerning eating with their families. While some of them such as Wendy value the importance of sitting down with her younger siblings and listening to their adventures at school, others such as Grace and Mai do not wish to eat with their families. However even in this situation where relationships are severely strained, Mai still values her mother’s cooking. As she says: “it fit my taste.” Whether this suggests that she prefers the food solely because it tastes better or

⁶See Eldridge and Murcott (2000) for a further discussion of decision-making and influence on adolescent eating.

because it represents her family is unclear. Nevertheless it reflects the importance of home-cooked food in her life, emphasizing yet again the significant meaning of food in the lives of young people.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=30)

	%	(N)
Age		
15 and Under	13%	4
16–17	43%	13
18–20	23%	7
21–24	17%	5
25 and Over	3%	1
Median Age: 17		
Mean Age: 18.3		
Range: 15–26		
Ethnicity		
African American	40%	12
Latina	20%	6
White	7%	2
Asian American	10%	3
Mixed Ethnicity	23%	7
Birthplace		
San Francisco Bay Area	87%	26
Other California	7%	2
Mexico	3%	1
Vietnam	3%	1