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FAMILY MEALS:

THE MEANINGS OF THE FAMILY MEAL FROM A MULTI-PERSON PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Whilst many claims are made about the importance of families eating together, linked to the concept of the family meal 'ideal', little is understood about the content of these mealtime interactions. This thesis explores the underlying family processes that occur during a family meal, using the theoretical framework of family process theory (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). The study aimed to compare and contrast the different family members' perceptions of family meals, both within and between the families, and examine the themes of gender and generation in relation to food provisioning. The study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach, utilising photographs, interviews, floor plans and questionnaire data, to add layers of meaning to the analysis. Questionnaire data from 213, 14-15 year old, young people was initially gathered from three regionally similar schools to identify contemporary family meal patterns and to gain access to the interview sample. Twelve families were subsequently recruited which led to 37 interviews with mothers, fathers and their sons/daughters in this small East Anglian sample. The key findings from the study were that mealtime interactions provided the space and time for families to communicate, deal with conflict, make decisions and plan ahead – central first order family processes that enable families to achieve their 'goals' of affect, meaning and power (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Additionally the everyday activity of 'food and eating in the family home' provided access into these private domains and afforded a valuable 'window' into the deeper family processes, conceptualised as family paradigms, which guide and influence family life. Importantly the study found that 'the family meal' was not a homogenous concept and, whilst still perceived as important, varied in relation to its composition, location, timing and content, both physical and emotional.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> "A family is not a naturally occurring collection of individuals; its reality is constructed from day to day, through activities like eating together."
>
> (DeVault, 1991, p.15)

Food and eating in the family home are central elements to family life, with eating together often used as a criterion to define a family. James & Curtis (2012) contend that currently in the UK there is a pronounced politicisation of parenting through food and in the US, "… the family dinner is viewed as an icon of the family and an ideal toward which contemporary families *should* (emphasis added) strive" (Ochs, Shohet, Campos, & Beck, 2010, p. 57). This belief has led to considerable research attention and debate regarding the importance of regular family meals for family life, and society more generally. Caplan (1997) believes that the family meal has become a very powerful metaphor for the family; consequently if the family meal is perceived to be on the decline, the inevitable assumption is that family life is also in decline. Evidence for this concern in contemporary British society is apparent in newspaper headlines which report the demise of the family meal, "One in 10 families NEVER has an evening meal together" (Daily Mail 26 Oct 2010). Other headlines outline the perceived implications for society, "Children's social skills eroded by decline of family meals" (The Telegraph 30 April 2012). Maternal employment, the rise in convenience foods and the 'breakdown' of the 'traditional family' are frequently proposed as key factors contributing to this decline. However Murcott (1997, 2010) has strongly challenged this assumed decline, and questions the evidence upon which these claims are made. She argues that many social commentators have perpetuated an idealised myth of the family meal with little academic research to consolidate these findings. Supporting Murcott's position, the available data on contemporary family meal patterns provides a more nuanced picture of food and eating in the family home.

The increased research focus, on food and eating, is also linked to the rising obesity epidemic in the UK and other developed countries. In England one third of children are classified as either overweight or obese (Department of Health, 2008) with one fifth of two to five year olds classified as obese. Whilst the Department of Health (2008) promoted a range of initiatives to tackle this rapidly growing epidemic, including promoting breastfeeding, increasing physical activity, ensuring healthy school meals, creating cycling initiatives and restricting advertising and marketing, little attention was given to the

importance of family meals. Statistics indicate that only 3 per cent of obese children have parents who are of a healthy weight, which the report concluded provides strong evidence for the role of family lifestyle, family eating patterns and family food choices. The report recommended that excess weight problems in children can only be tackled by addressing food and eating in the whole family, and society more broadly, reflecting a systems approach to this health and social issue.

To explore food and eating in the family home, this research was situated within a psychosocial approach, which emphasises the social context of development within psychology and focuses on processes rather than structures, emotions rather than just cognitions, and meanings from multiple levels of analysis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In contrast to sociology's focus on family structures and family practices (Morgan, 1996), family psychologists have used the framework of 'family processes' to explore everyday family interactions (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Family processes are defined as "…the strategies and daily sequences of behaviour employed by family members to achieve goals" (Day, 2010, p. 6). This recent development in the field of family theories has emerged from family systems thinking, which views the family as a collection of interacting systems and subsystems, establishing boundaries and regulating the distance between family members and others. In their detailed conceptual model, Kantor & Lehr (1975) identify *access* dimensions and *target* dimensions as key components of family process theory; access dimensions describe the physical aspects of family experience such as space, time and energy, whereas target dimensions identify the conceptual aspects of family experience, defined as affect, power and meaning. Thus the theory aims to identify and conceptualise the variety of family interactions experienced in everyday family life and explore how these processes are transmitted through the generations (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

Historically, the study of food and eating in family life has crossed disciplinary boundaries with important contributions made from anthropologists, historians, health professionals, sociologists and psychologists. In relation to research on family meals, many of the psychological and medical research teams have sought to quantify and predict mealtime frequency, and correlate these mealtime frequencies with various health and psychological outcome measures, such as obesity and high-risk behaviours (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Fulkerson, & Story, 2008; Gillman et al., 2000). Thus the focus has been on the individual account. In contrast, sociological research on family meals has emphasised that family members are part of a social group, embedded in values shaped by gender, generation and

culture (DeVault, 1991; Murcott, 1982a). The salience of gender norms is a recurring theme within this field, with feminist researchers indicating that women often have the dual burden of both paid employment outside the family home and the responsibility for feeding and housework within the family home, referred to by Hochschild (1989) as 'the second shift'. Another body of research has explored the importance of the mealtime *routines* and *rituals* in family life, focusing on the extent to which family routines and rituals promote health and well-being, maintain family stability, affirm family identity and protect family life during times of stress (for example Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). For contemporary family life, with perceptions of time scarcity and young people's engagement with digital technologies, mealtimes may provide one of the few opportunities for families to interact on a regular basis

To date the large body of research on food and eating in the family home, and specifically the family meal, has focused on large scale reports of family meal frequency and the links with health and well-being, or smaller scale explorations of the issues of gender, power and identity. However less is understood about the specific aspects of the family meal interactions that may affect family health and well-being. A recent inter-disciplinary research programme in the UK was the 'Changing Families, Changing Food' programme, co-ordinated by Peter Jackson (a human geographer). This programme aimed to explore the connection between families and food using a variety of data sources and argued that eating practices provide a powerful lens through which to examine contemporary family life (Jackson, 2009). In the US another inter-disciplinary research project is the Project EAT programme (Eating Amongst Teens). In a summary of their research findings, Neumark-Sztainer et al (2010) concluded that future research needs to establish what is happening *within* the family meal routine to provide insight into the apparent associations with various outcome measures. By exploring the underlying family processes that occur during the mealtime interactions, this thesis aimed to address this gap.

Additionally, research on the family has often relied on a single informant to present the 'family' account, with little appreciation of the richness and diversity of experience within each family group. Predominantly family research has been reliant on maternal accounts, with paternal and young people's accounts often overlooked, with notable exceptions such as Backett's (1982) and DeVault's (1991) couple research, Lareau's (2003) ethnographic family study and Kime's (2008) multi-generational family research. This thesis aimed to address this omission by adopting a multi-perspective approach, and interviewing mothers,

fathers and young people within the family system. To further enhance the richness of the data, the thesis adopted a mixed methods approach, to "...capture the complexity of everyday family relationships" (Gabb, 2008, p.167). Thus the study utilised in-depth interviews, photo elicitation, questionnaires and family home floor plans, to provide a more detailed picture of food and eating in the family home.

Thesis aims

The goal of my research was to provide insight into everyday family meals from multiple perspectives to inform future research, and to help shape policy, with an awareness of the current societal emphasis on the value of family meals. The primary research question was 'How do the different family members perceive the underlying family processes that occur during a family meal?' The research focused on both the similarities and differences *within* family accounts (between the mother, father and young person) and also the similarities and differences *between* family accounts (that is between the mothers, the fathers and the young people). Specifically the themes of gender and generation in contemporary food provisioning were explored - in the context of this study gender was considered in relation to mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters, and generation focused on the inter-generational relationship between the young people and their parents. A fourth research aim was to identify contemporary family meal patterns in this small East Anglian sample, to provide a context for this study. The specific research aims were to:

a. Explore the underlying family processes within a family meal
b. Compare and contrast the different family members perceptions of and meanings given to family meals (both within and between families)
c. Explore the themes of gender and generation in relation to family meals
d. Identify contemporary family meal patterns in this East Anglian sample

Thesis outline

In the first section of the thesis, the literature review examines the key research contributions to food and eating in the family home. **Chapter 2** unpacks the term 'family meal', by first considering contemporary definitions of a 'family' and a 'meal' before critically addressing the question 'what is a family meal?' This chapter also considers how family meals are socially, culturally and historically situated and concludes with a consideration of the 'family meal ideal'. Having examined the concept of 'family meals' and explored the powerful ideology around the family meal 'ideal', **Chapter 3** presents an

overview of the theoretical and methodological approaches used to explore family life, focusing specifically on the provisioning of food and meals within the family home. The final literature review chapter, **Chapter 4**, critically evaluates the patterns of contemporary family meals identified in national and international research and presents the research evidence which suggests the links between regular family meals and adolescent health and well-being. Chapter 4 concludes with a consideration of an emerging body of qualitative and mixed methods research that aims to explore the divergent experiences of food and eating within family life.

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the methodological considerations within this study beginning with an explanation of how the term 'family meal' was conceptualised. The chapter then introduces family process theory and explains how this conceptual framework informed each stage of the research process, from the design of the study and the research aims, to the research approach and the analysis of the data. **Chapter 6** then provides a detailed consideration of the research process, beginning with the rationale for the research population. The chapter outlines the research design with a procedural account of how the questionnaires and interviews were implemented, and subsequently how the data was then analysed. Throughout the study there were major ethical issues that needed to be considered and addressed, and the chapter concludes with a consideration of the importance of being reflective throughout the whole research process.

Chapter 7 is the first of three findings chapters and identifies the family meal patterns found in this East Anglian sample from both the questionnaire data and the smaller interview sample to *explore contemporary family meal patterns in an East Anglian sample*. This chapter focuses on the individual accounts of the family meal presented by the three family members and was sensitised to both gender and generation to *compare and contrast the different family members' perceptions of family meals.* It also explores the extent to which these convergent or divergent accounts either reflect or challenge the family meal 'ideal'. **Chapter 8** then explores *the underlying family processes that occur within the family meal* by addressing each element of the family meal in turn (from deciding what to eat, to the shopping and cooking and the actual meal). The thematic analysis was sensitised to the underlying family processes during food provisioning, as well as the similarities and differences between the family members' perceptions of the family meal, and *the themes of gender and generation in relation to the family meal.* The final

findings chapter, **Chapter 9**, presents three family case studies to illustrate how exploring food and eating in the family home may provide a 'window' into deeper family processes, conceptualised as family paradigms, that guide and influence family life. **Chapter 10** provides a summary of the research findings and reflects upon the methodological approach used to explore the private world of family life. This chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of these findings for policy and provides suggestions for future research on family meals and food and eating in the family home.

Chapter 2: Family Meals

2.1 Introduction

The concept of the 'family meal' is widely used within media and academic discourses, despite little agreement regarding its key components. Numerous claims are made about the importance of regular family meals for various developmental outcomes, along with the frequently cited assumption that family meals are on the decline in contemporary family life. This chapter aims to unpack the 'family meal' concept and explore each element in turn, by first considering contemporary definitions of a 'family' and a 'meal', before critically addressing the question 'what is a family meal?' The idea of a 'family meal ideal' will be presented, suggesting that contemporary family life is heavily influenced by ideals of how families 'should' behave (Smart, 2007). The chapter concludes with a consideration of how this 'family meal ideal' has been sustained within contemporary society to influence family behaviour.

2.2 What is a family?

Families in contemporary Britain take on many forms, with an increasing number of people living in step families, lone parent families and cohabiting couple families. Any research exploring family life must be very clear as to how 'family' is defined and conceptualised, and census data provides a useful means by which historical and contemporary patterns of family life can be explored. The first census in the UK was conducted in 1801, gathering information on the number of people, their occupation, and also the numbers of families and houses. Since then census data has been collected every ten years (apart from 1941) to obtain detailed demographic data on the individuals and families living in the UK. Along with gathering demographic data, the census allows researchers to compare how the 'family' has been conceptualised over the last two hundred years, with the evolving definition of a family reflecting the social changes in family life. For example between 1971 and 1991 a family was either a couple alone or with their never-married children, a lone parent with their never-married children, or one or more grand-parents with their grandchildren. In 1991, opposite sex cohabiting couples were added to this definition and from 2001, same sex cohabiting couples were included. Thus contemporary definitions of family types include 'same sex cohabiting couple' and 'lone parent' reflecting the extent to which the definition of family has evolved over time, to be more inclusive of individuals that do not conform to the nuclear family norm.

In the UK, the Office for National Statistics gathers annual data on families and households, to provide information to various agencies, such as policymakers, charities and researchers. One such report is the Families and Households (ONS, 2012) which uses data from the annual Labour Force Survey (LFS), a household survey of people in the UK. The LFS produces estimates on the number of families by type (categorised as married couple, cohabiting couple and lone parent), people in families by family type, and children in families by family type. The LFS also collects information on household size, household types (living alone, multi-family) and people in different household types. In 2012 the ONS defined a family as “a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child – children may be dependant or non-dependant”. The report also differentiated between ‘opposite sex cohabiting couple’ and ‘same sex cohabiting couple’. Whilst the annual Labour Force Survey categorises stepfamilies within couple families, the census defines a stepfamily as a family “where there is a child (or children) who belong to only one member of the married or cohabiting couple” (Office for National Statistics, 2005).

In 2012, of the 18.2 million families in the UK, the major trends were: an increase in opposite sex cohabiting couples; an increase in lone parents and a decrease in married couples. In 1996 there were 1.5 million opposite sex cohabiting couples (with 0.9 million dependent children), and this figure has almost doubled in 2012 to 2.9 million (with 1.8 million dependent children). Similarly the number of lone parents with dependent children has increased from 1.6 million in 1996 to nearly 2.0 million in 2012, of which 91 per cent were women. Despite these increases the married couple family remains the norm, with over two thirds of families in the UK being identified as a married couple, with or without dependent children. The data also indicate that 62 per cent of dependent children live with a married/civil partnered couple family, 14 per cent live in a cohabiting couple family and 24 per cent live with a lone parent (Office for National Statistics, 2012b). UK households were defined as “a person living alone, or a group of people living at the same address who have the address as their main residence and either share one meal a day or share living accommodation (or both)” (ONS, 2012). Thus within this definition sharing a meal was a key component to establishing a household. Using this definition 26.4 million households in the UK were reported, of which 29 per cent were single occupant and almost 20 per cent were four or more people (ONS, 2012). It is interesting to note that whilst this definition reflected the 2001 Census definition, “one person living alone or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address with common housekeeping – that is,

sharing either a living room or sitting room or at least one meal a day", the 2011 Census updated the definition of a household to reflect social changes. This updated definition removed the criterion of sharing a meal, and replaced this with sharing cooking facilities, "a household is: one person living alone; or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room or sitting room or dining area". This link between sharing a meal/cooking facilities and the definition of a household reflects the importance of food in everyday life. Many definitions of a family have included the role of food, such as DeVault's frequently quoted statement which makes a clear connection between the role of eating together and being a family, "A family is not a naturally occurring collection of individuals; its reality is constructed from day to day, through activities like eating together" (DeVault, 1991, p. 15). Similarly Morgan (2008 cited in Jackson, 2009) argues that through an analysis of the social practices involved in 'feeding the family' (who prepares food for whom, on what occasions, where and when, and under what circumstances) research is likely to reveal the fluidity of contemporary family relations as well as the durability of some family practices and structures. And agreeing with this, Jackson (2009) notes that researching food and eating within the family provides a powerful lens through which to view family life (Jackson, 2009).

2.3 What is a meal?

Whilst much is written about food and eating in the family home, the actual definition of a 'meal' is essential to consider. Food and eating is a topic that crosses multiple disciplinary boundaries, with important contributions from anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, historians and health professionals, illustrating that meals vary historically, culturally and regionally and can convey a number of social codes and meanings. In a twenty year review of research, Mintz & Du Bois (2002) noted that the anthropological study of food and eating has a long history, focusing on topics such as food and social change, eating and ritual, and eating and identities. Within Britain, the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1972) was one of the earlier writers to consider what actually constitutes a meal. She suggested three types of meals – the main meal, the second meal and the third meal, which were each differentiated by the type of food eaten, such as savoury/sweet, hot/cold and liquid/dry. Thus in 1960s Britain, Douglas found that the main meal, often eaten in the middle of the day, was a hot savoury dish of meat with two (vegetable) sides. In contrast the second meal could be a cold sweet dish such as bread and jam eaten in the evening (but never as a main meal). Alongside this classification schedule for identifying different meals, she also suggested that food and eating reflected a number of social codes, such as

hierarchy, inclusion, exclusion, and boundaries (Douglas, 1972). For example, hierarchies were replicated by the serving of meat to the male 'breadwinner', with children served next and the women usually waiting until last to eat, and often going without (Murcott, 1997).

Developing on from Douglas's work, Anne Murcott was also interested in the social and cultural significance of food and eating (Murcott, 1982a). She explored food and eating, specifically the 'cooked dinner', in a working class community in South Wales in the late 1970s by interviewing 37 pregnant women, aged from 16 to 40 years old, from a cross-section of socio-economic groups, who were attending a health centre for antenatal care (Murcott, 1983). The women defined a 'proper meal' as being a cooked dinner comprising of meat, potatoes, vegetables and gravy, echoing the hot and savoury main meal described by Douglas. Additionally the women were clear that the proper meal was not 'fried' food or a 'snack', but had to involve proper preparation. Murcott was also interested in the symbolism linked to this daily meal and found that eating a proper cooked dinner was regarded as vital for the health and welfare of the family members. She noted that the husbands' preferences dictated the meal choices, and in this community, at this time period, the preparation of this meal became one of the women's most important responsibilities, alongside other domestic tasks. A key finding from this study was that for the women she spoke with, eating a 'proper meal' together represented being a 'proper family' and preparing a 'proper meal' represented being a 'proper housewife'. Murcott argued that the cooked dinner also had an important social function, controlling women by ensuring that they were spending their time in an activity (cooking) that was appropriate to their status and gender. For Murcott this control was reflected in the considerable social implications for women who did not cook a proper meal; who were regarded as having failed in their 'wifely' duties (Murcott, 1982a). Cooking for their husbands was regarded as a matter of marital justice and obligation, leading to feelings of guilt if they did not cook, and in extreme cases leading to marital violence (Ellis, 1983 cited in Murcott, 1983). Murcott primarily interviewed the women in the Welsh families she researched, although she noted that a few husbands/boyfriends and mothers also 'came in and out' and gave comment. The gendered nature of this research was due both to practical considerations, but also a reflection of the research paradigm on family life which in the 1980s was very mother and female focused. Murcott later called for more men to be included in research on the family to provide a multi-person perspective to family life (see for example Murcott, 2000).

More recent research has focused on how notions of the 'proper meal' have expanded to include a variety of foods, particularly alternatives to the potato, such as pasta, rice, noodles, couscous and lentils, "Nowadays a proper meal can also be a salad or a pasta, chilli or curry, as a result of the world having become a melting pot of different cultures" (Ekstrom & Jonsson, 2005, p. 4). Blake, Mellor, Crane & Osz (2009) in their comparative study of Hungarian and English meals, found both cultural differences and similarities in their respondents' meal structure. Whilst all the respondents agreed that a 'proper meal' was hot and cooked, the Hungarian families were more likely to eat a three course evening meal, starting with soup, then a meat dish or a meat stew, followed by cake and/or fruit. The pattern contrasted to the English families' discourse of the 'proper meal' reflecting Douglas's account of a meat and two sides (M. Blake, et al., 2009). Poulain (2002) explored the contemporary diet in France by observing lunchtime meals, conducting interviews and administering questionnaires of over 1,000 adults. He found contradictions between individuals' ideas of a 'proper meal' (defined as a starter, a main course, cheese and dessert) and their food practices. He argued that social changes, such as changes in family structure, abundant food supplies and the industrialisation of the food supply have combined to unsettle the control of food habits by traditional culture. His conclusion was that present day changes in eating habits reflect a shift in eating towards 'grazing' - that is continual small amounts of food/snacks throughout the day. However contemporary research in the US found support for Murcott's original findings. For example Beck (2007) videotaped 32 US families preparing their weeknight dinners (defined as the primary family meal usually served between 6 and 7pm) and found that almost all the observed meals contained at least one protein, one starch and one vegetable. Whilst this US pattern appears to reflect the 'proper meal' identified by Murcott (1982), the starch element consisted of a variety of foods, such as rice, pasta and noodles and the vegetable was a side dish or a green salad or both, which again differs from the findings from the Welsh women studied three decades earlier.

Shifting the focus of meal research, Rappoport, Downey & Huf-Corzine (2001) were interested in the relationship between the contents of meals and their social meanings. They asked 157 US undergraduates to describe their most recent morning, midday and evening meal and their *ideal* morning, midday and evening meal. The ideal question was used to establish a more representative picture of their general eating habits but arguably the respondents may simply have described a societal ideal, rather than their general eating habits. The study found important differences in the way that the three meals are

conceptualised – breakfast was the smallest meal of the day and most likely to be eaten alone or skipped, whereas the evening meal was considered to be the most important both nutritionally and in terms of its 'social-emotional significance' was regarded as the primary occasion for social interaction (Rappoport et al., 2001). This study reflects the temporal and social importance of the evening meal, alongside the meal content, which has important implications for family meal research.

What families are eating – the rise in convenience food

Since Murcott undertook her study in the early 1980s, food consumption has undergone a revolution, with dramatic transformations in what families are eating, where they are eating and when they are eating. These new patterns of consumption are often linked to a variety of social changes such as increased maternal employment, increased availability of ready-made meals and take-away food, increased disposable income and a rise in out-of-school activities for children. In relation to what families are eating in the UK, the most dramatic change over the last few decades has been the increase in convenience foods, defined as fully or partially prepared foods which significantly reduce the time, energy and culinary skills needed to produce meals (Capps et al., 1985). This categorisation includes items such as frozen foods, ready-made sauces, tinned foods and ready-meals. Convenience options generally provide less healthy diets, being higher in fat, salt and calories and lower in fruit, vegetables, fibre, calcium and iron, with many social commentators arguing that they contribute to the rising problem of obesity and other diet related health problems (Beck, 2007).

The UK has the highest rate of ready-meal consumption in Europe, with market research indicating that 77 per cent of British consumers use ready-meals, compared with 68 per cent in France and 35 per cent in Italy (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007). A report by the Institute of Grocery Distribution (2004) attributes this rise in ready-meal consumption to changing household composition (including more single-person households), the increasingly hectic lifestyles that couples and families adopt, and the increased focus on individual choice, "…as family eating increasingly revolves around other activities, eating alone and choosing meals to suit individual preferences will prevail" (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007, p.102). To counter the symbolic link between cooking homemade family meals and demonstrating love for your family (Parkin, 2006), the food industry has targeted busy mothers in their marketing campaigns, using the notions of love and caring (Cook, 2010). Thus advertising campaigns focused on the mother showing her family/children that she

loved them by giving them the (processed) food they wanted to eat (and by implication avoiding the homemade cooking of previous generations).

At the time of writing, February 2013, the UK and other European countries are experiencing another 'food scare' with the discovery of horsemeat DNA within many supermarket readymade beef products, such as beef lasagne and beef burgers. Previous UK food scares, such as the discovery of salmonella in eggs in 1988 and BSE in beef in 1996 influenced consumption patterns, reducing egg and beef consumption, although the impact was only temporary. Whilst the current horsemeat scandal will inevitably affect supermarket sales of ready meals ("Horsemeat scandal: Birds Eye withdraws UK ready meals", BBC online, 22nd February 2013) the longer term influence on UK ready meal consumption is harder to anticipate. Local news reports indicate a dramatic increase in local butchers' sales, and Peter Kendall, the National Farmers Union President, speaking on Radio 4, suggested that the current horsemeat scandal would create a 'paradigm shift' in UK food consumption patterns (BBC Radio 4, 27th February 2013).

Convenience foods began to appear in the UK in the 1930s, though the concept of 'ready-made' is a relative notion, as in the 19th Century many foods which have now become normalised as standard would have been considered 'ready-made' such as sausages and custard powder. During the 1930s there was a rapid decrease in domestic servants as many working class women moved from domestic service into factory work. This social change led to more housework for middle class women, who were helped by a rise in labour-saving devices and convenience foods (prepared in the new factories by the working class women). To reinforce this new middle class identity, new discourses of the 'ideal housewife' appeared in magazines – promoting the belief that it was possible to be beautiful and do your own cooking and cleaning (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007). After the austerity of the Second World War and the post-war ration era, there was a rapid expansion of convenience foods in the UK during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. In 1961 Batchelors launched the 'Vesta beef curry' processed meal (Beckett, 2002), the first McDonald hamburger chain restaurant opened in South London in 1974, and Golden Wonder launched the Pot Noodle in the UK in 1979 – the 'five minute meal in a pot'. By 2001, the market for ready-meals (both chilled and frozen) was estimated to be worth over £1.7 billion (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007); by 2011 this had increased to an estimated £1.85 billion, with a predicted growth to £2.71 billion between 2012 and 2016 (Key Note Ltd, 2012).

As indicated by the Institute of Grocery Distribution (2004) report, a key driver for these social changes was the increasing perception of 'time scarcity' which has had a large impact on the changing patterns of consumption and the amount of time spent in food preparation. Jabs and Devine (2006, p. 197) define time scarcity as "people's perceptions or feelings of not having enough time to do all they want or need to do in a day". The food industry responded to, and perhaps helped to create, these growing perceptions of time scarcity by building large scale food processing companies to provide consumers with labour saving products, such as frozen food and ready-meals, and also by building large supermarkets where it was possible to buy everything in one place. At the same time technological advances, such as freezers and microwaves, enabled food to be stored and reheated when needed. The widespread increase of microwave ownership has been a key development in the UK – in 1991, 55 per cent of UK households owned a microwave; by 2002 this had risen to over 85 per cent, compared with 27 per cent of Italian households (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007). Rossi (1997) suggests this trend reflects more traditional approaches to cooking in southern Europe, with less reliance on microwaves, and greater family participation in meals with every family member eating the same meal, rather than individualised microwaved meals (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007).

With regards to the time spent in food provisioning, the rise in convenience food consumption has altered both the time and arguably the cultural significance given to preparing, cooking and sharing 'healthy' family meals. Evidence for this shift in food provisioning time is reflected in time diary data. In the UK, Cheng, Olsen, Southerton & Warde (2007) found that the amount of time spent cooking by women had reduced from 100 minutes per day in 1975 to 58 minutes per day in 2000 (with a comparative increase for men from 11 minutes 1975 to 23 minutes in 2000). The time diary data from the US indicates even less time spent on meal preparation – in 1965 women spent 74 minutes per day, reducing to 41 minutes per day in 1995/1998, whilst men in 1965 reported 8 minutes per day, increasing to 18 minutes per day in 1995/1998 (Jabs & Devine, 2006). This difference is likely to reflect the earlier introduction of convenience foods into the US market (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007).

However the difference between homemade meals and convenience food is not a simple dichotomy, as many modern food practices involve elements of both. To explore contemporary patterns of food provisioning, Beck (2007) observed and videotaped 32 dual-

earner families preparing 64 dinners in the US, as part of the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELF) study. Importantly they choose to describe the foods as 'commercial foods' rather than 'convenience foods' as they found that convenience foods did not consistently reduce time inputs (challenging the assumption of time-saving food). They classified each dish prepared for dinner as either 'commercial' (made entirely from commercial food), 'modified commercial' (such as using a jar of pasta sauce), 'leftovers' (originally prepared at an earlier date) or 'raw ingredients' (when the dish was made entirely from scratch). Whilst this categorisation seems quite clear, the relative notion of commercial food had to be noted, with the research team clarifying that for the purpose of this study items such as dried pasta and yoghurt were not viewed as commercial foods. For the analysis the meals were further defined in relation to the amount of commercial foods used: 31 per cent of the dinners involved 'limited' commercial foods; 44 per cent involved 'some'; and 24 per cent involved 'extensive' commercial foods (Beck, 2007). Thus within this sample none of the dinners were categorised as being cooked entirely from 'scratch', which reflects a dramatic shift in food provisioning compared to the 'proper meal' identified in Murcott's Welsh study in the late 1970s.

Alongside the focus on the content of the dinners, the CELF study aimed to examine the amount of time invested in food preparation, which was carefully recorded in the videotaped observations. The analysis found that the average hands-on time (defined as when the cook was physically engaged in meal preparation) was 34 minutes, with the average total time to prepare (which included waiting times) being 52 minutes. There was little difference in preparation time between meals with limited commercial food and meals with some commercial food, and importantly whilst dinners with extensive use of commercial food did reduce 'hands-on' time, they did not reduce total meal preparation time (Beck, 2007). These findings support the research team's decision to avoid the term 'convenience food' as commercial foods did not consistently reduce time inputs. Bava, Jaeger & Park(2008) also explored food provisioning practices using a multiple-methods approach, including participant observation, interviews and diaries, with eleven New Zealand mothers. The study found that whilst the women preferred to provide a variety of healthy meals, there were key constraints which limited the women's food provisioning practices, such as time pressures, the unpredictable nature of life with young children, and their lack of cooking skills. Subsequently, the women identified convenience foods as a necessary 'trade-off' to accommodate the identified constraints (Bava, et al., 2008). These

findings reflect the powerful discourse within contemporary society that convenience food equates to quick food, despite evidence from time diary studies such as Beck (2007) that this is not always the case. As DeVault (1991) argued two decades ago, many of these convenience products simply sell the illusion of saving time.

Linked to the perception of time-scarcity, the rise in maternal employment is often used to explain changing patterns of family meal consumption, with social commentators suggesting that more women in the workforce has led to an increased reliance on convenience food. To explore this assumption, Allen, Shockley & Poteat (2008) investigated the relationship between workplace factors, family dinner frequency and fast food consumption using an online survey of 220 working parents (78 per cent mothers). Participants were asked a variety of questions including, 'how many times does your entire family have dinner together in a typical week?' 'how many times in a typical week do your children eat the dinner meal from a fast food, cafeteria or 'take out' restaurant?' and questions regarding paid employment hours, access to flexible working arrangements (both flextime and flexplace) and the availability of family supportive supervision. Multiple regression analysis found no relationship between: employment hours and family dinner frequency; employment hours and fast food consumption; flextime and family dinner frequency; and flextime or fast food consumption. In contrast the analysis did find that family supportive supervision was associated with more frequent family dinners and flexplace availability was associated with less fast food consumption (Allen, et al., 2008). The findings from this study illustrate the complex relationship between employment and family life and provide a cautionary note to reject simplistic links between increased maternal employment and changing patterns of consumption.

Where families are eating – solitary eating and television meals

Whilst eating at the table with the family is conceptualised as a normative family meal, as discussed below, changing patterns of consumption indicate more young people eat in alternative locations such as in front of the television (with or without other family members). Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson (2007), analysing data from a UNICEF funded project to establish and compare child well-being in OECD countries, found that the UK has the lowest proportion of children in all of Europe who regularly eat with their parents at the table. Sixty seven per cent of UK 15 year olds reported eating at the table several times a week with their parents, compared to 94 per cent of Italian 15 year olds. This statistic indicates that a third of UK 15 year olds eat in a different location – such as on

the sofa (alone or with family) or in their bedrooms. The report also noted that Italian young people had the best relationships with their families "by some margin" (Italy scored 15 points about the OECD average of 100, whilst the UK had the lowest score of over 22 points below the OECD average). However, while this association would seem to provide some evidence for the value of the family meal, it is important to note that the amount of time children spent eating with their parents was one of the two proxy indicators for the quality of family relationships (along with amount of time spent talking with their parents). Thus scoring highly on family meal frequency would inevitably provide a high score on the quality of family relationships.

Whilst the OECD survey did not record specific data on whom the young people were eating with away from the table, Mestdag (2005) found evidence of increased solitary eating in her Belgian study. She aimed to explore the changes in meal consumption between 1988 and 1999, using time diary data and questionnaires from 463 and 599 respondents respectively, focusing on three dimensions of the meal structure – the temporal, the social and the spatial. The data indicated that there was a decrease in the social dimensions of the meal with an increase in solitary eating. The analysis also indicated that eating at home had decreased in importance, with the spatial borders of eating becoming vague. Mestdag proposed that this increased tendency for solitary eating was a symptom of meal 'destructuration' with mealtimes becoming less structured than in previous generations with a perceived reduced emphasis on table manners and etiquette. She concluded that in Belgium, the family meal is on the decline, being replaced by 'one hand food', influenced by patterns in the United States. However whilst the data did report an increase in solitary eating this was most noticeable in the first eating event of the day (presumably breakfast) rather than the third eating event (presumably the evening meal), which reflected only a minimal change. Additionally whilst the data did indicate a decreased importance with eating in the home, the home still remains the most common place for an eating event.

A key factor influencing meal location would appear to be television viewing, with the assumed increase in people eating their meal sitting on the sofa watching the television. Over half a century ago, Hopkins (1963) argued that widespread television ownership in 1950s Britain 'broke the ritual of the family meal', indicating how the power and dominance of the television in British society was already apparent to some social

commentators. More recently, the Changing Plates (YouGov, 2009) market research also found that a notable percentage of British adults (36 per cent) reporting that they usually eat their main meal on the sofa in front of the television. This proportion of 'TV dinners' may be a reflection of how living spaces have changed, with many families living in open plan spaces, with a television in the main living area, and sometimes no dining table and chairs. Coon, Goldberg, Rogers & Tucker (2001) found that children who watched television regularly during their meal routine, were less likely to eat fruit and vegetables and more likely to eat pre-packaged food, such as frozen pizzas and snack foods. Similarly, Fitzpatrick, Edmunds & Dennison (2007), found that eating dinner together as a family increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, whilst watching television during mealtimes decreased the consumption of fruits and vegetables.

When families are eating – increase in 'grazing'

The final change in patterns of consumption to consider is the temporal dimension to family meals - when families are eating. Two decades ago, De Vault (1991) conceptualised eating habits as reflecting a pattern of 'grazing' in which individuals eat small snacks on the run throughout the day, in various locations, such as in the car or other transportation systems. Mestdag's (2005) time diary study, discussed above, explored the temporal dimension of the family meal and found that people were eating less frequently at 'traditional' meal times and more frequently in between (reflecting DeVault's idea of grazing). She also found that people spend less time devoted to eating and more time eating as a secondary activity. This pattern of consumption, of grazing and secondary eating, turns food and meals into a functional activity rather than a social experience and has considerable implications for the social benefits of family mealtime interactions. However despite these changes, the time diary data indicated that the three-meal pattern (breakfast, lunch and evening meal) remains the most common eating pattern (Mestdag 2005). Summarising the available data, Jackson, Olive & Smith (2009) conclude that whilst family eating has changed, with more snacking and grazing, there is no overall decline in the amount of time families spend eating.

2.4 What is a family meal?

Powerful claims are regularly made by the media and researchers regarding the importance of families eating together, "In the United States, as in other societies, the family dinner is viewed as an icon of the family and an ideal toward which contemporary families should strive" (Ochs, et al., 2010, p. 57). However despite the considerable research and public interest, the construct of 'family meal' has not been clearly operationalized by well-

established and widely accepted measures - a pattern reflected within many areas of family research (Copeland & White, 1991). Taking a simplistic approach, it is possible to break down the component parts to explore the evolving definitions of 'family' and a 'meal', but when adding these two constructs together, the construct of 'family meal' includes additional layers of meaning.

A noticeable focus in family meal research has been the emphasis on frequency, which in turn has served to shift research attention away from the other elements of the family meal, such as the 'who' (composition), 'where' (location), 'when' (time) and 'what' (content). In relation to the composition of a 'family meal' subtle discrepancies exist in the way questions are phrased. For example Allen, Shockley & Poteat (2008) stipulate the entire family eating dinner, "How many times does your entire family have dinner together in a typical week?" whereas the large scale Project EAT team ask about most of the family eating a meal, "How many times did all, or most of your family eat a meal together" (Fulkerson, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & Rydell, 2008). A third position is taken by Beck (2007) who asked about "home-cooked weeknight dinners prepared for everyone that was home for dinner that night". This question incorporates composition and content, but excludes location and only alludes to timing. An innovative study by Ochs et al (2010) explored the extent to which working parents and their children shared an evening meal, and provided a useful categorisation of the types of evening meals (by composition, location, timing and content). From their ethnographic observations of family dinnertime preparation and eating patterns across thirty dual-earner families, they categorised four types of meals – *unison* (all family members ate in the same location and at the same time), *partial unison* (at least one family member missing but the rest ate in the same location and at the same time), *fragmented* (different locations and/or different times) and *part-fragmented* (at least one family member missing and the remaining family members eating in different locations and/or different times). The study also categorised the content of the meals by the preparation method - *from scratch, from commercial foods* and *from modified commercial foods*. Thus Ochs et al (2010) were able to provide a detailed and comprehensive account of the varying types of meals eaten in the family home.

Whilst Jackson et al (2009) note the difficulties of defining a family meal, they conclude that the term generally refers to, "…members of the same (usually nuclear) family eating a meal together, sometimes in the presence of other (non-family) members of the same household" (Jackson et al., 2009, p.131). This definition, whilst noting composition,

provides no guidance to the other dimensions of the family meal, such as those identified by Ochs et al (2010). Future research on family meals must be aware of and strive to define the important dimensions of location, timing, composition, and content, both physical *and* emotional, to gain a more detailed understanding of food and eating in the family home in contemporary society.

Historically situated mealtimes

In order to explore current mealtime practices, including family meals, it is important to examine how mealtime patterns have changed over time. Whilst historians are able to suggest a historical picture of family life, it is important to acknowledge the methodological challenges of researching and knowing what occurred within the private homes of families, particularly poorer families. What is established is that major changes occurred in family living during the Industrial Revolution, which affected both working class and middle class families (Larson, Branscomb, & Wiley, 2006). Before this time working class farming families had lived, worked and eaten together throughout the day (Gillis, 1996). However when rural families moved away from farming the land collectively and into the urban areas to work in the factories, this pattern of family life changed. For the first time, family members worked away from the family during the day, and only returned to the family home to eat and sleep. Working class families of the 1800s and 1900s had little space to eat together around a table and so food was often left out for family members to eat when they could. As most families lived in extreme poverty, usually needing to feed several dependent children and elderly relatives, there was often not enough space to eat together, so young children usually sat on the floor to eat and parents sat at a small table, with the rest of the extended family then eating afterwards (Jackson, 2009).

In contrast, historians suggest the wealthier Victorian middle-class began to champion the social importance of family meals as a time of togetherness (Cinotto, 2006). Family meals became social events that reflected good manners and social status, reinforcing the central role of the family and clearly differentiating gender roles. Whilst the mealtime was seen to signify family cohesiveness and 'spiritual unity', children were only allowed to join the family meal once they were 8 or 9 years old. Affluent middle class families were able to reflect their wealth by having a dining table, laid with fine china, glasses and tureens. With the widespread development of clocks in the 1840s, punctuality was taught as a value, and so mealtimes developed a clear structure and schedule (Cinotto, 2006). At the beginning of the 20th Century, the family meal was promoted by social workers and nutritionists, to improve nutrition and child development and to strengthen families. This important

development promoted a clearly identifiable link between eating together and the strength of the family. Working class families were encouraged to follow the middle class approach and were told by social workers, doctors, nutritionists and teachers what a family mealtime should be like, with all family members sitting down and eating together, "In the early decades of the twentieth century, workers' families were systematically exposed to lessons in what a family mealtime should look like, the middle-class way" (Cinotto, 2006, p.24).

Exemplifying the multi-disciplinary nature of mealtime research, Thompson (1975) a social historian, conducted over four hundred life history interviews with men and women born between 1872 and 1906 to analyse the dimensions of social change in Edwardian family life. The interviews gathered data on a variety of topics such as work, leisure, religion, crime and education, and importantly also asked about food and eating in the family home. In a secondary analysis of the data, Jackson et al (2009) presented three family case studies to explore eating practices and family mealtimes, and found that domestic routines were heavily dependent on employment patterns, particularly paternal working lives. The women maintained the domestic responsibility, including feeding the family, and family mealtimes were venerated as a (middle-class) ideal but rarely attained in practice (Jackson et al., 2009).

During the Second World War, politicians politicised the family meal, as the glue which held the fundamental important institution of the family together, "Wartime propaganda insisted on the image of the proper family mealtime as a reassuring icon of social stability in a time of anxiety and turmoil" (Cinotto, 2006, p.28). In the United States, the Committee of Food Habits, established 1941-1943, argued that if families did not continue with their regular family meals during wartime, then the family unit may break down with children joining gangs and breaking away from parental control (Bentley, 2002 cited in Cinotto, 2006, p.28). From this directive it is possible to identify the politicisation of family meals with the proposed link between regular family meals and children's anti-social/high-risk behaviours. To reinforce this belief, political images of the family mealtime were used in American culture as exemplified by the 'Freedom from Want' picture, painted in 1943 by Norman Rodwell. The painting was commissioned to represent one of the 'four freedoms' outlined by President Roosevelt in 1941 and reflected the fundamental value of the family meal in American society. Thus it serves as a powerful illustration of the values conveyed by the traditional family mealtime during this period in American history (Cinotto, 2006).

Image 2.1: 'Freedom from Want' painted by Norman Rodwell (1943)

Unlike the images portrayed in the United States, the working class family in post-war Britain had limited food choices. Food was rarely bought and eaten outside of the family home (except fish and chips) and family meals often followed a clear format, with the same meals eaten on specific days, e.g. roast on a Sunday, leftover food on the Monday, and fish on a Friday (Jackson, 2009). During this period, the main meal remained the cooked midday meal. Crawford and Broadley's 1938 research interviewed 5,000 housewives and found that approximately half the husbands ate their midday meal at home. The research did not ask if they ate with their family; although they implied that the wives and children were also present (Crawford and Bradley, 1938, cited in Murcott, 1997). Despite these limited food choices in Britain, Government policy still prioritised the family meal. For example, in the British post-war building programme, regulations insisted that new builds must have enough space in the kitchen for the family to sit comfortably round a table (Murcott, 1997). As affluence increased in British society in the 1970s and 1980s, new food choices emerged, such as eating in restaurants, takeaway foods, and ready-made meals. Alongside these developments, employment patterns changed, with increasing maternal employment, more dual earner families and more evening and weekend employment hours. For many families the hot meal of the day, dinner, moved from midday to the evening, as people had further and longer to travel to work. By the end of the twentieth century, the availability of food in the family home and consumption patterns had changed considerably, although the power of the family meal 'ideal' remained evident in social and political discourses.

Family meal routines

Changes in food consumption patterns are often linked to a variety of social changes which are perceived to have made family life increasingly complex and time pressured. The appearance of phrases such as 'quality time' reflect the challenges that families face in trying to manage individual family members' demands within the context of complex and fast-paced temporal structures (Daly & Beaton, 2005, p. 245). As discussed in section 2.3.1 this change has led to perceptions of 'time scarcity' with many families feeling pressured to accommodate existing and often conflicting schedules within a given time frame:

> Families need more time to orchestrate and navigate members' often complex work and school schedules… and for many families, finding the time to be together as a family has become a challenge. (Daly & Beaton, 2005, p.241)

One way that families can attempt to balance these multifaceted demands is "through the organised practice of routine" (Fiese, 2006, p. 2). Routines can be defined as "...those observable, repetitive behaviours which involve two or more family members and which occur with predictable regularity in the on-going life of the family...the organisational units of ordinary life in families" (Boyce et al., 1983, p.194). Fiese, Foley & Spagnola (2006) suggest that eating routines enhance the quality of life and health for individuals and families by structuring daily life and providing predictability and stability. Routines typically involve instrumental and direct communication, a momentary time commitment, and behaviour that is repeated over time with no special meaning, contrasting with rituals that do convey more symbolic meaning (Fiese et al., 2002). Similarly Evans & Rodger (2008) defined routines as "the occupations that occur in the home on a daily basis and assist in organising time, providing structure to family life… characterised by communication aimed at conveying instrumental information and having instrumental goals". In contrast, rituals were a "symbolic form of communication, expressing family identity and defining the boundaries of the family unit, creating a sense of cohesion" (Evans & Rodger, 2008, p.98).

Whilst not all food and eating in the home can be regarded as a routine, many families do adopt a more routinized approach to food and eating, conceptualised as a family meal routine. These eating routines reflect what people have learned is appropriate, expected and desirable in their cultural and social contexts and incorporate what food is eaten, when it is eaten and how it is eaten (Jastran, Bisogni, Sobal, Blake & Devine, 2009). Jastran et al (2009) explored eating routines of forty two US adults, using 24-hr food diaries over seven

days. The participants commonly reported the goal of creating 'family meals', which often included routine (homemade) foods eaten in routine places (at home, usually around the table) and within a routine atmosphere (relaxed, with everyone happy and satisfied). This view clearly reflects the 'family meal ideal', although participants also noted the tension surrounding this everyday activity, which was somewhat alleviated by adopting eating routines, "Participants maintained purposeful routines that helped balance the tension between demands and values, but they modified routines as circumstances changed" (Jastran et al., 2009, p.127).

Adopting a different methodological approach, Evans & Rodger (2008) interviewed ten mothers to explore routines and rituals in daily life, focusing on mealtimes and bedtimes. In relation to mealtimes, four major themes emerged: the opportunity mealtimes provided to have quality family time (although fussy eating often increased stress levels); mealtimes were often pressurised by competing time demands from work and/or sport; the women had developed strategies to make mealtimes work (such as planning ahead and quick meals); and special meals contributed to a sense of family and emotional closeness (moving the meal from being a routine to a ritual). They concluded that routines were important for orchestrating the complex demands of family life, whereas rituals were important for contributing to the emotional fabric and well-being of families. An important finding from this study was that the day to day temporal demands on family life, with competing schedules and perceptions of time scarcity, forced most meals into becoming a routine instrumental part of the day, with the emotional closeness and family cohesion reserved for the occasional 'special' meal ritual.

From a review of family routines, Fiese (2006) identified several elements of routinized behaviour evident in family mealtimes, including seat assignment (who sits where), manners (expectations about manners and acceptable conduct), role assignment (who does what), and frequency of problem-solving/ conflict resolution communication. Ramey & Juliusson (1998) explored family meal communication in white middle class families with children aged between six and twelve years old and found over 50 per cent of the interactions were positive exchanges, 20 per cent related to family management issues and 10 per cent were meal related. More recently, Jastran et al (2009), identified four common characteristics of eating routines: they were embedded in work and family schedules; they reflected personal food choice values (such as enacting ethnic traditions); they were adaptable; and people were reflective about their routines and derived their identities

from them (Jastran et al., 2009). Whether family members choose to opt into an eating routine is often linked to the way individuals deal with the tensions between the demands they face on their time, the resources they have, and the cultural importance assigned to the family meal, "Collectively family members make decisions about the meaning and importance of family time that involve reading cultural cues… for example the importance of mealtimes" (Daly & Beaton, 2005, p.244). The extent to which family members make collective decisions varies from family to family, with individual family members having to deal with competing and sometimes conflicting demands and pressures on their time. According to this perspective, for mealtime routines to be successful, each family member has to agree to be home and available to share the meal. To accommodate these competing demands, families often develop routines that are a compromise between what is desirable and what is practical (Jastran, 2009).

Family meals with a teenager

As families move through different stages of the life course, they face new and different challenges in relation to food and eating – for example the challenges in feeding a new-born baby and then introducing solids are different from encouraging a toddler to have table manners and try new foods. When children become teenagers many researchers have indicated that family meal frequency declines with the assumed drive for independence and separation from the family group:

> At least three quarters of parents with a child under 10 made time for regular family activities including mealtimes… among parents of older children the proportion sharing family time at home and days out dropped reflecting the growing independence of children as they enter their teens.
>
> (Gilby, Hamlyn, Hanson, Romanou, & Mackey, 2008, p. 13)

The UK National Survey of Parents and Children (Gilby et al., 2008) found that 76 per cent of parents with a child aged 0-9 reported four or more family mealtimes per week compared with 74 per cent of parents with a young person aged 10-19. Thus whilst the above quote appears initially to provide evidence for a decline, on closer inspection the data indicates that there is only a small reduction in reported family meal frequency as children get older. Other studies have found a mixed picture in relation to family meal frequency and age, which is discussed further in Chapter 4. These divergent findings may be a reflection of the discrepancies within family meal research, particularly the operationalization of the 'family meal' concept and highlight the need for future research

to explore the various dimensions of the family meal (composition, location, timing and content) to obtain a rich and complex picture of family meal patterns amongst families with a teenager.

