

## **Eating with your mouth shut: family meals and etiquette**

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### **Abstract:**

The table and the family meal as sites for the socialisation of children and adolescents are widely accepted. One of the ordinary manifestations of this socialisation is the reproduction of table manners or etiquette, which iterates and reiterates social ties and kinship, social roles and power relationships, especially for children. The table is the place children are taught the rules of the social community in which they live. Given that the family meal has morphed so that it no longer necessarily occurs with the constraint of the table, are rules about eating still observed? This study of 625 adolescents in Perth, Western Australia, illustrates that etiquette surrounding the family meal is, in fact, still evident. Many of the rules relating to bodily functions and movement around the table have deep historical ties; others, particularly those around where the meal should and should not be consumed, reflect the changing dynamics of family meal consumption. Whether or not adolescents conform to, or even acknowledge, the rules is partly due to the internalisation of behaviour codes so that they no longer seem like rules, and to the nature of adolescence itself as a time of questioning rules to establish autonomy and independence.

The table and the family meal as sites for the socialisation of children and adolescents are widely accepted (Murcott 1982; Charles and Kerr 1988; Visser 1991; Compañ, Moreno, Ruiz and Pascual 2002; Mäkälä 2000; Ochs and Shohet 2006). They act as arenas where the 'production of sociality, morality and local understandings of the world' (Ochs and Shohet 2006: 35) are played out every day in a variety of ways. One of the ordinary manifestations of this socialisation (as opposed to the extraordinary (Marshall 2005) is the reproduction of table manners or etiquette.

The purported demise of the family meal has led to a flurry of extrapolations on the repercussions for the social, moral and physical fibre of children, adolescents and the family. As recently as June this year, social commentator, Hugh Mackay (2006: 10), argued that manners are 'like symptoms of moral health' and are 'small signs of a civilised society'. In children, he argues, 'good manners are like practice for the real thing – training [for] a more serious test of moral courage' (Mackay 2006:10).

Manners at the table have evolved over time and form the central tenet to Elias' civilising process. In reviewing Elias' work, Ashley, Hollow, Jones and Taylor (2004) describe the development of manners as a dynamic process born out of competition between the classes that was imperative in determining power and status within the court. As monarchical power changed to bourgeois authority, social distinction became less predicated on etiquette and more focussed on wealth.

The manifestation of etiquette at the table has now moved from being a demonstration of class distinction to one which iterates and reiterates social ties and kinship, social roles and power relationships, especially for children. The table is the place children are taught the rules of the social community in which they live. As Visser (1991: 50) indicates, 'children learn when eating with their elders all the status and kinship patterns of their family as they watch how adults treat each other and discover their own "place"'. Falk (1994: 20) also attributes the sharing of a meal as the 'incorporation of the partaker into the community simultaneously defining his/her particular "place" within it'. Children are also taught about the hierarchy of the family and of the status of certain foods. Charles and Kerr (1988: 76) also show evidence of the privileging of men with regard to the distribution of food. Other rules children are taught include those concerning not wasting food, even when food is not scarce. Most of us can remember saying or being on the receiving end of "think of the starving

children in...”. The principle is respect for food, ‘wasting shows lack of respect for God, the earth and each other’ (Visser 1991: 52). Visser goes on to say:

... children are taught how to eat at an exceedingly culture-specific table. The dining table is not only the setting they will surely encounter, and need to have mastered, in life away from home; it is also a constraining and controlling device, a place where children eat under the surveillance of adults (Visser 1991: 54).

Another approach is that of Grieshaber (1997) who uses a Foucauldian framework of power, knowledge and resistance to discuss the family mealtime as a site of contestation. The rules of the table are one way in which gender, power and daily rituals are socially constructed in the context of the discourse positions available to each family member. As Compañ and colleagues (2002: 90) explain:

The simple act of sharing meals solidifies the family’s identity by modelling a wide range of learned behavioural patterns. One of the groups most affected in this sense are adolescents. Thus, the ritual of the shared meal continuously reinforces individual identity: *who* he/she is, *where* does he/she belong or *which* his/her role might be. This is why it is considered a *homeostatic ritual* (Compañ et al. 2002: 90).

