Feeding Post-Modern Families: Food Preparation and Consumption Practices in New Family Structures

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Building on a significant body of sociological and anthropological literature, the aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between post-modern families and food production and consumption practices in order to look for evidence of post-modern themes in this specific area of family life. Using a combination of qualitative research techniques this paper illustrates that post-modernity does seem to have arrived in family food preparation and consumption. However, in some cases, post-modernity is not in isolation: it coexists with few modern and pre-modern themes.

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As the modern family is characterized by the aspects discussed above, post-modern families are based on role de-differentiation, mutual authority and autonomy (Elkind 1995).3

Whereas the modern adherence to universals contributed to the upholding of progressive role differentiation, the post-modern belief in human diversity and individuality has the opposite effect, namely, role de-differentiation. There has been a limited but significant de-differentiation of gender, occupational and family roles. In particular, the deconstruction of family roles has involved not only parents but also children. In some homes children participate in housework and many teenagers nowadays do much of the household shopping or have almost total responsibility for their younger siblings (Kaplan 1999).

The sentiments of the modern nuclear family were largely unilateral, whereas at present authority within the family is becoming more mutual: both partners contribute towards determining the rules that govern the relationship. Likewise, the concept of shared parenting, a typical post-modern family sentiment,4 is based on mutuality in that both parents cooperate, or share those responsibilities with outside providers. Furthermore, whilst modern parents often set limits and made decisions for their children that are now regarded as restrictive, post-modern parents are more likely to be overly mutual in their authority failing to set clear rules, allowing children to make decisions regarding their personal lives.

Lastly, whereas the modern family was characterized by the value of togetherness, the post-modern period has been marked by the fusion of various factors in forming the new family value of autonomy, resulting in the individual member’s empowerment to place their needs for self-realization and fulfilment before the needs of the family unit.

This thoroughly modern exposition has revealed some important contrasts between modern and post-modern families; however, despite the increasing significance of these new post-modern families in contemporary society, academics have paid them little attention, especially in terms of their organization in relation to food (see Valentine 1999, as an interesting exception).

To address this gap, the aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between post-modern families and food production and consumption practices. Has post-modernity arrived in this specific area of family life? And if so, what is its effect in how families organize their food related practices?

More specifically, are modern themes related to this field revealed by research available (cooking as a women’s work, centrality of family meals, etc.) still important or does something else characterize post-modern families in relation to food?

The purpose of the present paper is to provide answers to these questions.

THE RESEARCH: INFORMANTS AND METHODS

Informants
Seven families participated in this research. The families, in different phases of family life, were resident in two different areas of Tuscany. Six of them were two-parent working families with young children or adolescents and one was a single-mother family with two children; five of the couples were married and two were stepfamilies. With the exception of one family, where the husband was Tunisian, all were Italian.

Methods
The research used multi-method qualitative techniques: in depth interviews with each family (some conducted in group and others individually), autodriving5 (Heisley and Levy 1991) and participant observation.

Transcribed interviews, photos and written field notes were coded, read and re-read in detail and analysed using constant comparative analytical techniques (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967).

This project is ongoing, but the information collected to date is sufficient to discern thematic redundancy. These findings are discussed below.

Although it is not possible to generalize from these findings regarding other post-modern families, this research material is nonetheless important. If we investigate food related practices from the post-modern family viewpoint, challenging traditional concepts of food and family, we may be able to identify how post-modern families use these practices to express their new identity and roles.

MAIN RESULTS

The results illustrate the elicitation of issues in four areas: a) family roles, b) children’s agency, c) decline of the family meal and d) change in food habits with a shift from home to market.

Deconstruction of the classical family roles in food related practices
The modern idea of family role differentiation is extinct. In post-modern families mothers and fathers share most food related work within the home. In some cases fathers do much of the shopping and share of the cooking, abandoning the convenient commitment to modern role differentiation.