Alongside these age-related developmental changes in the family life course, parental employment often changes as children get older, with women in the UK more likely to return to part-time paid employment once children reach school age, compared with women in the US and many European countries who are predominantly in full-time employment. The National Survey of Parents and Children also collected data on parental employment in the UK and family meal frequency and found that non-working parents were more likely than working parents to make time for family mealtimes. The self-report questionnaires found that 83 per cent of non-working parents with children aged 10-19 reported regular family mealtimes (defined as four or more times a week), compared with 74 per cent of all parents. The report concluded that higher income parents had lower levels of participation in regular family mealtimes, reflecting "cash rich/time poor' lifestyles" (Gilby et al., 2008, p.15). This link between parental employment and perceptions of time scarcity links to the earlier discussion on changing patterns of consumption. Finding 'quality time' (unstressed, uninterrupted special time with children) is important for family well-being but it can be stressful for parents, particularly working parents. For working families with a teenager striving for independence and choosing to spend time away from the family group, mealtimes may provide one of the few opportunities for families to interact and spend time together. Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh (2007) interviewed 32 dual-earner families as part of the CELF (Center on Everyday Lives of Families) project, and also collected video recordings from the family homes. They found that 'quality time' was re-defined by their participants to involve everyday activities such as mealtimes which provided unplanned and unstructured opportunities for social interaction.

Gilby et al (2008) found that perceptions of time scarcity were particularly apparent amongst full-time working fathers with a young teenager (aged 11-14), although many parents reported lack of quality time with their children. However contrary to the assumption that parents are spending less time with their children, time use data from the US, UK and Canada, indicates that preadolescent children are actually spending more time with their parents in recent years (Daly & Beaton, 2005). Gauthier, Smeeding & Furstenberg (2004) analysed time-diary data from 16 countries, including the UK, and found that married fathers in full-time employment devoted 1.2 hours per day to childcare

in 2000, compared with just 0.4 hours in 1960. Similarly the data showed an increase of 1.1 hours a day for mothers in full-time employment and an increase of 1.3 hours a day for mothers who were not employed. This increase, regardless of employment status, indicates that time availability is not the only factor influencing time spent with their children, which the authors suggested may reflect a societal desire to invest more in children. Whilst there has been an increase in maternal employment, there has also been an accompanying increase in paternal involvement in family life, alongside a shift towards smaller families, and better educated older parents (Daly & Beaton, 2005). These societal changes have altered family life and family routines, with fathers taking on more roles within family life (although gender inequality within family life is still apparent, as discussed further in Chapter 3).

An important point to note is that whilst much research focuses on parental viewpoints, less attention is given to young people's voices. Using data from the US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort (NLSY97), Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling & Cleveland (2008) asked a large sample of adolescents (4671) aged 12-14 about the quality of the relationship with their parents. The adolescents were asked how much parental monitoring they had, how supportive their parents were, how strict their parents were, and the routine family activities they took part in (eating dinner with his/her family, taking part in a family religious activity, and doing a fun activity together). Additionally the self-report computer survey gathered data on delinquency behaviour and mental health and well-being. The study found that the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship mattered to both parties, whatever the age or gender, and the young people valued the relationship with both parents. These findings highlight the on-going importance of parenting during adolescence and challenge the assumption that young people need their parents less as they get older (Hair et al, 2008). Daly & Beaton (2005) argue that despite parental guilt, most children are relatively satisfied with time spent with their parents. This finding resonates with Fiese's (2006) assertion that research on family time should differentiate between *practising* family time (the directly observable aspects of time spent as a family) and *representing* family time (the symbolic nature of family time):

> The representational aspects of time spent together suggests that the affective residues of family life may not necessarily be measured in temporal units but rather in complex subjective responses. Family time may not always be equivalent to time spent in families'. (Fiese, 2006, p.260)

This representational aspect of family life focuses on how individual members create beliefs about and representations of what it means to be a member of a family, so even when stressed and hard-pushed for time individuals can make emotional connections that reduce the effects of stress. In contrast the practising element of family time provides a more objective measure of the time families spend together with little attention given to the symbolic nature of this time. Thus 'quality time' is not simply the amount of time family members spend together but is defined by an individual's subjective response to it.

Family meals in decline?

As introduced in Chapter 1, a powerful assumption within contemporary discourses is that family meals are on the decline. Family meals have repeatedly been presented as an area for concern within contemporary society, which Caplan (1997) argues is because the family meal has become a very powerful metaphor for the family. So if the family meal is perceived to be on the decline, the inevitable assumption is that family life is also in decline. However Murcott (1997, 2010, 2012) has strongly challenged this assumed decline, and questions the evidence upon which these claims are made. She argues that many social commentators have perpetuated an idealised myth of the family meal with little academic research to support this position. To establish a decline, one would need to have accurate data on frequency patterns in previous decades, but as there is little accurate historical data, many assumptions are made without being directly checked:

> If we are to take seriously claims that family meals are declining, then the search for evidence to support them will need, at a minimum, to separate reports of frequency from articulations of an idealised image (Murcott, 1997, p. 42)

Murcott (1997) notes that the family meal ideal promoted in contemporary society was not apparent in earlier periods with cultural class expectations dictating eating patterns. For example in the Victorian period upper-class children were expected to eat in the Nursery with their Nanny, not with their parents, and poor families lived in overcrowded house so had no space for a table. In working class families the wife was more like a servant than an equal and women often went without food to feed their husbands and their children (Littlejohn, 1963 cited in Murcott, 1997). Therefore access to food was gendered, which challenges the 'togetherness' assumed in the family meal ideal. Whilst social commentators and media headlines often position the decline of the family meal as a new moral panic, Lynd & Lynd (1929) record the existence of an established anxiety about the decline of the family meal to their 1920s research on Middletown, a small American town in Indiana, "Meal-time as family reunion time was taken for granted a generation ago...

there is arising a conscious effort to 'save meal-times, at least, for the family" (Lynd & Lynd 1929 cited in Murcott, 1997, p.32). More recent research has often based claims on the decline of the family meal on data from magazine surveys (such as Good Housekeeping) or market research companies commissioned with a specific remit (such as Birds Eye and Kelloggs as discussed in chapter 4). Data from these sources has questionable reliability as it is not subject to the same academic scrutiny as peer-reviewed research, with little attention given to the self-selected samples or the wording of questionnaires for example. Despite the continued assumption of the decline, some recent reputable surveys have actually reported an increase in meal frequency. The non-ministerial government department of the Food Standards Agency (2005) reported that the proportion of households sitting down together for a main meal at least once a day has increased to 71 per cent in 2005 from 67 per cent in 2004. Additionally cross-cultural evidence further indicates that family meals remain an important part of everyday life. Kjaernes (2001 cited in Warde, Shu-Li, Wendy, & Dale, 2007) analysed family meals in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) and found that family meals were a part of ordinary everyday eating and were valued as important symbols of shared family life.

Jackson (2009) in a summary of the Changing Families, Changing Food Programme, concludes that "The implication of a wholesale decline in family eating since the last century is based on questionable evidence and we should be cautious in attributing social significance to this perceived trend" (Jackson, 2009. p.4). Murcott (1997) contends that the discrepancy between the assumed reality and families day to day experiences reflects the tendency for one generation to always reflect back on times past as a 'golden age'. Thus each successive generation remembers family meals from the past with rose tinted spectacles, as a time when all the family happily came together (and tends to forget the more confrontational unhappier elements). This position provides support for the existence of a 'family meal ideal', which guides and controls behaviour and family life.

2.5 The 'family meal ideal'

A frequently quoted and popular book within the US is one written by Miriam Weinstein (2005) entitled "The Surprising Power of Family Meals: How Eating Together Makes Us Smarter, Stronger, Healthier and Happier". As the title indicates the book makes grand extensive claims about the power of family meals and their ability to enhance family life. As Ochs et al note, "…family meals are charged with exceptional predictive powers for children's well-being and, as a corollary, for sustaining the family as a stable unit" (Ochs et

al., 2010, p.58). They suggest that the idealised western notion of a 'family meal' is represented by food cooked from scratch and eaten in 'unison' (all family members happily eating in the same location and at the same time). Ochs et al (2010) conceptualised this idealised, optimistic notion as the "apple pie" view of healthy, home-cooked, daily family meals eaten together. This provides a contrast with the alternative, pessimistic "gloom and doom" view that family meals are no longer viable in busy contemporary life and have been replaced with individualised convenience food. James & Curtis (2011) found that family members demonstrated a strong commitment to the notion of 'proper' family meals and these cultural understandings of what a family 'should' do filtered through to family life and influenced their family 'displays'. From their study they found that ideas of 'proper' and 'improper' families permeated the individual narratives with parents believing that feeding the family well is a sign of good parenting . This belief is reflected in how researchers have used the family meal to represent other elements of family functioning. For example researchers have used the frequency of the family meal as an indicator of various outcomes *measures*, such as quality of family relationships, and family cohesiveness (UNICEF 2007, Pajer et al., 2008).

Evidence for the existence of this family meal 'ideal' is available from a variety of areas, including studies which have examined how 'the family' is represented in magazine advertisements and articles. Marshall, Davis, Hogg & Petersen (2012) explored how family life, including family meals, was presented in Good Housekeeping (UK) by looking back at advertisements from the 1950s through to 2010. They found that the articles and numerous adverts repeated images of the ideal family mealtime, celebrating traditional roles – husband in paid employment returning home to his family and traditional home cooked meal prepared by his perfectly manicured wife. Similar adverts appeared in the UK, with the 'Oxo family' eating together – again with the father returning home from employment and the mother serving the food. For many of the adverts the key message was that the mother was demonstrating her love and affection for her husband and her children by the food she served to them (Lupton, 1996, p. 38). Marshall et al (2012) argued that whilst the adverts perpetuated the family meal ideal, creating a clear directive for how families should behave, the articles were less idealistic and provided a more nuanced picture of what family life is like (Marshall, et al., 2012). However it is important to question whether such media images constructed or merely reflected a family meal ideology.

A lot of the current discourse around family meals begins with the assumption that the family meal is always a harmonious, happy experience for the family members (DeVault, 1991). Thus the family meal ideal creates the strong symbolic image of the perfect family, eating together healthy food and interacting with each other in a supportive and sociable manner (Lupton, 1996). However for some families, this mythical ideal is often a struggle to live up to with mealtimes often fraught with tension, (Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009; Vuchinich, 1999). Perpetuating this 'family meal ideal', media discussions tend to ignore the potential for meals to be full of tension and conflict, with parents modelling unhealthy eating behaviours, and subsequently children developing unhealthy eating habits (Larson, et al., 2006):

> Food and eating in the context of the family are not simply associated with the positive emotions…eating practices in the family are also characterised by struggles over power and all the attendant frustrations, unhappiness and hostility that go with this on the part of both parents and children. (Lupton, 1996, p.55)

Anxieties over healthy eating may prevent the mealtime from being a happy environment, with parents preoccupied with ensuring their children eat a healthy balanced meal, such as eating their vegetables. For example Horodynski and Arndt undertook a focus group to explore fathers' perceptions of mealtime behaviours with their toddlers and a key theme that emerged was the fathers' frustration with their toddlers' 'picky eating' (Horodynski & Arndt, 2005). Sometimes family meals may be characterised by tension, if children feel subjected to interrogation or criticism, particularly if mealtimes are one of the few times in the week that families spend time together and research also suggests that family meals can be key trigger points in family discord. Burgoyne and Clarke (1984) studied divorced and remarried couples in England and found that many of the conflicts and problems in their first marriage were centred around mealtimes; similarly Ellis (1983) notes that many incidences of domestic violence can be linked to mealtimes (cited in Lupton, 1996). Thus there is a significant gap between the idealised images of family life and family meals, and the realities of family life in practice (Jackson, 2009). An interesting idea from Wilk (2010), in relation to family conflict, is that the reason that ready-made convenience foods have become so popular is because they negate many of the potential arguments and conflicts at the dinner table and prevent 'food fighting'. The assumption is that ready-meals enable individual family members to eat individual meals of their choosing and thus not be restricted by the single home-cooked meal that may not be to everyone's taste.

The extent to which the family meal 'ideal' reflects contemporary family meal patterns is open to debate. However despite this complexity, the existence of this idealised notion may create within many families, particularly the women who remain primarily responsible for food provisioning, continual feelings of disappointment that they are unable to live up to societies' standards. Bugge and Almas (2006) in their research on Norwegian women's narratives found that food was not just about providing the family with healthy nutritious meals, but there was also an element of self-presentation. Thus food is very much tied up with identity, which for many women is about their identity as a 'good wife' and a 'good mother' (Bugge & Almas, 2006). Alongside this pressure to be a 'proper' housewife and a 'good mother', feeding the family has also been linked to caring and love, which creates a powerful social pressure for women to do the work, "The image of women and caring – doing for others – is powerful one. It signals a central element in our culture's sense of what a woman should be; it represents the appealing, wholesome best in womanliness" (De Vault, 1991, p.1). Smart (2007) argues that the uniqueness of personal experience is 'haunted' by the cultural imagery of the family, emphasising how families are powerfully controlled by ideals of how they 'should' behave. Similarly, DeVault (1991) discusses the complexity of meanings that many parents attached to the family meal, which resulted in her families often feeling disappointed that the mealtime did not meet with expectations.

2.6 Conclusion

Despite the considerable research and public interest in family meals, the construct of the 'family meal' has not been clearly operationalized by well-established and widely accepted measures - a pattern reflected within many areas of family research (Copeland & White, 1991). Taking a simplistic approach, it is possible to break down the component parts to explore the evolving definitions of 'family' and a 'meal', but when adding these two constructs together, the construct of 'family meal' includes additional layers of meaning. Families in contemporary society take on many forms, with increasing numbers of people living in step families, lone parent families and cohabiting couple families, which will inevitably affect the composition of a 'family meal'. In relation to the content of the meal food consumption has undergone a revolution, with dramatic transformations in what families are eating, where they are eating and when they are eating. These new patterns of consumption are often linked to a variety of social changes such as increased maternal employment, increased availability of ready-made meals and take-away food, increased disposable income and a rise in out of school activities for children. Any future research on family meals must be aware of and strive to define the important dimensions of location,

timing and content, both physical *and* emotional, along with composition, to gain a more detailed understanding of food and eating in the family home. Within this study the decision was made to avoid the ideologically laden term 'family meal' and instead allow each family to self-define their eating patterns and routines, by asking about 'food and eating in the family home'. By taking this approach it was possible to accommodate and explore the variety of eating patterns and routines within this small sample of families. The next chapter will now explore the different theoretical approaches to researching food and eating in the family home.

Chapter 3: Family Processes

3.1. Introduction

Having examined the concept of 'family meals' and explored the powerful ideology around the family meal 'ideal', this chapter will present an overview of the theoretical and methodological approaches used to explore family life, focusing specifically on the provisioning of food and meals within the family home. It will consider how the different theoretical approaches have attempted to conceptualise and research food and eating within families and will argue for a more combined psychosocial approach to further our knowledge and understanding. Whilst the concept of a 'family meal' should be used with caution, as discussed in Chapter 2, for the purposes of this study the 'family meal' will be conceptualised as the whole process of food provisioning, which includes deciding what to eat, shopping for food, preparing and cooking the food, eating the food and tidying up afterwards. Having outlined the different theoretical approaches to researching this topic, the chapter will then present a detailed overview of family process theory as defined by Kantor & Lehr (1975), which provides the theoretical framework within which my research is situated.

Historically, a variety of theoretical approaches to studying the interior of family life emerged in the 1970s, such as family systems theory, conflict theory and rational choice theory. These approaches differed in terms of their level of analyses, their assumptions about family life and the role of the individual within the family unit. For example, within family systems theory the assumption is made that it is impossible to understand family life without viewing the family as a whole, and so the focus of research is to understand the underlying structures necessary to achieve the goals of the system (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, White & Klein, 2008). In contrast, rational choice theory (Becker 1964), which emerged from utilitarian thinking, assumes that each family member seeks to maximise his or her individual self-interest, and thus the individual becomes the focus of analysis. The theories also differ in relation to the goals of their research. For example positivist family theories aim to explain and predict family phenomena and events, critical family theorists strive to emancipate and empower oppressed social groups, and interpretive family theorists aim to understand and empathise with family members (White & Klein, 2008). So in relation to research on food and eating, many of the psychological and medical research teams have sought to quantify and predict mealtime frequency, and correlate these mealtime frequencies with various health and psychological outcome measures, such as obesity and

high-risk behaviours (Eisenberg, et al., 2008; Gillman, et al., 2000). Thus the focus has been on the individual account. In contrast, sociological research on family meals has emphasised that family members are part of a social group, embedded in values shaped by gender, generation and culture (DeVault, 1991; Murcott, 1982a). The salience of gender norms is a recurring theme within this field, with feminist researchers indicating that women often have the dual burden of both paid employment outside the family home and the responsibility for feeding and housework within the family home, referred to by Hochschild (1989) as 'the second shift'.

These differing theoretical approaches are also evident in the language used to identify specific phenomena of interest. Whilst sociologists have traditionally explored family structures, since the 1980s there has been a noticeable interest in understanding the micro-level processes in families, conceptualised as 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996). This family practice approach combines both the actor and observer's perspectives, conveying a sense of the active, every day, regular nature of family interactions. In contrast to this 'family practices' focus, psychology has used the framework of 'family processes' to explore the intricacies of inner private lives (Day, 2010, p. 5). Family process theory aims to identify and conceptualise the variety of family interactions experienced in everyday family life and explore how these processes are transmitted through the generations (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Whilst these different perspectives utilise different concepts, such as practices and processes, there are clear similarities between these approaches.

3.2 Research focused on individual health and well-being

As mentioned above, much of the psychological and health research on family meals has focused on the individual level of analysis, and researched various outcome measures linked to family meal patterns. A key focus for these research teams has been the links between family meals and child health, with a particular interest in obesity. For example the psychologist, Barbara Fiese, has published widely on the links between mealtimes and child health and well-being (Fiese, et al., 2006; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Fiese et al., 2002). The multi-disciplinary Project EAT research team have also undertaken extensive research on the socio-environmental, personal and behavioural factors influencing eating habits of teens, with a focus on obesity, eating patterns and high-risk behaviours (Eisenberg, 2006; Fulkerson et al., 2006; Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Larson, Fulkerson, Eisenberg, & Story, 2010). In contrast to this extensive quantitative focus, there has been less research exploring the family meal routine from a more qualitative approach. One exception is Kime

(2008), a health promotion researcher, who focused on the family meal climate during the family meal, from a multi-generational perspective.

Fiese has researched the links between family meals and child health, with a particular focus on the routine and ritual element of the family meal (Fiese, et al., 2006; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Fiese, et al., 2002). Her recent work has explored the link between family meal frequency and family climate during shared meals, over the family life cycle. For families with an adolescent, Fiese believes that a key task for the family members is to both negotiate independence and 'stay connected' during this time. The shared meaning and investment in rituals by the family may provide the adolescent with a sense of belonging and so less likely to feel alienated and lonely (Fiese, 2006). Thus regular mealtimes may provide the opportunity for: problem solving, supportive communication, learning conflict-negotiation skills, showing care and concern, increased time spent in constructive activities, reduced time in risky activities, stronger sense of self, less overall anxiety, and overall lower levels of conflict. Fiese also proposes that the widely held assumption that family meals are in decline may be due to social changes, such as TV dinners, and also changes in employment patterns, such as parents having to juggle shift work (Fiese, 2006).

However this research from Fiese and colleagues does not specify a critical number of mealtimes to support healthy adolescent outcomes, and like the majority of mealtime research, this work is cross-sectional and therefore limited in its ability to determine causative influences. One possibility is that family mealtime interactions may simply be a marker for family organisation as a whole. Thus organisation and routine may be the underlying causal variable that links the family meal to adolescent and family well-being. Fiese & Schwartz (2008) acknowledge that the exact mechanism of effect between frequency of family mealtimes and health outcomes remains unclear, and hypothesises that parental presence and parental monitoring may play a central role in family mealtimes. They propose that future research needs to focus on the context of the family meal, to further our understanding of its potentially beneficial role to child and adolescent well-being, "Attention to what behaviours occur during a family meal and the setting in which meals are conducted provides a richer context in which to understand potential correlates of child adaption" (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008, p. 5). Their use of the term 'richer context' in the above quote suggests that they are moving towards trying to understand the 'meanings' of this family routine in a more qualitative manner. This recommendation links with this

current study's research aims of exploring the underlying family processes that occur during a family meal.

Alongside Fiese, another key group of researchers exploring family meals are the US-based research team, Project EAT (Eisenberg, 2006; Fulkerson, et al., 2008; Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2010). This multi-disciplinary research team was established to examine socio-environmental, personal and behavioural factors associated with dietary intake and weight-related issues in a diverse population of adolescents. The multi-disciplinary team including Neumark-Sztainer, an epidemiologist, Fulkerson, a psychologist, and Eisenberg, a paediatrician, used a range of methods including focus groups, interviews, postal surveys, telephone interviews and a longitudinal survey (with data collected five-years after the original data collection). The project found links between frequent family meals and dietary quality, lower use of extremely unhealthy weight control behaviours, and lower substance use. Their findings also indicated that there was a great diversity in the frequency and context of family meals in homes with an adolescent.

Despite the commendable range of methods adopted by this research team, as mentioned above, a key critique of their correlational data is that any associations found may simply be a marker of family organisation and/or family relationships. To address this concern the Project EAT research team statistically controlled for family connectedness and reported that the associations remained significant within their large sample. They concluded that family meals may have a value above and beyond family relationships and called for future research to identify the mechanisms underlying this protectiveness of family mealtimes in the lives of adolescents:

> While survey data allow for the associations between family meals and various outcomes, qualitative research, including in-home observations of family meals, has the potential to inform us about the intricacies of interactions between family members and details on how food is served, what foods are available, and what topics are discussed at meals. (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010, p. 1119)

Echoing the call from Fiese & Schwartz (2008), this research directive to focus on 'the intricacies of interactions between family members' within the family meal routine, is a move away from the more quantitative focus on correlational data, to a more qualitative focus on understanding the underlying family processes occurring within the family meal.

Many researchers have explored the links between family meal frequency and diet quality (Gillman, et al., 2000; Videon & Manning, 2003) which is perhaps a reflection of western societies on-going concerns around issues of obesity, particularly childhood obesity. Alongside this medical concern, some psychologists have explored other benefits of the family meal. Snow and Beals (2006) researched the types of conversations that occur during family meals and found that family meals provide specific opportunities for children's literacy development, for example using exploratory talk, or the co-construction of a narrative, or future talk. They concluded that children's exposure to different conversations during family meals predicted higher vocabulary and reading achievement when the children started school (Snow & Beals, 2006). Larson, Branscomb & Wiley (2006) have taken a more holistic approach, focusing on what happens during the family meal. Whilst they highlight the occurrence of healthier eating habits, they also acknowledge the family meal as providing a wider range of opportunities, including increased literacy skills, and the opportunities to learn and identify cultural traditions and meaning systems. They argue that the positive communications during the family meal reduce high risk behaviours and reduce emotional problems, and the simple enjoyment of eating can reinforce all the other positive experiences at the table. However, the extent to which this portrayal of the family meal environment is representative of many families' realities and perceptions is open to question.

Whilst there have been a number of quantitative research projects exploring the links between the family meal and various health and well-being outcome measures, there has been noticeably less qualitative research. Kime (2008), a health promotion researcher, explored the role of the family environment in maintaining and transmitting unhealthy eating patterns. This study reflects a welcome shift away from a focus on simple correlations to exploring individual perceptions of the mealtime environment. Using a grounded theory approach of Glaser & Strauss (1967), by which explanation and theory are fashioned directly from the emerging analysis of the data using the 'constant comparative method' (Mason, 1996), Kime (2008) used focus groups and in-depth interviews from three generations of families. By adopting this mixed methods approach she was able to engage with multiple family members, both individually and in group settings, increasing the richness of her data. She concluded that it was the ordering of eating (how, where, when and with whom) that affected children's eating behaviours, and recommended that healthy eating policies should be re-focused on the family environment (Kime, 2008). Blake et al (2008) also used qualitative interviews to explore from a health perspective how people

cognitively construct evening meals. The aim of the research was to gain insights into the social and behavioural processes that are used in food choices, to provide a greater understanding of individuals' food choices and dietary intake. Using a grounded theory approach, eight different kinds of scripts emerged from the analysis, including 'provider' 'family cook' 'head of the table' ''egalitarian' 'struggler' 'just eat' 'anything goes' and 'entertainer'. Blake et al (2008) concluded that identifying these different scripts would provide researchers with a better understanding of ways to intervene and promote healthier food choices.

From the research presented it can be seen that a key emphasis for psychological and medical family meal researchers has been quantitative methodologies identifying correlates and outcomes measures in relation to family meal frequency. Whilst psychologists and health professionals have focused on key areas, such as childhood obesity and high risk behaviours, it is evident in their conclusions that future research needs to adopt a more qualitative approach to explore and understand the underlying mechanisms/ family processes that are occurring during these mealtime routines. Subsequently this study aimed to address these specific recommendations.

3.3 Research focused on gender, identity and culture

In contrast to the psychological/medical focus on the individual account, the key sociological researchers on family meals have focused on the family group, exploring cross-cutting themes such as gender and culture. Within the sociological literature, the analysis of the family is pervaded by two key themes. One view regards the family as a positive force, nurturing and supporting its members and providing intimacy whilst the opposing view regards the family as a negative source of oppression, characterised by conflict and control, and reinforcing power differentials. In relation to the family meal, for some researchers, the focus is on how the family meal articulates the identity of the 'family' and the 'home', whilst other researchers might emphasise the gender roles, identities and power relations between family members (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Early sociological interest focused on the 'function' of the family, that is what does the family need and what role does it fulfil in society? Thus the family meal was studied in relation to its function. Gabb (2008) notes this shift in emphasis from ideas of 'the family' as a structuring unitary social unit, towards understanding it as diverse relational networks that are constituted through everyday practices of intimacy. This altered emphasis is reflected in Morgan's work on 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996), which focuses on the variety of ways that 'family'

is created through sets of caring and intimate relationships (not just defined by biological ties), "Family practices are to do with those relationships and activities that are constructed as being to do with family matters" (Morgan, 1996, p.192). Thus, for Morgan, the family meal routine is a set of family practices which define and create the family unit. Other key sociological studies include Backett's (1982) study on family processes, Murcott's (1982) study on the 'cooked dinner', Charles & Kerr's (1988) research on women and food, and DeVault's (1991) study on feeding the family.

One of the earliest studies on family processes was undertaken in the early 1970s by Backett (1982) in her study entitled 'Mothers and fathers'. Her research aimed to adopt an interactionist approach to explore the everyday experiences of parenthood and family life in a group of twenty-two middle class couples in Scotland. A key element for Backett's research was to take a multi-person perspective, interviewing fathers as well as mothers, over a series of five interviews. Whilst not specifically focusing on family meals, her research explored how parents negotiate all aspects of family life, including mealtimes and childcare. Backett concluded that the findings from the study indicated the continued dominance of the 'mother role' in the lives of women, regardless of whether the women were in full-time paid employment or not. Thus in her study the mothers were responsible for childcare - fathers were more involved but still in a peripheral supporting manner, more as willing helpers than equal parents. Importantly Backett's data also emphasised the bi-directional model of parent-child relationships which highlights the interactive nature of the socialisation process and acknowledges both the child and parent's needs (Backett, 1982). A key strength of her study was that she interviewed mothers and fathers, rather than accepting the default position of 'parent' as 'mother' and she also acknowledged the bi-directional nature of parent-child relationships.

During the same time period, Murcott (1982) was undertaking her research on food and eating in a working class community in South Wales. As discussed in Chapter 2, her key finding was the importance of the cooked dinner for her respondents, with the regular home cooked dinner being regarded as vital for the health and welfare of family members. She also explored issues of gender, power and control concluding that the cooked dinner had an important social function, controlling women by ensuring that they were spending their time in an activity (cooking) that was appropriate to their status and gender. However whilst men were sometimes present during the interviews, Murcott was primarily interested in the women's accounts and did not directly seek input from the fathers and

sons. Thus her study was reliant on the maternal account, and thus only able to present a partial view on family life.

Charles & Kerr (1988) also choose to focus on women in their large-scale study on 'Women, food and families', in the North of England, in which they examined a range of issues related to food practices. They carried out semi-structured interviews with two hundred women with pre-school children, and the participants also completed food and drink diaries for a two-week period. As with Murcott's (1982) study, Charles & Kerr (1988) found that the women had the main responsibility for buying, preparing and serving food, and the 'proper meal' was construed as fundamental to the identity of the family and to its well-being. A key point was that for these women, the 'proper meal' became an indicator of a 'proper family' and so the role of this 'proper meal' was to produce 'home' and 'family'. Charles & Kerr also found that the provision of a proper meal was a means to show affection, that is that cooking a proper meal for their partners was a way of articulating love and affection for them (Charles & Kerr, 1988), a theme regularly reflected in media and advertising campaigns (Cook, 2010). A key interest for Charles & Kerr was the extent to which food practices symbolised social relations and divisions, and reinforced and reproduced these on a daily basis, "Food is important to the social reproduction of the family in both its nuclear and extended forms and food practices help to maintain and reinforce a coherent ideology of the family throughout the social structure" (Charles & Kerr, 1988, p. 17). For example the study monitored what the families were eating and concluded that the different consumption patterns reflected the status and power hierarchy within the patriarchal nuclear family, with the men eating more of the higher-status foods such as red meat. However it must be recognised that the children may have been actively choosing the lower-status foods (such as chips) and, similarly, the women may have been actively choosing to restrict their food intake due to concerns over weight and body image.

In relation to food preparation and cooking, when the men did cook or help in the kitchen it was generally regarded as a 'treat' (Charles & Kerr, 1988). They found that men's cooking often involved making a fuss about special recipes, or using a special gadget, or emphasising the difficulties in what they were cooking. Thus their meal became a special event rather than a routine meal. Since these key studies in the 1980s there has been a noticeable increase in men cooking, arguably due to the rising profile of celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey. However there remains a gendered relation between

what men cook and their interest (Ekstrom & Jonsson, 2005). Ekstrom & Jonsson (2005) argued that generally men cook if they are interested in cooking, with few men cooking if they do not like cooking, whereas women often have to cook regardless of their preferences. Caplan (1997) also suggests that there is a difference in the type of meals that men cook, with women generally cooking the routine day to day meals, and men choosing to cook the meals considered more appropriate for men: summer barbeques, Sunday breakfast and exotic specialities (Caplan 1997, p.9).

Murcott's and Charles & Kerr's focus on women for their research, arguably reflects the heavily gendered nature of food provisioning within Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, and highlights the extent to which research findings should be contextualised in relation to time and culture. In contrast to this female dominated research, DeVault (1991) spoke with women *and* men in her US research project exploring the everyday practices of feeding in the late 1980s. However her study, entitled 'feeding the family' retained a distinct gender imbalance as she interviewed thirty women and only three men in thirty households in Chicago. Despite this her attempts to include men in the study is commendable and influenced this present studies focus on recruiting both mothers *and* fathers into the study. For DeVault the aim of these interviews was to, 'explore with the individuals the contours of 'ordinary' experience in a range of household settings' (1991, p.28). From her interviews she identified several key features: parents' own childhood family meal experiences informed their own feeding practices; ideas about mealtimes often reflected idealised versions of family life; the evening meal routine was important for 'producing a family' and bringing the separate family lives together; sharing these meals established a shared culture, but not all members shared these family goals; for lower income families eating together, the same meal at the same time, was as much an economic necessity; whilst family meals were linked to creating a group identity they were also important for recognising the individuality of family members; difficulties with scheduling family meals led to feelings of frustration; and feeding and cooking for a family was hard work but also a way to demonstrate care and love (DeVault, 1991). A key strength of this research was that DeVault sought to interview both men and women in her sample, to try and gain multiple accounts of family life. However she did not seek the accounts from multiple family members, such as young people or grandparents, and thus was only able to present a partial account. Recently, Gabb (2008) argued that research needs to utilise more intergenerational research to explore family processes, along with an increase in mixed methods approaches to produce multi-layered cross-generational accounts of family life.

For Gabb (2008) her 'behind closed doors' project using a combination of mixed methods with multiple family members, "…produced a dynamic account of everyday intimacy and affective practices in families…producing a multidimensional picture of the complexities of family relationships" (Gabb, 2008, p. 61). This call for intergenerational mixed methods research, heavily influenced the research design of this study – both in relation to the participants recruited and the methods used.

A more recent inter-disciplinary research programme was the 'Changing Families, Changing Food' programme, co-ordinated by Peter Jackson, a human geographer. This programme aimed to explore the connection between families and food, focusing on both the relationships within the family as well as the place of the family in a wide range of social contexts. The assumption was that eating practices provide a powerful lens through which to examine contemporary family life (Jackson, 2009) and this assumption is prevalent throughout the analysis of this study. The programme used a welcome variety of data sources including social surveys, data sets, life histories, cohort studies, in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnographic accounts and participant research. One of the three strands of the programme was 'childhood and family life', and a key finding was that contemporary concerns within the media about the decline of the family meal may be over-simplified. Their findings were that there was not an overall decline in the amount of time families spend eating in the home, but the timing of meals has changed, with a move away from three meals a day at set times. The responsibility of feeding the family remained a highly gendered practice with women doing the majority of the feeding work, although men were cooking more (but mostly on special occasions). They also found that the 'proper' family meal, cooked from scratch, is still a widely-shared aspiration (reflected by Murcott 1982, Charles & Kerr 1988), though not always achieved. As Gillis (1996) notes, we all have two families, 'the families we live *with* and the families we live *by*' emphasising the difference between our realities and our aspirations. Thus whilst many families might aspire to the 'traditional' family meal routine, with all the family sitting around the table, the reality may be harder to achieve, with contemporary schedules and employment patterns. Despite the commendable use of a large variety of methods, the study did not conceptualise or examine the dimensions of a 'family meal'. Thus the research team did not acknowledge that family meals may vary between families in relation to composition, timing, location and content. This lack of conceptualisation of the 'family meal' is an important critique of this current research programme which needs to be carefully addressed in any future research on family meals.

3.4 Research focused on meal time routines and rituals

Another body of research has explored the importance of the mealtime routine and ritual in family life, focusing on the extent to which family routines and rituals promote health and well-being, maintain family stability, affirm family identity and protect family life during times of stress. For contemporary family life, with perceptions of time scarcity and young people's engagement with digital technologies, mealtimes may provide one of the few opportunities for families to interact on a regular basis. Spagnola & Fiese (2007) suggest that by engaging in family routines and rituals children are able to develop a variety of skills which are associated with various developmental outcomes and link with later academic achievement, "...variations in the practice of family routines and the meanings connected to family rituals are associated with variations in socio emotional, language, academic and social skill development" (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007, p.284). Routines and rituals can also contribute to the emotional climate of daily family life, by maintaining the predictable order and structure that guides behaviour (Gillis, 1996) and by supporting parental efficacy (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Spagnola & Fiese (2007) propose that regular routines make parents feel more competent, and competent parents have healthier children with better regulated behaviour, making the children more responsive and easier to parent, resulting in parents feeling even more competent (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). However many routines and rituals, such as mealtimes, require cooperation in planning and coordinating, with successful implementation reflecting a family's organisation and solidarity. According to Boyce et al (1983):

> Through the structure of routines, families create a social reality in which the stability and continuity of their collective life is affirmed and maintained. Routines become ritual, transformed into meaningful symbols of family identity, and rituals become powerful signs that the world is sensible and good (p.198).

Thus routines help provide order in the daily rhythms of life, leading to sense of comfort for individual family members (Day, 2010). This strong sense of family identity is linked to psychological adjustment and is regarded as very important for the psychological health and well-being of the family members. A seminal study on rituals by Wolin & Bennett (1984), found that ritual contributes to the establishment and preservation of a family's collective sense of itself, the 'family identity', giving all members a shared sense of belonging. Similarly, Boyce et al (1983) argued that routines have "symbolic meaning for the family"' and periodically re-confirm their identity and solidarity as a family (Boyce et al.,

1983, p.198). The assumption is that routines and rituals stabilise family identity throughout the family life cycle by clarifying expected roles, delineating boundaries within the family, and defining rules so that all members have a collective affirmation of their identity as a family (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). The symbolic nature of routines and rituals also fosters this sense of belonging by promoting feelings of group membership, and feelings of closeness and belonging. These early assumptions have been supported by Segrin and Flora (2005), who note the symbolic importance of rituals and routines to the family's well-being, suggesting that they fulfil a number of roles, such as being a mechanism of tension management, clearly differentiating who is 'in' the family group and who is an 'outsider', transmitting family culture from one generation to the next and marking time by producing symbolically meaningful memories of family events (Segrin & Flora, 2005),

> Through participation in everyday food-related routines and social interactions as both active participants and observers, children are socialised to cultural and class-specific orientations toward health and eating practices, as well as related notions of morality, responsibility, individualism, success, and what it means to be a family (Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009, p.185)

This transmission of culture is particularly apparent in migrant communities, with mealtime rituals being a key mechanism for preserving tradition and helping families adjust to a new life (Pleck, 2000), "In today's multicultural societies there are people of various cultural origins whose family meals are an everyday or every-other-day means of identification of their own group and self" (Ekstrom & Jonsson, 2005, p. 8). However, in her research on migrant women in Northern Europe, Brembeck (2010) noted that whilst immigrant women tried to give children their original cultural identity with the help of food, second-generation migrants in Sweden had rejected their family rituals, in a desire to integrate more within the new culture. Whilst the aims of this current study were not directly addressing issues of culture, the interviews with the family members explored the extent to which food was linked to their family identity.

Alongside the value of affirming family identity and maintaining family stability, routines and rituals are also key mechanisms in protecting families in times of stress and instability. Thus whilst routines and rituals help families create healthy emotional ties they also play an important role in enabling families to negotiate stressful life events, such as family membership change (occurring through divorce, remarriage or bereavement) "Family

routinization appears to be one of the important behavioural resources through which the stress of life change is absorbed...” (Boyce et al., 1983, p.198). Family routines and rituals can help families attain important family process goals, such as unity, closeness, intimacy, meaning and membership change during times of stress (Dickstein, 2002, p.441). For example, research suggests that adolescents in remarried households are more satisfied with family life when there are regular routines and rituals indicating that these routines and rituals may help buffer potential stress and chaos during transitions inside the family (Henry & Lovelace, 1995). Whilst stress is often noted by the disruption of family routines, one must be careful about the causal assumptions as routine families may reflect other characteristics, such as lower levels of conflict. Researchers have been particularly interested in the role of routines and rituals during parental divorce and with families with parental alcoholism. Hetherington et al (1978) argued that maintaining routines may foster children’s adaptation post-divorce, as routines and rituals support the basic human tendency to search for order during times of uncertainty. Similarly Wolin & Bennett (1984) found that children living with parental alcoholism were protected by maintaining family rituals. Thus, “Rituals have the capacity to bring stability and meaning, especially when children are vulnerable to other chaotic experiences outside the family” (Segrin & Flora, 2010, p.63). The reason for this protective nature of routines and rituals may be that in times of family stress, rituals provide a sense of order and predictability in life (Gillis, 1996) and may remind the family of important symbolic meanings or bring new meaning at a time when the family is vulnerable to the loss or confusion of meaning (Segrin & Flora, 2010, p.62). With an awareness of this research, this present study aimed to explore the extent to which food and eating patterns within each family group were routinized and reflected specific family rituals.

3.5 Family process research

As outlined above, researchers have explored the interior of family life, and specifically food and eating, from a variety of theoretical traditions. Each approach has utilised a different level of analysis, and whilst it is not possible to make firm distinctions, generally the psychological and medical research has focused on individual health and well-being, whilst the sociological research has focused more widely on the family unit and wider cultural influences. Arguably, future research that is able to integrate and combine the knowledge and understanding from these differing theoretical positions is best placed to fully understand the complexities and intricacies of daily family life. As Fiese (2006) notes, “A resolvable tension in the study of families is how to integrate the strivings and

perceptions of the individual into the communal boundaries of the group" (Fiese, 2006, p4). Recently, researchers such as Kime (2008) have attempted to bridge this theoretical gap, by exploring individual perspectives within the family 'whole'. Similarly, Becher (2008) added a more psychosocial understanding to Morgan's sociological family practices by focusing on how individuals within a family describe and interpret their family practices. Larson et al (2006) supports this inter-disciplinary approach, arguing that scholars in different disciplines have been studying the family meal, but in disciplinary isolation. He contends that to understand family meals, researchers need to uncover the symbolic processes involved in these interactions. Larson et al (2006) argue, when evaluating the role of family meals in family life, a key challenge is to be able to conceptualise the processes that occur during the family meal. This research team also notes that research must regard family processes as on-going processes, not simply discrete events, and to recognise the variety of forms mealtimes take across the diversity of contemporary families.

To address this gap, this current study adopted a theoretical framework of family process theory to understand the meanings of these mealtime interactions. This study was sensitised to family processes, such as establishing and maintaining intimacy, communicating, dealing with conflict, decision making, problem solving, setting and maintaining boundaries and negotiating differentiation. Of these key family processes, communication is one of the central family processes evident in mealtime interactions. Researchers are interested in the origin, intensity and direction of family communication, focusing on how meaning is created and managed and suggest that four fundamental family communication processes dominate much of family interactions – establishing/wielding power, making everyday decisions, dealing with conflicts, and building or maintaining intimacy (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Each family member communicates at the dinner table, both verbally and non-verbally - even by remaining silent, as this can convey multiple meanings. Effective communication is linked with family strength and young people's life satisfaction (Levin et al., 2012) and researchers have identified various types of communication/talk, including 'small talk', 'search talk' and 'straight talk', which can all build stronger relationships, by establishing trust and bonds of connection. However the use of 'control talk', such as interrupting, changing the subject, correcting, lecturing, exaggerating, using sarcasm, distancing yourself and playing the martyr, can have the opposite effect and damage relationships (Segrin & Flora, 2005). An early psychological study on family interactions was conducted by Dreyer & Dreyer (1972) who observed family mealtimes to study environmental factors associated with the

development of cognitive style in children. They were sensitised to a variety of factors including interruption rates as indicators of control behaviour, and compared the behaviour of ‘field-dependent’ and ‘field-independent’ children (defined as the extent to which the children were influenced by context). They found that field –independent children were less successful at interrupting the flow of another person’s speech, than field-dependent children and hypothesised that field-dependent children were more sensitive to social situations (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1972).

A final family process to consider, in more detail, is dealing with conflict. Vuchinich (1999) recorded sixty-four family dinners to explore how ‘non-distressed’ families deal with conflict, and adopted a grounded theory approach to explore his data. Vuchinich choose the family dinner as an ecologically valid home setting, which regularly brings several family members together around a table, and thus practically enabled ease of recording quality (he did acknowledge that not all families eat together regularly around a table). From his research he identified three principles from his mealtime observations. Firstly, that family problems are social constructions, which are actively created, sustained and promoted by the family. Secondly, that the solutions to family problems must fit and adjust the system, so the family needs to refocus on what good solutions are and how to attain them. And thirdly that family rituals structure the emergence and solution of family problems, so within the family meal context, the ritualistic elements of the mealtime provide family members with both meaning and regular opportunities to make connections with each other.

3.6 Family Paradigms

Drawing on a systems approach, Day (2010) differentiates between two levels of functioning in family processes: first order processes (which can be identified as specific and concrete ways of behaving and organising family life) and second order processes (which can be identified as highly abstract schemata, incorporating beliefs, values and viewpoints, and are rarely discussed). These schemata emerge from ‘training’, observing family interactions, exposure to family of origin, and from our own experiences and others. They are formed deliberately as we make decisions about the meaning of family and family life, and are shaped by the processes of assimilation and accommodation. When individual ideological schemata’s’ are shared by family members they become a family paradigm:

> A family paradigm (or deeply held family ideology) is the shared, enduring, fundamental, and general assumptions or beliefs to which family members

> subscribe about the nature and meaning of life, what is important, and how to cope with the world they live in (Reiss, 1981, p. 143)

Reiss (1981) identifies four family paradigms – consensus sensitive, distance sensitive, environment sensitive and achievement sensitive (analogous with Kantor & Lehr's closed, random and open families). Broderick (1993) suggests three styles of family governance – the competitive paradigm (individual needs), the policy-governed cooperative paradigm (policies transcend individual will) and the principled interaction paradigm (based on principles of mutual respect, empathy and equity). Paradigms are rarely explicit or conscious in families, but influence how families organise their lives. These second order family processes are by definition, more difficult to identify, yet are central to a families' identity and goal achievement, "This deeply held ideological core is so pervasive and powerful that it becomes a template for the actions, decisions and strategies families use to attain goals" (Day, 2010, p. 144). When individuals meet and create a new family, both individuals bring their own family of origin paradigms, which need to be assimilated and accommodated into their new family paradigm. Thus any exploration of family processes within mealtime routines needs to consider the family paradigms the parents bring into the family from their childhood experiences of food and eating.

In everyday life, family paradigms provide a sense of meaning and order, with little additional thought needed, however during a family crisis, family members rely on paradigms to guide behaviour and under stress often exaggerate the family ideologies (known as the exaggeration principle). In such a situation, deeply held family ideologies can either support or hinder a family's ability to achieve their goals. The process by which paradigms are transmitted through the generations has been identified as the 'generational transmission principle' (Day, 2010). With regards to what patterns are transmitted, Day (2010) suggests that both loving and destructive patterns can be passed down the generations. Due to the hidden nature of many family processes, these intergenerational transmissions often remain hidden and thus the destructive, conflictual processes are able to be perpetuated.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the key theoretical approaches used to explore food and eating within families. It has identified the different levels of analysis that research has adopted, from the medical and psychological research teams focusing on individual health and well-being to sociological research exploring issues such as gender

and culture within mealtime interactions. Drawing on this body of work, the present study adopts a family process framework within which to address the research aims of exploring the underlying family processes that occur during a family meal.

Chapter 4: Family Meal Patterns

4.1 Introduction

Many claims are made about the changing nature of family meals, including the assertion that family meals are in decline, with fewer families regularly eating together a home-cooked meal. However the available data on family meal patterns provides a more nuanced picture (Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Fulkerson, & Larson, 2013). Whilst the previous chapters examined the concept of a 'family meal' and presented the different theoretical approaches to exploring food and eating in the family home, this chapter will critically evaluate the patterns of contemporary family meals identified in national and international research and present the research evidence which suggests links between regular family meals and adolescent health and well-being. The chapter will conclude with a consideration of an emerging body of qualitative and mixed methods research that aims to explore the divergent experiences of food and eating within the family home.

4.2 Family meal patterns

Contemporary family meal patterns have been measured using large scale national surveys (such as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England 2004, the National Survey of Parents and Children 2008, and the Growing up in Scotland 2008) along with market research data, commissioned by commercial companies such as Birds Eye and Kelloggs (YouGov, 2009, Future Foundation, 2008). Whilst the majority of data on family meal patterns has emerged from US samples, more recently International and UK research has also collected information on eating behaviours, primarily in response to concerns around unhealthy diets and obesity levels. Such research has investigated the relationship between family meal patterns and other demographic variables such as age, gender, parental employment and family structure. Additionally some studies have explored other dimensions of the contemporary family meal such as where people are eating, who they are eating with, what they are eating and when they are eating (Ochs et al., 2010).

The available data on family meal frequency from large-scale studies, both national and international, reflects a complex picture. The most prevalent frequency pattern is 42 to 48 per cent of a sample reporting daily family meals, with 57 to 75 per cent of young people (or their parents) reporting five or more family meals per week (see tables 1-3). Whilst it is difficult to establish if family meal frequency is on the decline without accurate historical records, the available statistics would indicate that a large proportion of young people eat

a regular family meal – defined as five or more times per week (LSYPE 2004, National Survey of Parents and Children 2008, Currie et al., 2008, Growing up in Scotland, 2008, CASA, 2012, Project EAT, 1999-, Taveras et al., 2005, Videon & Manning, 2003, Davidson & Gauthier, 2010, Huntley, 2008). However the statistics also suggest that a sizeable minority of young people do not eat a regular family meal (Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2013). The data also indicates that family meal frequency decreases with age, with older adolescents less likely to eat with their family, and this pattern is more common amongst girls (Currie, Levin & Todd, 2008). The data on parental employment reflects a mixed picture, with some studies indicating that maternal employment reduces family meal frequency and other studies finding no association (Davidson & Gauthier, 2010, Gallegos et al., 2010). Similarly the links between family meal patterns and family structure have indicated a complex relationship (Fulkerson et al., 2006, Levin & Currie, 2009).