Mary Douglas (1975) has described meals as occasions when food is eaten in a structured format bounded by social rules. The key features are a table with a seating order acting as an orthopaedic device restricting movement. Given that the family meal has morphed so that it no longer necessarily occurs with the constraint of the table, are rules about eating still observed?

## **The Research**

This paper draws on data generated via a Web-based questionnaire administered to adolescents, and concerns their ideas of a family meal. More specifically, this paper discusses the rules that govern 15 year olds’ eating at the table or elsewhere. The project population consisted of 625 Year 10 students of Western Australia, Year 10 being the final year of compulsory schooling at the time the research was undertaken. This population was chosen as adolescents of this age are at a critical stage of development in terms of their own nutritional choices, eating habits, health concerns and obesity/body image issues. The survey population was generated from eight high schools in the Perth metropolitan area. These schools represent a cross-section of socio-economic areas and are reasonably evenly distributed across the metropolitan

area. Due to the demographic, that is, Web-savvy 15 year old school students, it was decided that a self-administered Web-based questionnaire was an appropriate survey method. Schools were asked to include the survey as part of the Year 10 Health, Science, Society and Environment or Physical Education programs. This was for two main reasons. First, we believed it would be a suitable forum in which students, 'gathered at the same place at the same time,' (Babbie 1990: 176) could complete the questionnaire. Second, it provided a way to ensure that all students, regardless of whether they had access to a computer and the Internet at home, would be able to participate. Some schools administered the survey to all their Year 10 classes, while others offered it to classes based on availability and other commitments. The overall response rate was 42% of the total number of Year 10 students enrolled at the eight schools.

### **Rules Governing the Meal**

Over half of the adolescents (n 338, 54%) stated that they had rules for eating. These rules were divided into three major categories including those general in nature, others that governed bodily functions and a third category that prescribed where food should or should not be eaten.

#### **General Rules**

It was interesting to note that of the adolescents who described general 'good manners' there was an understanding that they were not rules per se but rather just 'commonsense':

*there not rules... ther just things wer brought up with and is comensens<sup>i</sup>*

*General table manners etc.*

*Decent manners must be displayed.*

*manners (eg. asking someone politely for something)*

*table manners*

*Just the normal table manners*

Clearly for many, the word 'manners' itself was assumed to infer the types of rules that applied at table, and 'normal' inferred that everyone knows what these rules are and they are not worth articulating. This appeared to be a taken-for-granted orientation towards politeness, which meant that further explication was unnecessary.

If this is a common attitude, that is, there are no rules per se, simply ‘good manners’, then it could be speculated that adolescents saying “no” to the question have so internalised behaviour at mealtimes that they are no longer considered a separate set of guidelines. As Visser (1991: 341) notes, ‘universal rules governing modern manners usually take the form of unspoken, almost subconscious guidelines and constraint’.

### **Body Rules**

Body rules covered the full gamut of bodily noises (for example, burping or farting), eating with your mouth open, talking with your mouth full, elbows on the table and the wearing of hats. It also covered aspects such as removing food from another person’s plate, positioning at the table and the use of implements.

*Basic table manners, we can't talk with our mouth full, Don't slouch over our food, We shouldn't make big eating noises or play with our food. But these are pretty basic.*

*My sister isn't allowed to eat with her mouth open any more because its gross and she always does it.*

*No hats at the dinner table*

*No reaching across other peoples plates or they can stab you with their fork... LOL*

*No eating with mouth open, eat with knife and fork, no eating in rooms. No burping or farting*

*Well we are encouraged to stay at the diner table through out the hole corse of the meal, but my brother is a monkey and likes jumping around the house and simultaning between other activities and dinner!*

*Don't talk with you're mouth full*

*No leaving till u r finished*

Rules that govern these practices that categorise transgressions as ‘bad manners’ are generally about keeping food and the internal body workings separate from the extra-corporeal space. Douglas (1966: 2) has noted that there is no such thing as dirt; ‘it exists in the eye of the beholder’. She argues that dirt is ‘matter out of place’, and that even food can become dirt when not in its rightful position on a plate. Food, when it crosses the pre-determined boundary, becomes a potential pollutant: once masticated, processed in the stomach (vomit) or the bowel (faeces). Likewise, bodily excretions and emissions (saliva, gas) must stay contained.