I: So you started sharing the housework when you got married.
A: Yes. Of course. For example, today she vacuumed and I mopped the floors, then I went shopping and this evening I’m cooking dinner; I’ve bought some things especially that I want for dinner. It’s totally natural for me .... Not an obligation. Also, quite rightly, because she works; maybe if she didn’t, she would be able to do more herself, but, like me, she’s working, I think it’s right that I should help out in the house as well. (Antonio, male, age 35, married, two children)

It is interesting to note that men have begun to be involved in food related practices both as a contribution towards household labour

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3In attempting to describe the post modern family in general terms, the author somewhat falls back on the modern search for broad generalities. However, presenting what has occurred in families and children in contemporary society with this approach can be useful in constructing the theoretical framework of this research.

4Elkind (1995) assumes that changes in society transform the modern nuclear family’s sentiments to those of the post-modern family. Romantic love is now replaced by consensual love; where maternal love once reigned, we now have shared parenting; and in place of domesticity we find urbaniety.

5This is a photoelicitation technique using visual recordings of informants (photos taken during their activities related to food, such as shopping, preparation and consumption) as projective devices for interviewing family members.
and to express their appreciation of women’s efforts outside the home.

These changes in food preparation patterns within the home were foreseen by some researchers (Horrell 1994; Kemmer 2000) as a result of the erosion of strict gender roles. If a woman’s cooking for a man is a powerful symbol of gender and her appreciation of her identity as wage-earner, they therefore predicted that women’s deference would diminish as men ceased to be the sole providers, and that men would begin to actively participate in family tasks.

Evidence of men’s increasing involvement in the kitchen is also presented by Caraher et al. (2004) in their study in three schools in England and Wales on children’s views of cooking and food. Although the dominant figure in the home for cooking is still the mother and older sisters, children’s accounts of food and cooking in the domestic sphere report a large number of fathers preparing food in the home.

Women greatly appreciate this help and don’t feel that their importance and indispensability in the family is threatened, as clearly illustrated by Patrizia.

In contrast to Counihan’s (1988) description based on analysis of a traditional family in Florence during the ‘80s, there is no attempt to actively perpetuate male domestic incompetence in order to re-enforce the women’s position at home.

Role de-differentiation also extends to children. In some homes they do a share of the shopping and cooking and teenagers in single-parent families have responsibilities for their younger siblings that assume an almost parental role. However, as I examine below, children can perceive this situation differently.

Ermelinda explains her daughter’s important role at lunchtime during the week:

E: Giovanni comes home and waits for his sister who, when she arrives, starts preparing lunch. If there’s a ready-made sauce, she just warms it up and cooks the pasta, or else she sometimes helps me with ready made foods. She isn’t very good at cooking and can’t do much more than that!

(Ermelinda, female, age 42, married, two children)

The daughter knows that she is helping towards the family coping with busy schedules, but she perceives this as an expectation that she feels obligated to do.

If she could determine the situation, she would prefer her mother to stay at home and cook for the family.

A: I was definitely happier when my mum was at home …

Now I have to do it. For example, it’s my job to make lunch for my brother and me. Otherwise she wouldn’t eat … or we’d have to ask someone else to help us. (Anna, female, age 16)

The situation is perceived differently in the case of Leonardo, the older son of a single working mother with two children. In addition to the daily contribution to the family in taking care of his younger brother, Leonardo uses food to demonstrate his appreciation of his mother’s care. Fiorella leaves home early and comes back very tired in the late afternoon. Leonardo sometimes wants to help his mother by cooking the family dinner.

L: I can make something simple for my mum, my little brother and me; I like it; it’s a special way to repay my mother for all the things she does for us. She’s so stressed sometimes and I help out. (Leonardo, male, age 16)

Unlike Anna, Leonardo does not consider the caring he gives an obligation and this has common characteristics with theories on gift exchange (Mauss 1967), reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) and compassion (Wuthnow 1991) also illustrated by Kaplan (1999).

In modernity the general assumption was that children’s duties were merely to be obedient and successful students (Arendell, 1997; Shorter, 1977). Nevertheless as this and other studies (e.g. Kaplan 1999) illustrate, young people can provide reciprocal care and services within their post-modern families with high levels of competence.