In relation to the other dimensions of the family meal, aside from frequency, the available research evidence is unable to present a comprehensive picture of family meal patterns, such as where people are eating, who they are eating with, what is being eaten and when they are eating, as often these questions have not been routinely asked. Thus only a partial picture is available: some studies have indicated an increase in 'TV dinners' (Bradshaw et al., 2007); consumer trends reflect an increase in ready meal consumption (Glucksmann, 2007); and time diary evidence indicates more periods of 'grazing' (eating in between meals) and a variation in meal times (Mestdag & Vandeweyer, 2005, Cheng et al., 2007). However no research, to date, has explored all these dimensions of the family meal to provide a detailed account of family meal patterns in contemporary family life.

US research on family meal patterns

The majority of research on family meal patterns has been undertaken by researchers in the United States, with a large amount of data emerging from the Project-EAT research team, alongside other national studies. Project EAT (1999-), based at the University of Minnesota, has undertaken a large number of studies to identify the 'socio-environmental, personal and behavioural determinants of nutritional intake and weight status among a large and ethnically diverse adolescent population'. This on-going study has collected data along a number of time points (EAT-I, EAT-II, EAT-III and EAT-2010) using a variety of methods including focus groups with adolescents, school-based surveys, anthropometric measurements, parental telephone interviews and a five-year follow-up of 2,516 adolescents. This research team used the question *'during the past 7 days how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat a meal together?' and* thus defined

the composition, but not the timing, content or location of the meal. Despite this continuity in the question the research teams have found considerable variation in reported family meal frequency. For example Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer & Feldman (2009) found that 29 per cent of their sample said they ate a meal with their family three times or more per week, Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, Fulkerson, Story & Larson (2008) reported 44 per cent of respondents indicating five or more meals per week and Fulkerson et al (2006) noted 57 per cent of parents said that they had five or more meals a week, compared with 47 per cent of young people. This considerable variation in family meal patterns can partly be explained by methodology, such as which member of the family was asked, and the frequency measure recorded, such as whether 'regular' family meals was defined as three or more per week or five or more per week. But this variation also raises questions as to the accuracy of the data collected from self-report questionnaires, with such divergent findings from the same research group, within a relatively short time period.

Within the US, another research group that has produced a large amount of data on family meal patterns and is heavily cited is the National Center on Substance Abuse (CASA). CASA Columbia aims to "Assess the impact of substance use on American systems and populations, examine the links between substance use and other health and social problems, and translate knowledge about substance use and addiction into policy and practice" (CASA, 2012). CASAColumbia has produced a number of white papers entitled The Importance of Family Dinners (2003, 2005, 2006, and 2012) using data from the National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XVII: Teens. The research team asked '*In a typical week, how often do you and your parents [or parent or guardian] eat dinner together?'* The most recent report found that 57 per cent of teenagers (aged twelve to seventeen years old) ate five or more dinners with their families per week (National Center on Substance Abuse, 2012). They also note that this figure has remained relatively stable over the last decade (challenging the assumed decline in family meal frequency). Whilst CASA is a very influential organisation, with its published data being frequently cited in both academic papers and the media, this research must be viewed with caution. An initial concern is that the data is self-published and thus not subject to the stringent scrutiny of the peer review process, and secondly whilst CASA makes bold claims that frequent family meals reduce adolescent drug and alcohol use, these claims are based on correlational data, and thus unable to assume causation.

Source	Sample	Method	Family meal measure	Family meal frequency
National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) 2012	1003 US 12-17 year olds (49% male)	Telephone survey	In a typical week, how often do you and your parents [or parent or guardian] eat dinner together?	57% 5+ family dinners per week
Project EAT-II (Eisenberg et al 2009)	806 US 15-18 year olds (45.4% male)	School-based survey	During the past 7 days, how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat a meal together	28.6% 3+ per week 43.8% no regular meals
Project EAT-II (Neumark-Sztainer et al 2008)	2516 US 12-20 year olds (45% male)	Longitudinal school-based survey and follow-up mail survey	During the past 7 days, how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat a meal together?	44% 5+ per week
Franko et al (2008)	2,379 US girls aged 9-19	Longitudinal survey data from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute Growth Study (NGHS)	How often do you eat with your parent(s)?	<50% usually or always <50% sometimes
National Survey of Children's Health 2007	91,642 US parents (20.5% fathers)	Telephone interviews	During the past week how many days did all the family members who live in the household eat a meal together?	45.8% every day 42.2% of parents with a 12-17year old 55.5% of parents with a 6-11 year old
Project EAT (Fulkerson et al 2006)	99,462 11-17 year olds (50% male)	School-based survey and parental interview	During the past 7 days, how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat a meal together	57% parents 5+ per week 47.3% young people 5+ per week
Taveras et al (2005)	14,431 US 9-14 year olds (46% male)	Cross-sectional and longitudinal data from the 'Growing Up Today Study'	How often do you sit down with other members of your family to eat dinner or supper?	42.8% girls daily 44.6% boys daily
Videon & Manning (2003)	18,177 US 11-17 year olds (51% male)	Interviews from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health	How many times was at least one parent present when you ate your evening meal in the past seven days?	48.3% 6+ per week 30.9% <2 times per week

Table 4.1 US Family Meal Frequency Patterns

Source	Sample	Method	Family meal measure	Family meal frequency
Ackard and Neumark-Sztainer (2001)	560 US 17-55 year old women	Retrospective questionnaire data	How often did your family eat [specify meal] together when you were growing up?	68.8% recalled 5+ per week 10.9% recalled <2 per week
Boutelle et al (2001)	282 US young people (mean age 13.1 years – 38.3% male) and their parents, (mean age 40.4 years, 8.2% fathers)	Telephone surveys from the Teens Eating for Energy and Nutrition at School (TEENS) study	How often would you say that your family sits down together for dinner?	59.9% adults 4+ per week 49.6% of young people 4+ per week
Gillman et al (2000)	16,202 US 9-14 year olds (46% male)	Postal questionnaires from the 'Growing Up Today Study'	How often do you sit down with other members of your family to eat dinner or supper?	43.3% daily 50.7% aged 9 daily 35.4% aged 14 daily

Table 4.1 US Family Meal Frequency Patterns

Another research programme, with a wider brief than CASA, is The Growing Up Today Study (GUTS) which began in 1996, as a collaboration between the Brigham Women's Hospital and the Harvard School of Public Health. The aim was to undertake research to understand the factors that affect health throughout life, with a focus on how diet and exercise influences weight changes. In 1996 the study recruited 16,882 young people aged nine to fourteen years and in 2004 an additional 10,993 ten to seventeen year olds were recruited. Taveras et al (2005) and Gillman et al (2000) both used data from this study and, using the same question, '*how often do you sit down with other members of your family to eat dinner or supper?'* found similar frequency patterns, despite different sampling size and time frames. Taveras et al found that 43 per cent of girls and 45 per cent of boys report daily dinners with their family, whilst Gilman et al reported 43 per cent of their sample indicated daily family dinners.

The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH 2007) was a national telephone survey of over 91,000 children aged from birth to seventeen years old. The purpose of the study was "to estimate national and state-level prevalence of a variety of physical, emotional and behavioral child health indicators in combination with information on the child's family context and neighborhood environment". The family meal survey question asked *during the past week, on how many days did all the family members who live in the household eat a meal together?* As with many of the previous questions, the focus was on who was

present, rather than the timing, location or content of the meal. The data indicated that 46 per cent of respondents ate together every day, which is generally comparable with both other US data and other international survey data.

Another large scale sample was the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The study aimed to gather data on social, economic, psychological and physical well-being alongside contextual data on family, neighbourhood, school, and relationships to study how social environments and behaviours in adolescence are linked to health and achievement outcomes in young adulthood. The study began in 1994 with a school-based survey given to over 10,000 young people in grades seven to twelve, then in 1995 participants had a home interview with a parent (usually the mother) and in 1996 there was a follow-up interview with just the young person. The most recent in-home interviews took place in 2008. The survey asked *'how many times was at least one parent present when you ate your evening meal in the past seven days?'* This question defines composition and timing but again does not define location or content. It also differs from other studies in that it specifies at least one parent (and so would exclude a meal with siblings or other relatives as a family meal). Videon & Manning (2003) reported that 48 per cent of the young people sampled from this survey had six or more evening meals with at least one parent. This figure is slightly higher than the data from the NSCH study and may simply reflect the different composition of the family meal as specified by the question. In summary, it is difficult to make clear comparisons in relation to the family meal patterns due to the variation in sample composition, family meal measures and outcome data collected. However despite these methodological limitations the data indicates that; 42 to 69 per cent of participants report regular family meals (data comparable with the British findings), there is a discrepancy between parental reports and adolescent reports of meal frequency and the frequency of family meal decreases with the age of the child/ young person.

Two noticeable elements within the American data are the research sampling frameworks and the focus on wider contextual data, such as socio-demographic variables. Many of the American studies used adolescent survey responses, rather than just parental responses, which could reflect an awareness of the discrepancy between parental and young people's reports of family meal frequency, with parents reporting more frequent family meals, (Boutelle, Lytle, Murray, Birnbaum, & Story, 2001; Fulkerson, 2006; Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006). The American research also collected and reported more

contextual data, than the British surveys. For example the NSCH (2007) survey compared frequency of family meal data with several socio-demographic variables such as race/ethnicity, nativity, and parental education. Various patterns emerged such as: Hispanic adolescents were more likely to eat regular meals with their families compared with non-Hispanic white and black adolescents and foreign-born adolescents were more likely to eat regular family meals, than native born adolescents. This finding regarding foreign-born adolescents links with the ideas on the importance of food for cultural identity within immigrant communities, as researched by Brembeck (2010). The NSCH also found that young people whose parents had less than a high school degree were more likely to eat regular family meals than families in which the parents had a high school degree or higher. However, Fulkerson et al (2006) found the opposite pattern, with students of mothers with a college education or more reporting the most frequent family meals (48 per cent) compared with mothers who had a high school education or less (41 per cent). Thus the data on maternal education and family meal patterns is contradictory and suggests a more complex picture than a simple causal relationship.

Other international research on family meal patterns

Whilst the majority of mealtime research has been undertaken in the United States, some large scale international surveys have been undertaken covering a range of countries, and European, Australian and New Zealand research teams have also gathered data on family meal patterns. Davidson & Gauthier (2010) explored the family meal data from the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000 survey, a large cross-national study commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Davidson & Gauthier's research focus was to establish what factors predict the frequency of family meals and what potential role country-level variables have in cross-national differences in family meal frequency. For the family meal question, the research analysed the responses from 66,995 young people from thirty-one countries. Participants were asked '*in general, how often do your parents eat their main meal with you around the table?*' Thus the research defined the composition and the location, and arguably the timing and content (with the phrase 'main meal'). This was one of the few studies to define the exact location of the meal by specifying *around the table,* rather than asking about the room, as other studies have (such as Growing Up in Scotland 2008). The response options were *'never or hardly ever', 'a few times a year', 'about once a month', 'several times a month'* and '*several times a* week', and most of the participants reported regular family meals (80 per cent of the fifteen years olds indicating that they ate a family

meal several times a week). One concern about the response options is the large variation between 'several times a month' and 'several times a week', as this may have skewed the responses towards the more frequent option. There was also a large variation between countries with 93 per cent of Italian young people reporting eating regular family meals, compared with 64 per cent of the UK sample and 62 per cent of the US sample. This difference would suggest cultural variation in family meal routines and also attitudes towards family meals.

These cross-national differences in family meal frequency led to the researchers to explore the factors that influence the quality and quantity of family meals, and suggested three categories – family demands, family resources and family values. Family demands included factors such as gender, family size, family structure and maternal employment, family resources included elements such as family wealth and educational resources, and family values included mothers' level of education, family communication and a family's educational support. They hypothesised that there would be a difference between secular and traditional countries and between materialist countries (which emphasise material luxuries and strive to fulfil material needs) and post-materialist countries (defined as countries that emphasise autonomy and self-expression), with societies that embrace postmodern values, more likely to have frequent family meals. Their analysis found that young people were more likely to have frequent family meals if they were: male; had more educational resources; had high levels of family communication; high levels of family educational support; and lived in a more secular country. The research had predicted that young people living in a more secular society would have less frequent family meals, compared to 'traditional' societies, but the opposite pattern was found. The research team suggested that this may reflect a growing recognition of the importance of family interaction in the secular world (Davidson & Gauthier, 2010).

The analysis also found no link with family size or maternal education, but young people were less likely to have frequent family meals if they were: in a lone parent family; had a mother in full-time employment; had more family wealth; and lived in a post-materialist country (R. Davidson & Gauthier, 2010). The research team noted that increased family wealth, unlike high levels of educational resources, did not necessarily reflect parents' direct investment in their children. They suggested that high family wealth may result in a more comfortable lifestyle for the child, but not necessarily benefit their overall development. The research had also predicted that post-materialist countries would have

more frequent family meals, but again the opposite pattern was found. The research team argued that post-materialist societies may value cultural activities more and so have less time for family meals. Overall Davidson & Gauthier (2010) concluded that the best predictor of family meal frequency was the level of family functioning (measured by a family communication index developed by PISA), although without undertaking longitudinal research it is difficult to establish any causal link.

Source	Sample	Method	Family meal measure	Family meal frequency
Davidson & Gauthier (2010)	66,995 15 year olds from 31 countries	Survey data from the PISA 2000 survey (from the OECD)	In general how often do your parents eat the main meal with you around a table?	80% several times a week 93% Italians, 64% UK 62% US, 59% Finish
Utter et al (2008)	3119 NZ young people, mean age 14.8 years	Height and weight measures Computer based survey	In the last 5 school days how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat an evening meal together?	42.4% every day 27.5% <2 times
Huntley (2008)	1000 AUS adults, 18-64 years old (28% male)	National online survey	In general, how often do you eat meals together as a family?	45% every night 77% 5+ per week 22% <2 times
Mamun et al (2005)	3795 AUS 14 year olds (52% males) and their mothers	BMI measures and maternal reports of family eating patterns	Mothers were asked how often their family ate together	78% of mothers reported daily family meals
Compan et al (2002)	282 Spanish 14-23 year olds	Questionnaire	Sharing meals (lunch and/or dinner) with one/both parents	Average number of meals eaten together was 6 per week

Table 4.2 International Family Meal Frequency Patterns

Unlike the international data from the PISA 2000 survey, Utter et al (2008) found considerably lower levels of family meal frequency in their sample of New Zealand young people (mean age fifteen). Their study asked respondents to complete a computer based survey and also collected data on their height and weight (to calculate their BMI). The young people were asked '*In the last 5 school days how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat an evening meal together?*' As with the previous research, this question defined family meal in relation to composition and timing (the evening meal) but did not specify location or content. The study found that 42 per cent of young people reported a daily family meal (on school days), with just over a quarter indicating that they

ate with their family two or less times on a school day (data which is comparable with other studies such as the LSYPE (2004) UK data and Taveras et al (2005) US data). They also found that the older respondents were less likely to eat with their families, and the males were slightly more likely to eat family meals than the female participants. However one concern with this data is the representativeness of the sample. Utter et al (2008) reported that over half of their sample were measured as overweight/obese (compared with nationally reported levels of overweight/obese teenagers in New Zealand as 29 per cent). This high percentage of overweight/obese adolescents raises questions as to the representativeness of the sample and the ability of the research team to generalise their findings, as previous research has indicated that overweight/obese children/young people are less likely to eat regular family meals (Taveras et al., 2005).

Another study focusing on family meal patterns and adolescent weight was undertaken with an Australian sample of 3,795 mothers and their fourteen year old adolescents (Mamun, Lawlor, O'Callaghan, Williams & Najman, 2005). The research focused on maternal attitudes to family meals and the risk of adolescents being overweight, and along with maternal questionnaires and adolescent BMI measures, the study gathered data on age, gender, family income, maternal education, and race. Mothers were asked how often the family ate together, with the response options of *at least once a day, a few times a week, and about once a week or less*. The study found that 78 per cent of mothers reported daily family meals, which is a relatively high figure compared to other research. It is important to consider how the limited response categories may have skewed this data, as the mothers had to choose between *once a day* to *a few times a week,* as there was no option of *most days*. The women were also asked about their attitude towards the family eating together, with the response options of *'very important', 'quite important',* and *'not really important'.* The study found that 43 per cent of mothers felt that eating together was important, with a far greater prevalence of adolescents being overweight when the mothers thought that family meals were not important. Mamun et al (2005) concluded that maternal attitudes towards family eating were a key determinant in their child's overweight status. As the research utilised data from the Mater-University study of pregnancy and its outcomes (MUSP) which only included questionnaire data from mothers, no mention was given to the paternal role or paternal attitudes. Similarly the young people were not asked directly for their views, despite the research being presented as 'a study of Australian adolescents'.

Huntley (2008) also presented Australian data from a nation-wide survey, conducted by Ipsos, of 1,000 adults, specifically focused on family mealtimes. The survey asked *'In general, how often do you eat meals together as a family?'* The survey also provided a definition of a family mealtime as "… when family members gather, at the same time and place, to consume a main meal in the family home". In relation to the components of a family meal, as discussed in Chapter 2, this definition provides the closest example of including all four elements of composition (family members), timing (same time), location (same place) and content (main meal). Her data indicated that 42 per cent of adults surveyed (the majority of whom were women) reported eating a family meal every evening; over three quarters indicated at least five times a week, and a fifth of the sample reporting two family meals per week or less. These patterns are consistent with research findings from other studies such as the LSYPE (2004), the GUTS (Taveras et al 2005) and the NSPC (Gilby et al 2008), which indicate that a large majority of the sample ate regular family meals, defined as five or more per week. However there remained a sizeable minority of the sample that usually ate two or less family meals per week.

Whilst many of the research projects on family meal patterns have focused on health outcomes, such as links with obesity, Compan et al (2002) investigated family meal patterns as part of their research on adolescent health and family rituals. They gave questionnaires to nearly three hundred Spanish young people aged fourteen to twenty three years old, including eighty two young people who attended a mental health outpatient clinic (identified as 'cases'). The data indicated that the young people who did not have mental health issues ate on average six dinners per week with their family, compared with the 'case' group who ate fewer family meals (four and a half per week). Along with other data the study team concluded that, "… sharing daily meals with the family constitutes a union ritual that promotes adolescent mental health" (Compan et al., 2002, p.93). This link between family meal rituals and adolescent mental health has not received much research attention, due to the primary focus on physical health and obesity. However if there is a link between adolescent health (both physical and mental) and family meal routines, then future research must strive to understand the complex and multi-faceted nature of this relationship.

UK research on family meal patterns

Although the main body of research on family meals has been undertaken within the US, over the last decade in the UK there has been a growing interest in the frequency of 'family meals' primarily linked to concerns around young people's health and the rise in obesity

levels. Table 3 summarises the main UK studies, including the sample, the method, the family meal measure and their reported family meal frequency patterns.

Source	Sample	Method	Family meal measure	Family meal frequency
Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (2004-2010)	Wave 1: 14,558 young people aged 13-14 plus parents	Face-to-face computer aided structured interviews in family home (online and telephone interviews for wave 5-7)	In the past 7 days, how many times have you eaten an evening meal together with the rest of your family who live with you?	Young people: 41% 6-7 times 30% 2 or less Parents: 39% every night 35% most nights 27% 2 or less
National Survey of Parents and Children (Gilby et al 2008)	2,572 UK parents 1,154 10-19 year olds	Face-to-face computer aided structured interviews in family home	How often do you eat together with most or all of your family?	76% parents 4+ per week with child 0-9 74% of parents 4+ per week with child 10-19
Currie et al (2008)	6,400 Scottish 11, 13 and 15 year olds	School-based survey	% that eat a meal with their parents every day	48% daily family meal 55% 11 year olds daily 40% 15 year olds daily
Growing up in Scotland (2008)	11,528 Scottish parents (61% mothers) with children aged 2-4 years	Face-to-face computer aided structured interviews in family home	How often does (child) eat (his/her) main meal at the same time as other people in the household?	82% ate with at least one parent
Millennium Cohort Study Second Survey (Smith 2007)	<16,000 families with a 3 year old child	Face-to-face computer aided structured interviews in family home	Does (child's name) have meals at regular times?	92% of mothers reported their children had regular meal times
Consumer Attitudes to Food Standards (2005)	1,003 English adults aged 16+ (49% male)	Face-to-face computer aided structured interviews in family home	On average how often, if at all, do you sit down for your main meal at home with all the other members of your household	70% of households claimed to sit down together for a main meal at least once a day

Table 4.3 UK Family Meal Frequency Patterns

The main UK nationally representative data sets that have asked questions relating to family meals are the Longitudinal Study of People in England (established in 2004), the National Survey of Parents and Children (2008) and the Growing up in Scotland study (2008). The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) is an on-going, large scale, annual study of young people commissioned in 2004 by the Department for Children,

Schools and Families (DCSF) to help formulate and appraise policies related to young people. The first wave of the study in 2004 interviewed 15,770 young people aged thirteen to fourteen, as well as their main and second parent, with the most recent data collected by wave seven in 2012. In wave one, the face-to-face interviews in the family home asked young people *in the past 7 days, how many times have you eaten an evening meal together with the rest of your family who live with you?* This question conceptualised a family meal in relation to 'who' was present (every family member) and 'when' (the evening meal) but did not specify location or content. The options given were *'none', '1or 2', '3-5',*or *'6-7'* and the young people reported 41 per cent ate an evening meal with their family at least six times a week, with 27 per cent indicating three to five times per week and 30 per cent reporting two or less times a week. Within the parental questionnaire, respondents were asked a different question '*In a normal week, that is from Sunday to Saturday, how often do you have an evening meal together as a family?'* For this question the interviewer defined a family as '*you, your partner, and any young people aged 16 or under who live with you'.* Response categories for this question were *'not at all', 'once or twice', 'most nights', 'every night'* with 39 per cent of the parents indicating every night, 35 per cent recalling most nights and 27 per cent reporting two or less times a week. The survey does not explain why different questions and different response categories were used in this wave of data collection, but the use of different measures prohibits direct comparison between samples. Additionally subsequent waves of data collection, to date, have not included questions on family meal frequency, preventing any longitudinal analysis of changing patterns in family meals.

Despite extensive demographic data being collected from the young people and their parents, no variations have been presented in relation to family meal patterns and age, gender or socio-economic status but data has been published on family meal patterns and GCSE attainment. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) statistical bulletin reports that 50 per cent of young people who have a regular family meal (six or seven meals per week) attain eight or more GCSE's (grade A* to C) whereas for the young people who attain one to four GCSE's (A* to C and D to G) the dominant family meal pattern is no family meals. Despite the claims made by the report, the results also show that 31 per cent of the young people that report no family meals also attain eight or more GCSE's, as do 40 per cent of the young people that report one to two family meals per week. Thus the data does not provide clear evidence for the link between GCSE attainment and family meal frequency.

The DCSF also commissioned The National Survey of Parents and Children (2008), specifically developed to gather information on 'hard to reach' parents and carers to provide insights into family life and the links with young people's behaviour and well-being. The study used face-to-face computer-aided interviews with 2,572 parents and 1,154 young people aged ten to nineteen years old. The participants were asked *how often do you eat together with most or all of your family?* Unlike the LSYPE research, this question did not define the 'when' (for example the evening meal) but did expand the 'who' to include either '*most or all'* of their family. As with the LSYPE survey, the question did not specify location or content. The survey reported three quarters of parents with a younger child (nine or under) ate four or more meals per week, with this figure slightly lower (just under three quarters) for parents with an older child. This finding would support the assertion that as children get older they are less likely to eat with their parents, although the figure was only slightly lower, indicating that a majority of young people do still eat with their family. Again this study benefited from collecting data from both young people and their parents allowing the research team to explore the similarities and differences between parental and young people's responses.

Whilst the LYSPE focused on young people in England, the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study (HBSC), part of a World Health Organization (WHO) collaborative cross-national study, began collecting data in Scotland in 1994. The first stage of the study recruited 6,400 eleven, thirteen and fifteen year olds who completed a school-based survey, which included questions related to family meals. The findings from this school-based survey indicated that nearly half of the young people surveyed ate a daily family meal, with frequency decreasing with age (55 per cent of eleven year olds and 40 per cent of fifteen year olds). The study found no gender difference in family meal patterns, but did record a decline in family meal frequency from the 1994 figures which reported that 58 per cent of young people had a daily family meal, compared with 48 per cent in 2006 (Currie, Levin, & Todd, 2008). Thus the HBSC is one of the few studies that has been able to explore the assertion that family meals are on the decline. The study also found that family meal frequency decreases as children get older, which supports family meal patterns found in other research.

Another large research project undertaken on Scottish children is the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS), a large-scale longitudinal social survey commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department in 2003 to explore Scottish children's lives from birth to

late adolescence. Alongside gathering data on family meal frequency, the parental survey asks questions about who the child eats with, where they eat and what they eat (thus covering the other important dimensions of the family meal such as composition, location and content). Additionally the study aims to explore more qualitative elements of the meal by asking parents whether 'mealtimes are enjoyable for everyone', 'mealtimes are a rush' and 'mealtimes give the time to talk to each other'. In answer to the question '*How often does (child) eat (his/her) main meal at the same time as other people in the household*?', data from Sweep 3 of the survey (2007-2008) indicated that the majority of the children (over 80 per cent) mainly ate at the same time as their family, with only 5 per cent never eating together. Most of the children ate in the kitchen or dining room (62 per cent) with a considerable number eating in the living room (32 per cent). This study was not able to ascertain exactly where the young people ate, as eating in the living room could represent sitting on the sofa watching the television, or alternatively it could represent sitting at the table in an open-plan living space. However if the majority of the young people eating in the living room were eating on the sofa, then this would reflect a contemporary change in family meal location. Children with a teenage mother at the time of birth were most likely to eat in the living room (67 per cent) as were children from households in the lowest income category, and children in the most deprived areas. The report concluded that these findings may simply reflect the size of property owned by different families, but could also reflect "a greater tendency towards less structured mealtimes in particular households" (Marryat, Skafida, & Webster, 2009).

This suggested association between lower socio-economic status and less structured mealtimes raises important questions regarding family life and the importance of routines. It also links with the study finding that lone parents and young mothers were less likely to find mealtimes enjoyable and less likely to have time to talk, compared with older, more affluent mothers. Thus whilst 48 per cent of the sample said that mealtimes are mostly enjoyable for everyone, only 39 per cent of young mothers agreed with this statement compared to 60 per cent of mothers over forty. However it is important to note that lone parents and younger mothers are over-represented in the lowest income category, so it is difficult to establish which factor is determining these responses.

Whilst the GUS study was able to collect detailed information on family meal patterns, including feelings about mealtime experiences, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a multi-disciplinary longitudinal research project, only collects basic information on family

meals. The MCS is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and follows the lives of approximately 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000-2001. The survey will continue to collect information on a variety of diverse areas including parenting and child health and aims to follow the children from birth through to adulthood. Data from the second survey (2003) asked about parental activities and different parenting styles. In relation to family meals, the only question parents were asked was whether their child had a regular mealtime. Whilst 92 per cent of mothers said that their children did (Smith, 2007), this choice of question provides limited information on family meal patterns, with no additional data on the other dimensions of the family meal such as whom the child ate with, where they ate or what they ate.

The Consumer Attitudes to Food Standards (2005) was commissioned by the FSA to understand *consumer attitudes, knowledge, behaviour and awareness with regards to food safety and food standards* (Food Standards Agency, 2005). Wave six of the study asked 1,003 English adults, sixteen and over, '*On average, how often do you sit down for your main meal at home with all the other members of your household?'* The survey found that 70 per cent of respondents said that they sat down with their households for a main meal at least once a day, a relatively high percentage compared to other data sets.

Overall the key UK studies indicate considerable variability in family meal patterns, from 41 per cent of young people reporting six to seven family meals a week (LSYPE 2004) to 70 per cent of households claiming to sit down together at least once a day (FSA 2005). However any comparison across the studies is restricted due to the differences in sample composition, family meal measures used and outcome data collected. For example the LSYPE survey asked young people the number of meals eaten with *all* the family, whereas the National Survey on Parents and Children asked both young people *and* parents about meals eaten with all *or most of* your family, and the FSA survey asked adults about eating with other members of their *household* rather than family. This variation in the composition of the sample and the wording of the family meal measure is likely to considerably influence the family meal patterns reported. For example, sampling an older group of young people might establish a lower prevalence of family meals, if frequency decreases with age (as indicated by Currie et al 2008). Similarly only sampling parents might establish a higher prevalence of family meals, if parents report more frequent family meals (as indicated by Gilby et al 2008). Compared to other research, The Growing Up in Scotland (2008) study presents the most detailed picture of family meal patterns, with the

questionnaire not simply focusing on frequency, but also exploring other elements of the family meal such as composition, location and content, and the links with recorded demographic data (such as gender, age and socio-economic status). Additionally the survey has explored more qualitative elements of this daily activity such as whether mealtimes are enjoyable, whether they feel rushed and whether there is time to talk, again linking these patterns to the demographic data.

UK market research data on family meal patterns

Family meal patterns have also been researched by various market research companies in the UK, such as YouGov and the Future Foundation, on behalf of companies such as Birds Eye and Kelloggs. The 'Changing Plates' report, undertaken by YouGov (2009) and commissioned by Birds Eye asked 2018 UK adults, '*How often do you and your family (or others in the household) sit down and eat a meal together?*' Thus the question defined the composition of the event, but not the timing, the content or the location. The report indicated that forty five per cent of respondents said they ate together a daily meal, with sixty seven per cent reporting eating a meal together at least three times a week. The report also noted that thirty six per cent of respondents said they ate on the sofa in front of the television. The Future Foundation survey, commissioned by Kelloggs, asked 278 UK parents, aged sixteen and over, *'how often do you eat your evening meal with all members of your household every day'* (Future Foundation 2008). In contrast to the YouGov survey, this question did define the timing and the composition, but again did not specify the content or the location. Whilst over half of the sample said they ate their evening meal with all members of their household every day, eighty two per cent reported that they did this '*all or most of the time'*. The frequency statistics obtained from this survey are noticeably higher than the YouGov survey and could be accounted for by a number of factors, such as the different sample composition (adults/parents) or the variation in the question wording.

One noticeable finding from the Future Foundation survey was that whilst most of the respondents agreed with the statement that households eat together less than they did five years ago, longitudinal data challenges this assumption, "Contrary to widespread belief, the amount of time we spend eating together as families has remained stable since 1995' (Future Foundation, 2008, p. 5). These findings from the Future Foundation market research group provide support for the powerful contemporary discourse around the assumed decline of the idealised family meal as discussed in Chapter 3. However, whilst market research companies are able to provide data on family meal patterns and attitudes

towards family meals, the research has its limitations, linked both to its methodology and its commercial agenda. As Murcott (1997) notes it is often difficult to assess the strength of its methodological approach due to both its lack of publication in peer-reviewed journals and the commercially sensitive nature of its data.

4.3 The effects of changing lifestyles on mealtime patterns

Despite the note of caution needed when interpreting family meal patterns, social commentators have identified several changes in contemporary life, which are perceived to have affected family meal patterns, such as perceptions of time scarcity, increased parental employment and increased diversity in family structure. For example, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ackard, Moe & Perry (2000) US focus group research, with young people, explored the factors that may influence family meal patterns and concluded that parental employment and family structure were key determinants. The respondents also reported diversity in what they ate, when they ate and where they ate their meals (at the table, in front of the TV, in their bedrooms). The following sections will examine the contemporary patterns of time use in relation to food provisioning and meals, changing patterns in parental employment, and changes in family structure highlighted by the focus group detailed above.

Contemporary patterns of time use in relation to food and meals

In the UK, Cheng, Olsen, Southerton & Warde (2007) analysed time diary data from 1975 and 2000 to analyse changing patterns of food consumption. The 1975 data of 1,274 people was collected by the BBC and the UK 2000 Time Use Survey collected data from 8,522 people. Their analysis indicated that there has been a small decline in the amount of time spent eating and drinking per day reduced from one hundred and five minutes in 1975 to ninety eight minutes in 2000. However Cheng et al (2007) question whether this is evidence for the demise of the family meal, as their analysis indicated that whilst people are spending less time eating at home, when they do eat the "…episodes remained of a sufficient duration to suggest that they were eating with others" (2007, p.47). The data also showed that in 2000 people with young children spent less time eating and drinking at home, whilst people with older children spent more time eating and drinking at home than people without children – patterns which are a reversal of the 1975 data and again questions the assumption that family meals decline as children get older. One noticeable change in the 2000 data has been the significant increase in the amount of time spent eating and drinking away from the home (from eleven minutes per day in 1975 to twenty five minutes per day in 2000 averaged over the week). This pattern reflects the changing

patterns of consumption in contemporary life with the increase in both eating out and an increased in the fast food options available to families.

Linked to these changing patterns of consumption, Cheng et al (2007) found that the amount of time spent cooking for women had reduced from one hundred minutes per day in 1975 to fifty eight minutes per day in 2000 (with a comparative increase for men from eleven minutes 1975 to twenty three minutes in 2000). Whilst this decrease could be due to a range of factors, including the possible decline in the family meal, other alternative interpretations could be linked to the increased availability of ready-meals and pre-prepared foods, the rise in maternal employment, the rise in paternal cooking, and the rise in use of time saving devices such as microwaves and slow-cookers. Similar patterns in time use were also identified by the Institute for Social & Economic Research (ISER) which specialises in the production of longitudinal data which tracks changes in the lives of over 10,000 households in the UK. ISER data indicates that women in the UK today spend less time in domestic labour, such as cooking and washing (from one hundred and fifteen minutes a day in 1961 down to seventy one minutes a day in 2001). In contrast men's involvement has increased from ten minutes a day cooking and washing in 1961 to thirty minutes in 2001, though this figure is still less than half of the time women spend on cooking and washing (ISER, 2005). Whilst the ISER data recorded time spent on 'domestic labour' which included cooking and washing, rather than just cooking, the data still shows consistency with the Cheng et al time use data. The time diary data also reflected differences in food preparation time and employment status, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

In the US, time use data on food and eating is available from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), a monthly survey that began in 2003, with questions on food and eating included from October 2005. The time diary data collected data on 'primary' and 'secondary' eating, with primary defined as when eating and drinking is the main activity, and secondary defined as eating and drinking that happens alongside other activities. The 2006 data indicated that US adults spent sixty seven minutes per day 'primary' eating and drinking, with two thirds of this time occurring with family or others (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). An additional fifteen minutes per day was spent secondary eating. The ATUS data was also able to record the differences in time spent eating and drinking, shopping and preparing food in relation to a household's income (categorised as high income, low income, and on a food assistance programme, SNAP). The average time spent shopping for

food was relatively similar (twelve to fourteen minutes per day), though there was a noticeable difference in the amount of time spent preparing food and eating and drinking. The higher income households spent less time preparing food (thirty minutes per day, compared with forty and forty seven minutes per day in the low income and lowest income households) but comparatively spent the most time eating – seventy nine minutes per day compared with sixty nine minutes in the low income household and fifty eight minutes in the lowest income households (Andrews & Hamrick, 2009). All women, whether employed or not, spent more time on average, shopping, preparing food and cleaning up after the meal (a similar pattern to the UK data).

Mestdag and Vandeweyer's (2005) also used time diaries in their research to explore how Belgian families spend their time, and the place of family meals within this family time. Data were collected from two time periods, 1966 and 1999, and one respondent was selected per family. Their research found that 40 per cent of Belgian parents in 1999 did not manage to share a meal with their partner and their children on a working day. This compares with one to two daily family meals being the most common pattern in 1966. They also discovered interesting changes in mealtime consumption for both children and adults in their Belgian sample. The data from the time diaries showed that: families ate less frequently at traditional meal times and frequently in between these times, conceptualised as grazing (DeVault, 1991); families spent less time eating together and more time eating alone; and less time was devoted exclusively to eating. Mestdag and Vandeweyer concluded that traditional meals have lost their importance in Belgium, compared to the time diary evidence from 1966.

Employment patterns and family mealtimes

Within the UK, a major societal change in the last four decades has been both the change, and the increasing diversity, in employment patterns. For example female employment has risen rapidly, growing from fifty six per cent employment in 1971 to sixty nine per cent in 2011 (Plunkett, 2011). In relation to parental employment, current statistics indicate that seventy one per cent of married/cohabiting mothers are employed, with ninety per cent of married/cohabiting fathers employed and fifty nine per cent of lone parents employed (Working and Workless Households 2012, ONS). More recently there has also been an increase in part-time employment and shift work, with 55 per cent of UK mothers in couple families working part-time (Plunkett, 2011). Many social commentators have linked changing employment patterns, particularly the increase in maternal employment, with the decline of the family meal. To explore the link between parental employment patterns and

family meal patterns, a number of resources are available including UK time diary data, international survey data, and US research data.

As previously mentioned, Cheng et al (2007) used UK time diary data from 1975 and 2000 to explore changing patterns of food consumption. Their research found that parental employment status was the most significant factor in explaining variation in time spent eating at home - adults in full-time employment in 2000 spent less time eating at home, compared with 1975 data, though an analysis of the data reflects a very minimal difference (87 per cent of eating and drinking lasted under half an hour in 1975, down to 85 per cent in 2000). The time diary data also found that time spent cooking increases with age, parents spend more time cooking than adults without children, the amount of time spent preparing food has decreased, and the amount of time spent cooking increased for men and decreased substantially for women, although women still spend more time cooking at home, regardless of their employment status (which concurs with the findings of Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991).

A key change in the time diary was the amount of time spent eating and drinking away from the home – in 1975 eating and drinking out episodes lasting under half an hour accounted for 20 per cent of the time, but by 2000 this figure had increased to 55 per cent. This pattern was particularly pronounced for eating episodes lasting under half an hour which would provide evidence for increased use of 'fast-food' takeaway meals. The data also found that the more affluent spent a greater proportion of household expenditure on food away from home, which may account for the link between family wealth and less frequent family meals (Davidson & Gauthier, 2010). If the research question defines a family meal as being located within the home, then meals eaten out would not be captured within this measure, and families would be under-reporting meals eaten together with their family (both inside and outside the home). Overall Cheng et al (2007) concluded that whilst there has been a small decrease in time spent eating at home, the "overall temporal patterns of eating and drinking at home remain remarkably stable between 1975 and 2000" (Cheng et al., 2007, p.49). This consistency challenges the assumption that family meals are on the decline.

Other research has explored parental employment, focusing specifically on maternal employment. For example, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll & Perry (2003) examined US rates of family mealtimes by maternal employment, and found that frequent family meals (defined as seven or more per week) were more likely in homes where the

mother was not employed. Similarly, data from the PISA 2000 survey showed that children with mothers in full-time employment were less likely to eat frequent family meals (Davidson & Gauthier, 2010). The authors hypothesised that this link may be due to '*parental time availability*' with full time mothers lacking the time or the energy to committing to preparing family meals on a regular basis, despite expectations that they do linked to gender role socialisation. In their study of parenting stress and strength in families, Wiley (2006) explored how parents balance work-family life demands in relation to family mealtimes. They concluded that employed mothers often feel more stressed during family meals, than fathers, due to the gender imbalance of preparing meals. This gender imbalance is supported by time diary evidence which shows that women still spend considerably more time cooking than men, regardless of their employment status (Cheng et al., 2007). Hochschild (1989) introduced the concept of the 'second shift' to reflect this dual role of being both employed and maintaining responsibility for the home and food provisioning, although DeVault notes that these dual roles have been more problematic for middle class women entering the workforce, as many working class women have always had to juggle family life with paid employment, such as cleaning work (DeVault, 1991).

In contrast to the above findings, Fulkerson et al (2006) found that US students with mothers who had a college education or more reported the most frequent family meals (forty eight per cent) compared with mothers who had a high school education or less (forty one per cent). However these findings must be interpreted with caution as the study is assuming that women with a college education are more likely to be in employment. Gallegos, Dziurawiec, Fozdar & Abernethie (2010) investigated adolescent experiences of family meals using on-line survey data from over six hundred Australian fifteen year olds. They found that participants with a working mother were just as likely to eat the meal at the same time or in the same place as the rest of the family. Huntley (2008) also found a more nuanced relationship between parental employment and family meal frequency in her Australian sample. Her questionnaire data indicated that 44 per cent of full-time working parents reported daily family meals, compared with 39 per cent of part-time working parents, and 53 per cent of not working parents. She concluded that the lower frequency of mealtimes for part-time workers was often due to shift work, with parents having to work in the evening or through the night, thus reducing the time available to eat together as a family. In the exploratory qualitative stage of this research, parents did identify conflicting work schedules as one barrier to not eating together more often (along with a general lack of time due to homework, travel, sport and community activities).

Exploring this further, Allen, Shockley & Poteat (2008) researched the relationship between specific work place factors (such as paid employment hours, family-supportive supervision and flexible working arrangements) and family dinner behaviours. Two hundred and twenty US parents (nearly 80 per cent mothers) completed an online survey which included questions on family dinner frequency, fast food consumption, paid employment hours, access to flexible work arrangements, and availability of family-supportive supervision. The analysis indicated that flexible work hours and family-supportive supervision were positively related to family meal frequency, with the latter being the key indicator. Allen et al (2008) concluded that future research needed to investigate how workplace factors may influence the quality of the family meal, rather than simply the frequency, if parents are returning home in a negative mood after a difficult day at work. This focus was taken up by researchers from the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELF) who explored how parental employment affects general family interactions. Their naturalistic research design utilised a variety of methods including diaries, self-report measures and observation at multiple points throughout the day along with physiological responses (such as biomarkers like cortisol). Repetti, Wang & Saxbe (2009) found that following stressful days at work parents often adjusted their social behaviour at home, either by an overall reduction in social engagement and expression of emotion, or an increase in their irritability and displays of anger. In relation to family meals, it is possible that these employment stressors may inhibit family meals, if parents choose to remove themselves from social interaction, although alternatively the structure of a regular family meal may serve to reduce the potentially damaging effects of a stressful day at work.

Along with studying family meal patterns, research has also explored the link between parental employment and adolescent dietary behaviours. Pearson, Timperio, Salmon, Crawford & Biddle (2009) reported findings from the Youth Eating Patterns (YEP) longitudinal study of dietary behaviours among 1884 Australian adolescents. The online survey data found that adolescent girls whose mothers worked full-time were more likely to eat snacks and fast food. The reasons for this association could be complex, and reflect a variety of factors, such as: the increased independence of girls with full-time working parents; the reduced time available for parents to buy and prepare food from scratch; or the decline in adolescents cooking skills and abilities. However these explanations do not explain the gender difference found in the research (why the association was found for girls but not boys). It is important to note that of the parents who completed the consent forms, 84 per cent of the respondents were mothers, so the research team decided to only

present maternal characteristics (such as maternal education level and maternal employment status). Consequently the research is heavily focused on the mother, with little attention given to the father's role in adolescent dietary behaviours.

Family structure and family mealtimes

As discussed in Chapter 2, family structure has changed considerably in the last thirty years, with many children in the UK living in a variety of family structures, including married couple families, cohabiting couple families, married couple step families, cohabiting couple step families, lone parent families and multi-family member household (Office for National Statistics 2012b). When undertaking research on the family it is important to note the fluidity of family life as many children move between these different family types, for example initially living in a married couple family, then living with just one parent before moving in to a couple stepfamily. Thus research on family life must acknowledge that it is only able to record a snapshot of a specific time within a family group and must always be aware of the fluidity of these family structures and the differences both within and between the family groups. For example a young person who has always lived with a lone parent will have had a different experience to a young person who as a teenager is living with a lone parent, but has been brought up in a couple-headed family and had to experience a traumatic parental divorce.

With an awareness of this, the question to address for family meal researchers is the implications of these changing family structures on mealtime patterns. Fulkerson et al (2006) in the US and Levin and Currie (2009) in Scotland have both analysed the link between family meal patterns and different family structures. Fulkerson et al (2006) reported an association between family structure and meal frequency. Their research found that almost half of the US students from families with two parents reported eating five to seven dinner meals together in the past week compared with about one third of students from families headed by lone parents. However the Child Trends Databank (2003) found small differences between family meal frequency and family structure in their US sample. There was little difference between young people who had regular family meals (six to seven times a week) living with both parents and young people living in a step-family, and only a small increase in family meal frequency of young people living with a lone mother. Conversely the data for infrequent family meals (three times a week or less) was also similar for the three main family structures. This lack of a clear association between frequency of family meal and family structure would suggest that family structure alone does not account for discrepancies in family meal frequency. These findings may also

reflect the variety of ways that families organise their mealtime behaviours, irrespective of the family structure within which the family members are situated.

Using a Scottish sample, Levin, Kirby & Currie (2011) also explored the link between family meal patterns and family structure, focusing specifically on the links with adolescent risk behaviours. An analysis of the data from the 2006 Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children survey, of over 4,000 young people (mean age fourteen), concluded that regular family meals (defined as four times or more per week) mediated the potentially disruptive effects of living in lone parent and step families, for, “The family meal, associated with a reduced likelihood of many adolescent risk behaviours, reduces or eliminates the association with family structure and may therefore help to overcome inequalities in adolescent risk behaviours” (Levin et al., 2011, p.1). Whilst the HBSC data indicated a link between children living in lone parent and step families and higher levels of adolescent risk behaviours, the analysis found that regular family meals reduced this association. Whilst caution must always be taking in interpreting such associations, the possibility that regular family meals may reduce adolescent risk behaviours needs further research, again with a focus on what specifically it is about the family meal that may reduce adolescent risk behaviours.

4.4 Family meal patterns and young people’s health and well-being

Healthy eating patterns and regular family meals

Alongside studying the changes in family meal patterns, research has also explored the links between regular family meals and young people’s health and well-being, focusing on healthy eating patterns, susceptibility to high risk behaviours and literacy and academic achievement, “…the family meal remains an important opportunity for families to be together and, by doing so, potentially enhance the health and well-being of children and adolescent members” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 346). The relationship between family mealtimes and healthy eating patterns has received considerable media attention, particularly in the UK and the US, due to societal concerns over increasing obesity levels, in both children and adults. The prevalence of obesity in England has more than tripled in the last twenty five years with the latest Health Survey for England (HSE) data indicating that in England in 2010, 26 per cent of adults and 16 per cent of children (aged two to fifteen years) were classified as obese. The data also reported that 63 per cent of adults and 30 per cent of children could be classified as overweight or obese (Health and Social Care Information

Centre, 2011). Due to these public health concerns, researchers have explored the link between family meal patterns and diet quality.

Gillman et al (2000) researched family dinner frequency and diet quality among 16,202 US children and adolescents, using data from the Growing up Today Study (GUTS). Their analysis indicated that children eating frequent family meals had healthier diets – more servings of fruit and vegetables, and higher intakes of nutrients, such as calcium, vitamins and iron. Videon and Manning (2003) also explored the influence of family meals and adolescent eating patterns, using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Their data also revealed that frequent family meals were associated with a better intake of fruit, vegetables and dairy foods and also with increased likelihood of eating breakfast. The researchers concluded that family mealtimes provided the opportunities for children to observe and internalise healthy eating patterns.

As previously mentioned, Taveras et al (2005) investigated the associations between family dinner patterns and overweight status in 14,421 US adolescents, aged nine to fourteen years old. The results suggested that children who ate frequent family meals were less likely to be overweight at baseline and also that the frequency of family meals reduced as children got older. However there was no longitudinal association between being overweight and frequency of family meals. The research team hypothesised that one reason for this lack of longitudinal association could be that the critical period for family influences on children's eating patterns may be earlier in childhood, than adolescence. This idea has recently been explored by Miller et al (2012) who noted the predominance of research focusing on adolescents and thus chose to sample younger children, aged five to fifteen years old. Rollins et al (2007) also examined the association between frequency of family meals and weight status by focusing on younger children, aged four to nine years old. Supporting Taveras et al's findings, Rollins et al (2007) concluded that young children who eat regular family meals were less likely to be overweight. Without any further exploration the reasons for these associations remain unclear, though one can make several hypotheses: parental modelling of healthy eating at the table may be a factor; snacking on unhealthy foods may be less likely to occur in a home with regular eating patterns; or young people eating with their family may be more likely to pay attention to satiety cues, than those eating alone in front of the television. Support for this link between regular family meals and diet quality has also been provided by Utter et al (2008) who examined the associations between frequency of family meals, BMI and nutritional aspects of the

home environment in adolescents in New Zealand. The study found that young people eating meals with their families on all of the previous five nights had a lower mean BMI than those who didn't eat any meals with their families. The frequency of family meal was also positively associated with other healthy aspects of the home environment, including family support to eat healthy foods, limits on television viewing, and fruit and vegetable consumption.

