



Feeding Families Better – Moving the Conversation out of the Kitchen

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The wonders of family dinners are routinely celebrated in magazines, television shows, and other popular media. Many would have us believe that a family gathered to eat a healthy, home-cooked dinner at the end of the day is the answer to many of the ills that afflict modern America – including rising rates of obesity, family dysfunction, and a disengaged citizenry. The call for good parents to cook dinner for their families is mostly directed at women. This message reflects prevailing but often unrealistic standard for “good mothering.”

“Cooking, above all, connects us,” declares Michael Pollan, the best-selling author of *Cooked*, who argues that the path to reforming the food system “passes right through the kitchen.” That may be fine in theory, and even in reality for some privileged families, but does this ideal work well for a broader cross-section of American families? To find out, my colleagues and I have conducted interviews with 150 black, white, and Latina mothers with children between the ages two and eight years old; and we have also done in-depth ethnographic observations of twelve working class and poor families. Our findings reveal that the notion of the “ideal meal” creates significant stress for many households, and for other households it is simply unachievable. Being poor makes it nearly impossible to produce the foodie version of a home-cooked meal.

The Realities of Home Cooking

Unrealistic and romantic ideas often dominate discussions of home cooking. Many imagine a time when Americans grew much of their own food and used it to prepare healthy meals, which they ate gathered around the family table. Not only is this vision historically questionable; it also disregards the largely invisible labor – most of it performed by women – that has always gone into planning, making, and serving family meals, and cleaning up after them. Today, many families simply do not have enough time to try to recapture a romanticized past. When *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman says that his goal is to “get people to see cooking as a joy rather than as a burden,” he overlooks the time pressures and financial constraints that make cooking family meals an unwieldy burden for many women and some men trying to meet the demands of paid employment and handle home duties at the same time.

To be sure, many Americans do a lot of home cooking. Contrary to the myth that poor people constantly eat fast food, mothers in our study who were barely making ends meet routinely cooked for their families, because it was more economical. However, even though the mothers we interviewed cooked dinner for their families an average of five nights a week, many of them worried that they were not doing it “right.” Women are keenly aware of the gap between the idealized version of cooking – available day after day on cable television – and the realities of their own lives.

Home Cooking Today

Our interviews and observations suggest that three factors shape the reality of home cooking for both middle-class and low-income families:

- **Time.** Many mothers reported that they simply did not have enough time. Increasing numbers of working-class Americans have part-time jobs and often do not know their work schedules in advance. That makes it hard to plan meals or even to know when everyone will be home. Although middle-class women were more likely to have regular work hours, they still scrambled to find time to cook as children’s homework, sports, and other activities demanded their attention. Indeed, national time-use studies show that women today spend more time with their children than they did in the 1960s. It is not surprising that they struggle to find time to make home-cooked meals.
- **Money.** All the families in this study reported that finances were a factor in meal planning and preparation, but not in the same way. Middle-class families did not experience a shortage of food, but they

expressed regret that they could not afford to feed their children organic food. Poor families faced much starker choices. Romantic depictions of cooking assume, mistakenly, that family members can be home to eat dinner together. They presume that decent, nearby grocery stores sell fresh produce and that everyone has access to a kitchen with pots and pans, sharp knives, and reliable appliances. None of these assumptions held for many poor mothers. Furthermore, many told us that when times were especially tough, they skipped meals themselves and stood in long lines at food pantries or in government offices to provide food for their children.

- **Pleasing Others.** Another challenge to the home cook is a familiar one: the preferences of individual family members. In our ethnographic observations, we rarely observed a meal when at least one person did not complain about the food. This may be annoying for middle-class parents but for low-income mothers, it often means avoiding new recipes to prepare tried-and-true dishes, many of which use processed foods. This is preferable to running the risk of wasting food if a family member will not eat something new.

Thinking Outside the Kitchen

If the aim is really to give all American families the opportunity to sit down and enjoy a healthy meal at the end of the day, much more needs to be done beyond exhorting people to cook at home. American society will have to tackle broader inequalities and economic obstacles – such as stagnating wages, irregular work schedules, and lack of access to healthy and affordable food in low-income neighborhoods.

Few people would dispute that home-cooked meals can be healthy and beneficial. To make them possible for most American families, however, we need to take into account the extra burdens so many women, especially working mothers, currently face – and not simply call for such women to do more and more. Family-friendly jobs and work schedules could help on the home front. Yet we also need to experiment with other creative solutions, including community kitchens, healthy food trucks, and school programs with prepared meals for kids to take home.

Read more in Sarah Bowen, Sinikka Elliott, and Joslyn Brenton, “[The Joy of Cooking?](#)” *Contexts* 13, no. 3 (2014): 20-25.

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