The importance of children’s agency in determining their own food consumption practices

Unlike the modern view of young people as passive and dependent (Shorter, 1977), this research reveals their strong will and participation in resisting family food consumption models and defining their own practices.

This resistance often relates to parents’ expectations around food. They often try to be disciplinary, cook and eat healthily and force children to eat more vegetables and main meals instead of snacks. However, typical young people’s food preferences consist of pizza, chips, crisps, sweets etc. The solution to this conflict usually consists of a family agreement on a combination of “proper meals” all together and alternative, separated meals for parents and children reflecting their tastes.

M: The girls have a certain freedom in what they eat; for example the breakfast biscuits or some dinners based on their favourite foods, like chips, pizza and focaccia bread, etc. They sometimes come to the supermarket with me or write directly on my shopping list …

I: So, they can choose the foods?...

M: Yes, they can; but they’re well aware of limits on junk food and also know they have to eat bread, pasta, vegetables, meat and cheese as well … all the things that kids normally dislike (Monica, female, age 38, married, two children)

The importance of children’s agency is amplified in Anna’s case. She is a very “strange” eater and dislikes almost everything

"This latter tendency was strongly linked in the research with “step dads” and authors speculate this indicates the use of food and its preparation as emotional labour in strengthening bonds with step children. The issue of interaction between children and parents by means of cooking in this research is discussed below.

"It’s worth noting that, as with other research (Chapman and Maclean 1993; Douglas 1998; Dixey et al. 2001, Ross 2002), even though children know that junk food is not “good” in health terms because of risks of weight and skin problems, they eat it for what it represents: freedom from parental restraint and a good time with friends."
from vegetables (except potatoes), fruit (except juices), to fish and cheese. She likes pasta only with particular sauces and meat. The parents have tried to force her to eat “proper meals” but she has strongly refused to eat anything she doesn’t like. Following many arguments the parents decided to give her what she wants. As a result, the family never eat the same meal.

E: In the evening we sometimes have dinner together, but we have different meals!! A real hassle!! For example, my husband and I like vegetable soup or spaghetti fish sauce, but they don’t!!
I: Don’t the children eat pasta?
E: Only certain kinds of pasta, for example lasagne, and with particular sauces, as cream-cheese.
A: … And tortellini with cream-cheese and ham
E: Yes … they like that kind of stuff!! Food that we don’t like much … But we try to keep them happy. Yes, I end up cooking more than one meal … because I’ve realized that it’s difficult to satisfy everyone if we don’t have the same tastes …
I: And your son?
E: Sometimes he likes what we have, but not always
I: So, at times you cook one meal for you and your husband, another for your son and something else for your daughter?
E: Yes, of course. It happens a lot. For example, when there’s chicken breasts, Anna likes escalope, Giovanni fried cutlets Milan style (in egg and bread crumbs) and we prefer it grilled. And it’s not only with chicken breasts but many different foods! (Ermelinda, female, age 42, married, two children and daughter Anna, female, age 16)

Connecting the extension of role de-differentiation to young people discussed above with their power in defining food consumption practices, what this research depicts is notably distant from that by traditional research on food and family. This is particularly evident with Charles and Kerr (1988) and DeVault (1991) who both present young people as passive subjects, somewhat removed from the tasks and decisions associated with daily food preparation and with preferences subordinate to their parents’. As various researchers observe (Elkind 1995; Grieshaber 1997; Valentine 1999; Murcott 2000; Dixon and Banwell 2004), important changes regarding the parent-child relationship appear to be a feature of this shift to post-modern families.

The decline of family meals

The shift of basic family values from modern togetherness to post-modern autonomy is evident at mealtimes. Whereas eating together was prioritized in the modern family, this is no longer so for the post-modern family.

For post-modern family members, lunch is usually consumed outside the home (at school for kids and at work for parents) or at home but in a personalised way, and work meetings, sports practice or a friends’ party have become legitimate reasons to miss the evening meal and its related conversation about the day’s events.