In the US, the Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) team have undertaken a considerable body of work on the eating habits of teenagers from a health perspective. Their research has focused on family meals as this factor emerged from focus group discussions as an important element in the social environment influencing eating patterns (Dianne Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2000). The team adopted a variety of methods including focus groups, cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal surveys and telephone interviews with over seven thousand US participants. In a 2010 summary of the project, the research team concluded that family meals may have benefits in relation to healthy dietary intake and prevention of 'disordered eating behaviours' (defined by the research team as unhealthy weight control and binge eating). An important element of the Project EAT methodology is that they statistically controlled for family connectedness to ensure that any association between family meals and disordered eating behaviours was above and beyond overall familial relationships (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010).

Recently, a comprehensive meta-analysis of seventeen studies was undertaken, sampling 182,836 children and adolescents, to examine the link between shared family mealtimes and the nutritional health of children and adolescents (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). The analysis found that children and young people who have three or more family meals per week are more likely to be within the healthy weight range, more likely to have healthier dietary and eating patterns, and less likely to engage in disordered eating than children and young people who share less than three family meals per week. Again, whilst this relationship appears to be quite strong, the correlational nature of the data allows no opportunity to explore further the reasons for these associations.

Adolescent high risk behaviours and regular family meals

Another key area of concern has been the proposed relationship between family meal frequency and adolescent susceptibility to high-risk behaviours, such as drinking alcohol, smoking and having unprotected sex. Adolescents' decisions to undertake high-risk behaviours will be multi-determined, and will include a variety of reasons, one of which

may be the quality of the family relationships. A UNICEF (2007) report, surveying 162,000 young people in thirty five European and North American countries reported high levels of risky behaviour in UK teenagers. Despite these high levels in the UK, the main body of research exploring the link between family mealtimes and adolescent risk behaviours has been undertaken in the United States, using correlational data and longitudinal studies.

Fulkerson et al (2006) explored the relationship between family meals and sixteen developmental 'assets' and ten high-risk behaviours, as part of the Project EAT study. They found that adolescents were more likely to eat frequent family meals if they had a higher prevalence of external and internal assets. The most frequently reported internal asset was having a positive view of their personal future and the most frequently reported external asset was family support. The researchers undertook regression analysis to control for the effects of family support and family communication, to ensure that regular family meals were not simply a proxy for general family functioning. In relation to high-risk behaviours, all were inversely associated with the frequency of family dinner meals. This research team also examined five-year longitudinal associations between family meal patterns and substance use in adolescence, again using data from Project EAT. The main findings were that females who reported at least five family meals per week were significantly less likely to report substance use during their high school years. No association was found for males, which the researchers hypothesised might be because females are more attuned to the subtle emotional support offered during family meals. Importantly this research statistically controlled for family connectedness, and still found an independent association (Fulkerson et al., 2006). However, as with all such survey research, the issue of reverse causality remains – i.e. those adolescents likely to take drugs may be less likely to eat with their parents. The research team concluded that future studies need a more objective measure of the family environment, and suggested videotaping family meals in an attempt to collect objective assessments of family functioning. Whilst this move away from a reliance on purely questionnaire data is welcome, this research team is still focusing on collecting 'objective assessments of family functioning', rather than attempting to understand the individual family members' perceptions of this everyday activity.

A highly publicised survey is undertaken every year by The American National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA). Whilst the findings from CASA receive a lot of media attention, and are frequently quoted in academic research, some academics have questioned CASA's research process. For example Murcott (2012) criticises CASA for not

publishing the questionnaires on which the studies are based and challenges the methodological reliance on self-report telephone interviews. Additionally Wilk (2010) questions CASA's decision to not submit their work for peer review in academic journals (CASA's annual surveys are self-published). Despite these limitations, the annual survey of US teenagers has consistently presented a strong relationship between frequent family dinners and lower levels of teen smoking, drinking and illegal drug use, "Substance abuse risk score decreases as the frequency of family dinner's increases, regardless of age. At every age, a teen benefits from eating dinner with their family" (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2007, p. 14). The survey asks young people about a number of things including family meal patterns, relationships with parents and drug and alcohol use. Data from the 2008 survey indicated that nearly half of the teenagers surveyed thought that during or after dinner was the best time to talk about something that is important to them. This supports Fiese and Schwartz (2008) suggestion that conversation may be the key element in understanding the influence of family mealtimes on positive outcome behaviours. Riesch et al (2006) also emphasise that a key mechanism in preventing health-risk behaviours is the parent-child communication process and Bandy and Moore (2008) found that close relationships with parents was associated with positive behaviour outcomes, such as better academic performance and fewer behavioural problems.

A more nuanced picture of the relationship between family meal patterns and adolescent 'problem behaviours' (such as binge drinking, substance abuse and violence) was presented by Sen (2006). She analysed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997), an annual survey of 6,748 nationally representative American twelve to sixteen year olds. After carefully statistically controlling for potentially confounding variables, such as family connectedness and parental vigilance, the study concluded that frequent family meals are negatively associated with certain problem behaviours in males and females. Males who had infrequent family meals were more likely to binge-drink and be physically violent, whereas girls who had infrequent family meals were more likely to abuse substances. The research concluded that family meals may reduce problem behaviours by providing structure, stability and by improving family communication. The research that has emerged from this area would suggest that alongside communication, the family meal is an important opportunity for parents to monitor their adolescent's activities. Gonzales (2009) argues that adolescent risk behaviour is influenced by low parental monitoring and supervision, and high levels of family conflict and poor family communication skills

Similarly, CASA note that parental engagement is a key factor in reducing teens' substance abuse risk and one the most effective ways to be engaged in teens' lives is by having frequent family dinners (CASA, 2007).

Literacy and academic development and regular family meals

Children's literacy development and subsequent academic achievement is multi-determined, being influenced by a range of factors including parenting practices and child factors. Research has explored the link between the mealtime environment and the development of literacy skills, focusing on the content of mealtime conversations, the opportunities for extended discourse, and the role of mothers and fathers in mealtime conversations, highlighting considerable differences between families. Mealtime conversations can provide the opportunity for literacy development – both in terms of learning new vocabulary and developing conversation skills. Through mealtime interactions children can learn when to speak, when to listen, the conversational turn, the importance of keeping to a topic, how to change a topic, and how to end a conversation. The mealtime environment is also one of many contexts that can provide the opportunity for the children to develop their skills of extended discourse – both using explanatory talk (discussing sophisticated topics) and narrative talk (discussing the past and future plans). This extended discourse during the family meal is valued as an important vehicle for introducing children to cultural rules and expectations. Snow and Beals (2006) argue that children need a number of developmental skills to take part in such extended discourse, including the ability to think about hypothetical situations and the ability to understand and use relatively sophisticated language, "These features means that the talk is likely to be linguistically complex, cognitively challenging, highly engaging, and thus the perfect opportunity for children to gain language skills" (Snow and Beals, 2006, p.55). Beals (1997) longitudinal research asked US mothers to audiotape a typical mealtime conversation with their three-year-old child, each year, until the child was ten years old. During the annual home visits, the children's vocabulary was also assessed. The results showed a correlation between the frequency of informative and rare words at mealtimes and the children's vocabulary test scores. Beals (1997) concluded that the more often rare words are used in an informative manner during the children's younger years, the better their vocabulary will be.

The research presented by Beals (1997) reflects how maternal accounts of mealtime practices have tended to dominate the literature, with little attention given to the father's role. This research stated that fathers contributed little to the conversations, with mothers

being the main drivers of the mealtime conversations, providing most of the informative rare words. However, of the one hundred and sixty mealtime recordings collected, fathers were only present in fifty two. This could reflect less paternal involvement in mealtimes or conversely, as mothers were asked to tape the mealtime conversation, this could reflect the mothers' preference to tape a meal when the father was absent. Davidson and Snow (1996) examined the differences between five year old American children's interactions with their mother and their father and found that during mealtime interactions mothers used more complexity than fathers and initiated more varied conversation topics in which the child could join in. However any research on parental involvement must acknowledge the differing patterns of parental interaction during family mealtimes, and the considerable within-gender variations in relation to parenting variables (Pleck, 2010). As Lamb (2010) notes, "The broader, more inclusive conceptualisation of fathers' roles recognises the appreciable variation that exists both within and between fathers" (Lamb, 2010, p.5).

Miller, Walfogel & Han (2012) also explored the links between children/young people's academic development and behaviour problems and frequency of family meals. Their recent paper challenged previous research for its reliance on cross-sectional data, its focus on the evening meal rather than other meals in the day, the sampling of adolescents rather than younger children, and the inconsistent operationalization of family meal frequency. To address these methodological issues, they undertook a longitudinal study, based in the US, which asked about breakfasts and evening meals, on a sample of over 9,000 children aged from 5 (at the first wave of data collection) to 15 years old. With regards to family meal frequency they collected and analysed data on two separate measures, 'in a typical week, please tell me the number of days at least some of the family eats breakfast together' and 'in a typical week, please tell me the number of days at least some of the family eats the evening meal together', with 'frequent' conceptualised as five or more meals together per week. The longitudinal nature of this study enabled the researchers to explore changes in family meals over time, and the family meal frequency measure, utilising data on breakfast and the evening meal, provided a more complex picture of family meal patterns. The study found little evidence for the link between frequent family meals and academic and behavioural outcome measures, which they noted was a novel finding which challenges previous research findings (Miller, Waldfogel & Han, 2012).

4.5 Emerging body of qualitative and mixed methods research

Within family meal research there has been a predominance of using survey data primarily drawn from US longitudinal samples of individual family members (Huntley, 2008). The methodological limitations of this approach, with its reliance on self-report questionnaire data, has led to research teams developing new and innovative methods to explore this important aspect of everyday family life. Contemporary approaches to family meal research reflect a growing body of qualitative and mixed methods approaches, gathered from multiple family members, including fathers, children and young people. For example, Huntley (2008) adopted a mixed methods approach, initially using qualitative interviews to help guide and formulate her large-scale survey on Australian family meals. Her research aimed to understand and measure the attitudes, behaviours, expectations, perceived benefits, motivations and barriers of Australian families to eating meals together. Similarly, McIntosh et al (2010) used a mixed methods approach to focus on more qualitative elements such as the individual perceptions of the family meal. Alongside a survey of three hundred US families (parents) asking about their employment hours, meal planning and family meal frequency, the research team also interviewed the children in the families about their perceptions of the family meal and the frequency with which they ate it. The research found a strong link between mothers' perception of the family meal importance and the young person's views (McIntosh et al., 2010).

Key researchers in this field, such as Barbara Fiese, have also shifted their attention towards exploring how family mealtimes are part of a broader social, economic and cultural context (Fiese, Hammons, & Grigsby-Toussaint, 2012). Their recent health-focused research project observed two hundred family mealtimes (of families with an asthmatic child) and found that families who had a healthy weight child spent more time engaged with each other during the meal, expressed more positive communication and viewed mealtimes as important and meaningful, compared with families that had an overweight child. They concluded that key elements to ensuring a healthy family meal were planning ahead, positive communication and the relative importance placed on this routine by the family members. This finding links with Mamun et al's (2005) research on maternal attitudes which found that mothers who viewed family meals as important were less likely to have an overweight adolescent. Researchers from the Project EAT team (Neumark-Sztainer, Larson, Fulkerson, Eisenberg & Story, 2010) in a decade review of their research on family meals concluded that future research needs to move beyond survey data and gather a variety of information from multiple perspectives:

> While survey data allow for the study of associations between family meals and various outcomes, qualitative research, including in-home observations of family meals, has the potential to inform us about the intricacies of interactions between family members and details on how food is served, what foods are available, and what topics are discussed at meals (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010, p.1119).

This new direction for the Project EAT team reflects an important move away from a reliance on self-report frequency data to a focus on more salient aspects of the meal, such as the interactions, the food choices and the conversation during the meal.

Multiple Perspectives

Historically, research on the family has often relied on a single informant to present the 'family' account, with little appreciation of the diversity of experience within each family group. However, within contemporary family research there has been a growing interest in exploring the family group from multiple perspectives, including the child's, the young person and the father's accounts (which have often been overlooked in favour of maternal accounts). For example Wills (2012) argues that to understand young people's perspectives and to foreground their agency (as argued by James & James, 2004) it is imperative that they are included in the research process using a variety of innovative methods.

In relation to family meal research, there has been a noticeable qualitative focus on seeking multiple perspectives (Kime, 2008, Backett-Milburn et al., 2010, and Owen, Metcalfe, Dryden & Shipton, 2010, Hunt, Faziio, MacKenzie & Moloney, 2011) primarily driven by health concerns, around healthy eating and the rise in childhood obesity. Kime (2008) explored how the family setting influences children's eating behaviours using a qualitative study, utilising focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with three generations of family members (young people, their parents and their grandparents). This qualitative research on obesity and family meals moved away from the standard questionnaire method, enabling Kime to develop an in-depth understanding of the meaning of food and mealtimes within the three family generations that she interviewed. The focus group discussions identified 'order 'as a pivotal concept – the way food is eaten and how eating behaviours develop. Kime differentiated between families who demonstrated a 'high degree of order', who usually ate together on most days in the same place, and families who demonstrated a 'low degree of order', who did not prioritise eating together, often ate different foods, at different times and in different locations in the home. A key finding from

the research in relation to obesity was that eating was found to be a less ordered activity in those family environments with an obese child. Grandparents identified changes in how food was consumed, with a greater level of ordered eating in their generation. They recalled the mealtime routine as an established pattern, constituting the basic framework of their lives, and tended to be at the same time each day, with the same meals served on the same days of the week (Kime, 2008). The interviews identified key differences between families with an obese child and families with a normal weight child, primarily around order. Normal weight children generally ate 3 meals a day, in *an ordered* environment, at a table with family members (although not necessarily with the parents). In contrast the obese children mainly ate in an unstructured family environment, not usually at the table, at different times, in different places. Kime argues that obesity research needs to move away from the current focus on diet and instead needs to focus on eating and the family eating patterns within the home. She concludes that it is the *'how' of eating*, rather than the food itself, that must be the focus if we are to prevent rising levels of childhood obesity.

Backett-Milburn, Wills, Roberts & Lawton (2010) also adopted a multi-person perspective to explore the ways in which social class might influence eating practices and healthy food choices within working class and middle class families. They interviewed two generations - young teenagers (aged thirteen to fifteen years old) and their parents' (predominantly mothers) to obtain multiple accounts of eating practices and food choices within these families. Their research assumed that whilst eating together can help support family identity, this daily routine can also be problematic, particularly within families in which the young person is seeking more independence and autonomy, "the sharing of food in families with young teenagers can highlight tensions and conflict during this phase of the life course when young people seek to become more autonomous" (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010, p.304). Their findings suggested that there were both similarities and differences in eating practices between the different classes. Many of the teenagers perceived having little control over the food they ate within the home, although the working class teenagers appeared to have more autonomy over what and where they ate. The findings also presented a noticeable difference in the parental attitude to junk food, with the middle class parents closely monitoring and restricting junk food intake, whilst the working class parents, whilst not unconcerned, seemed to feel they had less control over their teenagers' diet. Backett-Milburn et al (2010) concluded that the working class parents (predominantly mothers), whilst concerned about their teenagers' diet, had other more important worries about their teenagers' lives and futures, compared to the relatively secure and healthy

environments in which the middle class children were living. This research identifies the importance of exploring social class in relation to food and family life, and encouraged my research design and analysis to reflect on both social class and wider contextual factors.

To address the predominance of mothers' accounts in 'family' food practices, Owen et al (2010) used a qualitative approach to explore fathers' accounts of risk and risk management in family food practices, as part of the Food and Families research programme (Jackson, 2009). They interviewed fathers and their primary school-aged children in three contrasting neighbourhoods in northern England, to capture social class and cultural diversity, and incorporated a visual element into their research by giving the fathers disposable cameras to capture 'aspects of daily life such as routine meals and fridge contents'. The study did find a wide diversity in the circumstances and negotiations around fathers' food practices, proposing that these differences were largely constrained by circumstances. The study also found two common themes from the interviews – all the fathers' expressed a desire through their accounts of their food practices, to have a close relationship with their children and, secondly, few of the fathers voiced anxieties around food provisioning and health (an anxiety very prevalent in maternal accounts).

Another study that focused on eating and beliefs was conducted by Hunt et al (2011), who explored eating and beliefs about family meals, again from a health perspective, but this time focusing solely on young women (aged fifteen to twenty six). The research team undertook qualitative narrative interviews with thirty 'gang-involved' young women and found that whilst many of the young women valued family meals, there were often significant obstacles to eating regularly with their family. A key finding from their research was the importance of understanding food and eating from the young people's perspectives. This position was also adopted by Holsten, Deatrick, Kumanyika, Pinto-Martin & Compher (2012), who explored young people's food choices in the home environment as part of a concurrent mixed methods study. They interviewed forty seven young people aged eleven to fourteen, and concluded that two of the key factors influencing food choices were food preferences and the role of the parent (as a 'gatekeeper' to food). Whilst these two recent qualitative studies focused on the young person's perspective, Berge, Arikian, Doherty & Neumark-Sztainer (2012) emphasised the importance of understanding the whole family perspective. They undertook multifamily focus groups with twenty six families to explore risk and protective factors for healthy eating and physical activity in the home environment:

> Although these results *(collected using quantitative measures)* are important and can help identify risk and protective factors of obesity in the home environment, it is also important to hear from families themselves, including multiple family members instead of just one parent, to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the home environment… (Berge et al., 2012, p. 124)

This research design, of speaking to multiple family members, ensured that different voices were heard in the research process and enabled the researchers to present a more complete view of healthy eating and physical activity within each family group. The families were asked: what challenges they faced in helping their children eat healthily and be physically active: what successes they had had in relation to healthy eating and physical activity; and what suggestions could they make for children and parents in general. It is of note that whilst the research was presented as 'multifamily focus groups', the first two research questions were worded towards the parental viewpoint. Ten themes were identified in the analysis, linked to the three research questions. In relation to the challenges the focus group participants spoke about time constraints, accessibility to healthy foods and young people's developmental age being key factors. Individual investment in healthy behaviour and family investment (such as rules about television time) were viewed as key determinants of success. And the family members mentioned family lifestyle, making healthy eating part of the family routine, parental modelling, making healthy behaviours fun, and involving the whole family in regular family meals as suggestions they could make to other families. The study concluded that the family system had a major influence on the health behaviours in the home environment and family meal routines were a key factor in helping families to eat more healthily.

4.6 Conclusion

Family meal research has explored a number of divergent areas such as frequency patterns, the effects of changing lifestyles (such as increased parental employment and changing family structures) on family meal patterns and the links between regular family meals and adolescent health and well-being. The data from large-scale studies, both national and international, on family meal patterns reflects a complex picture, with the most prevalent frequency pattern is 42 to 48 per cent of a sample reporting daily family meals, with 57 to 75 per cent of young people (or their parents) reporting five or more family meals per week. Whilst it is difficult to establish if family meal frequency is on the decline without accurate historical records, the available statistics would indicate that a large majority of young

people eat a regular family meal – defined as five or more times per week. However the statistics also suggest that a sizeable minority of young people do not.

Despite the large data sets available on family meal frequency, direct comparison between the research findings remains difficult due to a number of factors, such as how the concept of family meal was operationalised, the sampling framework adopted and the inclusion or lack of contextual data. Whilst much attention has been given to family meal frequency patterns, other dimensions of the family meal are important to consider too, such as the composition (who is present), the timing (when they happen), the location (at the table or elsewhere) and the content (both what is prepared and eaten and the emotional climate). Neumark-Sztainer et al (2010) in a summary of the Project EAT research findings, argue that future research needs to establish what is happening within the family meal routine to provide insight into the apparent associations with various outcome measures.

The research presented in this chapter would suggest that the 'iconic' family meal, conceptualised by Ochs & Shohet (2006) as parents and children happily eating together a healthy home-cooked meal around a table, at the same time each day, is no longer the normative pattern. The family meal research indicates that meals are eaten with a variety of family members, sometimes at different times (due to employment patterns or out of school activities) and different locations (table, sofa, bedroom) and the food can be home cooked, partially prepared or ready-meals. However many of the studies reported in this chapter have not collected data on all of these dimensions, resulting in only a partial understanding of family meal patterns. Drawing on previous work, this research aims to use a mixed methods approach to understand the role of family mealtimes in family life. Quantitative questionnaire data will provide the study with contextual information, allowing comparisons to be drawn with other studies, in relation to family meal patterns. Then qualitative interviews with multiple family members will explore the underlying meanings and family processes that occur during the family meal, providing a richer context in which to understand the potentially protective factors of this daily routine.

Chapter 5 Methodology and Conceptual Approach

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological considerations within this study beginning with an explanation of how the term 'family meal' was conceptualised. The chapter then presents a summary of family process theory and explains how this conceptual framework informed each stage of the research process, from the design of the study and the research aims, to the research approach and the analysis of the data.

Family meals are complex events for family groups that enable different family members to experience their family as a social group but also as a set of unique individuals. As discussed in Chapter 2, the term 'family meal' has often been used as a homogenous concept, with little understanding of the considerable variation that occurs within different family experiences. Guided by family process theory, this study conceptualised family meals as being composed of different emotional elements and sets of behaviours, which may include shopping for food, preparing/cooking food, sitting together, eating the food, and spending time with each other. By utilising a broad definition of family meals, this study was able to focus on the family processes that occur during each of these stages, rather than simply focusing on the consumption of a meal. Subsequently the analysis was able to explore each component of the food provisioning process and consider variations in the meanings given to these different elements.

Early in the study design the decision was made to avoid the term 'family meal' with the participants as I felt that this term was value-laden conveying an implicit assumption as to how families should behave. To avoid this issue I used the term 'food and eating in the family home' when asking participants about their eating experiences. This decision was guided by an awareness from the literature (for example Ochs et al., 2010) that family meals vary in terms of their temporal dimension, their composition and their spatial dimension: for some families food may be a quick snack whilst for others it may be a prolonged meal with three or more courses; some families eat individually, whilst other families may tend to eat together, or choose to alternate between individual and family meals; and meals may be eaten in different locations (at the table, on the sofa, in the bedroom, on the floor). Thus for some families meals may involve a predictable, organised, clear sequences of behaviours (a family meal routine) whilst for other families eating may be a more fluid and open experience. The extent to which family members co-construct this experience and create a meal is a mixture of individual agency and social structure.

When individuals eat in a family group they behave and interact in particular ways, both as an individual and as part of a social group, and they experience a variety of emotional feelings. This study conceptualised these behaviours and feelings as a form of 'family process' (Day, 2010) and aimed to conduct an in-depth exploration of the family processes connected to family meals, both from the individual and family perspective.

5.2 Research Aims and Questions

As outlined in Chapter 1, the main aim of this study was to explore the underlying family processes that occur during mealtimes, using the framework of family process theory. A key focus was to understand the family meal from the mother's, father's and the young person's perspective – counter-balancing the previous research focus on the 'parental' perspective, which by default has usually been the mother's voice (for example Boutelle, et al., 2001; Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2006). Research to date has repeatedly reported associations between young people's well-being and regular family meals (Hamilton, 2009), but the reasons for these correlations remain unclear. Therefore for this study the research aims were to:

a. Explore the underlying family processes within a family meal
b. Compare and contrast the different family members perceptions of and meanings given to family meals (both within and between families)
c. Explore the themes of gender and generation in relation to family meals
d. Identify contemporary family meal patterns in this East Anglian sample

The primary research question was 'How do the different family members perceive the underlying family processes that occur during a family meal?' The research focused on both the similarities and differences *within* family accounts (between mother, father and young person) and also the similarities and differences *between* family accounts (that is between the mothers, the fathers and the young people). The goal of my research was to provide insight into this everyday activity from multiple perspectives to help shape policy and offer guidance to families.

5.3 Conceptual framework

This study took an interpretive and exploratory approach to exploring the hard-to-access interior of family life (Gabb, 2008), acknowledging that reality is multi-layered and open to a variety of interpretations. Thus the study aimed to explore the different family members'

perceptions of the mealtime to try and uncover both the individual and the family meanings attributed to their evening mealtime experiences. Adopting a psychosocial approach, which emphasises the social context of development within psychology and focuses on processes rather than structures and meanings from multiple levels of analysis, I was interested in both the individual accounts of mealtimes and also how the mealtime context influenced the relationships within the family and shaped the family group.

A central requirement of good qualitative research is that the epistemological and theoretical position of the researcher is made explicit to enable the reader to understand what assumptions have informed the research and the analysis. This research is situated within a subjectivist epistemology (Daly, 2007), in which I acknowledge that I have affected the research process by the focus, theoretical perspective and interpretations I have chosen to make. I would position my research nearer the centre of the objectivist-subjectivist continuum, as whilst adopting a subjectivist position, I also believe that there are shared meanings that can be understood and known (Daly, 2007). Within my research the families may identify shared meanings around mealtime routines, which I perceived as a form of shared subjective reality for that family. Taking this approach I adopted an epistemological position identified as social constructionism, which assumes that all 'facts' are socially constructed, based on socially available, shared understandings of reality (Burr, 2003). According to this perspective, how we come to understand our world is through the process of social interaction, thus "meaning-making" is an interactive process (Gergen, 1985). The primary focus of my research was the way the individual family members constructed the meaning of their own everyday realities, with an awareness that this reality was fluid and subject to interpretation, and was also influenced by my presence in the research encounter. So rather than focus on 'what happened' I was more interested in how the different family members presented and interpreted these events. As social constructionism acknowledges that reality can be represented in multiple ways with the potential for many interpretations, then the differing versions of "reality" presented to me by the different family members, was accommodated and framed as rich and meaningful.

Within the field of family theories, family process theory focuses on how families interact in the everyday surroundings of their own homes, focusing on the 'myriad of small events' that take place within the 'normal' context of daily life (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Thus family processes can be defined as "…the strategies and daily sequences of behaviour employed by family members to achieve goals" (Day, 2010, p.6). Family process theory has been

influenced by family systems thinking, which itself has evolved from systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968). Systems theory assumes that all systems are governed by certain rules, they have boundaries which are semi-permeable and communication and feedback mechanisms are important parts of the system. Systems are purposeful, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and the causality within the system is circular rather than linear, and systems are made up of various subsystems, which are all part of a larger suprasystem (Barker, 1992). Family systems' thinking has adopted many of the ideas and concepts from systems theory, whilst distancing itself from the mathematical focus of the original model. Thus within family systems thinking, the family is viewed as a collection of interacting systems and subsystems using selected strategies to achieve both individual and family goals, by establishing boundaries and regulating the distance between family members and others,

> ...the family is an example of an open, on-going, goal-seeking, self-regulating, social system...that shares the features of all such systems. In addition, certain features – such as its unique structuring of gender and generation – set it apart from other social systems. (Broderick, 1993, p.37)

The five major components of family process theory, as conceptualised by Kantor & Lehr (1975) are: the family system and the subsystems: the access dimensions of space, time and energy and the related mechanisms, the target dimensions of affect, power and meaning, the three family process types and the "interactional system of four player parts'" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, p.221).

A central concept within family systems thinking is the notion of interacting systems, subsystems and suprasystems, and how the relationships are managed between these differing systems. Within a family an individual can belong to a variety of systems at the same time: the family system, the parental subsystem, the parent-child subsystem, and part of wider suprasystems, such as extended family, school, community, and the workplace. Kantor & Lehr (1975) conceptualise these different subsystems as the *family-unit* subsystem, the *interpersonal* subsystems (such as the siblings, the parents) and the *personal* subsystems (of the individual). These subsystems may interact cooperatively, sharing a collective responsibility for developing and maintaining relationships, but also act competitively with one another, to achieve their own goals of affect, power and meaning (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). In relation to family goals, system thinking suggests that all families pursue targets, by selecting what they want, mobilizing support, deciding how to achieve

the goals and monitoring progression. However Broderick (1993) notes that unlike other systems, family goals are more complex, they can alter through the life span, and are not always agreed upon by all the family members. Thus families can differ in how they perceive goals, commit to them and invest time and energy in achieving them. These different perceptions can create family goal hierarchies, with higher level goals becoming more robust and defining the priorities among lower level goals. According to Kantor & Lehr (1975) to achieve identified goals, each family system can adopt selected strategies – recurring patterns of interactional sequences, enabling an exploration of the dynamics of family behaviour, "We define a family strategy as a purposive pattern of moves toward a target or goal made by two or more people who are systematically bound in a social-biological arrangement" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, p.18).

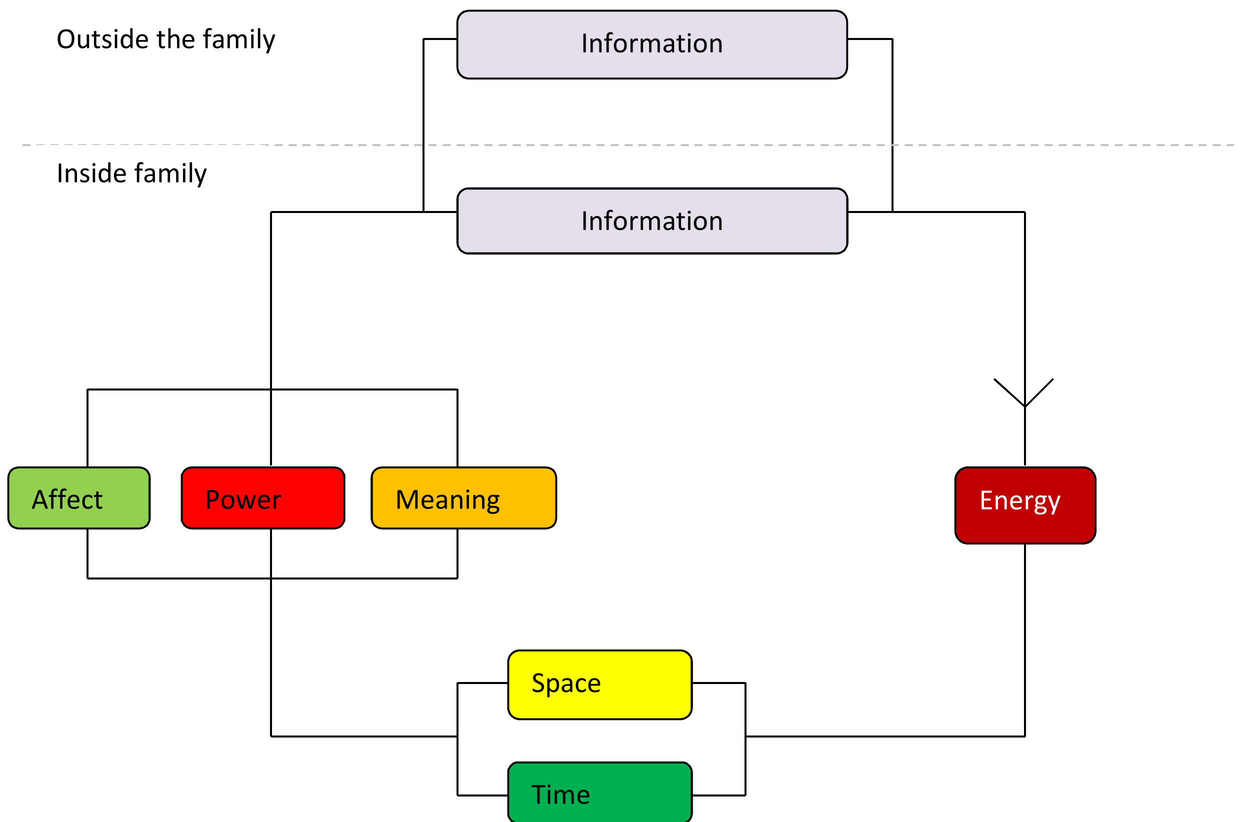

Figure 5.1 Self-regulating model of six dimensional goal-seeking activity (Kantor & Lehr, 1975)

Family strategies have five key features: they are purposive, family members are aware of them, they are a process of collaboration, they adopt shared responsibilities for their outcomes and they allow for contingencies in the playing of parts (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Most family strategies can be classified under one of three headings – maintenance (preserving existing relationships), stress (dealing with tensions among the parts) and

repair (altering or reconstructing the relationships as necessary). All three types of family strategies can be conceptualised as complex distance-regulating operations.

Access dimensions describe the physical aspects of family experience such as space, time and energy. Family members seek certain goals of affect (a sense of loving and being loved), power (the freedom to decide and get what an individual wants) and meaning (linked to defining personal identity and helping an individual to define reality). The access dimensions of space, time and energy are the physical media through which we achieve these goals (see fig. 5.1), "Through the transmission of matter and information, via energy, in time and space, family members regulate each other's access to the targets of affect, power and meaning" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, p. 39). According to this model the access dimensions of space, time and energy are fundamentally important as these are "... the spheres of activity in which family process takes place" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, p. 40). The following section will define these three access dimensions and outline the family mechanisms that support, defend and implement the family interactions within these three dimensions.

The first access dimension to consider is space, both interior and exterior spaces, with the key question being how does a family defend its territories and regulate 'optimal' spatial relationships of closeness and distance between each family member (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, p.42).

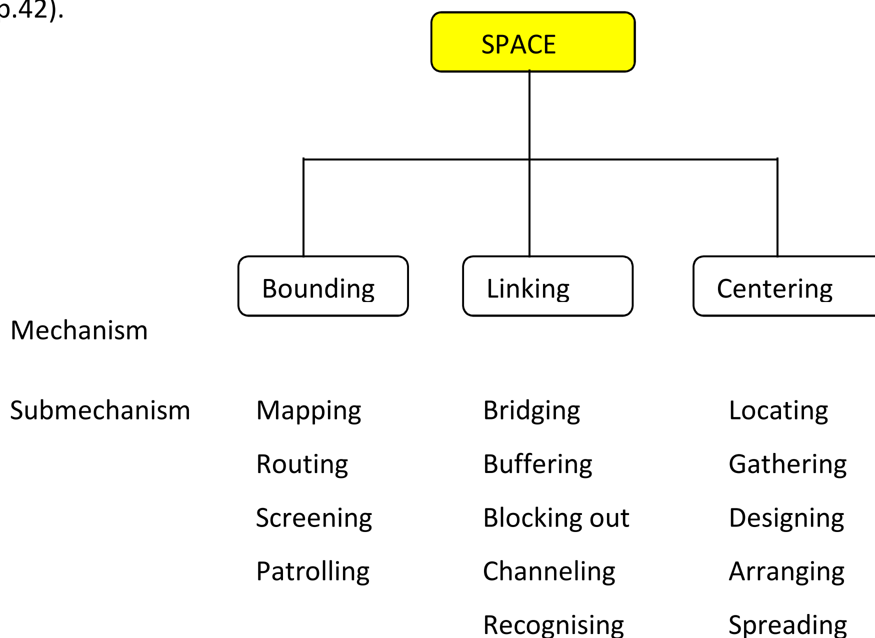

Figure 5.2 Mechanisms and submechanisms of the space access dimension (adapted from Kantor & Lehr, 1975)

An important goal for the family system is for the individual members to feel safe within the systems social space, to create a 'safety zone', which can be between the family-unit system and the external system, or between the interpersonal and personal subsystems. Thus within a family home certain areas can become particularly important for family subsystems, such as the parents' bedroom for the parental subsystem or potentially the parent-child subsystem. These areas can become *central* (spatial] *regions* in which family members interact in intimate and meaningful ways. To support, defend and implement family interactions, spatial mechanisms include bounding, linking and centering. Within this model, bounding is a mechanism by which families establish and maintain their territory within the wider social system, usually linked to safety, and includes the sub-mechanisms of mapping, routing, screening, and patrolling. Mapping involves identifying safe areas outside of the family space, routing is the way in which family members are instructed to move through these outside spaces, screening refers to the ways in which family members filter incoming and outgoing movement, and patrolling identifies the process by which the family 'guards' the flow of movements between the family system and the wider community. Linking is the regulating of distance, and includes the sub-mechanisms of bridging, buffering, blocking out, channelling and recognising. Bridging is a mechanism for bringing people closer together, both physically and conceptually, whilst buffering is the opposite of bridging, and includes activities such as avoiding family members. Blocking out includes being ignored and can be both obvious and covert, whilst channeling involves coercively bringing together family members. Finally recognising is the submechanism of noticing the linking phenomenon present in the family system. 'Centering' is the development, maintenance and transmission of spatial guidelines and includes the sub-mechanisms of locating, gathering, designing, arranging and spreading. Locating is the referencing mechanisms whereby families can identify what is working well in the family in relation to spatial access and what might need to change, gathering is simply the mechanism of bringing the family together, designing refers to how the family identifies its desired space, and how family members move between the different spaces both within and outside of the family system. Arranging is how the family responds to the family's spatial design, in terms of day to day living, and finally the spreading mechanism focuses on how the family members disseminate the agreed space dimension to all the members.

The second access dimension to address is time, with the central question being, 'how is time to be used?' Kantor & Lehr (1975) argue that it is the temporal elements of family life

that are closely linked with individuals' satisfaction. Family process theory focuses on the temporal mechanisms and sub-mechanisms by which family members move in phase and out of phase with each other, focusing on orienting, clocking and synchronizing. Orienting is the focusing of attitudes and behaviours towards the past present and the future, and includes along with past, present and future orienting, the sub-mechanism of integrating, which enables families to organise their experiences. Clocking is the regulation of time, and involves the sub-mechanisms of sequencing, frequency setting, duration setting, pacing and scheduling. Sequencing is used by families to create and maintain an order to their daily lives and activities, frequency and duration settings are submechanisms linked to how often events are repeated and how long they last, pacing refers to the speed with which family members do things and finally scheduling relates to how families regulate their time (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

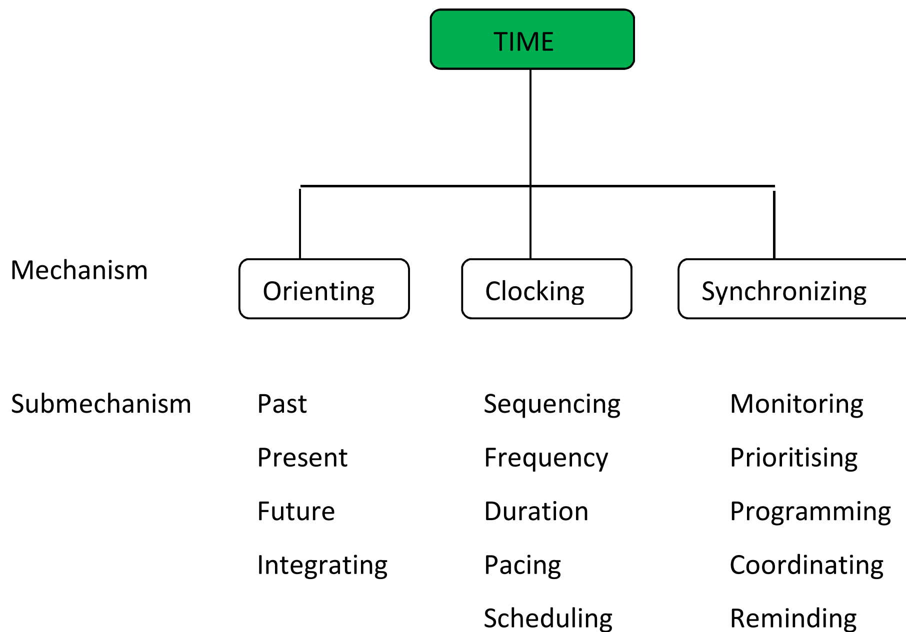

Figure 5.3 Mechanisms and submechanisms of the time access dimension (adapted from Kantor & Lehr, 1975)

Synchronizing is the mechanism by which families co-ordinate their time to achieve the maximum amount of time to do what they want to do, for example, whether that is having 'quality family time' or personal time. The submechanisms include monitoring, priority setting, programming, coordinating and reminding. Whilst monitoring time use and setting priorities for what the family perceives to be an important use of time, programming refers to the way families decide to use time. Coordinating refers to the ways in which families

attempt to implement their plans for spending time together and reminding links to the way families reinforce the family decisions made regarding priorities and programming.

The third access dimension identified by Kantor & Lehr (1975) is energy, a difficult term to conceptualise but reflects the mechanisms and strategies families use to regulate and balance the flow of individual energies. According to Kantor & Lehr (1975) energy is both static (stored) energy and kinetic (expending) energy and all families are constantly involved in a process of charging (accumulating) and discharging (spending) energy. A central challenge for all families is the need for balance, because using up too much energy can lead to feelings of depletion and depression, whilst accumulating energy, with no expenditure, can lead to a family feeling jammed and frustrated. Thus the energy dimension is supported, defended and implemented by the mechanisms of fueling, investing and mobilizing. Fueling focuses on how energy is acquired and includes the submechanisms of surveying, tapping, charging, storing and requisitioning. Surveying involves the looking for energy sources, tapping submechanism focuses on attempts to link up with the identified energy source, whilst charging is simply the taking in of energy, and storing is the development of a surplus energy store for future use, and requisitioning involves the planning of how to deal with family energy levels. Investing focuses on how energy is expended and recharged and includes the submechanisms of reconnoitering, attaching, committing, detaching and accounting.

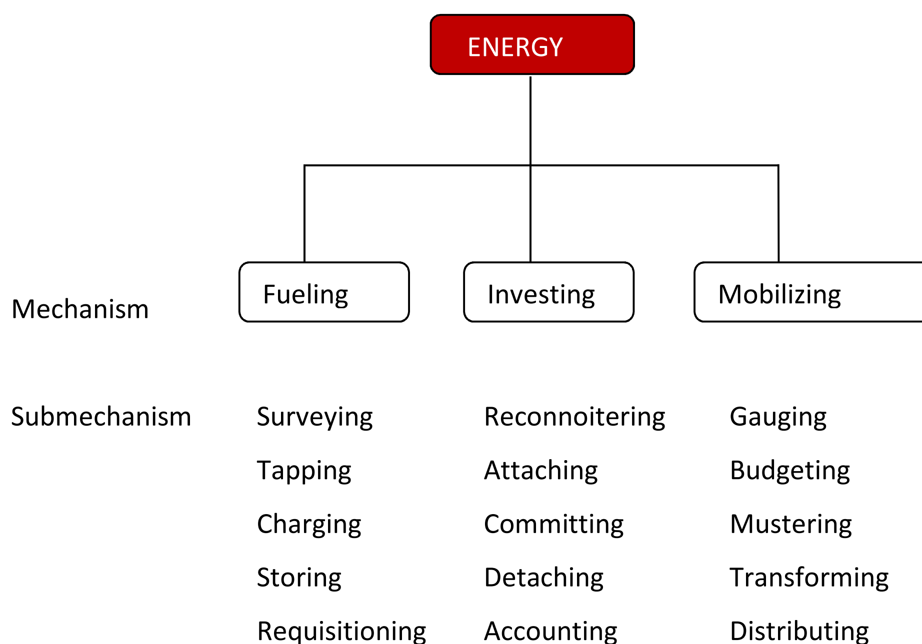

Figure 5.4 Mechanisms and submechanisms of the energy access dimension (adapted from Kantor & Lehr 1975)

Reconnoitering is the submechanism by which families identify potential targets to expend energy, attaching is the way in which families direct their energies towards the identified targets, committing is the 'devotion of energy to targets', detaching is when an individual removes energy from the target and accounting is the way in which family members keep track of energy expenditure. Mobilizing is the mechanism by which families develop guidelines for the regulation of energy within the family system and decide what levels are acceptable. The submechanisms include gauging, budgeting, mustering, transforming, and distributing. Gauging relates to how the family identifies how much energy is needed, budgeting is how the families regulate the flow of energy in and out of the family system, mustering is the process by which families focus their energy in times of stress, transforming is the submechanism through which families can change the level, form and charge of their energies, and distributing links to how energy is moved around the family system (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

As outlined above, target dimensions are the third component of family process theory. These can be conceptualised as the abstract general goals which the family system strives for. Kantor & Lehr (1975) identify three target dimensions - Affect, Power and Meaning - and within each target dimension there are sub-targets which are less abstract and more visible in the family's day to day interactions. Affect refers to how the family system creates intimacy and nurturance through emotional support and encouragement. Linked to this dimension is the process by which the family determines how its members shall 'join' and 'separate' from one another (in distance-regulation terms), an on-going process within a constantly changing family dynamic. The sub-targets within this dimension include seeking physical pleasure and demonstrating loyalty and generosity. The second target dimension of power reflects the family goal of having the freedom to decide what it wants and then being able to achieve that goal. Within the family, power relations focus on both freedom and restraint, that is the extent to which the individual members are able to move freely or are restrained, both physically and metaphorically, by the family system. Power issues within the family include rights and responsibilities, decision making, and status, and can be used by individual members to control the individual family members, "By means of its power relations, then, a family demands, rewards, protects, punishes, and tries generally to shape the social traffic of its members" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975, p. 50). The sub-targets within the power dimension include acquiring objects and striving after discipline and liberation.

The third target dimension of meaning relates to how both the family system and the individual create a purposeful identity, through which they have self-knowledge of both their individual identity and their family identity. This dimension incorporates all the actions and communications which relate to ideas about the family and the various worlds (social, spiritual, material) in which they interact. It includes the desire to establish ideas, values, ideologies, morals, leading to an integrated sense of direction and destination. The development of a family identity is influenced by the extent to which the ideas and meanings are shared by the individual family members. As Kantor & Lehr (1975) note the concept of 'shared' or 'unshared' meanings is not an evaluative term as too much shared meanings can be oppressive. The sub—targets within this dimension include seeking ideological solidarity and striving for uniqueness and integrity. In relation to distance regulations the three target dimensions can be conceptualised as regulating different aspects of the family's interior social space – the affect dimension regulates lateral transactions, the power dimension regulates vertical transactions and the meaning dimension regulates the depth axis within the family's interior social space (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

Every system has a boundary which clearly differentiates who is inside and who is not, by restricted emotional interchange (Barker, 1992). A central focus of family process theory (and systems thinking) is how families establish and maintain boundaries. The generational alliance principle suggests that boundaries between parents and children are natural and desirable, with the maintenance of clear boundaries leading to 'healthy' development of the members of the family, whilst blurred boundaries may interfere with 'healthy' development. The exact mechanism by which these boundaries are established and maintained is complex, though the assumption is that clear and effective communication plays a major role in this process. Families vary in the extent to which their boundaries are permeable - some families have very closed boundaries, and can become isolated from the wider social environment, whilst other families may have very open boundaries, and can be heavily influenced by the wider social environment (Barker, 1992). The reason for this difference could be linked to the principle of perceived threat – that is the extent to which the family system perceives the wider social world to be dangerous (Broderick, 1993). Kantor & Lehr (1975) in their observational research on 19 families identified three types of family system – closed, open, and random. In the closed-type family space is fixed, time is regular and energy is regular, in the open-type family space is moveable, time is variable

and energy is flexible, and in the random-type family space is dispersed, time is irregular and energy is fluctuating.

Whilst family boundaries can be physical, such as a locked front door, boundaries can also be symbolic, often only identified once they have been transgressed by non-family. Thus family boundaries refer to both actual spatial territory and also to an expansive symbolic territory, conceptualised as the *family domain* (Broderick, 1993). This can include spatial and temporal territories, the meanings attached to these territories, material and personal assets, the meanings attached to these assets, the family's life style, and the family's world view. Maintaining these selectively permeable boundaries can require keeping unwanted elements out (protective territoriality) as well as preserving family assets (possessive restrictiveness) (Broderick, 1993).

