The Meanings of Family Dinners For Young, Affluent Families in Urban China

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While in recent years the pace of life for urban Chinese families has become busier, the family dinner remains a mainstay of daily family life. To investigate this phenomenon we conducted long, semi-structured interviews with seventeen young, affluent Chinese families in their homes. Consistent with past studies, the findings substantiate the role of family meals in enhancing communication, family identity, and social capital. In addition, we learned that, while females perform the majority of the work associated with getting the food on the table, both males and females view dinner as essential for “producing family.” During periods of stress and transition, the ritual of the family dinner is seen as a haven of relaxation and stability for family members.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1233/volumes/v33/NA-33

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While in recent years the pace of life for urban Chinese families has become much busier, due to more competitive work and school, the family dinner remains a mainstay of daily family life (Veeck and Burns 2005). Exactly how do family dinners fit into modern life in China? In the face of hectic lives, why do family members continue to make time for family dinners and its associated tasks? To answer these questions, we conducted comprehensive, semi-structured interviews with a targeted sample of seventeen young, affluent families in Changchun, Jilin Province, P.R. China. Through these interviews, we hoped to illuminate the meaning of meals to family members and the role that home serves as a consumption site during times of change. by analyzing meals as family rituals.

Family rituals can be defined as patterned interactions among family members that are repeated over time and serve both an instrumental and a symbolic function (see Fiese et al. 2002 for a review). While rituals are naturally occurring events in family life, the extent to which rituals are practiced, as well as the manner in which they are conducted, have been found to be related to the health and well being of the family members. Rituals are influenced by changes that occur in the life course of families, such as changes in residences, work patterns, and family members (births, marriages, divorces, illnesses, deaths). In addition family rituals can be affected by forces external to the family, including social, political, and economic changes (Pleck 2000). During times of stress and transition, rituals can serve a central purpose in maintaining family relationships and roles (Bossard and Boll 1950). As such, studying family rituals is important for understanding how the home functions as a consumption site (Valentine 1999).

Family meals, in particular, can be viewed as ritualized, symbolic events that serve to reproduce social capital and reinforce family unity (Devault 1991; Douglas 1974). According to Wolin and Bennett’s (1984) typology, family meals can be classified as “patterned family interactions,” that serve to define the roles and responsibilities of family members and organize daily life. A number of important studies in the West have shown the importance of family meals in molding family identities and contributing to family unity. Further study is needed to investigate the role of family meals in maintaining family stability during times of stress and transition, created by both internal and external events.

Toward this end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with younger (parents <age 50), affluent (household annual income>30,000 yuan) families in Changchun. All seventeen of the interviews were conducted in the families’ homes, to facilitate interviews of the entire family and to allow the research team to take photographs and collect observational data of the families’ residences. The participants were asked a series of questions related to the routines, responsibilities, and affective responses that accompany their meals. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and translated. To focus this inquiry, we analyzed family dinners as rituals, interpreting the data via the major components of rituals (see Fiese and Kline 1993).

The findings substantiated the importance of family meals in urban China today for fostering family identity, improving communication, facilitating socialization of children, and allowing the transfer of social capital. We learned that family members view dinner as an important transitional time following work, allowing them a regular, defined period of time to relax in the stability of family life. Another important finding is that, even while the women perform most of the food tasks related to meals, men and women seem to place equal importance in the role of the family dinner for “producing family” (DeVault 1991). Men, in particular, often view regular attendance at family meals as a measure of the quality of a family. Finally, it should be noted that the smaller, three-member families common in urban China today allow for easier accommodation of all family members’ schedules.

Food consumption patterns are an excellent window through which to view social change, in general, and family change, in particular (Mintz and DuBois 2002). In this study, the ritual of the family dinner serves to illuminate the routines and responsibilities of family members as they navigate between the outside world and home. The family members we interviewed continue to believe it is both their duty and their pleasure to convene as a family once a day and eat dinner together. However, as work and leisure activities continue to change in response to the socioeconomic environment, the patterns of the family dinner could be altered. As China continues to experience economic and social change, it will be worthwhile to monitor the status of the family dinner.

REFERENCES


