A Life Course Perspective of Family Meals Via the Life Grid Method

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This study investigates how family meals change over a lifetime using a life course perspective. We conducted interviews with 15 participants aged 80 and over, using the life grid method to investigate how the meanings and processes of meals change in response to individual, generational, and historical influences. The findings reinforce the importance of overtly and systematically addressing the historically and socially structured nature of family life when studying lifetime consumption patterns.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13416/volumes/v35/NA-35

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
As much as any consumption behavior, the ritual of the family meal serves to define roles and identities, establish social relationships of inclusion and exclusion, and convey meanings of taste and style. Over the course of a lifetime, meal patterns are altered to conform to changing relationships, economics, nutritional ideology, geographical locations, technologies, health concerns, styles, and many other influences. As a result, systematically investigating how the meanings and processes of meals change in response to individual, generational, and historical influences can increase our understanding of changes in family consumption behavior over a lifetime. This research examines the dynamics of family meals by pairing life course theory with the life grid method of obtaining oral histories to capture the historical and social forces of change.

The primary framework currently used to look at generational differences in household consumption behaviors, such as meal patterns, is the family life cycle. However, the family life cycle is a model of trajectories in which consumption patterns are assumed to be somewhat steady state in nature. As such, it ignores the transitions between stages and the likely possibility that those transitions are experienced differently today than they were in earlier times. Variation in the life courses of different generations creates cohort effects that influence consumption profoundly. As Scott et al. (2006, p. 23) note, errors of presentism (i.e., assumptions and agendas of the present are projected upon the buyers of the past) exist. Methods that study changing consumption patterns in historical context are needed to counteract errors of presentism.

This research uses the life grid method to examine changes and continuities in family meals over a lifetime. Combining components of the structured and unstructured interview (Fontana and Frey 1994), the life grid method involves asking respondents questions about events that have occurred in their lifetimes, including historical events (such as the 1929 Depression and World War II) and internal events (such as changes in jobs, residences, and family). These lifetime events are then used as cues when questioning the respondent about patterns in individual or family behavior. Through the collection of mutually reinforcing memories, the life grid method enhances recall of less memorable details in individuals’ lives (Berney and Blane 2003).

We conducted interviews with 15 participants, aged 80 and over, living in four different senior resident centers, about how their meals have changed over the course of their lifetimes. In the course of the interviews, the interviewer worked with each participant to construct a “life grid,” by working chronologically through time to record the residences, jobs, and family changes of the participant. After the life grid was completed and the participant’s life history was outlined on paper, the interviewer could pair the life grid with historical events to cue the participant to particular times in his or her life and make inquiries about meals.

To analyze the interviews, we used the themes of life course theory (Bengston and Allen 2003). We found that multiple temporal contexts of development, including individual changes, generational changes, and historical changes interacted to affect family meals. Major historical time events like the Great Depression and World War II had a profound impact on the family eating patterns of our participants, with social class mitigating the extent to which families had to adjust their eating behavior according to these events. In addition, participants recalled how transformational developments and technological innovations, including changing food retail structures and new home appliances (e.g., refrigerators and microwaves), had changed both the composition and patterns of their meals.

Normative expectations or aspirations related to family structure also affected the family meals of our participants. Through analysis of the interviews, we learned how individuals’ roles and responsibilities changed in response to micro- and macro-environmental elements, as they aged, acquired spouses and children, changed jobs and locations and experienced historical events. In their current stages of lives, our participants continued to develop new roles and relationships, as they developed “family” bonds with other residents of their resident centers.

A “diachronic perspective on development” was also elucidated through the interviews, with the focus on entire lives rather than enclosed periods of time. We learned how our respondents were able to adjust, sometimes quickly and sometimes gradually, to sudden or incremental changes in their life paths. While the respondents shared the commonality that they were all currently living in a residential center, they displayed much heterogeneity, according to past and current influences, in terms of their adjustments to eating meals in a community environment.

Altogether, we found collecting oral histories from the elderly via the use of the life grid method to be helpful in analyzing changes in family meals over the past eight decades. In particular, it offers interesting glimpses of the development of the family in response to socio-cultural and historical developments. In addition to food-related behaviors, a number of lifelong consumption activities and products would be interesting to study through structured analysis of the effects of influential events, including home purchases, vacations, celebratory activities, investments, educational services, arts activities, and many others.

References