Distance regulation, both physical and social, is a principle element of family process theory, concerned with the shifting metaphorical balance between connection and separation. Family process theory focuses on the balance between two opposing forces - the 'bonding forces' that enable intimacy between family members and the 'buffering' forces that insulate them from one another and create a space for individuality. By regulating the system boundaries, families are able to successfully achieve this distance regulation balance, enabling family members to experience both a sense of self and a sense of connection to others. Whilst affect (creating intimacy and nurturance) is a key target dimension for family systems, 'over-connection', often defined as 'enmeshment' (Minuchin, 1974) is perceived as dangerous in terms of family well-being. Stress occurs in the family whenever different distance regulation patterns compete, thus for Kantor & Lehr (1975), a key question is "… how does a family regulate distance among its own members?" (p.41). According to Day (2010) a key process for families is to encourage and foster individuality, although it is important to acknowledge that this individualistic position might be at odds with more collectivist cultures. Within western culture, an important psychological task as children move into adolescence is the search for independence and identity that is to separate from family of origin. Day (2010) suggests that clear, negotiated, levels of differentiation in a family are more likely to produce teenagers who can build strong relationships with others and have fewer psychological, academic and relationship problems. Bartle-Haring, Younkin & Day (2012) explored how family distance regulation and other family demographic factors influenced parenting behaviour and family routines, focusing on child's school engagement. They used a multi-person perspective, interviewing

where possible mother, father and ten to fourteen year old son/daughter and concluded that distance regulation was a foundational family process that supported other behaviours and family interactions.

In relation to this study, the analysis focused on how the everyday interactions around food and eating in the home enabled the family members to achieve the goals of affect, power and meaning, via the access dimensions of space, time and energy. For example access dimensions focused on: how the location of the meal and/or the family seating positions within a meal were negotiated (space); the family rhythms around this recurring daily event and how this time requirement was managed and negotiated (time); and the levels of energy required from the different subsystems to balance and sustain the energy expenditure required for family food and eating (energy). Interacting with these access dimensions, the target dimensions of family process theory focused on: how intimacy and emotional support were conveyed within mealtime interactions (affect); how individual family members were able to move freely, or are restrained, within the family system (power); and how the families developed a 'purposeful family identity', of shared and unshared meanings, alongside their integrated individual identity's (meaning) (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

5.4 Research Approach

The choice of methods within this study was guided by the conceptual framework of family process theory, which aimed to explore the underlying family processes within the mealtime interactions. As these processes are not always explicit, I choose to utilise in-depth semi-structured interviews, within the family home, to aim for rich data from the multiple family members. The decision to use a semi-structured interview format was taken to ensure that certain key areas were covered, such as a detailed consideration of the last meal eaten, general food provisioning activities and roles and childhood experiences of food and eating in the family home (see Appendix XIII for interview prompts). The advantages of interviewing the family in the family home, was that I was able to see the family in their natural environment, and understand the home and the room layout (including where they usually ate their meals). As Huntley (2008) found, "Being able to place the respondent's comments within the context of the physical home environment provided a greater understanding of the factors driving behaviours" (Huntley 2008, p. 26). However, I was aware that I was unlikely to see the full range of family life, and instead would be observing whatever the family chose to show me. This links with

Goffman's (1959) ideas of the presentation of self, with the family members providing a 'performance' front stage for myself as the audience, with limited access to the 'backstage behaviours' (Smith, 2006). This also links with Finch's (2007) ideas on 'displaying family' and 'doing family'. Finch defines 'display' as, "the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant others that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships" (Finch, 2007, p.73). She argued that there are certain circumstances where the need for display becomes more intense, usually when families are in transition. It could be argued that during the adolescent period, when the qualitative nature of the parent-child relationship is changing, and young people and parents are renegotiating their interactions and relationships, these family 'displays' become more apparent. Thus during the visits to the family home to conduct the interviews, it may be that the family 'displays' to myself as a researcher, were particularly intense. Any researcher entering the privacy of the family home must acknowledge that families are likely to have a sense of what the researcher wants to see and hear, and thus may be anxious to present the picture of a healthy, happy family unit (Jordan, 2006). One way to reduce this constraint was to consider how I positioned myself and my research. Jordan (2006) suggests that presenting oneself as a 'student' helps create the position of a non-judgemental observer, who is there to learn as part of their education. Adopting this idea, I emphasised that I was conducting this research as part of my PhD, and was happy to take the role of naive student.

To enhance the quality of the interviews, and provide the young people with agency in the research process, I also choose to incorporate a visual element into the study, by using participant created photographs. Initially I had considered using video footage of a family meal (taken without the researcher present), guided by the research undertaken by Barbara Fiese, in the US, who has been advocating the use of video footage to code mealtime behaviours, using pre-coded measures such as the McMaster Mealtime Family Interaction Coding System (MICS) (Jacobs & Fiese, 2007). However as my research had a more exploratory orientation, aiming to explore the family processes within the mealtime interactions, this no longer fitted with my research aims. An important element of the research process is to maintain a flexible design, so I decided to adopt an alternative visual element to my mixed methods approach, by the use of photo elicitation. Owen et al (2010) used photographs in their research on fathers and family food practices, giving fathers and young people disposable cameras to capture aspects of daily life such as routine meals. The advantage of this visual method was that it allowed the fathers and young people to

provide a visual representation of their family meal, and proved to be a useful starting point for the in-depth interviews, enhancing the depth and encouraging richer and more meaningful accounts. Adopting this rationale, digital cameras were given to the young people during the first meeting to take photos of 'food and meals in the family home'. These images were then printed onto colour A4 paper, which I showed to each family member at the start of the semi-structured interview, in the order in which they had been taken. The use of the photographs to begin the interview created a relaxed and informal atmosphere, as the early stages of the interview were focused on the photographs rather than on the interviewee, which Epstein et al (2006, p.8) found particularly important in their research with young people. The use of photo elicitation also led to quite deep and meaningful comments in several of the interviews. As Harper (2002) notes, "...photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews" (Harper 2002, p. 22). Another benefit of giving the digital cameras to the young people was that it empowered them in the research process as they were able to select and choose which images to take. This method also engaged them with a technology that young people are increasingly becoming more familiar and comfortable with, as many now have mobile phones with digital cameras, which they take photos with and upload and share regularly onto social networking sites (Roberts et al., 2005).

As the study evolved, another visual element was incorporated into my research with the creation of hand sketched floor plans of the family eating spaces. After the family interviews I reflected on the knowledge I had of how space was used within the family homes for food and eating, and decided to sketch out floor plans to add another layer of meaning to my developing analysis. Whilst not routinely used in research on family life, the use of floor plans enabled me to reflect upon how the family members negotiated space within their homes – acknowledging that 'space' was one of the three access dimensions, along with 'time and 'energy' through which family members were able to achieve their family goals (of affect, power and meaning). My approach was influenced by the work of White (1976) who used roughly sketched floor plans of childhood mealtimes, including seating positions, as a tool to explore participants' earliest memories of family life and family interactions. More recently, Graesch (2004) examined how families spatially locate their everyday activities and interactions in the home environment, such as where they prepare and eat meals and Gabb (2008) pioneered the use of emotion maps to provide a starting point for her participants to discuss their recent feelings and emotional experiences within the family home. Her method involved the researcher or participant

sketching out a floor plan of the family home, then copies were given to each family member with emotion stickers, and over the week family members placed stickers on their map to spatially locate relational encounters. Within my study, these visual floor plans were used alongside the interview data and the photographs to add depth to my analysis, and were used to confirm, elaborate, complement or contradict the data gathered from the photographs and the interviews (O'Connell, 2013). The final method within this mixed method design was questionnaire data collected via three secondary school year groups, to provide contextual data on family meal patterns, from a macro level of analysis. Whilst not directly gathering data on family processes, this method addressed the research aim of identifying contemporary family meal patterns and importantly provided a sub-sample for the main study - an approach utilised by Hunt, Fazio, MacKenzie & Moloney (2011), to explore eating and beliefs about family meals with gang-involved young women.

The use of mixed methods is increasingly becoming more apparent in research, due to its ability to provide a more detailed picture of the area of interest, within real-life contexts. Gabb (2008) highlights the value of using a variety of mixed methods to enhance our understanding of the interior of the family, "...the combination of layer upon layer of mixed methods data captures the complexity of everyday family relationships" (Gabb, 2008, p.167). Similarly, Mason (2006) emphasises the value of exploring social lives on both macro and micro levels, arguing that lived experience transcends these social constructions, and is lived simultaneously on both levels. As Mason (2006) argues social experience and lived realities are multi-dimensional so "…our understandings are impoverished and may be inadequate if we view these phenomena only along a single dimension" (Mason, 2006, p. 10). It was important to acknowledge that tensions can emerge from using and integrating a mixed methods approach, linked to the different theoretical backgrounds from which the research has emerged, but this tension is not insurmountable. For Mason (1996), the key to integrating any methods is to be clear about the goals of research and to understand the implications of combining the methods.

The research aim was to identify contemporary family meal patterns in this small East Anglian sample, so the questionnaire data was entered into SPSS, a statistical computer package for the social sciences, and basic descriptives and cross tabs were conducted. The choice of statistical analysis was limited due to the nature of the categorical variables, which limit more advanced statistical analysis. So for this data set the chi-square test was used to analyse the relationship between the reported family meal frequency and age,

gender, family structure, parental employment, location of evening meal, frequency of television meals and composition of evening meal (who they usually ate with).

For the interview data, thematic analysis was selected to identify, analyse and interpret patterns and themes within the rich data set from the individual family interviews, “Thematic analysis is a flexible method, not tied to a particular theoretical or epistemological position that can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). For my research it was essential that the analytical method was able to capture the complex data, both within and between families, in a rich and detailed way, without losing the intimacies of the family accounts. I was not expecting the themes to ‘emerge’ as this suggests a passive account of the process of analysis and does not acknowledge my role in identifying the patterns and themes. Within my social constructionist position I acknowledged my role in creating or co-constructing the data, and the active role I had in this process. Additionally I had to be aware of the power imbalance within the interview relationship, and whilst I tried to minimise this and position myself as an appreciative researcher, my position within the University inevitably created a power differential (which was notably more apparent in some of the interviews). Within my analysis, I had to be explicit about what themes I have assumed are of interest, and what I had chosen to select and co-construct. The prevalence of a theme is often a key determinant, but as Braun and Clarke (2006) note prevalence is not always indicative of a crucial theme, and my judgement as a researcher was needed. I also had to decide whether I wanted to focus on obtaining a rich description of the data or whether I wanted to focus on a detailed account of one particular aspect. My research aimed to explore in depth the complexity of the underlying family processes linked to the family mealtime, so I decided to focus on these particular areas within the analysis, to allow for my interpretation of the data.

With regards to the type of thematic analysis I chose to undertake both *theoretical* and *inductive thematic* analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical thematic analysis was sensitised to the family processes within the mealtime interactions, alongside issues of gender and power, whilst the inductive thematic analysis was undertaken to explore less tangible elements of family life, such as how the family members negotiated meaning during these interactions. I also chose to explore *latent (interpretive*) themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to enable me to look beyond the surface meaning of the data and offer interpretations regarding the significance of the pattern and their broader meanings and

implications (linked to previous literature). For my research, my focus on the meanings of the family meal required me to identify latent themes, as the meanings within any family is not always so apparent on the surface and involves interpretation from the researcher, constructing meaning.

5.5 Conclusion

To address the primary research aim of exploring the underlying family processes within a family meal, family process theory was adopted as the theoretical framework. This theory then informed each stage of the research process – from the design of the study, the choice of the research population, the choice of research methods and the theoretical thematic analysis. It was important for this study that the term ‘family meal’ was carefully conceptualised to capture all the family processes involved in food provisioning, from deciding what to eat to finally eating the food, and clearing away. The initial research design was revised after piloting, with the final mixed methods study incorporating: a school-based questionnaire on family meal patterns and socio-demographic data from 14-15 year olds; in-depth semi-structured interviews in the family home with twelve families; participant created photographs of food and eating in the family home; and hand sketched floor plans of the family home identifying the eating locations of each family member, based on the interview accounts. This research process is explained in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Research Design

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed consideration of the research process, beginning with an account of the research population and the rationale for selecting this group. The chapter then outlines the research design with a procedural account of how the questionnaires and interviews were implemented, and subsequently how the data was analysed. Throughout the study there were major ethical issues that needed to be considered and addressed, and the chapter concludes with a consideration of the importance of being reflective throughout the whole research process

6.2 Research Population

The rationale for the research population for the interviews was guided by the conceptual framework of family process theory. This theoretical approach has emerged from systems thinking which highlights the importance of exploring multiple parts of the 'system' rather than focusing on individual components (White & Klein, 2008). Within family research the theoretical focus and research interest is on the multiple members within this family system, so the inclusion criteria for the interviews was three family members (mother, father and young person) and the young person needed to be aged between 14 and 15 years old. Consequently lone parent families and same sex couple headed families were excluded from the interview stage of the study.

During the recruitment stage, a mother from a same sex couple headed family did phone me to volunteer to take part in the study. I explained to her that this study was focusing on maternal and paternal accounts, but thanked her for contacting me and asked if I could keep her contact details on file for future research, which she readily agreed to. Whilst I am very aware that family groups take a diverse form in contemporary society, as discussed in chapter 2, the decision to only study opposite sex couple headed families was taken to ensure that fathers' voices were heard and to allow for comparison between families in relation to gender. Past research on family meals has often identified 'parental' views, which on closer examination have predominantly been the 'mother' (for example Fulkerson et al, 2006, 82% mothers, and Boutelle et al., 2001, 83.7% mothers). As discussed in chapter 3, this gender division reflects how family research over the last few decades has focused on 'mothering', with fathers and younger family members' voices often not being sought or heard. More recently there has been a shift to utilise multiple informants (Becher, 2008; Gabb, 2008) with an awareness of the richer data obtained from multiple

perspectives. As Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb (2000) note, "... understanding fathers and family life is enhanced by obtaining different family members' perspectives" (Marsiglio et al., 2000, p. 1180).

A sample size of twelve families was selected (producing thirty seven interviews) as it was felt that this number could capture a range and diversity that exists in the population, which is the objective of qualitative sampling (Mason, 1996). From the families who volunteered for the interview stage of the research, I aimed to recruit an equal number of families with a 15 year old son or daughter and also tried to ensure that the families varied in terms of their social class and geographical location (rural, market town or seaside town). Eight families were recruited via the young people completing the school based survey and four families were recruited via informal contacts. To aid recruitment each young person received a £10 gift voucher as a token of appreciation for taking part in the study, although the use of financial incentives raises important ethical concerns discussed below, in section 6.5.

For pragmatic reasons, my study focused on three different geographical areas in East Anglia, close to the University, which are not representative of the wider population, with regards to factors such as ethnicity (all three areas have particularly low black and minority ethnic populations, which was reflected in my research sample). A demographic summary of the twelve families can be found in table 6.1.

Family[1]	Class	Father	Age	Ethnicity	Mother	Age	Ethnicity	Son/daughter	Age	Ethnicity
Leggett	C2	Alan	46	White	Vicky	42	White	Chloe/Meg	15	White
Johnson	D	Mark	50	White	Mandy	51	White	Laura	15	White
Turner	B	Peter	37	White	Siobhan	42	White	Ellie	15	White
Holton	B	Keith	44	White	Claire	45	White	Molly	15	White
Williams	C2	Gareth	41	White	Kathy	40	White	Stacey	15	White
Howard	D	Ed	42	White	/[2]	/	White	Alfie/Daisy	15	White
Wilson	B	Barry	49	White	Sharon	50	White	William	15	White
Chambers	B	Colin	55	White	Sarah	53	White	Daniel	15	White
Carter	C2	Stuart	47	White	Trish	43	White	Jordan	15	White
Baker	C1	Andrew	52	White	Elaine	49	White	Jonathon	15	White
Armstrong	C1	Dave	46	White	Priya	42	Mixed race	Alexander	14	Mixed race
Mitchell/ Webb	E	Neil	47	White	Linda	39	White	Amy	15	White

Table 6.1 Demographic details of final interview sample

For the interviews the family members recruited were mostly White (95%), with only two family members self-identifying as mixed race. The young people's ages ranged from 14-15

[1] All names given are pseudonyms
[2] Mother declined to take part in the study

years old, the mothers ranged in age from 39-53 and the fathers ranged from 37-55. The parental occupations included factory workers, teachers, business owner, children's centre manager, school cook, IT specialist, mental health support worker, school secretary, teaching assistant, hostel worker, insurance salesman, pilot , and builder.

Family	Father	Employment	Type	Mother	Employment	Type	Family type	Location
Leggett	Alan	Factory worker	F/T	Vicky	School admin	P/T	Married couple	Market town
Johnson	Mark	Factory worker	F/T	Mandy	School cook	P/T	Married couple	Market town
Turner	Peter	Support worker	P/T	Siobhan	Centre manager	F/T	Married couple	Seaside town
Holton	Keith	Teacher unemployed	/	Claire	Early years consultant	F/T	Married couple	Market town
Williams	Gareth	Admin	F/T	Kathy	Hostel worker	P/T	Married couple	Seaside town
Howard	Ed	Factory worker	F/T	/	/	/	Cohabiting couple	Rural
Wilson	Barry	Company owner	F/T	Sharon	Home maker	/	Married couple	Rural
Chambers	Colin	Pilot	F/T	Sarah	Home maker	/	Married couple	Seaside town
Carter	Stuart	Builder	F/T	Trish	Police officer	P/T	Married couple	Seaside town
Baker	Andrew	Engineering manager	F/T	Elaine	Teaching assistant	P/T	Married couple	Seaside town
Armstrong	Dave	IT technician	F/T	Priya	Mental health worker	F/T	Married couple	Seaside town
Mitchell/ Webb	Neil	Unemployed	/	Linda	Home maker	/	Cohabiting couple	Market town

Table 6.2 Characteristics of final interview sample

Table 6.2 outlines the characteristics of the twelve families, including their employment type (full-time or part-time) and their family type (using ONS classifications). Ten of the couples were married, and the remaining two couples (Howards and Mitchell/Webbs) had been cohabiting for over 10 years. Two of the fathers (Peter Turner and Neil Mitchell) were step-parents to the older children, and both also had a biological child with the mother. As the recruitment strategy focused on opposite sex couple headed families this inevitably shaped the interview sample, and excluded alternative family structures, such as lone parent families and civil partnered couple families. However this sampling criterion was necessary to ensure that both mothers and fathers accounts were gained, to enable the study to address the research aim of exploring family life and the themes of gender and generation.

For the questionnaire stage of the study, the research population was drawn from three high schools in contrasting geographical neighbourhoods, to provide contextual data on family meal patterns from a non-clinical community sample. School 1 was an average-sized secondary school (982 students) in a rural market town in Suffolk (population under 5,000

people). The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals was lower than local and national averages (15.9% in England, 6.7% in the county) as was the proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds (22.2% in England). School 2 was an average-sized secondary school (976 students) in a large seaside town in Norfolk (population 51,000). The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals was well above the local average (8.6% county), as was the proportion of students with special educational needs. A very small minority of students were from a range of other ethnic backgrounds, and most of these pupils spoke English as an additional language. School 3 was an average-sized secondary school (1027) in a small town in Norfolk (population under 6,000). The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals (15%) was well above the local average (8.6% county), as was the proportion of students who had learning difficulties or disabilities (nearly 42%). The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups had risen recently but remains well below the national average (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

Whilst restricting fieldwork to just three geographical locations had the disadvantage of not sampling a representative group, the advantage was that I could make efficient use of time. The lack of representativeness was not considered to be an issue for this study, as the study was not trying to make generalised statements. The only inclusion criteria for the questionnaire was that the young people were in a year 10 class (aged 14-15 years old) and were willing to complete the questionnaire. This age group was selected as it is an important developmental stage, in which young people have an increasing desire to seek independence away from the family group (Olson et al., 1989). In relation to family meals, evidence shows that as young people strive to distance themselves from the family group, their eating patterns change, with fewer opportunities, or desire, to eat with the family (Currie et al., 2008). Thus meals may become an individualised, fragmented experience, for the young person, with little of the benefits associated with eating regular family meals. Table 6.3 summarises the demographic details of the questionnaire sample.

From the two hundred and thirteen questionnaires collected the majority of the young people were aged fourteen to fifteen years old, with an equal gender balance within the sample. Over three quarters lived in couple headed families, of which nearly one fifth were in a stepfamily, and just over one fifth lived with a lone parent. These data vary from national figures which estimate that sixty three per cent of children live in a couple headed family and just over a quarter live with a lone parent (Office for National Statistics, 2012a)

Measure		Frequency	%
Age	13	12	5.6
	14	80	37.6
	15	120	56.3
	16	1	0.5
Gender	Male	103	48.4
		110	51.6
Family Structure	Couple-headed families	120	56.3
	Lone parent families	44	20.7
	Couple-headed step families	42	19.7
	Multi-family member households	5	2.3
	Other/not known	1	0.5
Paternal employment	Full-time	147	69
	Part-time	18	8.5
	Unemployed	12	5.6
	Other/not known	36	16.9
Maternal employment	Full-time	91	42.7
	Part-time	57	26.8
	Unemployed	45	21.1
	Other/not known	20	9.3

Table 6.3 Survey sample characteristics N=213

Two thirds of the young people described their father as being in full-time employment, with a smaller number of fathers in part-time employment (under 9 per cent) or unemployed (under 6 per cent). In contrast there were lower levels of maternal employment - just under half of the sample indicated that their mother was in full-time employment, with over a quarter of the young people reporting a mother in part-time employment. The questionnaire data suggested that one fifth of the sample had unemployed mothers, although this category included homemakers as the questionnaire did not differentiate between unemployed and a homemaker. These figures differ from national data which indicate that over 90 per cent of fathers are in employment and two thirds of mothers (Office for National Statistics, 2012c). National statistics also indicate that more women are in part-time employment, than full-time (37 and 29 per cent respectively), a pattern that was not reflected in this sample.

6.3 The procedure

Pilot Study

A pilot questionnaire and two pilot interviews were undertaken to evaluate the whole research procedure, to ensure that the main questionnaire would be able to gather data on contemporary family meal patterns and the main family interviews would be able to meet the research aims of exploring the underlying family processes within the family meal. This was an essential part of the research design and provided an immense amount of information to inform my main study. These included changes to the questionnaire design

and process, changes to the interview process, changes to the sample population and the introduction of a different visual method.

An average sized middle school in a small, East Anglian, market town was selected for the pilot study due to its location and willingness of the Head teacher to take part in the research. The town's population is under 5,000 people, with the majority of the inhabitants being white British. From a discussion with a personal contact, five middle schools were identified in the local area, and ranked as possible research populations, due to their location and 'research friendly' Head teachers. Being able to utilise a personal contact to identify 'research friendly' Head teachers was an obvious benefit to my study.

The initial questionnaire (Appendix I) was initially piloted on a group of 12-13 year old young people. I contacted the first Head teacher by letter (Appendix II) with a follow-up phone call, three days later, and the Head teacher indicated that he was very willing to take part in the research and arrange a meeting. From this initial meeting the paperwork to parents was adjusted to include a permission slip for the parents to complete (originally the letter had required the parents to contact me or the school if they did not want their child to take part). These letters were sent to 26 parents of one Year 8 class (Appendix III), via the school, on 24th Sept 2010. Each letter was coded to enable me to link the coded questionnaires to any subsequent interviews. When I visited the school in October 2010 to pilot the questionnaire, from a class of 26 young people, 18 parents/guardians had returned the permission slips (response rate 69%). The key points that emerged from the session were: the use of (/ /19) for date of birth confused them, so the questionnaire was revised to ask 'How old are you' and a blank space for the answer; the term parental employment was difficult for the young people to understand, and many were unsure what full-time and part-time signified. After the questionnaires were completed, a second letter was sent home with the young people, inviting families (mother, father and young person) to take part in the second stage of the research. (Appendix IV) Families contacted the researcher directly and the interviews then took place in the family home. I visited the school once more to run a 'seminar-style' class to Year 8 students on Psychology and Higher Education, at the request of the Head teacher.

The second draft of the questionnaire in January 2011, attempted to address the issues raised by the pilot study. I decided that the questionnaire needed to be simplified and focused on the family meal so questions 9-15 were removed. The revised questionnaire was piloted again in February 2011, with a small focus group of seven young people, one

male, six females, aged 13-14yrs, in a family home. The young people were initially asked to complete the questionnaire, and then asked for their thoughts and comments about the question wording, layout and ease of understanding. The revised questionnaire took four minutes to complete, and the young people reported that it was quite straightforward and clear. However, despite the altered layout, the questions on parental employment still caused confusion. The young people were unsure of the difference between full-time and part-time and suggested that brackets be included with an indication of each term. Therefore for the final questionnaire, full time employment was operationalized as 5 full days a week and part-time was operationalized as less than 5 full days a week, as suggested by the young people (Appendix V).

For the pilot study, all the young people who completed the questionnaire were given a letter to take home requesting family volunteers for the interview stage of the research. Families were invited to contact the researcher by phone, email or letter. From the 18 letters that were sent home, two mothers responded by email that evening (11% response rate). I replied by email and arranged a convenient time to phone, and then arranged a date to visit and interview all three family members. The interviews took place in the family home: I visited one family in the morning during the school holidays, and one family on another evening at 7pm. Both of the families that responded to the interview request were atypical in terms of their composition and family history – one was a couple headed family with a large age gap between the parents and the mother disclosed an eating disorder and the other family was a newly formed adopted family group. The Robson's were a two parent family with one 12 year old daughter living with them. The father, Michael, 78, was retired and the mother, Ann, 40, worked part-time. Both Michael and Ann had adult children from previous relationships (46 and 20 years old respectively). During Ann's interview it became apparent that she had struggled with food and eating difficulties throughout her life, and identified herself as having an eating disorder. The Blake's were an adoptive family of five, which had been created five years ago, when the three children (now aged 15, 14, and 10) were adopted as a sibling group.

Learning from the pilot study, considerable changes were made to the recruitment procedure, the questionnaire design, the sample population and the interview procedure to enhance the research design. The response rate to the initial letter home to parents was 69 per cent, and the response rate to the second letter home, asking for families to volunteer for the interview stage, was 11 per cent. To improve these rates, particularly the

volunteers for the interview stage, the initial reply slip were altered to include a section for families to leave their contact details if they were willing to take part in the second stage of the research (Appendix VI). The questionnaire design was modified and improved to provide a clearer focus on the family meal, with the removal of the questions about family time. After careful reflection, I decided to change the sample population to 14-15 year olds and their families. Further analysis of the literature identified this age group as increasingly likely to move away from eating with their families (Currie et al., 2008) and my experience of the 14year olds in the small focus groups suggested that this older age might be able to offer more thoughtful insights into their family life. To improve the flow of the interviews, the interview prompts were revised considerably, with a clearer focus on the family meal, and the re-ordering of the demographic questions away from the beginning of the interview. Additionally, photographs taken by the young people were included to enhance the interviews in the form of photo elicitation.

An additional benefit of using photo elicitation was that it extended the contact time with the families. During the pilot I only met the families once, and during this visit I explained my research, asked them to complete the consent forms and then conducted the interviews. The disadvantage of this approach was that I had no opportunity to establish a relationship with the interviewees, the family members had no opportunity to think about the research and consider their involvement, and the interviewees may have felt rushed with my need to interview all three family members during one meeting. All of these factors had the potential to impact on the quality of the data. To address these concerns I altered the process to include at least three visits to the family home. The first visit was to meet the family members, explain my research, discuss and complete the consent forms, and give the young person a digital camera (which I believe had a powerful effect of symbolising my trust in them). The second brief visit was arranged to collect the camera. Although it was brief it provided another opportunity for the family to decline to take part and also enabled the family to see me again. Thus when I visited for the third time, to do the interviews, I was not a stranger to the family.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire stage of the study had two main aims. The first was to provide context to the main interview study and the second was to identify a sub-sample of families for the in-depth interviews. From my social constructionist position I was not expecting this data to reveal 'factual data' about family meal patterns, but was interested in the answers the young people chose to give. I was able to link four of the numbered questionnaires to the

families that came forward for the interview stage of the research, as I had paired each coded questionnaire with a coded letter. However I was not able to link all the questionnaires as some of the families did not have their initial letter (with the code on) and some of the young people had not completed a questionnaire. Again this process was not about checking responses, but trying to understand the links (and disparities) between the questionnaire responses and the interview transcripts (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003).

The initial questionnaire was developed with fifteen questions, which were reduced to nine questions after piloting. *Question 1: Date of birth:* This variable was included to establish family meal patterns with comparable age samples (for example Gillman, et al., 2000; Utter, et al., 2008 found that family meal frequency decreases with age). *Question 2: Gender:* This variable was included to explore differences in family meal patterns between males and females. (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2006; Taveras, et al., 2005 both found small gender differences in US family meal patterns). *Question 3: Who do you live with?* This variable was included to assess family structure, and explore possible links between family meal patterns and types of family structure. Evidence suggests that children in larger households were more likely to eat without an adult (Currie et al., 2008). *Question 4/5: Paternal/ Maternal employment* This variable was included to explore the possible links between parental employment patterns and family meal patterns (Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2003). *Question 6: Where do you normally eat your evening meals?* This variable was included to establish the extent to which young people eat at a table, or eat sitting on the sofa, or eat away from their family in their bedrooms (to compare with data gathered for the Growing up in Scotland, 2008 report). *Question 7: Who do you normally eat your evening meals with?* This variable was included to establish whether young people were eating with their family group, their siblings, alone or with others. *Question 8: How often is the television on when you eat your evening meals?* Researchers have gathered data on the proportion of meals eaten in front of the television and explored whether television meals affects diet quality (Coon, et al., 2001) and family connectedness (Eisenberg, et al., 2009). *Question 9: In the last week how many times did you eat an evening meal with your family?* The wording for this question was taken from other research projects (such as the Project EAT team, Eisenberg et al., 2009) which have attempted to standardise the phrasing of this question to allow comparison across samples.

The fieldwork within the schools took place over a three week period in June-July 2011. The procedure was different for each school, due to both adaptations to the research

process, and the opportunity sampling of school 2. School 1 was federated with the middle school used in the pilot study, and thus the Head teacher was already aware of the research and was happy to help. In school 1, all the year 10 students (N=234) were given a letter about the research during form time, to take home to their parents/carers, which included a parental permission slip. The permission slips also requested contact details for families who were willing to take part in the interview stage of the research. I did not meet any of the students directly, and the questionnaires were completed during form time. On completion of the questionnaire, the students were given a second letter inviting them and their parents to take part in the interview stage of the research.

School 2 was involved in an Open Day at the University, and a senior member of staff gave permission for the students (N=74) to complete the questionnaires as part of a seminar session which I was running. The young people were given a consent form and questionnaire at the end of the session, and whilst they completed the forms I moved around the room reminding the students that the questionnaire was optional, confidential and anonymous. Thus I met all the students directly and handled all the paperwork. Again the students who completed the questionnaire were given the second letter regarding the interview stage of the research. School 3 was accessed, via a personal contact, who informally spoke with the Head teacher, and facilitated the schools cooperation. All the year 10 students (N=196) were given a letter about the study to take home to their parents/carers, asking families to contact the school or the researcher if they did NOT want their son/daughter to complete the questionnaire. No families contacted the school or me. This opt out method raises important ethical issues which are discussed further in chapter 6. The questionnaire packs (questionnaire, consent form and letter to parents) were handed out to each student at the beginning of a science lesson, by the eight science teachers, who had been 'primed' by my personal contact. I moved around the classes answering questions and reinforcing that the questionnaires were optional, confidential and anonymous. The students who completed the questionnaires were then given the second letter to take home to parents/guardians inviting them to take part in the interview stage of the research. Thus in this school I met most of the students and collected the questionnaires once they were completed.

The procedure adopted considerably affected the response rate. In school 1, of the 234 parents/guardians that received research letters, 30 returned permission slips (13% response rate), and of these, 21 completed questionnaires (9% response rate). In school 2,

of the 74 students that attended the University taster day seminar, 71 completed the questionnaires (96% response rate), and in school 3, of the 196 parents/ guardians that received research letters, no parents contacted the researcher to exclude their son/daughter from the data collection. Of the 137 students present in class, 121 completed the questionnaires (88% response rate), 15 declined, and 1 provided nonsense answers. Thus the total response rate from the three schools was 48% (213 questionnaires completed) and the best response rates were achieved with parental 'opt out' permission and direct contact with the young people completing the questionnaires, as in schools 2 and 3.

In-Depth Interviews

The main focus of the study was the in-depth interviews, with the multiple family members, as I was aiming to explore the underlying family processes within a family meal. As my approach assumed that all research is socially and culturally located, my focus was not on the 'truth' about their family mealtime behaviours, but on their perceptions, understandings and interpretations of this daily activity, with a focus on what appears 'natural' or 'obvious'. This approach also enabled me to recognise the multiple and often contradictory voices of the different family members.

Six of the families, the Leggett's, the Johnson's, the Holton's, the Howard's, the Wilson's and the Mitchell/Webb's, provided their contact details on the parental permission slip sent out by school 1, so I contacted them by phone to discuss my research (5 mothers and 1 father – Ed Howard). Once the families agreed to be involved, I then arranged a time to meet all three family members in the family home. From school 2, two mothers, Kathy Williams and another mother, both texted to say their families would be happy to help with the research. I replied by text (acknowledging their chosen method of communication) and arranged a time to telephone to discuss my research further. After this initial contact, one of the mothers was unable to continue with the research due to unexpected family commitments. However the William's were able to help with the research and I arranged a time to meet all three family members, as above. From school 3, one of the mothers, Siobhan Turner, emailed to say her family would be happy to help. I replied by email and again arranged a time to telephone to discuss my research, following the procedure outlined above. The final four families, the Chambers, the Baker's, the Carter's and the Armstrong's were obtained via a personal contact. At this stage I had a disproportionate number of families with girls, so I needed to recruit families with boys. A personal contact was able to find four families willing to take part from school 3 – she initially spoke to them,

and then I followed this up with a phone call (speaking to three mothers and one father). To ensure clarity and clear communication, once an initial meeting was arranged over the telephone/by email, I then wrote to the families to confirm the time and date I would be visiting. Similarly after the first visit, I wrote to the family again confirming the times and dates of the second and third visit (to collect the camera and to interview). Every time I reminded the families that if the date was subsequently inconvenient to let me know and we could rearrange. Six of the families did contact me to re-arrange visits.

Once contact had been made with the families (either by text, email or phone) I arranged to briefly visit the families to explain the research in person to all three family members. This stage was very important as I wanted to ensure that I had genuine informed consent from all three participants, rather than relying on the family gatekeeper (predominantly the mother) to pass on the research details (Harden, et al., 2010). This initial visit also gave the family members the opportunity to see me, see what I looked like and also gave me the opportunity to briefly meet them and establish a good initial rapport. This initial meeting lasted approximately ten to twenty minutes and involved me explaining my research interests and asking the participants to complete consent forms. I explained that I would use the interviews and photographs for my thesis, for conference presentations and for journal articles but all names would be replaced with pseudonyms and faces in photographs would be covered to maintain confidentiality. I did explain that with family research it is not always possible to maintain complete confidentiality as individual family members may recognise their own contribution and subsequently other family members' accounts. All the family members signed the consent forms without question or comment, and several signed instantly without reading the short detail. This ethical issue of maintaining confidentiality within family accounts is discussed further in section 5.8.

When I gave the young people the digital camera I deliberately kept the instructions quite vague as I was interested in what images the young person chose to take. The use of the camera also provided me with the opportunity to briefly visit the family home for a second time, to collect the camera. This process felt beneficial for the quality of the data collection as by the time I came to interview I had already met the family members two or three times. I was also aware of the symbolism associated with the handing over the digital camera, as for me it reflected my trust in the family, and I felt this aided the participant-researcher relationship.

Throughout the research process I was very aware of the terminology I was using in relation to food and eating within the family home. Initially I had used the phrase 'family meal' in my pilot study but quickly felt that this was narrowing the potential responses to my question, and not acknowledging the complexity of experiences family members might experience in relation to food in the home. I was also concerned that this phrase might be perceived as making a value judgement about how families 'should' organise their mealtimes. Thus in subsequent meetings with the families, I avoided using the term family meal and instead used phrases such as 'the food eaten in the home in the evening'. As the interviews progressed, if the mother or father or young person used the term 'family meal' then I felt able to also adopt this phrase in subsequent discussions.

All the interviews took place in the family homes, mostly during the evening – one took place in the morning with Peter Turner during the school holidays. On arrival, I always asked if the family wanted me to take off my shoes, which most did. The mother or father then asked who I wanted to interview first, and I always replied the order was up to them. In most of the families I interviewed the young person first. In some homes it was difficult to find a private space, so I interviewed three young people in their bedrooms (Chloe, Stacey and Jordan). Most of the interviews took place in the lounge, the dining room (where there was one), or the kitchen. I began each interview thanking them again for agreeing to help with the research, and reminding them about consent and that they were free to withdraw at any time. I then showed them the digital recorder, which I switched on and placed down on the floor, table or sofa. Each interview started with the photos which were printed onto A4 sheets and presented in the sequence in which they had been taken, before moving on to discuss the last meal they ate in the evening and their feelings about this, general food provisioning, their childhood memories of food and eating, and time spent together as a family. At the end of the interview I thanked them again. The average length of the interviews was 45 minutes: 50 minutes for the paternal interviews (ranging from 17 -86 minutes), just over an hour for the maternal interviews (ranging from 37 – 91 minutes), and just under half an hour for the young people's interviews (ranging from 24 – 37 minutes). When undertaking the interviews, after the second interview I checked if the third person was happy to be interviewed or if they would like me to return another day. Most of the families were happy to continue, although two did arrange another day for me to return. The interviews took place over a seven month period, from June 2011 to January 2012, with 37 interviews completed from twelve families (12 fathers, 11 mothers, and 14 young people, including two sets of twins).

6.4 Analysis

The thematic analysis I undertook involved several stages, although this was not a linear process, as I moved back and forth between the stages as needed. Phase 1 involved entering the documents into the NVIVO computer programme and familiarising myself with these interview transcripts, reading and re-reading and making notes for coding. Phase 2 involved generating initial codes, by identifying features of the data that appeared interesting. As my approach was both theoretical and inductive I simultaneously undertook both open coding to explore themes within the data, and focused coding, looking for specific extracts linked to family processes. I coded for as many patterns and themes as possible and coded data inclusively, so as not to lose the context of the surrounding data, including my prompts. I also coded extracts of data into different themes, sometimes reflecting inconsistencies and contradictions, which I felt were important to retain as they reflected the complexities within family life, "…it is pertinent to retain the emotional messiness, uncertainties and fluidity which constitute relational experience, because by leaving in methodological and experiential loose ends we retain the vitality of lived lives" (Gabb, 2009, p. 37). At this point I had generated over four hundred codes.

When all the initial data were coded, Phase 3 involved attempting to sort the codes into potential themes, by combining and dividing. At this stage I moved away from NVIVO and used post-it notes around the room on large pieces of paper as I found it easier to visualise the developing coding frame and see how the themes linked. To help with the fourth phase of reviewing and refining the themes, I consulted with colleagues to clarify my thinking and help structure my ideas, before defining and further defining my themes in phase 5. I clarified what each theme represented, and aimed to provide each theme with a clear definition and name, again in discussion with colleagues. Finally in Phase 6, I wrote up the findings of my thematic analysis. In the analysis, the key methodological challenge was to retain a sense of the individual account alongside the individual being part of a family group, and also part of a gender and a generation group. Thus throughout the analysis I was 'sensitised' to *'family perspectives'*, *'gender perspectives'(mothers/fathers and sons/daughters)* and *'generational perspectives' (adults/ young people)* with the need to take into account how *family processes* were co-created in these families through the specific actions and experiences of women, men and young people. Throughout the whole process I made notes and memos to ensure I continually reflected on my analysis, and during the writing I ensured that my interpretive voice was present, to enable me to be confident that I was able to produce a fully reflexive account of my research.

Additionally to aid my analysis I sought collaborators within the department, from the Qualitative Research Group, to discuss a transcript from my study and explore my influence on the research interview,

> …researchers seek collaborators to help them to gather and interpret research materials… push beyond our own perspectives, both personal and theoretical, to discover insights, concepts, and theories that illuminate our analyses of other persons' experiences and our own. (Gilgun, 2012, p83)

I presented to the group a short transcript from an interview with a white, 50 year old, working class male, who had become involved in the study via his daughters completion of the school questionnaire and his wife emailing me. This was my fourth paternal interview, and my research diary notes that I was feeling anxious about this interview beforehand as I was keen to establish a good rapport. The diary also notes that after the interview I had felt disappointed that the interview had been quite short with, as I perceived little depth. The directive for the study group was to read through the transcript and note any evidence of my assumptions or my influence on the interview process. This was a very helpful exercise and enabled me to reflect upon my interview style and how I had co-constructed the data, "Personal values and experiences influence the data we collect, how we interpret them and how we represent them" (Allen, 2000 cited in Gilgun, 2012, p.86). Working through the transcripts, the first comments related to how I had effectively set the interview, by situating him as the authority, when discussing a photograph of home grown strawberries, from the photograph taken by the daughter/mother. My comment that 'I didn't know they only lasted for a few years' positioned him as the authority and was an effective opening dialogue. Whilst not directly conscious of my positioning, this may have reflected my awareness of my position as the educated university researcher and my desire to empower his role. This opening interaction appeared to be effective as it led the way into several detailed excerpts.

In relation to my assumptions, the group picked up on a question I had asked about family roles, specifically loading the dishwasher, 'So tonight, who loaded the dishwasher, who did that?' On reflection this was appeared to be quite a challenging question, linked to my assumptions (and judgement) about his limited involvement in housework, based on previous comments from the mother. The consequence of my challenging question led to shorter more abrupt answers, whereas the previous sections had produced much longer responses, indicating that he had potentially picked up on the judgemental tone of my

question. Evidence for this comes from his subsequent assertion that 'I do a bit around the house, I'm not completely idle'. These two examples illustrate the importance of being reflective in the research process and using collaborators to identify researcher's biases. However this process was not about tidying up the materials; reflective analysis enables the researcher to explore how they have co-constructed the research and recognise the elements they bring to the research process.

From a review of the literature on family life (for example Brannen, 2003, Laureau, 2011) I decided to include case studies in one of my findings chapters. My thematic analysis had generated ideas about family paradigms, second order family processes, and presenting these themes within family case studies seemed to be the most effective approach to enable me to retain a sense of the family group. Adopting a case study approach raises the issue of generalizability, but for this qualitative study the three families I choose were not in any way 'typical' or 'representative' of the interview families. They were selected as I felt they provided a clear illustration of how family paradigms guide and shape family life. Another important issue to consider with a family case study approach is the ethical concern of maintaining family confidentiality, and this is discussed further in 6.5 below. With regards to the photographs, I made a note of how many photos were taken, a summary of the content, and the extent to which the photographs had been edited (each photograph was numbered so sequential numbers indicated no editing). However I did not analyse the photographs further as I had not used the method to elicit data to analyse, but to act as a doorway into the family home (Doucet, 1996). Whilst it is apparent that gathering both visual and interview data from more than one family member provided a richer and more detailed picture of the meanings and understandings of family meals, one issue to address was how the research would deal with differential accounts of the same phenomena, both *within* and *between* the family sets. Within a constructivist orientation, a key interest is the differing accounts and how these are constructed by the different actors, so the study aimed to explore and analyse these divergent interpretations, which were viewed as providing rich and interesting data.

6.5 Ethical issues

The research received ethical approval from the School of Social Work and Psychology's Ethics Committee, operating under the British Psychological Society guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2009). Studying the private interior of family life poses a number of ethical issues for family researchers that must be addressed sensitively and carefully. The

challenges of gaining access into this personal space, of ensuring that each family member is given a voice, of obtaining informed consent from all family members, maintaining confidentiality throughout the study, and respecting individual family members' wishes are all issues that must be sensitively addressed throughout the research process (Gabb, 2008). Additionally this study had to address ethical issues linked with recruiting participants via schools, using payment to recruit young people and acknowledging and dealing sensitively with food issues.

The practical requirement of accessing the private domain of the family is another important consideration for research to address. Within British culture, the family home is considered private and not open to public scrutiny, a cultural belief reflected in the unwillingness of politicians to intervene and legislate on private family matters. For example the Foresight Report 'Tackling Obesities: Future Choices' (2007) on childhood obesity made several recommendations to schools regarding school meals but made little mention of the home environment, despite children eating the majority of their food at home. So gaining access into the private and often protected domain of the family home was something that needs to be negotiated carefully, with respect for the privacy of the family. Gabb (2008) highlighted the complexities of researching this private domain, including an awareness of the potentially sensitive nature of any topic, issues of privacy, the consideration of possible negative repercussions in advance, and the steps she took to reduce any possible distress.

For Gabb, on-going informed consent, negotiated on a continual basis, is an essential part of the research design to ensure the rights of participants are respected. Thus within her research she had repeated conversations with her participants about confidentiality, and at each stage she ensured that she gave clear explanations as to the research process (Gabb, 2010). To obtain informed consent from all three family members, I felt it was essential that I met each person face-to-face to explain my research, rather than rely on the gatekeepers, whom in this research were predominantly the mothers (Harden, Backett-Milburn, Hill, & MacLean, 2010). Despite several of the parents volunteering their other family members for the research, I insisted on meeting each family member face-to-face to ensure they had a genuine choice in participating. During the initial meeting with each family, explained that I would use the interviews and photographs for my thesis, for conference presentations and for journal articles but all names would be replaced with pseudonyms and faces in photographs would be covered to maintain confidentiality. I also

explained that with family research it is not always possible to maintain complete confidentiality as individual family members may recognise their own contribution and subsequently other family members' accounts. I deliberately kept the consent form quite brief (supplementing the written information with verbally presented information) to encourage participants to read it, but several of the family members signed the consent form very quickly, without reading it. This scenario creates an interesting challenge for researchers as whilst I have a vital role in protecting my participants and ensuring they are fully informed, if they choose to sign a consent form without reading it, I am restricted in how I deal with this scenario. With my research families, I ensured that I verbally read out the consent form, to those who had quickly signed, but even then if the individuals chose not to listen I had little control over that. To try and address this issue, I mentioned consent and their right to withdraw at any time, at each subsequent meeting. For future studies, I plan to record this discussion about ethical issues such as informed consent and confidentiality, to ensure both that I have adequately discussed these issues and also to provide auditory evidence that I have, if needed.

To aid recruitment the decision was made to offer the young people in the family interviews a £10 voucher to thank them for their participation in the study. Payment of participants raises the important ethical issue of ensuring that informed consent is freely given. When payment is offered to participants within a research study, there is always the potential for participants to feel coerced into taking part, particularly within low income families (Morrow, 2009). Thus within this study extra time and care was taken to ensure that family member gave their informed consent, in on-going conversations throughout the study (for example during the initial phone contact, during the initial meeting, during the second meeting, and during the interviews).

A central ethical issue this study has had to navigate was maintaining confidentiality. As the study was taking place in the family home, the research had little control over the spatial location, so the interviews took place in the kitchen, the lounge, the dining room and a spare bedroom. Ensuring the interviews were private was a problem, in some families more than others. In some families, privacy was entirely respected, with no interruptions throughout all the interviews. However in other families, privacy was less respected with family members walking in and out of the room and leaving doors open. Whilst I attempted to maintain privacy, pausing the conversation, and getting up to shut

left open doors this was not always possible and it was interesting to reflect on the extent to which this may have affected the interview depth.

The issue of confidentiality was also a concern with regard to the writing up of the study. Whilst all family members were given pseudonyms, and certain demographic information was changed, when presenting family accounts there is always the possibility that family members may be able to identify themselves, and subsequently identify each other. This is an on-going issue within family research, and whilst steps can be taken to minimise this, it is not possible to avoid this completely (Gabb, 2008). As mentioned above, during the initial meeting, and on subsequent meetings, I reiterated to the participants how the interview material might be used (for my thesis, for journal articles and for conference presentations) and emphasised that it is not always possible to guarantee complete confidentiality when presenting family groups. None of the families asked any questions about confidentiality and appeared quite happy and accepting of this.

Another ethical issue to address is linked with each schools preferred method of obtaining parental permission. In the first school, the Head teacher requested parental permission slips to be collected before the young people completed the questionnaires, whereas in the second school permission from a senior teacher was requested for the students to complete the questionnaire whilst on campus. Whilst parents were not directly consulted, the Head teacher and the Chair of the University ethics committee took the view that the questionnaire was not controversial and students had the opportunity to opt out. Finally in the third school, the Head teacher was happy for all the young people to take part, if they wanted to, unless their parents/carers contacted me or the school directly (which nobody did). Using this ‘opt out’ method, rather than asking parents to complete and return reply slips, greatly enhanced the response rate, but potentially created the situation of young people being involved in my study without parental approval. As I had contacted the parents directly, by letter, I felt that I had given parents the opportunity to decline and the young people within the school were also able to opt out of the questionnaire, which a few chose to do.