As Stefano reports, parents and children attribute great importance to family meals as a symbol of family cohesiveness, despite being increasingly arduous given the difficulties in organizing family schedules in today’s society. This reiterates the idea put forward by various authors (Martens and Warde 1997; Williams 1997; James 1997) who note that the family meal maintains its symbolic importance, regardless of frequency.

The solution proposed by families to compensate for the reduction of shared meals is to make use of the little time they have together in activities that make family meals an involving and pleasant experiences for all; much value is given to introducing children to cooking or the preparation of special dishes that are family favourites. I: Do you sometimes let the children participate when you cook?
M: Last time we made biscuits, Sara did them … let’s say I made the base mix and she added the chocolate chips, mixed it up a bit, rolled them out, and then put them on the baking tray, and I just put them in the oven … She practically made them by herself!! My husband and I were preparing dinner. She really likes being in the kitchen with us … In the end, it is a way like any other to be together when possible. (Mariagrazia, female, age 33, married, two children)

P: When we’re together and we have some time we often experiment with new recipes that everyone would like. Stefano’s in charge and the children and I collaborate with the preparation (Patrizia, female, age 39, two times married, two children)

As also illustrated by Caraher et al. (2004), in these excerpts there is a clear emphasis of the emotional aspects linked to food preparation and that parents may make use of these activities, when possible, in bonding with children. Moreover, families recognize the importance of celebrating birthdays, Sundays and holidays, since these can become an opportunity for togetherness, compensating for the fact that they rarely share meals at other times. As observed by several authors (among others, Wallendorf and Arnould 1991 and Lupton 1996) celebrations and their related ritualized foods serve to reproduce and constitute ideals of the happy, united family.

The following excerpt illustrates this.

M: I’ve always given great importance to birthday parties … their organization, in celebrating them in the best way possible.

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8 An individual interview with Anna revealed that her dislike of any food cooked in the family started from around the age of six/seven and represents, on a deeper level, resentment towards maternal authority, her mother being the only person responsible for food in that period. Anna’s rejection of her mother’s cooking was part of a power struggle between them which has greatly influenced her attitudes to food.
I usually make the cake … think up the party theme. In this photo we’re in the beach house and the theme was clowns, so the shape of the cake, the tablecloth and all the plates, cups, napkins, etc. In clown theme. It’s true that I really like organizing parties in general, it’s almost a hobby of mine, but I especially want birthdays to be celebrated, that they’re really special … particularly when the children are little. We’re can bring adults, children, relatives and friends together. … They’re an opportunity to get together or even get to know each other, for example when my nieces, nephews or cousins present their boy/girlfriends, etc. (Monica, female, age 38, married, two children)

As observed, it is evermore difficult to find time for family meals since children are involved in a greater number of extracurricular activities (English school, dance, theatre, sport, etc.) and parents strive to manage more complicated work schedules (for example, Antonio who works evening shifts in a restaurant or the single mother Fiorella all day in a local private clinic).

At the same time, an interesting issue this study reveals is that when parents make sacrifices in order to spend time with their children it is not necessarily to share a family meal but also for activities related to their children’s personal interests (going to the cinema together, participating in plays or sports, etc.).

As a result, the disappearance of daily family meals should not automatically be associated with the demise of the family as suggested by some (including, Fischler 1980; Mintz 1984, 1985), firstly because the meal’s symbolic power is maintained even if occurring on an every-other-day basis and secondly family cohesiveness can be derived from other activities.

Changing food habits: from the home to the market

Changes in the foodscape and lifestyles are gradually shifting the domestic work of food preparation and consumption from the home to the market.

As Counihan (1988) observes, although home-cooking is still practiced, eating is increasingly becoming part of the money economy. Compared to the past, women, or families in general, have less personal power in determining the symbolic meaning of food which as a result has ceased to represent the values of home, family and women and increasingly those of consumerism.

Many family members often eat lunch outside the home and families generally eat out more than in the modern era when going to a restaurant was considered a special outing.

This increase has to be considered along side an increased use of ready-made convenience foods that make food preparation at home quicker and easier.