Eating disrupts the barrier between 'inside' and 'outside' and bodily propriety means that we must recognise the potential for disgust amongst others. Hence, we ensure that other diners cannot view the mastication of food, and mouths remain closed in an attempt to keep the bodily process contained and to ensure that the contaminated food cannot escape. Von Drachenfels (2000: 539), in her manual on table manners, makes this point strongly: 'Never speak with a full mouth... a full mouth is offensive to see...'. In the present study, the most commonly cited rule was not talking when your mouth was full or alternatively not opening your mouth while chewing. Visser (1991) describes this as paradoxical since the meal in our culture is not a silent affair but a site of commensality, and not talking is often considered impolite.

Other rules, such as not removing food from another's plate, also emerge due to the risk food has already been contaminated, but only in Western cultures. In such cultures, sharing food from each other's plate is a sign of intimacy that has sensual connotations, partly because of the dropping of rules about boundary maintenance between different bodies, bodily products and food. These types of rules which began as a code for discerning social standing have now altered to reflect the current obsession with cleanliness, health and reducing risk. Burping, farting and noises of eating, at least in Western culture, are frowned upon as they represent a break in the barrier, a potential for internal processing to be made known. This has not always been the case, for example, farting at the table was not always proscribed. Erasmus argues that trying to prevent wind from escaping the buttocks was dangerous for health and if one could not withdraw and fart in private then 'in the words of the old adage ... cover the sound with a cough' (cited in Visser 1991: 336).

There are also rules that discuss controlling movement at the table and when to commence eating, and these are designed to control bodily pleasure in order to heighten that pleasure. Another view is that such rules allow space for other attitudes to find expression 'ideals such as mindfulness, gratitude and [a] willing awareness of people other than ourselves' (Visser 1991: 145). Saying grace before commencing a meal is one way in which the meal is delayed and a sense of mindfulness about the food to be consumed elicited. Only two adolescents indicated that they prayed before the meal commenced. Rules discouraging elbows on the table are a sign of bodily control and of not trespassing on the space of others (Visser 1991: 330), and hark back to formal rules of etiquette regarding poise and posture.

When it comes to the use of knives and forks – rules governing their use reflect an era when violence at the table was a real threat. The student who remarked ‘or they can stab you with a fork’ probably made the comment flippantly, however, many of our current rules regarding implements were to prevent ‘violence which could so easily break out at table’ and so ‘we are especially sensitive and vigilant about the use of these weapons’ (Visser 1991: 184).

Removal of hats generally, but especially at the table, is a form of deference, a ritual lowering of oneself (Visser 1991: 111). The hats, of course, have changed from fedoras to beanies and baseball caps. The wearing of such hats at the table could be seen as a direct assertion of identity and rejection of any form of deference as adolescents forge adult identities. The rule about not wearing them could be seen as an attempt by parents to assert their control over that identity.

### **Place Rules**

Historically rules governing the meal have focussed on rules at the table; however, this survey highlighted those that pointed to the ‘family meal’ as a moveable feast. Homes, in the past, have consisted of separate rooms, enclosed and separated from other parts of the house, expressing purity and an unviolated enclosure (Visser 1991: 304). With the changing design of houses it is less likely for there to be a separate dining room but rather an open plan space where dining takes place with other activities such as television watching. For adolescents in this situation there was a distinct set of rules that delimited where food could be eaten.

*No eating in bedrooms...*

*Don't eat or drink near the computer*

*Not allowed to eat in bedroom or lounge room*

*No eating in the bedroom or in the study no throwing food around*

*Can't eat in bedroom, can't walk around while eating,*

*No eating in carpeted rooms.*

*Don't drop food on the carpet*

*Not to sit in your room when eating.*

*That I'm not allowed to sit in the lounge room and eat my dinner*

Many of these rules, it could be argued, are designed to protect property – carpet and computers, for example. The rule about not eating in the bedroom, however, has a