Within two of the research families, one family member was reluctant to take part, which highlighted important ethical concerns around respecting all family members’ wishes. In one of the families the mother initially agreed to me visiting the family home to explain my research but when I telephoned to confirm the appointment the father said they did not want to take part in the research. I thanked him for his time and put down the phone. Ten

minutes later the mother phoned and said they did want to take part (and that I needed to ignore her 'moody' husband). She was keen to arrange an initial meeting, which I did, with reservations. When I visited this family I modified the procedure, by leaving the consent forms with the family, rather than asking the family to sign them straight away. I felt this was important to give the father the opportunity to decline to take part. I also left the camera and arranged to visit the following week, either to collect the completed consent forms or to collect the camera (if they had decided not to take part). When I visited the following week, the son answered the door and handed me the completed consent forms. I felt by adapting the procedure I had given the father an opportunity to not sign, although the extent to which he was pressured by his wife/son is obviously a concern.

With the second family, the mother decided not to be involved. The father had completed the reply slip and was keen to taken part in the research but when I visited the family for the initial meeting, the mother declined to meet me, despite the father's attempts to bring her into the room. At this point I offered to leave but the father was insistent that we continue. So I arranged the second meeting to collect the camera, and the third meeting to interview, hoping that the mother might change her mind. When I collected the camera the following week, the mother opened the door, smiled, and gave me the camera, but gave no indication if she had changed her mind. Then when I returned to interview the other family members she declined to be interviewed. This situation raises important ethical issues around respecting individual family members' rights not to be involved and whilst I was very aware that the mother herself did not want to be interviewed, at no point did she indicate that she did not want her partner or son to take part in the research.

In relation to the representativeness of the study sample, the participants were self-selected and will have had their own reasons for volunteering to take part in the research. According to Campbell and Adams (2009), research participation is generally decided within a cost-benefit perspective; people participate if the benefits outweigh the costs. During the interviews it became apparent that some of the participants had specific reasons for taking part in the study, either to gain practical information or to use the study as a 'vehicle for change'. From example: one father wanted advice for his older daughter about studying at University; another mother and father wanted to discuss their younger daughter's eating problems; and one mother wanted to change her son's diet. Whilst I was able and willing to provide information about studying at University, I did not give advice regarding eating problems and/or diets. The recurrence of food 'issues' within the study

families was of note, though I contend that rather than reflecting an atypical sample, this may simply highlight the possibility that many families have 'unusual' eating habits, which usually take place (and are hidden) within the privacy of their family home. In regard to the two families that mentioned their daughter's/son's diet, it emerged during the interviews that other agencies were involved with these families (the school nurse and the doctor referred MEND programme respectively) so I felt reassured that support and advice was available to these families. Another mother spoke about her plans to change the family eating location to suit her preferences, "I'll have to start putting my foot down". And another mother reflected on her work-life balance, indicating that she was not happy with her current long employment hours and planned to make some changes, "I feel bad about the amount of hours that I am away from my family life because that is the most important thing to me: I need to sort that out". For both these women, the interview process provided them with both the time and space to reflect on their mealtime experiences and formulate a rationale for their preferred situation.

The pilot study highlighted the possibility that individuals may volunteer for a study on food and eating due to their own personal issues with food. For example within the pilot study, one mother spoke about her difficult history and on-going battles with bulimia. When recruiting for the main study it was important to be aware that the self-selected study design may attract families with unusual eating patterns although it was not possible to establish the reasons for volunteering before meeting any of the families. Whilst eight of the families volunteered directly via the school letter, four families were recruited via a personal contact. These families presented as 'happy to respond to a friend's request' and during the interviews, no specific issues became apparent around food and eating, although each family had its unique approach to food provisioning. This pattern contrasted with the ten volunteer families (eight within the main study and two pilot families), of whom two of the mothers self-identified as having had eating problems, out of the 19 parents interviewed. Whilst the numbers are small, this incidence of eating problems (10.5 per cent) is higher than the national UK average of 6.4 per cent of people displaying an eating disorder (Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, 2007). However it should be noted that this national figure is very difficult to accurately establish due to methodological difficulties of gathering data on (often hidden) eating problems. If the young people are included in this volunteer sample, none of whom reported an eating disorder, then the incidence within this study sample would reduce to 6.5 per cent, which reflects the nationally reported incidence of eating problems. From this volunteer sample it is difficult

to assess whether food was a particularly salient issue for these families, and created an unrepresentative sample of volunteers. Future research would need to be aware of this concern and strive to ensure that the sampling approach adopted did not attract a disproportionate number of families with issues around food and eating.

6.6 Reflexive Account

Within qualitative research a fundamental requirement is that researchers remain reflexive throughout the whole research process to understand how they have shaped and influenced the study, and co-constructed the findings. My initial interest in families and food developed from my awareness of the debate around the role of the family meal in contemporary family life and the claims made regarding the importance of the family meal. As a mother of two teenage children (born 1996 and 1999) living in a couple headed family, I have had to consider my values, experience and interest in relation to this topic and the extent to which these have been influenced by the powerful 'family meal ideology' discussed in Chapter two. My decision to focus on families with a fifteen year old son/daughter was shaped by my personal family experience as well as the literature, which identifies adolescence as a period of increasing independence from parental regulation. An interesting reflection for me is that it was not until I was a year into my research, after a discussion with a colleague, that I also realised another deeper reason for focusing on this topic. I am the youngest of four children and as a six year old I was a very fussy eater, refusing to eat virtually anything except ice-cream and biscuits, which from memory was allowed. Thus family meal times were a very stressful and unhappy occasion, as my strict father did not agree with my mother's softer approach. My parents were in a very unhappy marriage and on reflection I wonder if my fussy eating was an attention gaining strategy, which inevitably caused arguments and shouting, with me being at the centre of them. Their marriage eventually broke up when I was twelve years old and I left the family home with my mother and no longer ate 'family meals' with my whole family. In this new lone parent family structure I ate quick and cheap meals on trays in front of the television, sometimes with my mother and sometimes alone. Whilst I obviously knew this family history, I was surprised that I had not made the connection sooner between my childhood experiences and my current research interests.

Throughout the research process I have made many assumptions that I am aware of, and potentially others that I am not. I have assumed that: spending time together is important

for families and eating together is one way that families can achieve this; family life is perceived as being increasingly busy; family meals vary from family to family; family research should include all family members; and a qualitative focus exploring meanings is the most effective way to explore underlying family processes. I have also assumed that utilising a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach is the best way to address my research aims, by adding layers of meaning. During the interviews I made the decision to avoid the term 'family meal' as I believed this term was too value-laden and did not reflect the variety of eating patterns within the family home. So I asked instead about 'food and eating in the family home' to ensure that I captured the variety of ways that the individuals in my sample ate with and apart from each other. I also had to make a judgment about how much information I was willing to divulge about myself, which I found hard to judge. Whilst I wanted to create a good rapport within the interviews, I felt I needed to maintain a semi-professional boundary (to ensure that the interviews achieved a certain depth and were not perceived as a 'chat' with a friend). Several of the parents asked if I was a mother, which I felt happy to acknowledge as this positioned me more as an 'insider' within the research dynamic, though other questions about where I lived and whether I ate family meals, I was less inclined to respond to. My position as an insider-outsider within this study is important to address as my presentation as a white, middle class, married (I wear a wedding ring), female, University researcher inevitably shaped the interviews, but in different ways. Berger (2013) suggests that the position a researcher takes, as in insider-outsider, can be quite fluid and change according to the participant, the setting and outside influences. This fluidity was very apparent in many of my interviews. For example, one of the mothers was a white, middle class, working mother who spoke at length about her guilt at working full-time and not always being home for her three children. During her account she became quite emotional and I felt the strong need to empathise with her as a fellow working mother, which I did. As Gilgun (20120) notes we do actively interpret the participants' accounts and must acknowledge that these accounts do affect us.

In contrast during my interviews with many of the fathers and the white, working class women, I felt very aware of my contrasting position as a middle class, female researcher and had to work hard to establish a rapport. The research design ensured that I met the individual family members at least twice, if not three times before I interviewed, which helped to establish a rapport. Generally I think I managed to achieve a good rapport with most of the participants as many of them spoke at length and in depth about their feelings, and several at the end of the interview thanked me for listening. I was surprised by this

response, as my assumption was that the interviewees were helping me, but on later reflection I believe it was an indication of the uniqueness of having someone properly listen to you in an open and unpressured way.

Whilst I would have liked to spend more time with the families, to establish a stronger rapport, I was constrained by my own family responsibilities. During one very intense, long evening interview with a mother, I was aware that it was getting late, and I needed to return home to my children, but the mother was very relaxed and was talking in depth about very powerful emotions in relation to food and eating. So I was torn between my family responsibilities and my research, and in that moment stayed with the interview. Another time, I had rushed out to an evening interview (most of my interviews took place in the evening), having spent only a brief amount of time with my children on my return home from work. During the interview the mother (a full-time homemaker) spoke at length about the importance of feeding her children and being there for them when they returned home from school, with a freshly baked cake or biscuits. This was a very difficult interview for me as I had to deal with strong emotions of guilt regarding my two children that had been left at home to prepare their own food. Acknowledging these emotions, I checked the interview transcript carefully for any signs of my emotions, but did not find any evidence that these feelings had seeped into the interview.

Alongside being reflective during the design and implementation of any study, it is important that any researcher reflects on their analysis of the data, and acknowledges that their perspective is inevitably limited, “A fundamental issue is researchers’ personal perspectives, which are limited, with the consequences that their capacities to understand others and to interpret the beliefs and actions of others are limited” (Gilgun, 2012, p83). From supervision it was apparent that my analysis was mother-focused, which I sought to address in further drafts.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined how the study was developed, conducted and analysed and paid particular attention to the important ethical issues that were critical to address. Research on families raises both general and specific ethical issues that have to be carefully and thoughtfully considered to ensure that the BPS ethical principles of respecting participants, avoiding harm and acting with integrity are maintained (BPS 2009).

Chapter 7: Findings I: Family Meal Patterns

7.1 Introduction

The following three chapters present the main findings from this study. This first findings chapter identifies the family meal patterns found in this East Anglian sample to *explore contemporary family meal patterns in this East Anglian sample*. This chapter focuses on the individual accounts of the family meal presented by the three family members and was sensitised to both gender and generation to *compare and contrast the different family members' perceptions of family meals.* It also explores the extent to which these convergent or divergent accounts either reflect or challenge the family meal 'ideal', providing insight into the *meanings linked to the family meal*. Chapter 8 then explores *the underlying family processes that occur within the family meal* by addressing each element of the family meal in turn (from deciding what to eat, to the shopping and cooking and the actual meal). The thematic analysis was sensitised to the underlying family processes during food provisioning, as well as the similarities and differences between the family members' perceptions of the family meal, and *the themes of gender and generation in relation to the family meal.* The final findings chapter, Chapter 9, presents three family cases studies to illustrate how exploring food and eating in the family home may provide a 'window' into deeper family processes, conceptualised as family paradigms, that guide and influence family life.

The study initially gathered questionnaire data from over two hundred young people to provide contextual data on their family meal patterns. This method also provided access to the twelve families who took part in the interview stage of the research. The family meal patterns from the school questionnaire indicated that 68 per cent of the young people reported regular family meals (five or more per week) with 74 per cent indicating that they usually ate with their family. In relation to meal location, 61 per cent usually ate at the table, 28 per cent ate on the sofa, and 8 per cent usually ate in their bedroom, and the majority of the sample, 52 per cent, reported that the television was usually on when they ate their meal. The young people who lived in a couple-headed family (excluding step families) were more likely to eat at the table compared to young people living in other family groups and young people who did not eat at the table reported less frequent family meals. From the interview sample nine of the twelve families indicated that the young people usually ate their evening meal with at least one parent, whilst none of the young people reported that they ate alone. Eight of the families usually ate together at the table,

two of the families ate together on the sofa, and two of the families ate at the same time but in different locations.

7.2 Family Meal Patterns

Patterns from the questionnaire data.

For the initial stage of the research, questionnaire data were gathered from three high schools to provide contextual data on family meal patterns within this selected sample. From the two hundred and thirteen questionnaires collected the majority of the young people were aged fourteen to fifteen years old, with an equal gender balance within the sample.

Measure		Frequency	%
Family Meal Frequency	<2 times a week	31	14.6
	3-4 times a week	38	17.8
	5+ times a week	144	67.6
Who you usually eat with	Alone	31	14.6
	With siblings	17	8.0
	With family	157	74.1
	With friends	1	.5
	With grandparents	2	.9
	With others	4	1.9
Where you usually eat	At the table	129	60.6
	On the sofa	60	28.2
	In my bedroom	17	8.0
	On the floor	1	.5
	Other	5	2.4
Frequency of television on during meal	Never	45	21.2
	1-4	56	26.3
	5+	111	52.4

Table 7.1 Family meal patterns from the questionnaire data (N=213)

In response to the question '*in the last seven days how many times did you eat an evening meal with your family?',* just under 68 per cent reported that they had frequent family meals (calculated as five or more times a week) with fewer than 15 per cent reporting two family meals per week or less. In response to the question *'who do you usually eat your evening meal with?'* three quarters (74 per cent) reported usually eating with their family, 8 per cent eating with their siblings and over 14 per cent usually eating alone. Data from the National Survey of Parents and Children in England (Gilby, et al., 2008) found a similar pattern with 74 per cent of parents with a child aged ten to nineteen reporting four or more family mealtimes a week. When asked *'where do you usually eat your evening meal?,*

nearly two thirds (61 per cent) reported usually eating at the table, with just under a third (28 per cent) eating sitting on the sofa and 8 per cent eating in their bedroom. Statistics from the Growing up in Scotland (2009) study found a similar pattern of 34 per cent of the children questioned usually ate in the living room (Marryat, et al., 2009). The final question established the extent that the television was on during meals, with the majority of the present study's sample (52 per cent) reporting that the television was usually on whilst they were eating, compared with one fifth (21 per cent) who said the television was never on during meals. Table 6 provides a summary of the reported family meal patterns, including where and with whom the young people usually ate their evening meal.

The questionnaire data were further analysed in relation to frequency of family meals and demographic variables. To explore the relationship between the categorical variables, Pearson's chi-squared test was used. As one of the assumptions for chi-squared is that each cell needs to be greater than 5, the frequency of family meal reports were collapsed into three categories (less than twice a week, 3-4 times a week, and 5 or more times a week). There was no link between family meal frequency and family structure, parental employment, television viewing and gender. Of the young people that reported regular family meals, 49 per cent were male and 51 per cent were female. There was a slight increase in the number of females who indicated infrequent family meals, two or less per week, compared to the males (55 per cent and 45 per cent respectively) but this difference was not statistically significant. However this pattern may reflect a growing independence amongst teenage girls to cook for themselves, as found by Utter et al. (2008). There was also no link between family meal frequency and age, which does not support previous findings that frequency of family meals decreases with age (Canadace Currie, Kate Levin, & Joanna Todd, 2008; Taveras, et al., 2005). However the age band within this sample was too narrow to draw any firm conclusions in relation to age and family meal patterns.

The one factor that did report a relationship was the link between family meal frequency and location of the family meal (X_2= 11.52, p= .0015, N=211). The young people who did not eat at a table were less likely to report a family meal, than the young people who did, but this relationship could simply reflect the assumption that a 'family meal' is a meal eaten at the table. To address this point the data were also analysed in relation to the composition of the meal (who the young people ate with) and demographic variables. There was no link between whom the young people ate with (composition) and age, gender, family structure, parental employment, and television viewing. However there was

a relationship between whom the young people ate with and location of the family meal (X_2=30.01, p=.00, N=206) reflecting the previous link between family meal frequency and location. Young people who ate alone or with their friends were far less likely to eat at the table than young people who ate with their family.

The data was also analysed in relation to the location of their meal and demographic variables. There was no link between meal location and age, gender, and parental employment. However there was a relationship between eating location and family structure (X_2=3.90, p=.02, N=210). Young people living in couple step families, lone parent families and multi-family member households were more likely to eat away from the table compared to young people living in couple headed families. In couple headed families 67 per cent of the sample reported usually eating at the table, compared with 51 per cent of lone parent families and 55 per cent of step families. Whilst eating on the sofa was relatively consistent across the sample, the biggest variation was in the young people that reported usually eating in their bedrooms. In couple-headed families (excluding step families) only 3 per cent of the young people indicated they ate in their bedroom, compared with 14 per cent of young people in a lone parent family and 12 per cent of young people living in a step family. Whilst it is impossible to assess causation within correlational data, this finding raises important questions about the link between family structure and meal location. Henry & Lovelace (1995) proposed that regular routines (such as family meals eaten at the table) can help to buffer the potential stress and chaos during transitions in family structure, such as divorce and remarriage. And more recently, Levin, Kirby & Currie (2011) suggested that regular family meals can mediate the potentially negative link between family structure and adolescent risk behaviours. To explore these assumed associations, future research could explore individual experiences of and meanings given to food and eating in the family home to ascertain the potentially supportive role of eating together.

Patterns from the interview sample of twelve families

The twelve families who volunteered to take part in the interview stage of the research were recruited via the school questionnaires and also from a personal contact. The families varied in terms of their family structure, employment status and family meal patterns. Whilst the majority of the families were living in a couple-headed family, three of the families were step-families, and two were multi-family member households (the sixteen year old daughter in the Williams family had just had a baby and the Howard family included temporary foster children). The number of couple-headed families (excluding

step families) is similar to the questionnaire sample (58 and 56 per cent respectively) whilst the incidence of step families (a quarter) is slightly higher than the questionnaire sample of 20 per cent.

Family	Family structure	Paternal employment	Maternal employment	Location of meal	Family members Present
Leggett	Couple-headed	FT	PT	Table/sofa	All family
Johnson	Couple-headed	FT	PT	Sofa	All family
Turner	Couple step	PT	FT	Table	Varies
Holton	Couple-headed	Unemployed	FT	Table	Varies
Williams	Multi-family	FT	FT	Table	All family
Howard	Multi-family	FT	Homemaker	Table	Children
Wilson	Couple-headed	FT	Homemaker	Sofa	All family
Chambers	Couple-headed	FT	Homemaker	Table	All family
Carter	Couple-headed	FT	PT	Table	Mother + children
Baker	Couple-headed	FT	PT	Table	All family
Armstrong	Couple-headed	FT	FT	Table	All family
Mitchell/ Webb	Couple step	Unemployed	Homemaker	Table/sofa	All family

Table 7.2 Family meal patterns in the interview sample

Nine of the fathers were employed full-time, Peter Turner was the only father to work part-time, and two of the fathers were unemployed. In contrast only four of the mothers worked full-time, with another four working part-time and four identified as a homemaker. The number of interview fathers in full time employment (three quarters) and part time employment (8 per cent) closely reflects the date from the larger questionnaire sample of 70 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. The data for maternal employment is less similar to the questionnaire data with only one third of the interview mothers in full time employment, compared with 43 per cent of the questionnaire sample. Table 7 outlines the family structure, the parental employment status, the usual family meal location and the usual family members present during the meal of the twelve families in the study.

In relation to eating patterns: four of the families, the Williams, the Bakers, the Chambers and the Armstrongs indicated that they usually ate together at the table every evening; two of the families, the Turners and the Holtons tried to eat together at the table, but busy

work schedules and evening activities often prevented this; two of the families, the Johnsons and the Wilsons ate together sitting on the sofa watching the television, and two of the families, the Leggetts and the Mitchell/Webbs often ate at the same time but in different locations. The Howards were the only family that indicated that the children usually eat together at the table without their parents, whereas the Carter children usually ate at the table with their mother, Trish Carter, and Stuart Carter, their father, would often eat later alone. Thus overall nine of the twelve families reported eating their evening meal with at least one parent, which closely mirrors both the questionnaire sample and the data from the National Survey of Parents and Children (2008). However none of the young people in the interview sample indicated that they ate alone, compared with 15 per cent of the questionnaire sample. This discrepancy may be a reflection of the self-selection interview process with families who adopt more individualised eating patterns less likely to volunteer for research on ‘food and eating in the family home’.

With regards to meal location, the individual interviews suggested that eight of the twelve families usually ate together at the dining/kitchen table. The Johnsons and the Wilsons individual accounts concurred that they usually ate together sitting on the sofa watching the television and the Leggett family accounts reported usually eating together, at the same time, but in different locations – the Leggett parents often sat at the table, whilst the twin daughters, Chloe and Megan sat on the recliner sofa watching television in the open plan living space. The Mitchell/Webb individual accounts presented the opposite pattern to this, with the three older children, including Amy Webb, eating at the kitchen table and the parents, Neil and Linda, and the youngest brother, eating in the separate lounge whilst watching the television. Thus within this small sample, six of the young people usually watched television during their meal, which supports the assertion by Bradshaw et al (2007) that eating meals in front of the television is becoming a more common pattern for young people than in previous generations.

There was generally a consensus in the reported meal locations between the different family members, reflecting a routinized meal pattern, although there were comments regarding preferred meal location (for example Sharon Wilson, the mother, wanting to eat at the table rather than on the sofa). The one family group that did provide some discrepancy in their accounts was the Leggett family, with the individual accounts suggesting that the parents, Alan and Vicky, usually sat at the table eating their family meal, whilst the girls ate their family meal on the sofa, watching the television. Thus for the

Leggett family members a shared meal location was not a key requirement of a family meal. Of note Vicky and Alan did not initially mention this dual location, although when prompted both presented this pattern. Megan, the daughter, indicated in her school questionnaire that she usually ate at the table with her family but in her subsequent interview said that she usually ate on the sofa with her sister, whilst her parents sat at the table in the open-plan lounge. This discrepancy between the information provided within a school-based questionnaire and information given during a face-to-face interview raises important questions in relation to the role of context in data collection. If different settings , such as home and school, provide differing accounts of family meal patterns this has implications for research based on one method of data collection. The reasons for Megan presenting these different accounts is of note, and can arguably be linked to the 'family meal ideal' with Megan's questionnaire responses presenting the expected family meal patterns rather than the realities of their day to day lives. However one must be careful about making assumptions regarding the authenticity of the data and assuming that the interview accounts provide a more accurate reflection of day to day lives.

7.3 Young people's accounts of family meals

There was considerable variation in the young people's perceptions of their evening meals. Whilst some of the young people expressed the family meal 'ideal' of enjoying eating at the table with their families, others presented the evening meal as a more functional event, with the time spent eating viewed as a temporary break from their other activities, usually computer based. Two of the young people, Megan Leggett and William Wilson, suggested they were not bothered where they ate or with whom, whilst Laura Johnson and Amy Webb, indicated that they would like to eat more meals together with their family at the table.

Enjoying eating with the family

Molly Holton clearly articulated her feelings about eating with her family:

> I like having meals with the family because during the week we all do different things and we don't get to speak a lot – it's nice to sit down and catch up and stuff… I really do think that if you didn't eat with your family then you wouldn't have that connection, you wouldn't be able to talk. Yeah, it would be lonely.
>
> (Molly Holton, 15)

Molly's account reflects the family meal 'ideal' of sitting at the table to eat with family members and having the opportunity to communicate and feel a positive emotional

connection. Alfie Howard, Daisy Howard and Ellie Turner also expressed similar sentiments of enjoying 'catching up' with each other and having family time. Alfie noted that 'it's nice, you can catch up on things and listen to what people are doing' and his twin sister, Daisy, agreed, 'it's nice, sort of family time at the table, it's nice, talking about our days and stuff'. Like Molly, Ellie noted that eating together was one of the few times the family spent time together. This perception of more individualised lifestyles was apparent in the young people's accounts. For example Stacey Williams notes:

> …it's what we do because we like to sit down together and talk while we eat … we get to hear about what people have done and how they feel and stuff, it's nice to sit down and talk because we are all usually out or doing something else so it's nice to sit and talk to each other. (Stacey Williams, 15)

Functional meals

In contrast to these affective accounts of eating with their families, Jordan Carter and Alexander Armstrong provided more functional accounts of eating with their families. The Carter family accounts indicated that most meals were eaten at the kitchen table whilst watching the television, with dad often eating later, and so for Jordan, the main purpose of the meal was to eat the food,

> … we generally just watch telly, but sometimes we talk together, just eat our food but sometimes we talk a little bit … if there are main things going on in the week we would talk about that but if not much went on we would eat our dinner and watch telly or if we are in there (at the dining table) we would talk.
>
> (Jordan Carter, 15)

From his account, Jordan demonstrates his awareness of how the situational context of the mealtime alters the interactions, with the family members more likely to talk when sitting at the dining table in the lounge. Within some of the young people accounts there was a noticeable ambiguity regarding their feelings around eating with their families. For example Megan Leggett explained that whilst she liked both eating locations, she usually preferred to eat on the sofa in comfort, 'It's nice when we do sit up the table because we can all talk but it's nice when we sit here as it's comfy and you get to watch TV' (Megan Leggett, 14). William Wilson's account also indicated that he had little emotional connection to this time of the day. As highlighted in Chapter 8, the Wilson family usually ate their individualised meals on trays sitting in the lounge on the sofa/armchair watching

the television. When asked about his feelings about this time, William provided a very functional response:

> I suppose I don't have any feelings towards it, I would notice, I would sort of think it's almost 6 o clock, I better not start anything on one of my computer games because I'll be going down for tea soon, but I don't really think, oh no not this time again or I can't wait for… now I come to think of it I am not sure of how much difference it makes. (William Wilson, 15)

Thus for William, the family meal was presented as a routine time of the day, with his primary concern being how he schedules his computer use around it. This link between the young peoples' accounts and their computer use was apparent in the majority of the accounts. For example Jonathon Baker noted that whilst it can be nice to sit and talk with his parents, if he has something to do on his computer than that takes precedence:

> I'll sit and talk anyway to be honest 'cause it's nice to sit down for a little while. **Do you like that time of the day?** Sometimes, sometimes it's a bit …erm… I think it just depends really. Sometimes I don't… if I want to get back off the computer then sometimes I'll just whizz off again, yeah it does depend I think.
>
> (Jonathon Baker, 15)

Wanting a more sociable meal

Of all the young people, Laura Johnson and Amy Webb were the only two that reported that they would like their family eating patterns to be different. The three Johnson family interviews all indicated that most meals were eaten together on trays sitting on the sofa watching the television, whereas the Mitchell/Webb family ate in separate locations - the three older children, including Amy, ate at the table in the kitchen and the parents and the younger brother ate on trays sitting on the sofa in the lounge. For Laura, she was able to explicitly express her preference for eating at the table, linking it to being more sociable,

> When it's tea time we put the computers aside, we'll watch TV because there's nothing else to look at but I do prefer it when we go on the table but sometimes there's something we want to watch on the TV. **Why do you say you prefer it?** I don't know everyone seems more friendly, they make conversation and talk about their days and stuff and I find it a bit more sociable (Laura Johnson, 15)

In contrast to Laura, Amy was less explicit in her feelings. When asked how she feels about this time she responded in a very flat voice, 'I don't mind eating in here, it don't really

bother me, it's what I've always done'. This contrasted sharply with her animated recollection of the Christmas meal when all the family sat together at the kitchen table (and her younger brother was having his afternoon nap). I argue in Chapter 8 that Amy's apparent unwillingness to challenge the current family meal pattern, which has been established around her younger brothers eating needs, reflects Amy's acceptance of the dominant family paradigm that guides the Mitchell/Webb family's interactions.

7.4 Maternal accounts of family meals

Maternal family accounts of the evening meal appeared to provide more emotional responses than the young peoples or paternal accounts. Most of the mothers' spoke about the evening meal as important for being together as a family and feeling close, in an unforced way, reflecting DeVault's findings that the evening meal routine was important for 'producing a family' and bringing the separate family lives together (DeVault, 1991). The meal provided the opportunity to talk and catch up, and for some, the opportunity to monitor their children's diet. A few of the mothers mentioned that eating together at the table was becoming less frequent because of their children getting older and commanding more agency. Like her son, Trish Carter presented a more practical view of the evening meal and Linda Webb was the only mother who indicated her dislike of this time of the day and the need to eat to 'get it over with'.

Opportunity to be together in an 'unforced' way

Elaine Baker noted that this time of the day was special and reflected the young people's accounts that the mealtime was often the only time of the day that the family came together,

> **Do you like that time of day?** Absolutely, I think you should have that time, it's very special, because otherwise you don't...as I said they do go off in different directions and you don't always have that time to sit down. I think that is nice to be able to sit down… obviously the evening time is the only time we get to all come together, most of the time. **Do you think it matters?** Yes I do. I do think it's important 'cause that's the only time you get to talk to each other and communicate. How do you know what's going on? How they feel? And what their day has been. It isn't just about the food is it? It's about what's been going on, and it is a time to just talk and be together (Elaine Baker, mother)

Priya Armstrong, Siobhan Turner and Claire Holton also echoed these sentiments that meals were often the only time in the day when the family were together. For these full-

time working mothers, this everyday activity provided one of the few opportunities for their family to interact and spend quality time together. The women noted that this was particularly important as their sons and daughters were getting older, which corresponds with the feelings expressed by the participants in Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh's (2007) study:

> **… how do you feel about that time of the day?** Well I quite like, I like that, cause that's probably the only time we sit down together cause as soon as… like when I get in from work, Alexander will be in his room, Jade will be in her room, Dave will be sat in here, I'll go in there and do the cooking. They might pop through and get a drink if I'm in there but they don't tend to sit in there and talk to us. And then after dinner, particularly week days, they tend to go back upstairs to their rooms after we've eaten, so … (Priya Armstrong, mother)

For both Siobhan and Claire, a key element of this mealtime was that it enabled the family members to come together in an unforced way:

> I really like getting the family together it feels warm and lovely, it's really nice to share food and be thankful for the food we've got and sit and relax and enjoy each other's company in a relaxed, you know we all want to be eating and so it's almost sometimes when you have teenagers it can be a bit forced time you have together but at mealtimes it's not forced time you spend time as a family
>
> (Siobhan Turner, mother)

> I think it's time as a family but it doesn't have to be justified because it's part of the routine so I don't have to say Molly and Emma come on let's have family time, …that isn't going to work, but that come and sit down and have a meal I think that takes away the pressure of having family time because it fits in with something that's happening anyway. (Claire Holton, mother)

Mothers' accounts of meals not being forced family time, was of note and reflects an awareness by these mothers of their teenager's changing needs as they get older and the need for families to negotiate how they interact and spend time together. Some of the mothers, such as Kathy Williams and Sarah Chambers, also noted that alongside being together, it was an opportunity to monitor diet, " I am guessing as well subconsciously we are monitoring what they are eating at the same time and making sure they do eat, so many different things about it that are important" (Kathy Williams, mother),

> I am resigned to having to cook because it's important I cook because it's important the children eat healthily, that's why I do it, the overwhelming thought for me is the children must eat healthily and that's why I get up and cook every day… (Sarah Chambers, mother)

Monitoring the young person's diet

Of all the mothers interviewed, Sarah Chambers spoke most forcibly about the importance of ensuring her son and daughter had a healthy diet, with this health narrative dominating her lengthy interview. In contrast other parents spoke about 'junk' food and 'rubbish' food and 'healthy' food, but this did not dominate their accounts, with parents taking different positions in relation to the amount of authority they had over their children's diet. Whilst social class was not formally measured during the interviews, the parental attitudes to 'junk food' did appear to link to social class (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010). For example, Sarah Chambers, who lived in a large detached house in an affluent area, spoke at length about her anxiety and the importance of carefully monitoring her children's diet. In contrast Kathy Williams, a hostel worker, who lived in a terraced house in a less affluent area, spoke comfortably about 'freezer dinners' (readymade meals from the supermarket) at the end of the month, before payday. However, as with most research on family life, this distinction was not clear cut, as Mandy Johnson, the school cook who lived in a council house, also emphasised the importance of home-made fresh food – although she made fewer links with health as her focus appeared to be more linked with economics. Reflecting findings from Owen et al's (2010) research, few of the fathers in this study voiced anxieties around food-provisioning and health, although some did acknowledge that certain foods were 'rubbish' or 'junk'. Of note William Wilson was the only boy who discussed his food not being 'healthy' and William's particularly restricted diet is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Dealing with their son/daughters growing independence

Several of the mothers reflected on the changing nature of family meals as their children were getting older, although there was a different level of acceptance. For example Sharon Wilson spoke about her lack of contact with William and her preference for eating at the dining table (as mentioned above the family usually ate their evening meals on trays in front of the television):

> I do miss that sitting up, I think that's an important time because you're all there at the same time, talking about your day. **…** I think it's nice so I can talk about their

> day see what they are doing, I feel it's a time for the family, if William has any problems he can talk to us but he's always rushing up on his x box
>
> (Sharon Wilson, mother)

The Johnson family also ate their meals on trays in front of the television, which Mandy Johnson seemed to accept as part of the children getting older and needing to relax after school:

> I don't think it's right, I really don't we wouldn't have been allowed that when I was a child, mind you we didn't have laptops then in the dark ages. No you can't beat sitting up to the table, I just wish we did it more often but I always think now, if they have been at school all day they want to chill don't they? They don't want to be with us old fogeys, I can understand it, we do chat over a meal, especially Sam if there's a football game on or a bit of sport we don't just sit and eat, it is a social thing. (Mandy Johnson, mother)

This maternal account of the children's preferences is different from the daughter Laura's account of preferring to eat at the table as it is more sociable. Whether Laura was unable to express this preference to her family or whether other family members' choices (noticeably her older brother) dominate this family system is open to debate. This parental acceptance of their children's needs changing as they get older is also reflected in Sarah Chambers account:

> I think as the children get older I keep calling them children, that probably won't be the case, they'll probably want to say I am coming back late and I will say it's OK I will plate it up you can have it when you get home something like that, it's the way people's lives are, there are more opportunities to do things outside the home than there used to be and of course when children are younger it's nice to be round the table isn't it but as they get older you have to accept they will do things independently and that's fine. I try to keep a balance. (Sarah Chambers, mother)

In contrast, Siobhan Turner repeatedly expressed her anxiety at her children getting older and wanting to spend less time eating with the family and more time away from the family unit. This discrepancy between these maternal accounts may partly be linked to their differing employment statuses – Sarah Chambers was a full-time homemaker, who took pride in being able to bake fresh cakes most afternoons for her children to return home to the aroma of fresh baking, whereas Siobhan Turner worked full-time in a highly pressured

job, frequently causing her to return home late and miss the evening meal. Thus both women would have different perceptions of time and their access to it. Siobhan's anxiety is also likely to be linked to her dominant family paradigm of needing to keep her children close, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

Functional meals

Unlike the majority of the women, Trish Carter presented a very practical approach to the evening meal, very similar to the tone of her son, Jordan's account:

> **…** it's just part of the day, I don't make a big issue of it or whatever it happens every day and we do have that every day and I know some families don't but we do … I wouldn't say I made a big deal of it going we can't do this because you must be in at… you can tell by our lifestyle you can't have a set tea on the table
>
> (Trish Carter, mother)

For Trish, who worked part-time as a police officer and had primary responsibility for food provisioning within the family, meals had to be scheduled around a busy after school set of activities, that included dancing on a Monday for Alice, skiing on a Wednesday for Jordan, dancing on a Thursday for Alice, badminton on a Thursday for Trish, swimming on a Friday for Alice and swimming on a Saturday morning for Alice. Such a busy timetable of activities required a considerable amount of time (both scheduling and synchronizing) and invested energy. According to the family accounts this role was taken on by Trish Carter, rather than Stuart Carter, reflecting the findings from the '*Running around in circles'* report by Skinner (2003). Thus meals were presented as a practical activity, something that had to happen each day to meet physiological needs, rather than an emotional activity.

Anxious mealtimes

Whilst several of the women noted the stress linked to food provisioning and family meals, Linda Webb presented the most negative account of the evening meal, indicating that for her mealtimes were a continued source of anxiety and stress primarily due to her younger daughter, Lily's eating behaviours:

> **…how do you feel about mealtimes?** If it's something that I know Lily is going to eat then I'm fine. If it's something that I don't think Lily is going to eat then you sort of feel this, not panic, but you know the scenario, how it's gonna go is, there's gonna be, not so much, well there is tears sometimes but it's so frustrating because obviously Neil has stood there and cooked and then all of a sudden, she knows

> what she's having and she'll just sit there and say I'm not gonna eat it ... if it all goes smoothly then it's over and done with. … I just think sometimes it's a bit of a chore in the day where you've gotta, you know, gotta sit there and do it. It's not, it's not that I don't want to eat, it's just the fact that sometimes you think (sigh) you know, here we go, we've all got to sit here now .. (Linda Webb, mother)

Linda's account clearly contrasts with the idealised image of family meals, reflecting the conflict, power struggles and frustrations evident during some family meals (as discussed by Lupton, 1996). Linda also explained that food and eating had been a continual source of tension and anxiety throughout her life, reflected in her hospitalisation as a child for not eating. In their 2010 review of Project EAT, Neumark-Sztainer et al (2010) called for future research to explore the extent to which parental childhood experience of food and eating influence current mealtime behaviours, a factor that had already been explored by DeVault (1991). This influence is evident in Linda's account as she reports '*hating'* cooking for her four children, two of whom are presented by all three family members as having 'difficult' eating patterns. Lily the youngest daughter often refuses to eat anything and Mark, the youngest son with Downs Syndrome eats only a restricted diet. The feelings that Linda Webb describes in her interview are supported by her partner, Neil Mitchell, who describes the evening meal time as a "horrible time of the day", as discussed in the paternal accounts below.

7.5 Paternal accounts of family meals

The main elements in the paternal accounts included: that it was nice to be together, to socialise and 'catch up' and plan ahead, whilst also acknowledging that it was a functional activity in their increasingly busy lives. A noticeable difference in the paternal accounts was the focus on their own enjoyment of the meal (rather than being pre-occupied with what others were eating). Alan Leggett and Gareth Williams presented themselves as stricter parents, wanting the family to eat at the table, whereas Barry Wilson and Mark Johnson noted their preference for eating their meals on a tray on the sofa. Only Neil Mitchell, like his partner Linda Webb, presented the evening meal as a "horrible time of day".

Opportunity to catch up and plan ahead

A key focus in the paternal accounts was the opportunity the evening meal gave to 'catch up' and plan ahead,

> … it is the only time really that we do sit down, all together really, occasionally, as I say, if there's something on the TV … then we'll sit here and watch that but actual

> family time together then that is you know that sort of half an hour, three quarters of an hour whatever it is, is the only time that we, on a typical day, that we would sit together and talk about things, yeah... it's very important… I wouldn't have a clue what they were doing basically… having the meal at the table, that is when we find out what's going on, yeah (Dave Armstrong, father)

> **You said you're the one who wants them to sit at the table, is it possible for you to explain the feelings you have when you all eat together?** It's nice to know that we are together sometimes it can be the only time I see them, especially if they are off out or they are busy doing something when they are doing their school stuff and I come in and it's the only time I would see them, so it's really seeing them and listening and seeing what's going on and knowing what I missed or what I am going to miss, or what I should have done and haven't done (Alan Leggett, father)

Alan Leggett focused on the importance of seeing his daughters within their busy lifestyles and noted how the meal was an opportunity to organise both family time and his time, by synchronising future activities (through programming, co-ordinating and reminding) and monitoring what should have happened. The phrasing of the extract indicated that Alan took a passive role in this organisation, waiting to be told what to do, rather than initiating it, reflecting the paternal involvement noted by Coltrane (1996) in relation to process responsibility (Pleck, 2010), "...in most families, husbands notice less about what needs to be done, and wait to be asked to do various chores and require explicit directions if they are to complete the tasks successfully" (Coltrane, 1996, p. 54). Process responsibility is conceptualised by Pleck (2010) as taking the initiative and monitoring what is needed, and whilst in this extract Alan Leggett indicated that he uses meal times to find out what he 'should have done', it would be wrong to categorise all the Leggett family interactions in this way. As Doucet (2008) notes it is more helpful to classify paternal involvement in process responsibility as a continuum, positioning fathers as assistants, partners or managers. Using this classification, in other extracts Alan and Vicky Leggett presented his role as that of partner, sharing the task of shopping and cooking with Vicky.

Scheduling meals to include/exclude family members

Ed Howard also gave an account of how important evening meal are for him, although all three family member accounts indicated that he usually ate alone at the table as he did not return home from work until 5.30pm (compared with the other families in the study the Howard children ate particularly early without their father):

> **So when you do sit down together, can you explain how you feel about these times?** It's important that you all sit and have a meal together and try and socialise and have a bit of a chat it's something I remember as a kid having Sunday dinners together it's a family thing isn't it quite nice… **Do you enjoy it?** Yeah I enjoy my food. (Ed Howard, father)

Whilst a few of the families did eat before 6pm, this was usually to accommodate paternal shift patterns, such as the Johnsons and the Leggetts. To accommodate competing and conflicting demands and pressures on time (such as shift work), families often develop routines to provide a compromise between what is desirable and what is practical (Jastran 2009). Thus the Johnsons and Leggetts appeared to have developed a flexible mealtime routine to enable all family members to be present. In contrast, the Howard family meal pattern of eating between 4.30pm and 5pm restricted Ed Howard from eating with his family. As already mentioned, it is not possible to understand this routine from Debbie Howard's position, as she declined to be involved in the study. However the synchronization and timing of the meal, controlled by Debbie Howard according to the other family member accounts, excluded Ed Howard and may be a reflection of the maternal power and control within this family system and/or a reflection of marital conflict.

Enjoyment of the food

When asked about the priority for him at mealtimes, Ed Howard initially mentioned his enjoyment of the food, rather than the more social elements, which was a similar pattern in the paternal accounts from Mark Johnson, Colin Chambers and Barry Wilson:

> **So what would you say is the priority for you at mealtimes, what's the most important thing?** That I enjoy the food, that I enjoy the food and I like to be relaxed, I wouldn't like the idea of everyone afraid to speak and especially at the age they are you don't see much of them so even if you are all in there it's nice to all be together. (Mark Johnson, father)

> **How do you feel about that time in the day?** I enjoy the meal… yes I enjoy that and sitting down with the children that's quite relaxed, I look forward to it it's quite pleasant the food is always nice, it's relaxed. (Colin Chambers, father)

Within these paternal accounts, their individual enjoyment of the food appeared to pre-figure their enjoyment of being with their family. This pattern was not as dominant in the maternal accounts suggesting that for the women in this study their enjoyment of the meal

was less focused on the taste of the food and more connected to their emotional feelings about being with their family.

Paternal strictness in relation to eating location

Noticeable within some of the paternal accounts was the emphasis on being strict, particularly in relation to eating behaviours at the table, which reflects enculturation into appropriate behaviours (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Both Alan Leggett and Gareth Williams presented themselves as stricter parents, and this was supported by the other family members' accounts:

> **Why does that depend on whether you are here or not?** Because I tell them we should sit at the table. **Why do you say that?** Because it's nice to sit together otherwise they shut themselves off in front of the telly and obviously it's my settee they are dropping their food all over. (Alan Leggett, father)

Whilst Chloe and Megan indicated that their father did want them to eat at the table, they reflected their agency, and arguably disharmony within their family system by simply ignoring his request. In contrast to Alan Leggett, Gareth Williams insisted that his family eat at the table, and this instruction was followed without question:

> **How do you feel about that time you spend together eating?** I don't know really, I just think because we have always done it, it comes natural, the kids don't even think about going to sit down with their tea on their lap in front of the TV, they just automatically go up to the table, it's something we have always done, it's natural **Is it important to you?** I think it is, it gives them structure, discipline, manners at the table (Gareth Williams, father)

From this account Gareth emphasises the importance of discipline, structure and manners for his large multi-generational family (an emphasis that was supported by his wife, Kathy Williams). In contrast to the Williams family, the Wilsons and the Johnsons usually ate their evening meal on a tray on the sofa. Whilst Sharon Wilson noted her preference for eating at the table, Barry clearly stated his preference for eating on the sofa as it was more comfortable. Similarly Mark Johnson also notes that his family usually eat on the sofa in front of the television, though his account differs from Barry in that he presents it as lazy:

> …these days it's tends to be a TV thing on a tray, we do occasionally sit up the table when it's emptied, we have got a bit lazy about it I'm afraid. **Why do you say you're afraid?** No I think it's a good thing to sit up the, it's probably the one time

> of the day we are all together … we're all you know in all different parts of the house and tea time is the one time you are altogether and if you are sitting at the table you have more chance of chatting than if you are in front of the telly because you're watching the telly, but we do do it occasionally. **Why has it changed then?** Mostly the kids I think, they started saying could we have a tray, I'm in the middle of this or that and we let them get away with it and it goes on from there really, often we have a fair bit of clutter on the table we don't get round to clearing and it's just the easy way out really. (Mark Johnson, father)

Whilst Mark Johnson does not suggest his current situation as ideal, reflected by his phrase ''we have got a bit lazy about it I'm afraid", he also presents a rationale for their meals in front of the TV noting both his children's preferences and the cluttered space on the table. From his interview it appeared that there was a sense of him being resigned to the situation, rather than actively choosing to eat this way, as Barry Wilson did for example.

Meals being a horrible time of the day

From the twelve fathers interviewed, Neil Mitchell was the only father to present the evening meal in a negative light,

> **How do you feel about that time of the day?** It's a horrible time of the day. You know right from the morning that it's going to come in the end if you know what I mean but it's ... That is sort of knowing what to do all the while because of ... whatever you do there's always gonna be one of them that say they don't like that or they don't want that. (Neil Mitchell, father)

The impending sense of dread that this account contains, reflects the negative perception of the evening meal that his partner, Linda Webb also described. For both parents the evening meal was perceived as a stressful part of the day, dominated by the 'children's' fussy eating (although on closer examination it was only the younger two children, Lily and Mark, that appeared to have unconventional eating behaviours, rather than all four children). Of note, Amy Webb did not present this negative view of the evening meal, although implicit in her account was her preference to eat at the table with her parents (as discussed above).

7.6 Family member accounts of the family meal ideal

The final section of this chapter will explore the extent to which the family member accounts reflected or rejected the idealised version of the family meal that dominates

popular culture. The iconic family meal is conceptualised as the whole family happily eating together, every evening, around a table, a ‘proper’ healthy meal cooked from scratch (Ochs, et al., 2010) although Jackson (2009) suggests that proper meals, cooked from scratch, are aspirational rather than the daily reality of most families. This ideal clearly defines the composition, location, timing and content (both material and emotional) of the family meal. Whilst four of the families presented a shared family meal ideal, in which each family member indicated their enjoyment of eating together at the table, other family member accounts indicated alternative views. Three families reflected a partially shared family meal ideal, with not all family members ‘opting’ in to the ideal, and two of the families suggested a general ambivalence towards this everyday activity. Of the twelve families, three presented a contested family meal ideal, with the individual accounts varying in relation to their preferred composition, location and content.

Shared family meal ‘ideal’

The Turners, Holtons, Williams and Chambers families all presented with a strong shared family meal ideal which was reflected in all three family members’ accounts. Thus within these accounts there was a shared consensus as to the composition (the whole family), the location (at the table), the timing (usually linked to employment hours) and the content (both the meal and the emotional content). Whilst all four families subscribed to this ‘ideal’, the Chambers family were the only ones able to achieve this on a regular basis. This discrepancy between aspiration and reality links with Gillis’s ideas of ‘the families we live with and the families we live by’, highlighting the difference between idealised versions of family life and the day to day reality (Gillis, 1996). For the Turners, the Holtons and the Williams work schedules and after school activities often prevented the family from eating together, which was lamented more by the mothers Siobhan Turner and Claire Holton, who both worked full-time. In contrast, Kathy Williams had a more accepting view of her employment hours, despite working more unsociable shifts.

Partially shared family meal ‘ideal’

In contrast to this shared family meal ideal, three of the family groups reflected a partially shared family meal ideal, in which the young people presented as being less concerned about eating with their family than their parents (and noted their desire to return to their computers/ television). The Baker family, the Armstrong family and the Leggett family all reflected this pattern. Whilst the children, Jonathon Baker and Alexander Armstrong, accepted the composition and location of the family meal, they challenged the timing of the meal by resisting any prolonged period of eating. And whilst parents, Alan and Vicky

Leggett, presented the family meal ‘ideal’ of all eating together, when prompted it became apparent that the twin daughters, Chloe and Megan, usually ate on the sofa. Thus Chloe and Megan Leggett resisted the location of the meal by choosing to sit and eat on the sofa despite Alan Leggett’s request that they sat at the table together. Of note was that Megan indicated in her self-report questionnaire that she usually ate at the table – a research finding that highlights the problems with a reliance on self-report data without opportunity for further clarification. All of the young people in this partially shared family meal ideal group indicated that meals were ‘ok’ but provided no account of the emotional content of the meal, presenting food and eating as a brief interlude from their other activities.