Some families view this food as an “emergency meal” (Jerome 1981), but more often as an important solution for family members who have to cook for themselves and lack sufficient skills or time.

S: From time to time I use them, sometimes when we’re all late and there’s not enough time or we don’t want to prepare something fresh; I’ve bought the vegetable ‘Quattro salti in padella’ (ready-made frozen meal) a few times but the problem is that one packet isn’t enough, we need quite a lot, and they’re expensive … (Sandra, female, age 54, two times married, four children)

I: Do you ever buy ready-made meals?
P: Yes, sometimes, because I put them in the freezer and my husband uses them when he has lunch alone because the children are out and I’m working and he doesn’t want to cook for himself. (Patrizia, female, age 39, two times married, two children)

It is also worth noting that women and the family in general do not perceive ready-made convenience foods in negative terms. This food is not viewed symbolically as a sign of “lack of care” as suggested by Goffon and Ness (1991), or as a threat to institutions such as family, cultural heritage and even sense of identity as reported by James (1993).

This is probably due to the successful attempts by companies to imbue processed foods with the character, traditions, and sense of “homemade” and facilitate consumer transformation of these products into “homemade” dishes (Arnould and Price 2001).

To ensure the success of these products in a country such as Italy, characterized by strong gastronomic traditions associated with a great love of food, it is not by chance that the main competitors (Sagit Findus and Nestlé Buitoni) have drawn accurately from the roots of national cuisine. Indeed, their range includes Pappardelle al Ragù di Cinghiale (pasta with boar meat sauce), Agnolotti al Ragù di Prosciutto (stuffed pasta with ham sauce) and Pasta e Fagioli (pasta and bean soup), that are, typical of traditional regional cuisine.

To this it is also necessary to add that all the ready-made meals nominated by the informants are “stir fry”; this preparation technique gives the impression of participating in the creation of the dish and the possibility of adding a personal touch (herbs and spices, other ingredients, etc.) and as a result has contributed towards bringing ready-made meals closer to the ritual of personal cooking.

Lastly, there is a further point explained by Monica; as well as solving problems, convenience food can sometimes also be a simple solution for a nice meal.

I: Do you ever buy ready-made foods? Like at the supermarket delicatessen, or dishes like ‘Quattro salti in padella’?
P: Yes, I’ve got the ‘Quattro salti in padella’ a few times .. I’ve tried the mushroom tagliatelle, and they’re good, the girls and I like them, ready without little effort. Occasionally we have the seafood risotto, they’re not bad, .. we even buy them as a treat sometimes. (Monica, female, age 38, married, two children)

Monica implicitly recognizes a trade-off between the flavour of homemade and commercially produced food, but she is comfortable with this, especially considering that convenience food allows for eliminating many preparation stages. Plus, she isn’t worried about the trade-off because she likes these tagliatelle!

Like this, the ready-made meal becomes an alternative to personally prepared dishes combining quality, service aim and food traditions.

DISCUSSION

Post-modernity does seem to have arrived in family food preparation and consumption.

Classical modern models are now replaced by certain post-modern themes that characterize post-modern families in terms of food. Specifically, the reconstruction of the classical family roles regarding food related practices, importance of children’s agency in determining their own food consumption practices, decline of family meals and shift from home to the formal market sector of the economy for food preparation and consumption all provide clear evidence of “transfer” of the typical post-modern family’s characteristics in the food field.

However, in true post-modern fashion, that which can be labelled post-modern coexists alongside what is recognized as more generally modern (different week and weekend food habits) and pre-modern (the importance of rituals, such as birthdays). This is to be expected since post-modernity in its plurality is open to the
simultaneous continuance of both traditional and more post-modern practices.

The post-modern condition in which families live may mean that in some cases, the liberatory post-modern practices (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) co-occur with some more constraining modern or even pre-modern ones.

This paper is intended to report on the preliminary results of ongoing research; nonetheless the material collected so far appear to strongly challenge traditional literature on food and family in the domestic context.

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