different connotation. Bedrooms for adolescents have been described as cultural spaces over which they have control (Brown, Reese Dykers, Rogge Steele and Barton White 1994; James 2001; Ferrell 1997). In situations where adults have power, bedrooms become attempts to carve out 'independent zone[s] of identity' (Ferrell 1997: 21). By stipulating that eating should not take part in the bedroom, adults are not only reasserting the adolescent's attachment to the family group but also their position within the family. The bedroom may well be recognised as the adolescent's cave – a place to retreat to and develop as a safe place; to eat there, however, is to move the distribution of power towards the adolescent. Insisting that adolescents do not eat in their rooms enables adult surveillance of what is being eaten, and may also be linked to concerns about the need to monitor healthy eating in contexts where eating disorders are matters of societal concern.

### **No Rules**

Just under half of adolescents (n 287, 46%) stated they did not have rules governing the family meal. There could be a number of reasons for this assertion. As mentioned previously, not having rules could indicate that such codes of behaviour have been internalised and as such do not require iteration. However, given that adolescence is a significant period of identity formation, the assertion that there are no rules may also indicate that there are 'no rules that apply to me' and constitute a way of establishing interpersonal distance from adults in the family, a key feature of adolescence (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant and Moors 2003). The family meal is a significant site of contestation and by deliberately not being involved at the meal the signal is one of independence and moving into adulthood, regardless of whether this meal involves a table or not. Alternatively, given that adolescence is a period of unpredictability, one of the reasons for not being involved with the meal could be a form of protection of both themselves and others. For example, many adolescents expressed their disdain for the family meal as it represented a moment in time when they were questioned or had to witness disagreeable family dynamics. Visser (1991: 298) argues that we are taught to consider the feelings of others in order to feel part of the group, to be accepted and approved; 'at table we are not only together but separate: we protect ourselves, but we also protect others from experiencing us as threatening, unpredictable, or disgusting'.



## Resistive Rules

In terms of willingness and ability to cooperate, it is important to acknowledge the enormous diversity in the adolescent population who participated in the research. These are reflected in some of the responses received, as illustrated below. Some participants were clearly resistant to our questions, producing mischievous responses throughout the survey, which were easy to discern. The following examples are recognisable as 'silly' partly because of the shared cultural knowledge about the sorts of things that might be 'taken-for-granted' as family meals rules. These offerings gain their humour from the fact that they are so very obscure in relation to the 'category bound activities' (Silverman 1994) associated with 'table manners'.

*Don't piss on floor*

*No getting out your AK-74's and blowing your parents heads off*

*No dancing on the table shouting IM A CHICKEN ENVELOPED IN PINK*

## Rule Variations

When looking at whether adolescents acknowledged the presence of rules around the family meal, we wanted to explore whether their presence was related to any other factors. There was no variation in the presence of rules across class as determined by postcode of residential address or father's occupation. Unlike the original impetus for table manners, the differentiation of social standing, practising table manners appears to no longer have any bearing on social status, or at least to be irrelevant in an Australian context, which has relatively fewer class distinctions in terms of behaviours than, say, England. This finding supports Hupkens, Knibbe, Van Otterloo and Drop (1998) who also found few differences in the prescriptive rules imposed on eating between classes.

There was no significant difference in the presence of rules according to cultural background. However, surprisingly, adolescents were less likely to have rules if they came from an Asian background. Again we hypothesise that good manners and behaviour at the table in these families are not governed by a set of overt rules but rather may form part of everyday expected behaviour which is not seen as being necessary to mention.

## Conclusion

This study of adolescents in Perth, Western Australia, illustrates that etiquette surrounding the family meal is still evident. Many of the rules relating to bodily functions and movement around the table have deep historical ties; others, particularly those around where the meal should and should not be consumed, reflect the changing dynamics of family meal consumption. Whether or not adolescents conform to the rules or even acknowledge their existence is due in part to internalisation of behaviour codes to the point they no longer need to be iterated and to the nature of adolescence, itself, as a time when rules are questioned in order to establish autonomy and independence.

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## Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> At the outset is important to note that the 15 year old participants used creative spelling, which occasionally made interpretation quite challenging. We have refrained, in this paper, from using the signifier [sic] to indicate the accuracy of quotations.

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