Ambivalent feelings towards the family meal ‘ideal’

Two of the families seemed to have ambivalent feelings towards the family meal ideal, the Johnsons and the Carters. The Johnson family reported usually all eating together on the sofa in front of the television although both parents indicated that this was not ideal, “We do occasionally sit up the table when it’s emptied – we have got a bit lazy about it I’m afraid” (Mark Johnson, father) and “We do often use the table but not as often as I would like… if we have company we are at the table but mostly we slop everywhere. It sounds awful, like something out of Little Britain!” (Mandy Johnson, mother). Whilst both parents explicitly critiqued their routine, this could have been a reaction to my role as a researcher and what they thought I would be expecting to hear in relation to the family meal ideal. Both Mark and Mandy indicated that this situation was linked to their children’s ages, with Laura, fifteen, and Jake, seventeen, preferring to eat their meals in front of the television. However this perception contrasts with Laura’s account of preferring to eat at the table.

The Carter family also presented ambivalent feelings towards the family meal ideal. The children and mother usually ate in front of a television, though sitting at the kitchen table, and presented a more practical functional approach to the evening meal within their hectic out of school schedule. Thus this family presented the family meal in relation to timing and content, and partially location (although the kitchen table was a breakfast bar dominated by the large television) but not in relation to composition as Stuart Carter, the father, usually ate alone, later in the evening. None of the Carter family accounts mentioned any emotional links to food and eating within the family – all three presented meals as a practical activity for nourishment in between other activities.

Contested family meal 'ideal'

The final group of families, the Howards, the Wilsons and the Mitchell/Webbs, presented contested family meal ideals, in relation to timing, location and composition. For the Howard family the family meal was contested in relation to timing and composition. Whilst the father, Ed Howard, spoke clearly about his enjoyment of eating with his family, both his and his children's accounts indicated that he usually ate alone at the table, when he arrived home at 5.30pm (an early time relative to the other families in the study). His partner had refused to take part in the study so I was unable to explore the reasons behind this early family meal time. Other parents in the study worked a variety of shift patterns, such as the Alan Leggett, Mark Johnson and Kathy Williams, and the families were often able to vary the timing of the evening meal to accommodate this. The Wilson family also presented a contested family meal in relation to location as Sharon Wilson, the mother, wanted to eat at the table, but Barry's preference to eat in front of the television prevailed. The son, William Wilson, also chose not to eat the home cooked meal prepared by his mother, opting instead for processed and frozen food (though still prepared by Sharon). The reason these contested meal preferences have remained is explored further in Chapter 8.

Of the twelve families in the study, the Mitchell/Webb family accounts indicated the most stressful mealtimes, dramatically at variance with the family meal ideal. Whilst the family meal was usually eaten at the same time, the composition and location varied as the older children usually ate together in the kitchen and the parents and youngest son ate together in the lounge, and the content varied, primarily due to the younger sons 'alternative' eating habits. Both parents also indicated that this was a *horrible* time of the day which they dreaded, due to the younger daughter's perceived fussy eating. In contrast Amy Webb, the older daughter interviewed, gave little emotional reaction to this evening routine. The underlying family paradigm which guides and influences this family is explored further in chapter 9.

7.7 Conclusion.

Utilising a mixed method approach this study explored family meal patterns from a high school sample and individual accounts from a sub-sample of twelve families. The interviews revealed considerable variation in the individual family members' perceptions of their evening meals. Whilst some of the young people expressed the family meal 'ideal' of enjoying eating at the table with their families, others presented more ambivalent feelings viewing the evening meal as a more functional event. The paternal accounts of the evening meal noted that it was nice to be together, to socialise and 'catch up' and plan ahead,

whilst also acknowledging that it was a functional activity in their increasingly busy lives. In contrast, the maternal family accounts spoke about the evening meal being important for being together as a family and feeling close, although for a few of the mothers, eating together at the table was becoming less frequent because of their children getting older and commanding more agency. Some of the families presented a strong shared family meal ideal, with each family member indicating their enjoyment of eating together at the table. In contrast other families reflected a partial ideal, with either the young person not 'opting' in to the ideal or a general ambivalence amongst some of the family members, or a contested family meal ideal, with the individual accounts varying in relation to their preferred composition, location and content.

The findings from the questionnaire analysis indicated that many of the young people in the sample ate regular meals with their parents and young people living in couple-headed families were more likely to eat at the table compared to young people living in alternative family structures, although the small sample size prevents any clear conclusions being drawn from this data. A comparison of the questionnaire data did reveal some discrepancies between the self-report questionnaires and the interview data and raises the importance of context in data collection. Such discrepancies highlight the value of using multiple methods from multiple perspectives to enable triangulation of data. The next two chapters will focus on the specific elements of the family meal. Chapter 8 will explore the underlying family processes within each element of the meal and will explore the different family roles in relation to these activities. Chapter 9 will present three family cases studies to illustrate how exploring food and eating in the family home may provide a 'window' into deeper family processes, conceptualised as family paradigms, that guide and influence family life.

Chapter 8: Findings II: Family Processes and Family Meals

8.1 Introduction

Having presented the contemporary family meal patterns in this small East Anglian sample, and considered the link to the family meal 'ideal', this next chapter will explore the *underlying family processes that occur within the family meal.* The term 'family meal' was conceptualised as representing the whole process of food provisioning, including deciding what to eat, shopping for food, preparing and cooking food, and eating the meal. The theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was guided by both the research questions and the theoretical framework of family process theory (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). As a result the coding framework was developed to identify the family processes that occurred during and around the family meal, such as solving problems, dealing with conflict, making everyday decisions and setting and maintaining boundaries (Day, 2010). The family processes coded within these interactions were subsequently further interpreted to focus on how they contributed to both the personal and family goals of creating affect, exerting power and achieving meaning for the individual family members, through the access dimensions of time, space and energy (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). The coding framework was also sensitised to the themes of gender and generation to address the research aim of *exploring the themes of gender and generation in relation to the elements of the family meal*.

It is important to acknowledge that the families in this study were 'established families' with established routines and patterns of behaviour that had evolved and were continuing to evolve as the family progressed through the life course. At the time of interview all the families had at least one fourteen to fifteen year old son/daughter, although their position in the family varied from being the youngest, middle or eldest child. The research presents a snapshot of their family life and the underlying family processes at one point of time. The research sample was predominantly families from a rural/market town and a seaside town, with varied employment statuses. Whilst the majority of parents in these couple headed households were engaged in a range of labour market activities, only one family, the Armstrongs, had both parents employed full time. Thus for the majority of the families, 'family meals' were less constrained by long working hours of both parents, although several families had to accommodate meals around shift patterns. The following sections will explore the various elements of the family meal such as how family members decided

what to eat, how shopping was organised, who prepared and cooked the food and finally the individual accounts of eating the meal.

8.2 Making everyday decisions regarding food provisioning

A central family process is making everyday decisions - a process that requires an investment of both time and energy, with the resulting choices often reflecting power, affect and meaning within the family system. For this study the thematic analysis was sensitised as to how the families made decisions about food provisioning such as deciding what to eat and deciding who will cook. The individual accounts indicated that the mothers were predominantly responsible for deciding what to eat, with their choices being primarily based on their partners and children's preferences. Some of the families indicated that decision making around food was a joint responsibility between the parents, and whilst attempts were made to include the young people's preferences this was not always successful; parental accounts suggested that the young people made inappropriate suggestions and the young people's accounts reported that they were not always listened to.

Maternal food choices based on paternal and young people's preferences

The accounts suggested that maternal decisions on food choices were made primarily based on what the husband and children liked and would eat, mirroring findings from earlier studies such as De Vault (1991) and more recent work from Haukanes (2007):

> "Well we've been married a fair while now, she knows what I like..."
>
> (Mark Johnson, 50, factory worker)
>
> "...we could have anything but within the repertoire that is there that the children will eat...she (Sarah) probably gets a bit bored having to cook the same thing all the time, but that's what the children will eat" (Colin Chambers, 55, naval pilot)

Whilst Mark Johnson's comment clearly articulates the findings from Murcott's (1982b) study that the husband's choices and preferences dictated the evening meal, the comments from Colin Chambers, noting the children's preferences, reflect the growing agency of young people in contemporary family life. When asked if there were foods that they particularly liked, several of the women noted that there were foods they liked, such as liver, but as nobody else in the family liked it they did not cook it:

> "... I have changed what I eat because of what they eat, I suppose. It's interesting that you ask that question because probably I don't cook the things I used to. See I

would cook liver and bacon – I love liver and bacon … really I should… but they won't, they won't eat it. (Elaine Baker, 49, part-time teaching assistant)

So that's interesting, you mentioned what Jake likes, you mentioned what Mark likes, what do you like to eat? Good point. I love liver and they don't so I never buy liver, it's sad really because it doesn't take long to cook and I could quite easily munch into that while they're having something else, I go with the flow more..."
(Mandy Johnson, 51, part-time school cook)

This decision by the women to accommodate other preferences, rather than their own, reflected a subtle element of control of the content of the evening meal, to try and ensure that mealtimes were free from conflict around food. By investing time and energy in cooking food that everyone liked, the mothers aimed to demonstrate affect and create a positive meaning around that daily routine.

Collective family decision making

In five of the families (the Turners, Holtons, Mitchell/Webbs, Leggetts and Williams) the individual accounts suggested that decision making and planning of food was more of a joint responsibility. For these families a variety of paternal employment patterns influenced this arrangement. Peter Turner worked part-time, Keith Holton and Neil Mitchell were unemployed, and Alan Leggett worked shifts. In the Turner family, Peter Turner, the father, explained that he is currently responsible for the decisions around shopping and cooking, linking this role to his employment hours:

"At the moment that's me, I do the shopping and the cooking. My job is, I think, contracted for 31 hours and yeah that's me I do the shopping, do the cooking.
(Peter Turner, 37, part-time teaching assistant)

His wife, Siobhan Turner, who worked full-time in a busy managerial role, also indicated that she had a role in planning meals, focusing on her attempts to involve her children in deciding what they would like to eat:

"Just as I am experiencing teenage-ness with them it's still a way I can communicate with them and get them together at the table, so I will ask them what they would like to eat so I try and get them involved in it, so I am asking them what would you like?" (Siobhan Turner, 42, full-time Children's Centre Manager)

In family process theory terms, her approach provided a vehicle to engage the children in this decision making process and in doing so regulated the distance between the family members, aiming to bring them closer together. Whilst the parental accounts focused on their own role in decision making, with little acknowledgement of each other, their daughter, Ellie Turner, was able to acknowledge that both parents were involved in this decision making process. Ellie's account indicated that her mother, Siobhan, took on more of the planning role, before the weekly shop, and her step-father Peter, took on the daily task of cooking and shopping for smaller items. Thus her young person's viewpoint was able to provide a different perspective to this family process, combining both parental accounts, which would have been obscured if the study had not adopted a multi-person perspective. The extent to which family members were included in this decision making process varied between the families, although the family members were sometimes asked by the mothers for food and meal suggestions before the shopping:

> If I go shopping I do my shop once a week and if there's anyone about I say what do you fancy and Jake(son) will say pasta, Mr Adventurous!, they all like different things. It's just who's about at the time and I think Jake had what he liked yesterday and I think maybe I'll do something that Mark (husband) likes today, that sort of thing. (Mandy Johnson, 51, part-time school cook)

By being invited into this decision making process around the weekly shop and menu plan, different family members, other than the mothers, were able to have some influence over the food eaten in the home, which in turn served as a mechanism to enable the family members to link together and regulate the emotional distance between them. The Williams family members provided differing accounts of the decision making element of the 'family meal'. The father, Gareth Williams indicated that this was a joint decision, influenced by the children, whilst the mother, Kathy and the daughter Stacey suggested that Kathy made these decisions, linked primarily to her employment shifts (as a residential support worker):

> It is down to me and Kathy I suppose but there is the influence of the children, there are things they don't like ... (Gareth Williams, 41, full-time office worker)

> Mainly me, yeah, if I ask Gareth it will be 'whatever' so I really don't both most of the time. Sometimes the kids will say have we got any whatever and I tend to do when I am on my days off, the veg and gravy meals, and then when it's my days on,

> they will have something simple and when it's my nights in I won't do too much on a night shift so that shapes the way we eat a bit.
>
> (Kathy Williams, 40, full-time hostel worker)

These differing accounts were of interest and indicate the fathers assumption that he is involved in the decision making process, which contrasts with the maternal viewpoint that deciding what to eat is primarily her responsibility.

Not being listened to regarding mealtime decisions

A noticeable element in the young people's accounts was their lack of acknowledgement of the efforts made by their parents (usually their mothers) to carefully design the menu to cook the food that they liked. Thus the young people presented their lack of agency in relation to meal choices, which contrasted with the parental accounts of making decisions and designing menus around their children's preferences (and in doing so using their time and energy to demonstrate affect),

> "Normally mum will say 'oh do you fancy having this?' and sometimes I will say 'yeah I don't mind'. She says, she'll give us an option, you can either have this or this and I'll just say that or sometimes she'll just say we're having that. And most times it will be alright, sometimes I say I don't really like that and she goes 'oh tough', which is quite common." (Jonathon Baker, 15 year old son)

> "She asks us what we don't want to eat and then she'll put in on the plate anyway"
>
> (Chloe Leggett, 14 year old daughter)

Some of the young people indicated that their preferences were not always listened to, and as in Jordan's case this would '*wind'* him up,

> "Mum usually cooks what I like the sort of thing I am not too keen on is shepherd's pie, I do like shepherd's pie but it's just the way mum does it, she puts beans in it. She says right I will cook you a special section, she does half with beans in and half without and the half without is for me and I always find a couple of beans in it and it winds me up." (Jordan Carter, 15 year old son)

The above account from Jordan of having to eat shepherd's pie reflects his mother's attempts to modify a meal to suit his tastes and his lack of appreciation at her efforts (instead focusing on the 'stray' beans that *'wind´* him up). This sense of 'entitlement'

(Lareau, 2003) mirrors the expectations of William Wilson and is discussed further in chapter 9.

8.3 Claiming knowledge and competence around food provisioning

Another key family process is linked to how knowledge and competence is claimed and received within the family system, linked to the power dimension of family life. Thus in relation to food provisioning the focus is on whether knowledge is assigned to just one family member, or shared amongst the family members and also whether the assigned roles are happily accepted or contested or rejected. As with the decision making process around food and meals, the family accounts indicated that the mother generally did the food shopping, with some of the fathers involved as either chauffeurs (Mark Johnson and Gareth Williams) or topping up the weekly shop (Alan Leggett and Peter Turner). Andrew Baker was the only father that took on the main role of doing the weekly shop, whilst other fathers positioned themselves and were positioned as 'helping' the mother. Only three of the young people indicated an involvement with food shopping - Laura Johnson, Stacey Williams and Daisy Howard.

Maternal control due to knowledge and competence

The reason given for the maternal decision making was often linked to the mother's role in shopping. This group of mothers were the 'gatekeepers' over the menu as they had knowledge of the shopping and what was available to cook:

> "Priya does tend to do most of the shopping, so...again she does cook most evenings. If I'm going to cook then I don't particularly know what she's bought from the shops so I'll be raiding the cupboards trying to find something, yeah. On the whole Priya plans out the shopping for the week."
>
> (Dave Armstrong, 46, full-time IT engineer)

So knowledge and competence in shopping and planning were the key reasons attributed to the women, by both themselves and their partners and children, to explain their control over the decision making process. Whilst some of the women accepted this responsibility without comment, others reflected on the difficulties of having to always decide. In her interview, Elaine Baker clearly articulated Hochschild's (1989) idea of the 'second shift' in which employed women predominantly remain responsible for housework, such as food provisioning:

> "I do sometimes say give me some inspiration please, and I do try. I think because I work, and yeah I don't work full hours, I'm working, but then I often say 'yeah I do two jobs, I do one work there and one job here... I say help me out, I'm bored with cooking!" (Elaine Baker, 49, part-time teaching assistant)

> "... I think that's the hardest part of food, it's not the actual cooking, it's deciding what you are going to have in the first place, it's what I find the hardest, coming home and thinking what are we going to have, pasta again!"
> (Clare Holton, 45, full-time Early Years Specialist)

Unlike the Bakers, the Holtons were a family in transition, in relation to family life and food provisioning roles, due to Keith being made unemployed three weeks previously. Keith acknowledged that prior to his redundancy Clare had done most of the organisation around food. But now with his changed employment status, the family were in the process of re-negotiating the family roles and responsibilities, although Keith's account presented the current situation as temporary, assuming he would be in a new job by December (the interview took place in September),

Paternal responsibility for cooking

Along with Peter Turner, Neil Mitchell was the only other father that took the main responsibility for cooking in this small sample of twelve families. This pattern of paternal involvement in cooking compares with national patterns of time use which indicate changes in both the amount of time spent cooking and the gendered nature of food provisioning in the UK. In 2000 men spent on average 23 minutes a day preparing food, compared with 58 minutes per day for women, which reflects an increase for men (from 11 minutes a day in 1975) and a decrease for women (from 100 minutes per day in 1975) (Cheng, et al., 2007). This decline in overall cooking time could reflect the increasing involvement of men in food preparation but could also reflect changes in eating patterns, such as the increase in ready meals and the increased use of eating outside of the home (Glucksmann & Nolan, 2007). The Mitchell/Webb's were the only family in the study in which both parents were long-term unemployed, and thus food provisioning was not directly affected by employment hours or shift work. Unlike the Turner family, both parental accounts acknowledged the others role, indicating that making joint decisions around food and meals was what most households did:

> It's normally me or Linda really, that's ... I think that's the same in most households. You say what do you want for tea, nobody every knows what they want for tea, you know, so that's just a matter of getting what, going out and getting when you see something, you get it, if you know what I mean ... Sometimes you think or you know what you want for tea but yeah that is, it's normally me and Linda sort of decide, whoever go to the shop really (Neil Mitchell, 47, unemployed)

The reference to other households served to normalise the roles that they have, in relation to food provisioning and might reflect awareness from Neil Mitchell of his unusual role as being the main cook.

Process responsibility (guided shopping)

Whilst in general the parental accounts concurred with Alan Leggett, that most people don't like food shopping, Andrew Baker was an exception. His account indicated that he quite liked shopping,

> "...I actually quite like doing it. Yeah. I know all the cashiers… and they all say to me, oh I wish I could get my husband to come and do this! I actually enjoy doing shopping in supermarkets but you won't get me doing it on a Saturday. No way would you get me in on a Saturday. No its bedlam.
>
> (Andrew Baker, 52, full-time engineering manager)

Both Andrew and Elaine Bakers' accounts indicated that he did the shopping with a list produced by Elaine and was able to schedule his visits to the supermarket, preferring to shop on a quieter Thursday evening. His account of the energy and time he invests in this shopping experience indicates that he is able to use this activity to represent himself as unique, reinforcing his personal identity as a good husband. His enjoyment of the shopping, contrasts sharply with the maternal sentiments of 'hating' shopping and reflects the notion of the '*choice hypothesis*' (Kroska, 2003), which suggests that women often do domestic work, including food provisioning, out of obligation, whereas men are likely to be doing it out of choice, and therefore have a more positive view of this task. Whilst Andrew takes pride in this role, Elaine notes that she still 'oversees' the shopping and regularly 'tops-up' during the week, with smaller shops for fresh ingredients. So she maintains a daily monitoring role, referred to by Coltrane (1996) as an element of 'process responsibility' to ensure that food and meals are always available.

Lack of knowledge and competency

Most of the individual accounts indicated that the fathers had some involvement in preparing the family meal, such as peeling and mashing potatoes or carving the meat, with only Barry Wilson reporting no involvement at all, due to being a 'traditional family' (a phrase also used by Mark Johnson to explain his limited involvement in the kitchen):

> Sharon prepares the food; I go to …we are quite a traditional family. I like to go to work, Sharon looks after the family... we are a traditional family but I am not lazy…
>
> (Barry Wilson, 49, full-time company director)

Barry went on to explain that Sharon will serve his food on a tray and then take his tray back to the kitchen before bringing his dessert out, and she will then return to the kitchen to '*clear up'* whilst he falls asleep in front of the television (although he did note that if Sharon was not well he would take her *stuff* out). Mark Johnson also used the phrase traditional when explaining the roles in his family:

> **So do you think it works well in this family, the roles you have?** Yeah it seems to have happened over time really, possible because we come from a traditional old type of family and I think Mandy wouldn't have had it any other way I used to feel a bit bad she did do it all so I used to do the washing up, still do occasionally because not everything goes in the dishwasher I used to feel by doing the washing up I was doing my bit, I do the hovering that sort of thing, I do a bit around the house, I'm not completely idle. (Mark Johnson, 50, full-time factory worker)

Whilst Barry Wilson confidently described his family role in relation to being a traditional family, Mark Johnson spoke less assertively about the roles within his family, though he did indicate that Mandy had a role to play in maintaining this arrangement. His comment that 'Mandy wouldn't have had it any other way' reflects the concept of 'maternal gatekeeping', conceptualised as the way in which women inhibit men's involvement in family work, such as shopping and cooking (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Of note is the use by both men of the term 'lazy'/'idle' which indicated that they are aware of the changing societal norms regarding housework but feel able to justify their limited involvement by positioning their family as being 'traditional'. Unlike Barry Wilson and Mark Johnson's justifications of their role, Dave Armstrong noted his dissatisfaction with the gender imbalance in his family system. He admitted that he should do more in the kitchen and identified 'laziness' as a contributing factor to his limited investment of energy into cooking:

> **In terms of the role that you do are you happy with the role that you have or would you like it to be different?** Erm, I feel that I should cook more, I've often thought that, that I should, perhaps on a Saturday I should go and do the shopping or whatever, and then plan it... but for whatever reason I don't, erm, I don't know the reason, laziness I suppose. So yeah, so I do feel that I would cook more, or should cook more, not would, should. Yeah.
>
> (Dave Armstrong, 46, full-time IT engineer)

The effect of Dave Armstrong positioning himself as 'lazy' within his family system is important to consider, particularly in relation to his role as a father. Milligan & Dowie (1998) interviewed over sixty Scottish young people to establish what children need from their fathers, and identified five areas of need: a role model, quality time, supportive behaviour, expressions of love and physical contact. In relation to being a role model, the study found that fathers who were not good with chores such as the washing up and were lazy were regarded as poor role models (Featherstone, 2003). However whilst Dave Armstrong positions himself as 'lazy' around food provisioning, he is a positive role model in other ways, for example by coaching his son's football team and being involved in community organisations. Thus he is able to find other avenues to support Alexander and spend quality time with him. Of note, Alexander Armstrong, was one of the only boys in the study who indicated that he felt he should help his mother more with food provisioning, though reflecting his father's position, his awareness of this did not influence his behaviour.

8.4 Gender and family role in food provisioning

Within this small sample, most of the mothers took the primary responsibility for shopping and cooking, irrespective of their feelings about these roles, whilst the fathers' accounts indicated a variety of roles from preparing, or cooking or shopping to taking no involvement at all in food provisioning. In relation to the young people, all of the boys indicated very little/no involvement in shopping or cooking, whilst some of the girls indicated that they had a lot more responsibility, such as preparing meals and snacks for the family.

Hating shopping and cooking

A powerful theme identified from the maternal accounts was their dislike of shopping and cooking, with several strongly expressing this emotion as hate. However despite this strong emotion most of the women expressed their acceptance that it had to be done and they were the default position:

"My heart drops when I think I have to go to the supermarket, I can't tell you how much I dislike going to the supermarket." (Sarah Chambers, 50+, homemaker)

Do you like going to the supermarket? "No I hate it. No I don't like it anyway" (Linda Webb, 39, unemployed)

The reasons for this dislike varied, from feelings of resignation that it was something that had to be done, to having time pressures, to having to be aware of financial restrictions:

""No. I hate it. I hate shopping (**So why do you do it?)** Cause if I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done, that's how, that's what it feels like, yeah, so..."
(Priya Armstrong, 42, full-time mental health worker)

"I hate cooking, it's not a pleasure but unfortunately there's no one else here who likes it either so I am there by default doing it"

(Kathy Williams, full-time hostel worker)

"I am resigned to having to cook because it's important I cook because it's important the children eat healthily, that's why I do it, the overwhelming thought for me is the children must eat healthily and that's why I get up and cook every day"
(Sarah Chambers, 50+, full-time homemaker)

"Do you like cooking? No it's just something you do because you have to. It would be lovely to be married to a chef and come home and have your tea all done for you" (Trish Carter, 43, part-time police officer)

The sentiments expressed by these women, reflect the view that cooking is a necessity – a household chore that needs to be done (Kroska, 2003). Flemish time-use data was examined to explore men and women's motivations for cooking and produced five possible responses – obligation, sense of duty, necessity, and pleasure, along with an ambiguous response category (Daniels, Glorieux, Minnen & van Tienoven, 2012). The analysis indicated that whilst women still spend considerably more time cooking than men, there was no difference in the meaning of cooking, with the majority of men and women perceiving cooking as a necessity. The primary reason for the women's dislike of shopping and cooking was being rushed and having to shop and prepare a meal quickly after a long,

tiring day at work. Again this finding reflects Daniels et al (2012) who found that people who enjoy cooking are less likely to feel rushed in their daily lives and thus more able to experience cooking as a leisure activity. The women in this study reported regularly feeling rushed and anxious due to work commitments and time pressures. For example Vicky Leggett, talked about their dislike of shopping linked to the access dimension pressures of time and scheduling:

> **So do you like shopping and planning meals?** No not really, it's alright, it depends if I have time, I can go round ASDA and I can be two hours, if I think I haven't got to rush that's a nightmare, I think oh God I have been in here an hour and a half and I have got to go home..." (Vicky Leggett, 42, part-time school secretary)

Along with her dislike of shopping, Trish Carter also spoke about having to schedule it around her daughter's swimming. Thus she used the sub-mechanism of sequencing, within the time access dimension to achieve the family goals of meaning (being a good mother) and affect by supporting her daughter's activities and providing food for the family. So lack of time, defined within family process theory as the pressure of having to synchronise the available family time, was presented as a barrier to enjoying cooking for the family by the women. Other reasons cited were lack of appreciation (Elaine Baker), too tired (Mandy Johnson), and preferring the taste of a meal cooked by someone else (Vicky Leggett and Claire Holton). Linda Webb was the only women who reported doing very little cooking (beans on toast was the meal she reported she can make) and she linked her hating of cooking to lacking confidence and having a brother who was a chef. In the following extract she also illustrates her awareness of the societal expectation that women generally cook for their family:

> "I always used to cook but it's just the fact that I hate it, I hate something, I don't know. I think if I didn't have the children and lived on my own I hate to think what I'd eat because... I'd go to my mum's, yeah! I just don't like doing it. I know it's wrong. I do make sure that everyone eats healthy but... **Why do you say it's wrong?**... well I think, I think I should perhaps do it" (Linda Webb, 39, unemployed)

In relation to family process theory, Linda's identity as a 'good' mother may be challenged by this position she takes in relation to feeding her family, by choosing not to invest energy and time in this activity. As Johnson et al (2011) note, many studies have shown that providing healthy meals for their children and families is perceived as a central part of

being a good mother and thus central to a strong maternal identity. By not adopting this role, Linda was potentially risking her maternal identity so instead, throughout the interview, she positioned herself as being responsible for Mark, her four year old son with Downs Syndrome. This alternative role of carer enabled her to construct her own maternal identity by investing her time and energy into being the primary carer for Mark.

Variability in paternal involvement

The paternal accounts indicated considerable variability in the extent to which the fathers were involved in preparing and cooking in the family, with continuity between the fathers who sometimes shopped and sometimes cooked (such as Alan Leggett and Andrew Baker) and the fathers who had no involvement in any aspect of food provisioning (such as Barry Wilson and Mark Johnson). Several of the fathers indicated that they had specific meals that they were confident to cook, including a stir fry (Colin Chambers) and a cooked breakfast (Andrew Baker).

Within the paternal accounts confidence and competence in the kitchen were perceived as key factors prohibiting their increased involvement, a factor echoed in some of the young people's accounts, such as Amy Webb. Of the fathers who did cook occasionally they primarily cooked meals such as quick snacks or weekend breakfasts or one-off speciality meals. This pattern was noted by Caplan (1996) who suggested that men cooked specific meals that were "particularly appropriate for men: barbecues, Sunday breakfasts or exotic specialities" (Caplan, 1996, p.10). Contrasting this finding, Neil Mitchell and Peter Turner were two fathers that took primary responsibility for the cooking in the family, with both indicating that they enjoy this time in the day:

> **"**I love it, I really enjoy it, like I say tiredness is a factor sometimes, I just want to get a meal done and sit down, my energy sort of peaks in the week and have to build up to something, I like cooking, I like making nice things, put a CD on and that will be half an hour, three quarters of an hour, an hour or whatever it takes"
>
> (Peter Turner, 37, part-time teaching assistant)

> "**Do you like cooking?** Yeah I do like cooking, it's just something I don't know, that sort of get you away from everything else, if you know what I mean, it's nice to just stand there and do something different (Neil Mitchell, 47, unemployed)

A noticeable theme within these two accounts was that Peter Turner and Neil Mitchell

reported that they cooked because they enjoyed it, whereas the women predominantly cooked because they felt they had to (reflecting the pattern found by Kroska, 2003). Ekstrom & Jonsson (2005) also found a gendered relation between cooking and interest, noting that "men prepared the meals if they were interested in cooking. If not, they did not do so. For women… they prepared meals whether they were interested or not" (Ekstrom & Jonsson, 2005, p.6). Thus for this study agency and choice were less apparent in the mothers' accounts of food provisioning. However it is important to note that Siobhan Turner's employment hours and Linda Webb's rejection of cooking necessitated their partners to take on this cooking role, so it is possible that these two men had less choice in this arrangement (and potentially chose to report to me their enjoyment rather than their lack of agency).

Gendered differences in young people's accounts of food provisioning

In relation to the young people's involvement in shopping, preparing and cooking food there was a noticeable gender difference, reflecting the belief that food provisioning socialises girls into gendered cultural norms (DeVault, 1991). Three of the girls mentioned helping with the shopping – Daisy Howard, Stacey Williams and Laura Johnson, and whilst Jordan Carter did mention shopping, he indicated his dislike of ever having to go shopping and how he dealt with this situation to ensure Trish Carter never took him:

> "Mum, she does the shopping when me and (sister) are at school because if I go shopping with mum I make her get out of the shop quickly and I tend to pester her in the shop and I make sure she's very quick. She tends to spend a lot of time in shops having a look at every single thing that she's got to buy so I chivvy her up sort of thing. I don't think she likes that so she goes when I am not around"
> (Jordan Carter, 15 year old son)

Jordan demonstrates his power within the parental-child subsystem, through his control of time, to restrict his mother's activities. His comment that he *'chivvy her up'* positions himself as the dominant figure, controlling her time use and inverts the usual parent-child dynamic, reflecting his status within this family system. This position is reflected throughout his account, for example in his discussion of eating shepherd's pie. Molly Holton was the only young person that reported cooking meals independently. On the night I visited she had prepared spaghetti bolognaise using an internet recipe, as her mother, Claire Holton, was returning late from work and her father, Keith Holton was on a training course. By investing her time and energy into cooking a meal, Molly was able to

achieve all three family process goals (target dimensions) of affect, power and meaning. Molly's awareness of her mother returning late from work had been perceived by Claire as a thoughtful act, Molly's ability to cook a meal reflected her competence in the kitchen, and Molly was able to reinforce her identity as a helpful daughter. The other girls' accounts all indicated that they had some involvement in this element of the family meal, such as helping to prepare food or making snacks during the day and at weekends:

> "... I usually in the weekends I do lunch for everyone. Yeah egg I can do and I normally do sandwiches or something, whatever people want..."
>
> (Amy Webb, 15 year old daughter)

> "This was when I was home alone and I was hungry so I made myself something so I was sitting at the dinner table eating it and it was pasta, mayonnaise and cheese"
>
> (Stacey Williams, 15 year old daughter)

In contrast, all of the boys, except Alexander Armstrong, indicated that they had no involvement in preparing or cooking meals, apart from a few school related cookery lessons. Four of the boys cited school homework as the reason for their lack of involvement in helping, an excuse legitimised by the parental accounts, which were accepting of homework as a reason for non-involvement. Alexander indicated that he made snacks when he came home from school (such as noodles) and cheese on toast at the weekend, and his mother, Priya Armstrong, noted that when she was driving home from work she would often phone ahead and ask him or his sister to start the meal (chop an onion, peel the potatoes). Ironically, when questioned about their feelings about the roles they have in the home, Alexander Armstrong was the only boy who indicated that he should do more:

> "I probably should do more but I don't know. If mum asked me to come down and do it then I suppose I would but I won't like instantly think to myself I need to come down. I probably should but... no I probably should do more"
>
> (Alexander Armstrong, 14 year old son)

This feeling of needing to do more is clearly evidenced in both Alexander and his father's account. Dave Armstrong noted "I feel that I should cook more, I've often thought that…" and puts his lack of cooking down to laziness. Both Dave and Alexander position Priya as having the responsibility for food provisioning, reflected in Alexander's phrase *'if mum asked me'.* The extent to which cooking remains an unequal and gendered activity in the

Armstrong family is of note, and from a systems perspective it is important to consider the extent to which each family member plays a role in maintaining this status quo, as discussed below.

Maternal control of food provisioning

Whilst a thematic analysis of the interviews has highlighted the predominantly gendered nature of food provisioning within this sample, with women maintaining the main responsibility (echoing the work of Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991), a systems approach focuses on the role that each person takes to maintain this position. So whilst the fathers often justified their role in relation to their partners' competence, several of the women spoke about their reluctance to relinquish their role in relation to food provisioning, despite their apparent dislike. For example Priya Armstrong noted that whilst she hates shopping she still prefers to do it as she believes that she is better at budgeting than her husband, Dave Armstrong, and so is more competent at managing the family finances in relation to the weekly food bills:

> "I hate shopping but I actually would rather I did it than anybody else because I think that part of the whole shopping thing is also around budgeting and how much things cost and knowing how much money is coming in to the house and how much is going out. And I don't think Dave has really got an idea of that at all"
>
> (Priya Armstrong, 42, full-time mental health worker)

By maintaining control over the shopping budget, Priya demonstrates her competence, which within family process theory is conceptualised as a sub-target of the power target dimension (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Her account also indicates that she chooses to retain control over this element of the family meal, despite her dislike of the task, due to her husband's perceived lack of budgeting ability. Similarly Kathy Johnson, whilst reporting her dislike of cooking after a day of working as a school cook, defined the kitchen as her 'domain…my office' and similarly linked this to maintaining control over the food in 'her' cupboards.

8.5 Family processes during the mealtime interaction

Having focused on the elements leading up to the meal, this section will explore how actual elements of the meal such as the seating position, dealing with conflict, serving of food and monitoring of the young person's diet can reveal underlying family processes.

Seating positions and power

The extent to which seating positions around the table were rigid or fluid varied between the individual families; where there was a set seating position, each individual family member was able to specify the exact seating position of each family member. Whilst in some families these seating positions were presented as agreed seats, in the Carter family the seating positions appeared to be more contested. When asked about seating positions during a meal, both Jordan and Stuart Carter indicated their preference for a particular seat at the kitchen table:

> **"Do you normally sit in those seats?** Yeah, that's my seat but dad sits in that seat for breakfast so I have to wait, I can't sit on any other seat so I wait until he's finished and then I have mine." (Jordan Carter, 15 year old, eldest child)

> **How do you feel about this time? Does it matter if Jordan is there? "**Not necessarily, it's just part of the things we do. Not.... sometimes he's not there. Like tomorrow night he won't be here for tea and I get to sit in my seat...well that used to be my seat before he came along so... I tend to, if I sit there, I sit there in the mornings to have breakfast there and I'm usually gone before he comes in and takes over, the same spot!" (Stuart Carter, 47, builder)

From Stuart's account it is clear that the particular seating position at the kitchen table was disputed, with dad noting that he had had to relinquish his seat '*before he came along'* and still referring to this seat as '*my seat'*. Seating position was a recurring theme in the majority of the family accounts, with all but two of the families (the Leggetts and the Johnsons) indicating that they had their own seats at the table (or the sofa in the Wilson family accounts). The 'traditional' position of fathers at the 'head' of the table was evident in the Williams, Howard and Armstrong family accounts, with the remaining families adopting a less 'traditional' seating plan. How and why these arrangements had evolved was unclear in most of the family accounts, but despite this the family members indicated their preference for having these set places. From a family process perspective, the gathering and designing of the family space is a sub-mechanism within the spatial access dimension that provides access to power, control and meaning (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Resultantly, how the family members design their space to gather together becomes an important sub-mechanism allowing the family members to define who they are as a family and their unique position within that family system. Thus within the Carter family, Jordan's

'control' over the disputed seat, can be seen to reflect his powerful agency within his family system.

Dealing with conflict

Conflict around food and eating was more apparent in the young people's accounts, although some of the mothers mentioned their children's fussy eating though usually when referring to their younger years. For example both Jordan and Trish Carter mentioned the battles over food when Jordan was younger:

> "I think when I was younger I remember this time when mum put sweetcorn on my plate and said I had to eat it and what I did was locked myself in the toilet and that's the end of it, I won't come out until it was gone and I really didn't want to try it...it was a long time ago, I really didn't want to try it. Mum did try and get me to try but no." (Jordan Carter, 15 year old, eldest child)

Whilst Stuart offers little comment on Jordan's diet, Trish also gives a detailed account of her 'battles':

> "We had all this battle, it started when he was younger, when he was a baby he'd eat anything, then started dividing it up and he stopped eating the vegetables and then it's a battle between you as to whether you force him to eat it and then they get upset and won't eat the other. He's never, touch wood, been ill or sickly boy so he's obviously getting what he needs so I never did the battle, maybe that's my fault, I should have made him eat stuff but gradually I'll put a piece of broccoli and a carrot on his plate and he'll eat those and he'll have apple juice or whatever but I don't make a big issue of him not eating more. Obviously I would like him to eat more...in the early stages we tried to get him to eat but what I tend to do now is do the things I know he likes and will eat..." (Trish Carter, 43, part-time police officer)

These two accounts may reflect the *child-centred power structure* (Segrin & Flora, 2005) within this family system, with Jordan's behaviour illustrating how he ensures that he gets what he wants, it is important to note that patterns of family power are often not stable across time and context and other interactions within the family system may reflect a different power structure (Broderick, 1993). Trish acknowledges her difficulties in the past, before rationalising that Jordan is quite healthy, and indicating how she now manages the situation by giving him the food that he likes. Thus to avoid conflict and upset at the table,

as identified in this extract, Trish now tailors the meals to Jordan's particular likes. This pattern of maternal concern around diet and tailoring meals around children's likes, to avoid conflict, occurred repeatedly in the family interviews.

Alongside conflict around the actual food eaten, another potential area for conflict during the meal was disagreement over the eating location. Within the Leggett family accounts, a noticeable area of disagreement was the meal location and the inclusion/ exclusion of the television, with each family member presenting a different interpretation of the situation. Alan Leggett spoke about how he preferred to sit at the table without the television on, but sometimes allows it on, and sometimes he says no "… I say get that off". He also was aware that his preference for eating at the table was not followed when he was at work,

> **Is that were you normally sit at the table?** Yeah most of the time, it depends whether I am here, Vicky and the girls, sometimes they sit in here (lounge), in fact, most often than not lately. **Why does that depend on whether you are here or not?** Because I tell them we should sit at the table… because it's nice to sit together, otherwise they shut themselves off in front of the telly"
>
> (Alan Leggett, 46, full-time factory worker)

Contradicting her husband, Vicky Leggett indicated that the family usually sits around the table *"*more often than not we sit up there, probably three or four times a week" but this assertion was not supported by Megan or Chloe. Megan noted that she sometimes eats in her bedroom (she was the only young person to report this) and Chloe commented on her preference to eat on the sofa "…because it's something to watch as well". She also indicated that whilst her parents may attempt to turn the television off, their protests usually ensure that she is able to remain on the sofa watching the television whilst eating,

> **Who turns the TV off?** Both of them, dad if he's just got in and doesn't want to do anything… We go 'no!' and they leave it on. **So if you've started a programme they won't turn it off?** Well they would but we would protest
>
> (Chloe Leggett, 14 year old twin)

In family process terms, this spatial dimension of the family meal can be seen to reflect the differing power dynamics within the family. Whilst Alan Leggett clearly articulates his preference for eating together at the table, Chloe and Megan override his request, by

resisting gathering together for the meal and investing little time and energy into this activity, instead preferring to detach themselves via the television or the computer.

Serving of food and control

The individual accounts indicated that the serving of food during the mealtime was primarily controlled by the person who cooked the food, which was usually the mother in this small sample. I argue that this simple activity reflected both status and positioning within the family system and enabled the server to maintain control over portion size and thus each family member's diet. The extent to which the order of service reflects the family position is most clearly reflected in Sarah Chamber's account of serving the meal:

> "When the food is ready I will normally say 'dinner' and then they will come and sit at the table and I will put it on the plates and sometimes Colin puts the plates from the side to the table. The children get served first, Colin gets served next and I get served last. **Always?** Always. **Why is that?** I don't know why, because that's my place" (Sarah Chambers, over 50, full-time homemaker)

By organising the food portions and ordering the service, she was able to control both portion size and make a subtle statement about who is the most important. This prioritisation of food might serve to reinforce the family identity of a child-oriented family in which the children's needs are prioritised above the adults. Sarah clearly positioned herself as the least important in this family order, illustrated by the literal use of the phrase '*that's my place'*. Most of the families indicated a routine order of service in relation to the meal being served, with the young people in the family mainly being served first, although in some families, such as the Wilsons, the father was served first. None of the family members indicated that the mother was served first. Whilst this ordering of service can be viewed as a practical arrangement, it may also reflect the family hierarchy and power dynamics within a family system.

Good eaters and parental identity

A common theme within the parental accounts was the positioning of their children as 'good eaters' despite sometimes contradictory evidence from the young people themselves. William Wilson was the only young person who self-identified as 'fussy', although several of the young people, including Megan Leggett, Chloe Leggett, Jordan Carter and Alexander Armstrong indicated that there was a lot of food that they would not eat. Both Alan and Vicky Leggett indicated that they were proud of their daughters' divergent food tastes and

were keen to present their daughters as being adventurous and trying new foods, for example when they went abroad and the family ate swordfish. When describing their food preferences Vicky Leggett noted that:

> …neither of them will eat mushrooms, Chloe will not eat onion, she won't eat red peppers, broccoli, they won't eat broccoli…. I put a black bean sauce with it, they pick bits out but in all that was alright… (Vicky Leggett, 42, part-time secretary)

She then concluded with "they are pretty good for food, Sam is the fussy one". This presentation of 'good eaters' contrasted with the daughters accounts of not eating food they did not like,

> **What happens if you don't eat food on your plate?** We put it in the little grey bin. **Does anyone try and persuade you to eat it?** Mum says eat it but I don't. **Does she just say it once?** She normally says to eat it and we don't and we put the plate ready for washing up and she says you should have ate that and we say no (Megan Leggett, 15)

Vicky Leggett's perception of 'good' and 'fussy' eating was shaped by her experiences of her elder son, Sam, whom she identified as the problem eater in her family system. Within societal discourses there is a powerful belief that a 'good mother' is one who can get her child to eat; conversely a child who is a 'problem eater' is framed as reflecting some kind of failure within the mother-child relationship (Southall, 2000). During her interview Vicky Leggett spoke at length about the difficulties she had had with her eldest child, Sam, who had recently left home to live with his girlfriend and young baby, and reflected on the impact his fussy eating had on her self-concept as a good mother. In contrast Chloe and Megan's eating preferences and dislikes were regarded as acceptable in comparison. This parental pattern of positioning their children as good eaters was a common theme in the interviews, irrespective of the eating behaviour presented by the young person, and enabled the parents to identify themselves as 'good parents'. As discussed in the final section, this positioning of their children as good eaters enabled the mothers to maintain this family meal ideal, regardless of the actualities of the situation.

8.6 Family meal performances

The theoretical thematic analysis of the family meal indicated that within this small sample of families, the mealtime interactions were often carefully 'orchestrated' with the aim of

producing a meal 'performance'- an intimate and emotionally supportive environment, in which all family members had agency, enabling both their individual and family identity to be fostered. This idea of a meal performance links to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical ideas of front stage and backstage behaviour, and encouraged me to consider the extent to which these accounts of the family meal performances were 'performed' to myself as the audience. Similarly Finch's ideas of family 'display' is reflected in these meal performances with the parental subsystems keen to present a unified family account (Finch, 2007). A common pattern within the individual accounts was how the mothers implicitly and explicitly 'conducted' the entire meal time interaction, from deciding what to eat (choosing meals that the family members liked), to organising and preparing the meal (again tailoring meals to specific tastes), to cooking the meal (despite her dislike of cooking) to serving the meal (often varying the content to incorporate individual likes and dislikes) to conducting the mealtime conversations. Whilst Siobhan Turner and Linda Webb had less involvement in cooking for the family, they still maintained a supervisory 'executive producer' role.

In contrast the fathers' roles varied considerably within these 'meal performances'. Two of the fathers (Peter Turner and Neil Mitchell) were the primary cooks, 'the producers', whilst Keith Holton and Alan Leggett sometimes cooked, and Andrew Baker was the only father who took sole responsibility for the weekly shop (with a list supplied by Elaine Baker). Several of the fathers had little or no involvement in the process of food provisioning (Mark Johnson, Gareth Williams, Ed Howard, Barry Wilson, Colin Chambers, Stuart Carter and Dave Armstrong) other than eating the food (analogous with an executive producer of providing the funding). Similarly the young people's roles also varied considerably. Molly Holton was the only young person that cooked a full meal, though four of the girls (Laura Johnson, Ellie Turner, Stacey Williams and Amy Webb) indicated that they sometimes helped prepare meals and often 'cooked' their own snacks (pasta, toast, noodles), whilst several of the young people had very little involvement in the process of food provisioning, including all of the six boys. These 'family meal performances' presented a unified image of the family unit, reflecting the family meal ideal perpetuated in contemporary society. Despite time pressures and low levels of energy, most of the families still strived to achieve an adapted version of this ideal.

8.7 Conclusion

A central focus of this study was to understand what actually happens during the mealtime interactions – that is to explore the underlying family processes that occur during this

everyday activity. Within this sample the individual accounts indicated that both before and during the evening meal a number of family processes were evident, such as making decisions and dealing with conflict, which enabled the individual family members to gain access to the family process goals of affect, meaning and power. For example, through allocating time and energy into deciding what to cook and eat, individual family members were able to demonstrate affect by making choices based on the knowledge of other family members' preferences. The potential for conflict was evident throughout the mealtime interactions, such as when there was a disputed choice of meal location (often table or sofa), to contested seating positions, to disagreement over food choices and what had to be eaten. The extent to which individual family members invested time and energy into negotiating these spatial encounters, and reducing the potential conflict, often reflected the meanings they ascribed to this everyday activity.

For this East Anglian sample, food provisioning remained a predominantly gendered role, with the women maintaining process responsibility for meals, regardless of their feelings towards this role. In contrast the paternal involvement in food provisioning varied considerably; from the father being the main cook to having no responsibility for any aspect of the meal. All of the boys reported that they had very little or no involvement in shopping or cooking, whereas some of the girls indicated that they prepared meals and snacks for the family. The theoretical thematic analysis of the family meal indicated that within this small sample of the families, the mealtime interactions were often carefully 'orchestrated' with the aim of producing a meal 'performance'- an intimate and emotionally supportive environment, in which all family members had agency, enabling both their individual and family identity to be fostered. These 'family meal performances' served to present a unified image of the family unit, and in doing so reflect the 'family meal ideal' perpetuated in contemporary society, despite time and energy constraints. The next chapter will focus on three families to explore the extent to which the individual accounts of food provisioning and mealtime interactions in the family home can reveal deeper underlying second-order family processes, conceptualised as family paradigms, that influence and guide behaviour.

Chapter 9: Findings III: Family Paradigms

9.1 Introduction

This third and final findings chapter presents three family case studies to illustrate that exploring food and eating in the family home may provide a 'window' into deeper family processes, conceptualised as 'family paradigms' that guide and influence behaviour. The case studies were not selected for their representativeness of the study sample, but for their ability to illustrate the concept of family paradigms. Thus the three family case studies I present each have distinctive family meal patterns: the Wilson family eat different meals, together, sitting in the lounge; the Turner family try to eat the same meal, together at the table, but maternal employment and the older son's external activities often restrict their mealtime interactions; and the Mitchell/Webb family eat the same meal at the same time but in two different locations. Whilst none of the family case studies reflect the assumed normative family meal routine of eating home-cooked food in '*unison*' (as discussed in chapter 2), the Turner family case study provides the closest example to this normative routine. In contrast the Wilson family were the only family in the sample in which the young person consistently ate different meals to his parents and the Mitchell/Webb family were one of two families that ate the same food at the same time but in different locations.

9.2 Family Paradigms

As discussed in Chapter 3, the concept of family paradigms was introduced by Reiss (1981), who drew heavily on the ideas of Kuhn's (1969) seminal work on scientific paradigms. Reiss defined family paradigms as second order family processes which influence how families organise their day to day lives. Despite being rarely explicit or conscious in families, they are conceptualised as being central to a families' identity and goal achievement:

> A family paradigm (or deeply held family ideology) is the shared, enduring, fundamental, and general assumptions or beliefs to which family members subscribe about the nature and meaning of life, what is important, and how to cope with the world they live in. (Reiss, 1981, p. 143)

When individual family members challenge their family paradigm, this can lead to a family crisis, analogous with the way scientific paradigms are challenged during scientific revolutions. These crisis events alter the ways in which family members interact and how individuals in families behave, serving to either reinforce and exaggerate the original family

paradigm, known as ‘the exaggeration principle’ (Day, 2010), or create a new family paradigm:

> …that new idea or approach, born in crisis, which serves as a background and orienting idea or perspective to the family’s problem solving in daily life. A family paradigm serves as a stable disposition or orientation whenever the family must actively construe a new situation. (Reiss & Oliveri, 1980, p.435)

This chapter argues that through exploring food and eating in the family home it is possible to illuminate the underlying family paradigms that guide and influence family life. Alongside providing a window into these second order family processes, mealtime interactions may also serve to provide the individual family members with the time and space to understand and subscribe to these ‘shared’ ideologies on family life. Adopting Reiss’s assertion that family paradigms evolve in times of crisis, it is possible to identify within each of the three family case studies detailed below, the crisis events which have shaped the predominant family paradigm.

9.3 The Wilson family

The Wilson’s are a white British family who live in a large, detached farmhouse in a rural location in East Anglia. Barry Wilson, 49, works as a full-time company director and has been married to Sharon, 50, for twenty four years. She is a full-time homemaker and designated carer for two elderly relatives (who live nearby in their own homes). Their youngest child is William Wilson, 15, the target child.

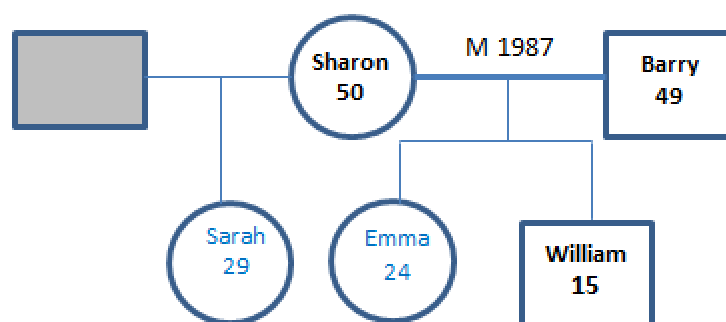

Figure 9.1 The Wilson family genogram

Barry and Sharon also have two older daughters, Sarah, 29, and Emma, 24, who are both unemployed and live locally with their own children. Barry is a step-father to the eldest daughter, who was 2 years old when Barry and Sharon met.

The Interview themes

The interviews took place in the family home one autumn evening. Barry, the father, initially spoke about William's alternative meals, their 'traditional' family roles, 'their' preference for television dinners, the differences between himself and William, his poor background, hating his mother, and feeling guilty about working long hours but wanting a better life for his children. William then spoke about his 'fussy' eating, his awareness of healthy food, his mother's role in serving food, the meal location, his limited cooking skills, spending little time with his parents and wanting more family time. And Sharon, the mother, in the final interview discussed her anxiety over William's diet, the early childhood reasons for his diet, her duty to cook and serve food, her enjoyment of eating at the table, her childhood memories of food and wanting to give her children a better life. In summary, all three family members mentioned William's diet, the family roles in relation to food provisioning and their eating location (prompted by the photos and the interview). Barry, the father, emphasised the differences between himself and William, and spoke about wanting to spend more time with William – sentiments which were echoed in William's account. Both Barry and Sharon spoke about their difficult childhoods and emphasised their desire to give their children something better.

William's alternative meals

Of the twelve photographs taken by William before the interviews, six were photographs of 'meal pairs' - that is a photograph of a meal his parents ate, such as toad in the hole, and a photograph of a meal he had eaten on the same evening, such as waffles and spaghetti.

Image 9.1 'Toad in the hole' with vegetables

Image 9.2 Potato waffles and tinned spaghetti

Using photo elicitation methodology at the beginning of the interview meant that the initial discussions were inevitably shaped around the photograph prompts, and focused on

William's alternative diet. Barry provided a simple, descriptive account of William's alternative meal, "That's one of William's spaghetti and waffles…Sharon will cook our dinner like that and William would get that as the alternative". Similarly, William presented his food as 'the standard meal':

> This is sort of here, the standard meal for me really, I usually end up having some sort of fried potato meal with tomato sauce and like beans or spaghetti because that's how I am, it's a bit fussy sometimes and people are surprised about it.
>
> (William, 15 years old)

Whilst William initially described his food simply 'that's how I am', he also included his awareness of other people's reaction to his diet and introduced the concept of being 'fussy'. In contrast Sharon focused on her worry about his diet, and that William was not 'eating right':

> This is one of William's meals…He doesn't eat vegetables; he doesn't eat meat, no meat at all. In the last six months he's started to eat tomato soup but otherwise that's waffles or smiley faces, beans spaghetti, pizza garlic bread, he used to eat gravy and Yorkshire pudding but he's gone off that, he doesn't eat that so much… It does worry me what he eats…People say oh he's big and tall, and it worries me on the nourishment side although he does eat cereal and yoghurt and he drinks milkshakes but it worries me that he isn't eating right. (Sharon, mother)

Later in the interview, Barry did provide an opinion on William's diet, by introducing the concept of 'rubbish' and 'proper' food, and indicated that it is 'unfortunate' that William does not eat proper food, "**And did you have that meal?** No we wouldn't have had that... I wouldn't eat a pizza like that because I know they are rubbish. .. They're not proper food, but he doesn't like proper food unfortunately" (Barry, father). This notion of 'proper' food links to Murcott's (1982a) research in South Wales, in which the women in her study defined a 'proper meal' as meat, with potatoes an additional vegetable, and gravy. Charles & Kerr (1988) developed this work, and found that the provision of a 'proper meal' was often a means by which the mother showed love and affection, a key family process. Thus in relation to food, the provisioning of a 'proper meal' can be regarded as a means to build and maintain intimacy and convey 'affect' (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). In contrast to identify the provision of a 'rubbish' meal could be perceived as reflecting a lack of love and affection,

although the picture is more complex in a family group that strives to avoid conflict and arguments. When asked about his feelings in relation to eating different food to his parents, William's response was notably divergent from his mothers and fathers,

> "**How do you feel about eating differently to your mum and dad?** I know it's not normal but it doesn't feel like it's that different to me, some people might say it's strange but I'm not really bothered about it, that's how I am"
>
> (William, 15 years old).

William's account of 'that's how I am' suggested his acceptance of his restricted food preferences and his apparent lack of concern about food quality. Barry also rationalised William's diet, using William's height as a criterion, noting that whilst William's meal was "not very healthy", William was five foot eleven, "taller than me and he's only fifteen". In contrast, Sharon provided a more detailed account of her concern over William's diet and her unsuccessful attempts to encourage him to eat a more varied diet:

> **Has he always eaten like this?** When he was a baby, because he has dyspraxia, when he was a baby I had to mash everything up, because if I didn't mash everything up finely he would choke on it…he doesn't like bits… he'll eat beans on toast but he doesn't like spaghetti and toast together… I used to mash things up with gravy and potato and he would eat that fine and that was when we were then getting on the stage of eating properly and the health visitor said you have to start him eating properly you can't keep mashing it up for him and I just couldn't find anything he liked and these were the things he would eat… he would gag and he's gone through his life eating this. (Sharon, mother)

The above account from Sharon provides an indication of the struggles she has had with William's eating and the energy she has invested in trying to find food that he likes. She positions herself as being responsible for William's diet, receiving advice from the health visitor, but Barry's role in this eating issue is not discussed in either of the parental interviews. Whilst research does indicate that children with dyspraxia can have eating problems, with a neurological basis, environmental influences, such as parental factors also play a key role (Nicholls & Jaffa, 2006). Nicholls & Jaffa (2006) argue that to fully understand the development of eating problems it is important to utilise a bio-psychosocial framework, acknowledging both factors in the child, and also parental factors, the parent-

child relationship, and parenting issues. Whilst the current eating routines can be understood to have developed through his dyspraxia, the reasons for the on-going maintenance of William's diet are less clear.

Nicholls & Jaffa (2006) indicate that one of the main developmental goals of childhood and early adolescence is to manage the transition from 'feeding' to 'eating', characterised by the number of tasks including the selection of appropriate foods for the child's age and developmental stage, the inclusion of food that needs to be chewed, and exposure to and tolerance of new tastes and smells. William's extremely limited diet, based around frozen potato products and tinned beans or spaghetti, indicates that he has not been able to manage this transition. As this transition from feeding to eating is highly susceptible to tension and conflict, particularly over issues of autonomy and control (Nicholls & Jaffa ,2006), I argue that William's diet is maintained by the underlying family paradigm of '*avoiding conflict at all costs'.* Whilst this family paradigm can explain why William's diet is not challenged, there may also be other reasons for William continuing with this atypical diet. For example, as food and meals are symbolic of family cohesion and identity (Jackson, 2009) individual food choices in a family may be an opportunity to reflect distance and a growing independence (Contento, Williams, Michela, & Franklin, 2006). Thus for William his individualised eating may serve to reflect the difference and distance between himself and his parents. Another explanation could be the continuity of closeness through 'childish' eating patterns (such as mashing food). As her youngest, and presumably last, child, Sharon may be attempting to maintain closeness with William by continuing to feed him mashed food, indicative of their younger mother-son relationship.

The 'traditional' family

From my inductive thematic analysis of the three interview transcripts, another theme that I selected was the presentation of a 'traditional family' script by the Wilsons. Barry used this term when asked about food provisioning within his family:

> **Who prepares the food, who prepared tonight?** Sharon prepares the food, I go to… we are quite a traditional family I like to go to work, Sharon looks after the family. She works harder than I do actually because she looks after my granddad who's nearly 100 and then there's mum who's ill and our two daughters who both have children. So she's always out and about doing stuff quite a big house to clean and blah blah blah, so she's quite busy so she does all that stuff, she prepares the meal. (Barry, father)

Barry used the term ‘traditional’ to explain his lack of involvement in food provisioning for the family, and seemed to acknowledge Sharon’s hard work in this arrangement. However his use of the phrase ‘blah blah blah’ at the end of his account suggested he was being rather dismissive of her role. Sharon’s account also reflected her ‘traditional’ gender role in cooking, serving Barry his food and clearing away the dishes:

> William will go and get his, sometimes Barry will get his if not I will bring it to him and then I bring my own, and when William has finished he’ll go and get his afters and he’ll eat that and then he’ll say bye and off he’ll go again, then after tea I take all the dishes away and Barry will sit and watch the telly. (Sharon, mother)

Within this context, Barry used the phrase ‘lazy’ twice – once to define himself as lazy, ‘Sharon prepares it all and she’ll clear it all up as well while I am being lazy!’ and then to defend himself:

> **At the end of the meal, do the trays get taken back through, who does that?** Whoever, it’s usually Sharon but not always, no. Like I say we are a traditional family but I am not lazy, Sharon will take them back, William will do his but Sharon if she finishes hers at the same time as me she’ll take or if she’s not very well I’ll take her stuff out. It’s the sort of routine. I care for them in the traditional sense because that’s what we’re like. Sharon will then go out and get our dessert and bring them back in and away we go again, and then Sharon will go in there and clear up. I fall asleep in front of the telly watching Emmerdale. (Barry, father)

Barry’s alternating account of ‘being lazy/ not being lazy’ may be an indication of his awareness of changing cultural norms in relation to housework and food provisioning within the home. He may have assumed that I, as an educated female, would be expecting to hear that there were more balanced gender roles within his family home. When asked about her feelings in relation to the role that she had, Sharon replied, “I don’t mind. I just take it as part of my duty”, which suggested her acceptance of the ‘traditional’ subservient gender roles within the family. William’s account also supports a gendered nature of food provisioning, with his report that he has no involvement in any aspect of the food provisioning:

> **At the end of the meal what happens?** When I finish my… when I am finished I say I'll see you later or something to my parents and I go up and brush my teeth and they… well, that's basically all it is. **Who washes up and tidies the kitchen?** I think most of the time it's my mum, I'm not sure if my dad helps regularly or not I have a feeling he doesn't. (William, 15 years old)

When asked whether he believes the food provisioning roles work well for his family, William did demonstrate an awareness of his mum's feelings of stress in relation to her role of preparing food. However alongside this awareness, William also indicated his 'expectations' that Sharon prepares his food exactly as he likes it, finely mashed:

> She does give me my mash and everything but there have been times when I have complained about it, so there are times when I have to mash it myself so it doesn't have any lumps in it… and obviously that takes a lot of time and effort for me so I don't' like that so mealtimes… I don't expect to have to come down and expect to have to do that sort of thing. And that's very self-centred of me really.
>
> (William, 15 year old)

In this account, William was able to present contrasting emotions and self-awareness. He acknowledged his mum's feelings of stress in relation to his particular diet but also has 'expectations' of mealtimes, before acknowledging that his expectations are very *'self-centred'.* This sense of entitlement was identified by Lareau (2003) in her naturalistic observations of the daily lives of twelve American middle class, working class and poor families. Lareau proposed that middle class children tend to be raised by parents that adopt strategies of 'concerted cultivation', and one outcome of this approach is that the children develop a *'robust sense of entitlement'*. Whilst William's daily life does not mirror the over-scheduled middle class children observed by Lareau, his sense of entitlement is reflected in his 'expectations' about how his food should be served. William's 'expectations' of his mother's role are also supported by his position within his 'traditional' family with the traditional gendered roles in relation to food provisioning never being challenged (Charles & Kerr, 1988).

Eating at the table

Within all the interviews, accounts of the evening meal location were guided by the interview schedule, which prompted each family member about where they generally ate their evening meal. For the Wilson family a notable theme that I coded for was the

differing preferences of eating location. Barry presented his clear preference for eating his meal on a tray in the lounge watching the television:

> We normally eat in here, we didn't used to, up until July, we had, we spent four years hosting children from Macau … so we have always ate at the table but you can't beat having your dinner in front of the telly, when you have been out at work all day, so yeah that's dinner on a tray, TV dinner. (Barry, father)

All three family members mentioned the different eating patterns when they had visitors, of eating at the table in the dining room rather than eating their dinner in the lounge on trays watching the television:

> Before we used to eat in here we used to eat in the dining room when we had a Chinese student staying with us because that was probably more respectful, more civil than sitting round watching TV… I suppose when you think about it sitting round the TV while you're eating doesn't seem such a, it's hard to say, it seems a sloppy thing to do like something you wouldn't do if someone came to the house you wouldn't eat around the TV, you would eat at the table. (William, 15 years old)

> We used to have a student and I used to like it because we used to sit and talk about our day but since he's been gone we seem to be eating in here on a tray and they have the telly on and that's not good for me so tonight we had our tea in here… we used to talk about the day but since he's gone we don't very often, and I miss that. We had a student for the last five years. Two students one three years and one two, yeah I do miss that sitting up, I think that's an important time because you're all there at the same time, talking about your day. (Sharon, mother)

William's language of being 'more respectful, more civil' when eating at the table positions himself as being aware of his family behaving differently when visitors come to the house. This variation in behaviour was conceptualised by Goffman (1959) as 'front stage' and 'backstage' behaviour. However when asked directly which location he preferred he replied that he was 'not bothered either way'. In contrast, Sharon emphasised the opportunity to talk more and her enjoyment of eating at the table. When asked why the family do not continue to eat at the table, she cited Barry's preference of eating in the lounge:

> **Why don't you still do that?** Because Barry likes to relax after a day at work, he's been sitting up a desk all day he doesn't want to sit up the table, and I think I have been here all day on my own sometimes I go out and I think it's nice so I can talk about their day see what they are doing, I feel it's a time for the family, if William has any problems he can talk to us but he's always rushing up on his X- box
>
> (Sharon, mother)

Later in the interview Barry again asserted his preference for eating in the lounge, even though the family home has a large dining table and a large kitchen table. His assertion that 'we all like to congregate here' positions his voice, in this situation, as the family voice. In relation to the evening meal location, Barry's wishes prevailed in this family system, when negotiating difference, which would support the 'traditional' family roles reported by Barry. If power is defined in family process theory as, "the freedom to decide what we want and the ability to get it" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975), then Barry's account suggests that in this situation he 'wields the power' by eating his meals on the sofa.

Being different – living separate lives

A theme that was evident in all three family member accounts was the divide and difference between William and his parents. This pattern was reflected in their meal choices (as discussed above), their seating locations (represented in figure 7), and their time use.

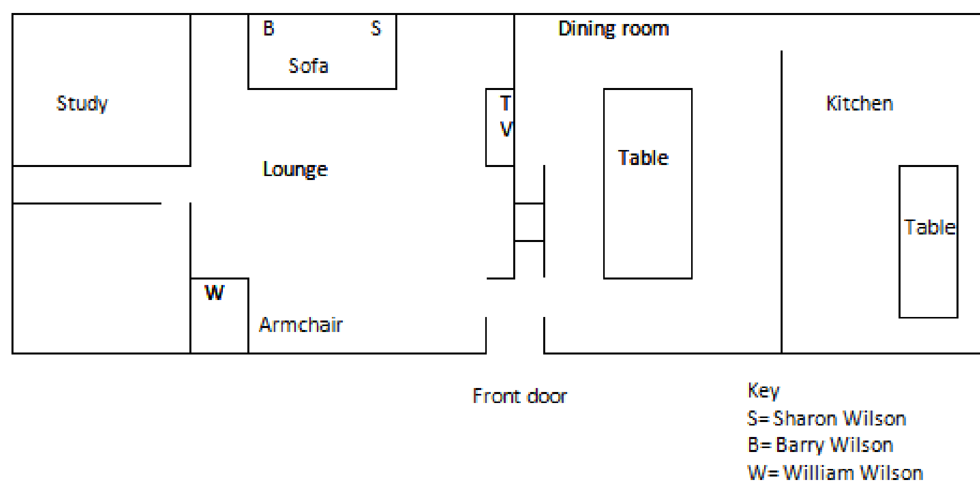

Figure 9.2 Floor plan of the Wilson family mealtime eating positions

The established family seating plan in the lounge for the evening meal was clearly described by all three family members:

> He (William) would have had his on the tray, he eats his over there I eat here and Sharon eats hers there but not tonight because the cat was asleep where you are (on the sofa). **So that's William's place to eat?** That's his, yeah. We sit this side. **Do you ever sit over there?** No… the cat will go over there but otherwise it's just me and Sharon, and William over that side (Barry, father)

In their very large lounge, Barry and Sharon sat beside each other on the large sofa eating the same meal, and William sat across from them, approximately four metres away, in a large armchair, eating his alternative meal. When I asked William why he sat in that chair he replied 'just because that's my chair'. Barry's account of Williams 'side' and his and Sharon's 'side' illustrates the differences within this family system between the parental subsystem and William. The alternative meals, the alternative eating positions, and the clearly differentiated space indicate both a physical and symbolic boundary between William and his parents (a space that only the cat appears to cross). Early social psychological work on personal space and seating arrangements during mealtimes explored how personal space boundaries are challenged during mealtime interactions, often leaving a small 'buffer zone' between family members when they are in close proximity (Sommer , 1969, cited in White, 1976). Within the Wilson family the clearly differentiated individual seating locations may serve to reduce any potential tension during the meal time and enable the individual family members to maintain a large 'buffer zone', particularly between William and his parents.

All three individual family accounts reported William leading a very separate life both during the week and at weekends, only 'appearing' for his evening meal and returning immediately to his bedroom, with no involvement in the cooking, washing up or tidying away, "At the weekend we won't see a lot of William because he'll be in his own room doing his own things so teatime is about the only time we congregate while we are eating our dinner" (Barry, father):

> … since he had his X-box he's up there playing games with his friends because they are on line and he's always up there, that's why I think it's important to have meals round the table so we all talk really but Barry can't see that he goes I'm tired I've been sitting at a desk all day I want to sit and relax but I do think it's an important time, I'll have to start putting my foot down. (Sharon, mother)

For Sharon, her apparent wish to eat together at the table would be a way to re-connect with William, and her comment at the end 'I'll have to start putting my foot down' may provide insight into her reasons for volunteering to take part in the research. The reasons why anyone volunteers for research is always important to consider, and this is discussed further in Chapter 9. It could be that she viewed me as an agent for change and thus instigated her family's involvement in the research to change the current family eating patterns. Whilst William brought the research letter home from school, Sharon completed the reply slip and when I telephoned to discuss my research, Sharon answered the phone and so was the first point of direct contact with the family.

Whilst Sharon linked family time with eating together at the table, Barry focused on how 'totally different' William was to him, emphasising William's lack of interest in sport, commenting that there was "nothing sporty about him" (William). In stark contrast Barry identifies himself as "very sporty and active" as a child. The above parental accounts indicate that Sharon wants to 'connect' with William through food and mealtimes, and Barry had hoped to 'connect' and identify with William through sport. When Barry spoke about these differences between himself and William he used a very wistful tone. He did not simply state the differences – he clearly expressed his disappointment with the current situation in the manner of his voice and his use of sighs. Although Barry and Sharon described their concern at William's isolation, with Sharon emphasising the importance of the meal time, and Barry focusing on William's perceived lack of social skills, William indicated less concern about family mealtimes, "I suppose I don't have any feelings towards it" and when asked if he would miss eating in the evening with his parents he indicated his ambivalence, "I'm not sure really, now come to think of it, I am not sure how much difference it makes". In relation to the time he spends with his parents, aside from mealtimes, William presented his lack of family time as being linked to his parents' care of his nephews:

> **Can you tell me the last time you spent time as a family the three of you?** This might, honestly this might take a while. It's not because my parents are bad or anything and a lot of the time on weekends they take my nephews places and it's not somewhere I would want to go, it's more for them … (William, 15 years old)

In his account, William positioned his parents as being responsible for the lack of time they spend together as a three. He indicated that although he would like to spend more time with them, he thought the balance was 'alright':

> …if I could find some way that I and my parents would both enjoy it I would like to spend more time with them but at the same time I think it's alright, the balance is alright. I would prefer to spend more time with them but overall I'm not too fussed. (William, 15 years old)

This ambivalence could be a reflection of his satisfaction with the status quo or could represent William's emotional management, indicating his awareness of me as a researcher and what he 'should' be saying. Providing a contrasting perspective, Barry suggested that William avoids family time:

> William he chooses not to want to be involved, he'll say sometimes well you never want to do what I want to do. There's very little he wants to do to be honest…I would love to have a relationship with William, which might not happen if he's going to university … (Barry, father)

Thus Barry's account focuses on William's agency, rather than his own, positioning William as being responsible for the lack of time they spend together as a three. Later in the interview, Barry spoke about his desire to have a son, "I pushed for William because I wanted a second biological child and I wanted to see if we could have a son" and presents an idealised image of his father-son relationship with William, in which he creates a fantasy for the future, " … it would be nice every Tuesday night to have me and William go out to the pub and have a game of pool or something because I do love spending time with William". This idealised father-son relationship, contrasts sharply with his own experience of not having a loving relationship with his father as his own dad '*ran off'* when he was eleven and he had no further contact with him. The extent to which this affected Barry's identity as a son, and now as a father, is of note. Identity theory suggests that father involvement in their children's lives will vary as a function of the salience with which a father views his parenting role (McBride et al 2005). Thus whilst Barry presents an idealised father-son relationship in the future, the individual accounts indicate that neither Barry not William are happy with the current relationship. Barry was very open and direct with his feelings about his children, particularly considering I was a stranger to him and the interview took place in the not so private lounge:

> … we don't want to push William but we do see our own failings in each of our children, with Sarah our older one we were too aggressive with her in our

> parenting so she went off the rails, Emma we were too soft with, so she went off the rails, now with William we try a new tactic… psychologically we might be confused as to how to bring our kids up because two ways hasn't worked we haven't got time… we know there are some areas we fail because he's not as good at social skills as he should be which is because he spends all the time in his room so he would feel uncomfortable in his life talking to people about day to day stuff I suppose… he's going to find difficult… can't solve all the problems can we.
>
> (Barry, father)

Within Barry's account it is clear that he is disappointed with his own parenting skills, using the term 'we do see the failings in each of our children'. (Whilst Barry highlighted William's perceived lack of social skills, I actually found him quite personable and easy to talk to). Later in the interview he states 'I would love to have a relationship with William…' powerfully reflecting his feelings of disappointment in relation to the current status of their father-son relationship. Milligan & Dowie (1998) interviewed young people to find out what children need from fathers and the young people identified five areas of need: a role model, quality time, supportive behaviour, expressions of love and physical contact. Both William and Barry indicated that they wanted to spend more 'quality time' together and whilst this study must be careful not to over claim and over interpret the available data, I would argue that the distance between William and his parental subsystem limits the opportunities for William and Barry to achieve the family process goals of affect and meaning. However the over-riding family paradigm of '*avoiding conflict at all costs'* prevents this physical and emotional distance being challenged and enables the status quo to prevail.

Difficult childhood memories of food

Another theme that developed through the inductive thematic analysis was the influence of the difficult childhoods that Barry and Sharon had both experienced and the links with their food and family meal experiences. The interview schedule enquired about childhood experiences of food and eating in the family home, and Barry and Sharon both spoke at length about their impoverished childhoods. Sharon described memories of eating flavourless mince and lentils, fighting with her siblings for her father's leftover porridge, and picking fruit with her mother to supplement their meagre income. Barry also spoke about eating horrible meals, made from cheap cuts of brisket, and having to drink the cabbage juice from the pan because of the 'goodness in it'. He also described the embarrassment of queuing up for free school dinners and not having money to go on

school trips. Alongside these childhood memories of the intersection between poverty and food, both Barry and Sharon recalled difficult childhood emotions:

> … when I was at home it was all my other brothers and sisters and I was quite fat and they used to tease me and I had a turn in my eye and I used to get a lot of styes and they used to get a little farmyard pig and say here this is your sty. **Your siblings?** Yeah I didn't get on with them at all. (Sharon, mother)

> **I was going to ask you about what memories you have of food as a child, can you remember meals?** Yeah they were rubbish I'll tell you two things that often comes up in conversation, my mum who died two or three years ago, her and Sharon didn't get on, I loved her because she was my mum but I hated her as a person, she's not a person I would have associated with if she wasn't my mum…
>
> (Barry, father)

Both parental accounts recall powerful emotions linked with food and mealtimes, from Sharon's cruel teasing about her eye and her weight and Barry's memories of '*rubbish*' food cooked by a mother he hated. These childhood accounts, linking food with conflict, provide evidence for the development of the current dominant family paradigm of giving William a better childhood by *'avoiding conflict at all costs*'. They also provide a clear illustration of how this study's focus on food and eating provided relatively easy access into these deeper and more personal reflections on their feelings and experiences.

Parenting style

Both Barry and Sharon were able to articulate how their early experiences had shaped them as parents. For Sharon early memories of horrible food had influenced her approaches to mothering, "I don't want them to have horrible food like I had and sometimes I give them all nice stuff and that hasn't been for their own health I think". Within this account, Sharon was able to recognise her desire to give her children '*nice stuff'* and acknowledged that this drive to give her children '*nice'* food may not have always led to healthy food choices. Barry's account also acknowledged the contradictions in his parenting approach, emphasising his strong work ethic to give his children a better life but also noting that he feels guilty about not giving his children enough time:

> I have never had a job where I have worked less than 60 hours a week and I have had years where I was working 90 or 100 hours a week… we said when we got

> married that we don't want our children or our children's children to be denied of things... so we feel a little bit guilty that our children have missed out because I have always been at work (Barry, father)

Thus Barry reports his difficulties with establishing a reasonably satisfactory work-life balance because of this powerful drive to provide for his children. His account indicated that he had always worked long hours "so we had the money coming in to build a future so that our children and grandchildren don't have the sort of life we had as children". However Barry noted the effect on William:

> We feel guilty for it as well so with William we go with the flow really, we don't want to upset him, we don't want standing arguments, I don't want standing arguments when I come home from work, I have plenty of that at work Sharon doesn't want the hassle and so we tend to be a bit soft with him, … it's not an ideal world, it's not where we want to be with William but it's just how it's evolved into the routine we are in, we might be in a routine and it might be boring to some people but it's comfortable to us. (Barry, father)

This evolved routine, of Sharon doing all the work in relation to food provisioning, Barry working long hours and William living a separate life, only '*congregating'* in the lounge to eat with his parents (his separate meals) at 6pm during the week, is presented by Barry as not ideal. His comment that 'we tend to be a bit soft with him' can clearly be linked to the dominant family paradigm of *'avoiding conflict at all costs'*. The theme of childhood influences on parenting style was developed more by Barry and Sharon due to their considerably longer life experiences than William and their detailed accounts of their childhoods. Both parental accounts, though reporting different experiences, focused on the difficulties they had experienced and their strong desires not to repeat these experiences for their own children:

> I want him to be happy because I wasn't happy when I was young and I don't want to create friction to go out and go bowling if he doesn't want to, I want him to think of his childhood as good and not the childhood me and Sharon had which is all bad (Barry, father)

Thus this desire to give their children a different childhood became a powerful driver in shaping their family paradigm of *'avoiding conflict at all costs'*.

Family paradigm – 'Avoiding conflict at all costs'

From exploring these themes it is possible to suggest an underlying family paradigm that guides and influences the Wilson family life. I argue that the underlying Wilson family paradigm that drives and shapes their interactions with the social world can be conceptualised as '*avoiding conflict at all costs (to give William the happy childhood they did not have).* This paradigm enables William's restricted diet to prevail, Barry's mealtime preferences to continue, the family to adopt the 'traditional' gender roles without question and the different use of family time not to be challenged by any family member. The consequence of this family paradigm of '*avoiding conflict'* has created a family dynamic in which Barry and Sharon are reluctant to confront William or each other in their day to day lives. Thus William's restricted diet, from early childhood, remains unchallenged, Sharon does not assert her preference of eating at the table, neither parent attempts to control the amount of time William spends alone on his computer in his bedroom, and neither Sharon nor William challenge the long hours that Barry works.

9.4 The Turner family

The Turner family live in a large, terraced, Victorian house in the centre of a coastal town in the East of England. Siobhan, 42, is of Irish heritage, and works full-time in a management role in the public sector. Siobhan is married to Peter, 37, who is white British, and for the last two years has been working as a part-time learning support assistant at the local college, having previously been a stay at home dad. Siobhan and Peter met eleven years ago, moved from London to the coastal town two years later and have been married for seven years. There are three children in the family – Mark, the 16 year old son, Ellie, the 14 year old daughter (target child) and Keira, the 8 year old youngest daughter. Peter is a step-father to the older two children and the biological father to Keira.

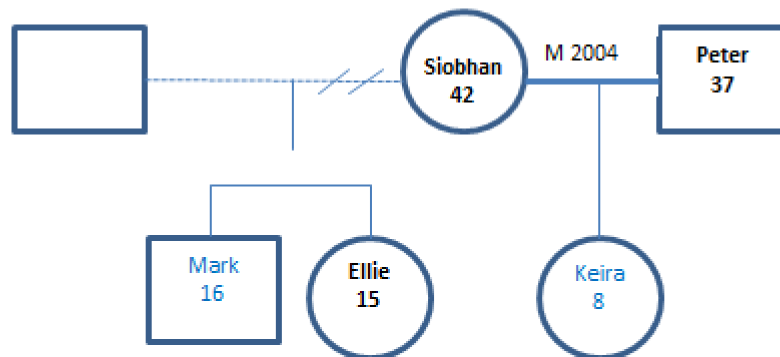

Figure 9.3 The Turner family genogram

The Interview themes

The interview took place over two visits to the family home. On the first visit I interviewed Ellie and then Siobhan. As Siobhan's interview lasted late into the evening, I returned the following week, during the day, to interview Peter. Ellie, the daughter, initially spoke about cooking her own snacks, her brother Mark's absence from the family home, her dad's enjoyment of cooking, her mum wanting to cook more, how family time is changing, her use of technology and her feelings about family meals. Siobhan, her mother, then discussed her anxiety about Keira, her younger daughter, being alone at the table, her guilt with working late, missing cooking, her desire to be with her children more, her awareness of Mark's anxiety to be with his friends, her childhood experiences of meals and her struggles to cope with her work-life balance. When I returned for the final interview with Peter, the (step) father he spoke about his role as cook, Siobhan's work commitments, regulating technology usage, Mark doing his own thing, the importance of weekend time, childhood experiences and encouraging Ellie and Mark's independence. In summary, all three family members mentioned Mark's desire to spend more time away from the family home, the effect of Siobhan's job on family time and meals, and the changing nature of family time. Siobhan spoke more about her anxiety and guilt about working late and missing family time, whilst Peter re-framed this as valuing their time more at the weekends. Both Siobhan and Peter spoke about their childhood experiences of family meals.

Absent Mark

Each family member positioned Mark (16 years old) as resisting the restrictions of family meals and striving to be independent from the family group. A re-occurring theme in all three family member accounts was Mark's desire to leave the meal quickly or not eat with his family at all, "We were having some sort of stir fry in bowls with chopsticks we were all sitting at the table, except for my brother he wasn't there" (Ellie, 15 years old) and "Mark isn't here, Mark, where was Mark that night? He might have been at football training so he tends to have his food when he gets back in" (Siobhan, mother):

> **How does the meal end?** What would happen normally is Mark would finish his first and would be ready to leave and go out or Ellie would finish first and be wanting to get some pudding … I normally say Mark you can hang on a minute and wait until everybody's finished…sometimes he doesn't, he wouldn't leave the table and be like I'm not waiting here or anything like that but he might say oh but and he's made a social arrangement that he has just got to get to, so I say ok alright then. (Siobhan, mother)

> **Did you say Mark and Ellie do join in?** Yeah they do join in with bits and pieces yesterday Mark did shoot off after the cake was finished, that's it he's done his bit, he's getting a lot more like that, he's getting a lot more, he wants to do things on his own, be more teenage like (Peter, step-dad)

The above accounts reflect a difference between Siobhan and Peter in their attitude to Mark's desire to leave the table quickly. Whilst Siobhan asks Mark to wait, Peter's account indicated his acceptance of Mark wanting to do things on his own and behave like a teenager. Ellie also suggests a difference in Siobhan and Peter's approach to Mark:

> … my mum and dad encourage my brother, because he goes out a lot with his friends, they encourage him to come downstairs and watch TV with us for an hour or so and he's like no I'm going out with my friends, so it's the only time we sit down together so they try and enforce it, to have dinner, if you say I'll have some later they say no, otherwise we won't see you. **So is that both mum and dad?** I'd say it was more mum, but dad tries it too but mum wants it to stay like that. (Ellie, 15 years old)

Ellie's use of the phrase 'mum wants it to stay like that' provides an insight into the underlying family paradigm that guides and influences the Turner family, of *'Being together and always being there for each other'*

The importance of eating together

Siobhan clearly articulates her emotional need to eat with her family:

> **This part of the evening, how does it feel for you?** Unwinding from work and it feels good to be at home with my family, it feels nice to be talking to my family and spending time with my family it's not on a general rule stressful at all… but you know I like mealtimes, I wish we could have all mealtimes together because it's a nice way of grouping together and being a family and I do feel quite protective of that you know I miss that as well, I do long for probably I am quite looking forward to the time when I can get back into the real routine, or whether I will have that I don't know so because they are getting older and they will be doing other things but I really like family meal time. (Siobhan, mother)

Her suggestion that the current routine was only temporary 'I am quite looking forward to the time when I can get back to the real routine' may simply be wishful thinking or may reflect a changing shift in her family paradigm, re-assessing what is important to her and what is inevitably changing as the children get older. A key element for Siobhan was the way in which mealtimes provide the vehicle for the family to be together in an unforced way:

> it's really nice to share food and be thankful for the food we've got and sit and relax and enjoy each other's company in a relaxed, you know we all want to be eating and so it's almost sometimes when you have teenagers it can be a bit forced time you have together but at mealtimes it's not forced time you spend time as a family… I like cooking for a lot of people as well, if we have family things I like cooking for everybody, it's a social time actually when we sit down still even though their ages have changed they still like to eat, Mark likes food, for me it's still a real connection with Mark because it's a basic need of people isn't it you know I still can sort of communicate and relate through cooking food (Siobhan, mother)

Within this account, Siobhan makes a clear link between feeding Mark and 'connecting' with him, at a time when Mark is getting older and striving for independence. Thus for Siobhan food has become a mechanism by which she can create the time and space (Kantor & Lehr, 1975) to eat together to maintain her cohesive family system and avoid the fragmentation of her family group. The extent to which all the family members 'buy in' to this family meal time is of interest, with evidence from the individual accounts that Mark is frequently choosing to opt out of these mealtime interactions . Siobhan indicates that she is the primary driver behind these regular family meals – that is the family member who invests energy into this activity:

> I don't think I would put as much effort getting my family round the table if I didn't like it so I wouldn't be that bothered, it probably wouldn't happen but because I do like it, probably going to keep on going for it as long as possible.
>
> (Siobhan, mother)

Mirroring a similar response to her mother, Ellie's account also reflects the importance of eating together to keep the family group connected:

> **You mentioned about people wanting to feel close, what do you think you get from a family meal? Why does it seem important to you?** Because it's nice to know what everyone's doing, it's easier place to talk about it rather than in passing in the hallway, how's your day, good, then you walk up the stairs, you have more time to talk about everything, see how everyone is if anyone has any news … I think if we didn't have family meals I don't think we would be as close as we are, because that's the time we talk the most, because we have everyone talks at the table, no one is silent, it's something that keeps us more of a family when we sit at the table. (Ellie, 15 years old)

From this quote Ellie equates family meals with being a family, *'keeps us more of a family'*, which links to the ideas of 'doing family' and 'family practices' as proposed by Morgan (1996).

Childhood memories

Guided by the interview topics, many of the participants, including Siobhan and Peter, spoke about their childhood experiences of food and eating in the family home. However, of all the participants in the study, Siobhan gave the most poignant account of her childhood experiences and her emotional links to food. Siobhan recalled her early childhood memories within the first five minutes of the interview, when talking about seating positions, "I remember in our house when we were younger we always had our places as well, my dad sat there my mum sat here…" Later in the interview she recounted the traumatic experience of her mother becoming ill at the table, and subsequently dying in hospital:

> …in fact we still have our dining room table out the back there and it's so precious to me that table and it's precious in lots of ways, my mother died when I was 7 and actually the last memory I have of my mum, the proper memory I have of my mum is sitting at this place on the table next to me and picking up, and we were sitting to a family meal and picking up the salt cellar and possibly putting salt on her meal and then putting the salt cellar down on her plate instead of back in the middle of the table and she then didn't feel very well and my dad said are you OK and my dad went round to her and took her upstairs and we were just sat at the table and you know my mum went away and got taken out of the house in a seated chair with blankets round and got taken away in an ambulance and that was the last time I saw my mum. (Siobhan, mother)

Siobhan recalled how her dad continued to provide regular meals to her and her younger siblings, despite his bereavement and his reliance on alcohol:

> Things did go a bit 'skew-wiffy' for a time, my dad drank for quite some time in a bereaved state so… but our meals my dad would still cook us our meals, so it might be a bit hap hazard in the kitchen but we still got our meals, at a regular time (Siobhan, mother)

Despite her dad's heavy drinking, he 'hit the bottle bad for a good few years', Siobhan recounted that he still managed to produce a family meal in the evening, and maintain that daily routine. In their seminal research on children living with alcohol problems in the family, Wolin and Bennett (1984) found that maintaining family routines, such as mealtimes, was a key protective factor in developmental outcomes for the children. Siobhan's experiences would support this finding as she indicated that all her siblings had good jobs and were happily married with children of their own. Siobhan also mentioned how she became very independent from a young age, and identified with Mark's current drive to be away from the family unit, "we were quite self-sufficient so yeah, teenage years, I was a bit like Mark". In contrast, Peter's account offered a more 'traditional' experience of family life,

> My mum did all the cooking, my dad had a high pressure job but we all sat down at the table, we had a dining room, separate dining room, we all sat at the table for that in the evening, … My dad was quite strict with us, he was more of a disciplinarian, they had very traditional roles if you like (Peter, step-dad)

Peter also indicated an awareness of Siobhan's traumatic childhood, noting the pressure that was placed on Siobhan when seven years old to 'mature and step up' as the eldest child and take responsibility for her four younger siblings, whilst her dad struggled to deal with the death of his wife. As Peter notes, she had to quickly take on responsibility for her younger siblings, a difficult task in itself, which most likely led to the abrupt and premature end to her own childhood. This family trauma and the subsequent erratic care from her grieving father may also have contributed to Siobhan's need for certainty and routine:

> Siobhan likes menu planning… I'm a bit more flexible, whereas if Siobhan was doing the cooking she would have Monday to Saturday, Monday to Sunday planned

> out on Tuesday the week before so she would have a clear path of what the week was going to entail, so maybe that does come from her younger experiences with food, she was responsible for planning out, making sure everyone was catered for
>
> (Peter, step-dad)

Peter was aware of Siobhan's childhood experiences and was able to link this preference for routine with the childhood responsibilities that were placed on her shoulders at a very young age. The death of her mother would have inevitably shaped Siobhan's personal constructs and considerably influenced her view of the social world.

Seating positions

The need of Siobhan to have her children close to her is reflected in her comment about seating positions, 'we have our places'. When asked about the reason for the family seating positions, Peter and Ellie's accounts provide little insight into why these positions have evolved. Peter suggests that "I don't know, I don't know I'm not sure really, it's just how it went I guess, I don't know", whereas Ellie briefly replied "I don't know, when we first moved here we moved about but then we just suited those places". In contrast, Siobhan carefully reflected on the seating positions,

> **Any reason why Ellie sits next to you?** Why would Ellie be there? Probably because I would have liked Ellie sitting next to me or Ellie would have liked to sit next to me and the same as Keira would like to be close to me and Mark would probably when he was younger, he's never been someone that needs that close attention he's always been socially confident, these two (pointing to Ellie and Keira's chairs) would be staying next to their mummy. (Siobhan, mother)

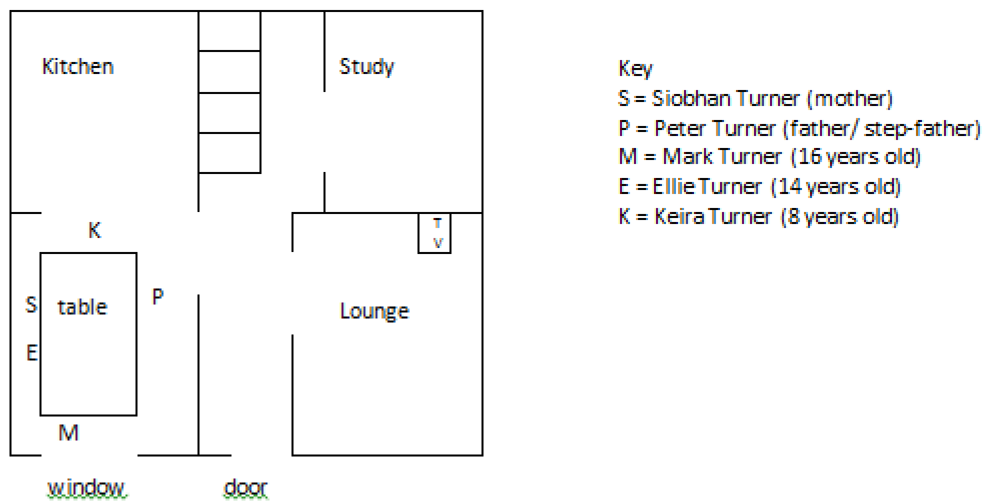

Figure 9.4 Floor plan of the Turner family mealtime eating positions

The seating positions appear to provide order and stability for Siobhan and a sense of belongingness, which Siobhan lost as a child with her mother's sudden death when she was aged seven. Within the above account her use of '*mummy*' was of note, as this was the only time she used this word throughout the interview (throughout the rest of her account she used the term '*mum*'). Drawing on discursive notions, this change of language from the mature word 'mum' to the immature 'mummy' reflects a change of 'footing' in Siobhan's account, conceptualised as the variety of relationships/ positions that speakers or writers take for differing purposes (Goffman, 1981). Siobhan's change of footing (her use of 'mummy') may symbolise her emotional link to her childhood and sitting at the table with her 'mummy'. As family paradigms evolve and shift in times of stress, the traumatic event of losing her mother in early childhood may have created a construct of needing to be close to her daughters, just as she needed but could not be close to her mother as a seven year old.

Linked to the family seating positions was the difference in how the individual family members' discussed the interface of the public/private place of the dining table in front of a large sash window that looked onto a busy street. Peter's account indicates that he is similar to Mark in relation to not wanting people to look in at the family eating, "if Mark was here he would pull the blind down because it's not very private and I'm a little bit like that". In contrast, Siobhan was apparently content to be seen by the outside world and described her preferences as linked to enjoying the light and the greenery:

> They all joke at me because I like to have the blind up all the time and I don't mind people seeing in and everyone pulls the blind down all the time and I like to have the light coming in and we don't have nets or anything like that, Mark doesn't like having people looking in but that's like a social thing probably but I like to look out and see the greenery and probably could do the same where we used to live because I would be looking at the outside and have a view of the kitchen.
>
> (Siobhan, mother)

This preference of wanting to be seen by the outside world may link to the concept of family display, conceptualised by Finch (2007). Finch (2007) defines display as, "…the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships" (Finch, 2007, p67).

Within this context, Siobhan is keen to 'display' to the outside world (her relevant audience) the image of her family eating a meal together at the dining table, and in doing so represent 'family'. This desire to 'display' her family again reinforces the evolved family paradigm of '*being there and always being there for each other* '

Siobhan's employment

Siobhan's long employment hours were another theme that all three family members spoke about, although there was a noticeably different emphasis from each account. Ellie noted how her mum works late and would like to cook more:

> Dad will get home next and he will start preparing it if it's a long meal to prepare, my mum's home next because she works late she gets home as it's being put on the table and it's my dad that cooks most of the time, my mum does most of the cooking at weekends and if she has an early day she cooks it. **Do you think they like cooking?** Yeah I know mum wishes she could cook more but she doesn't have time to, dad is really into cooking, he has lots of cookbooks. (Ellie, 15 years old)

Ellie's account indicated an awareness of her mother's feelings but was apparently more accepting of the situation that her mum does not cook in the week simply due to not having time. Whilst Ellie reported that her mum often arrives home as the food is being served, Peter suggested that Siobhan is often late for meals and eats later:

> … she's the manager of a busy children's centre so she stays late and does extra hours, so yeah sometimes she'll be home in time, if she comes home late she would probably have a bowl of chilli because she's tired… At the weekend Siobhan will cook if I am cooking through the week and we will do burgers and salad on a Saturday night so we have more time to just be… it's still homemade and fresh and then on a Sunday we will sit down and have a meal… when we are both working you value your weekend a bit more. (Peter, step-dad)

Peter also demonstrated an awareness of the conflict between their shared family values in relation to mealtimes and the realities of Siobhan's employment affecting this family meal ideal to which they both subscribed:

> We value the same principles of you sit at the table and eat at the table as a family, I think she's a little bit upset that she works long hours and misses out on some of

> that as well and I think that upsets her and I think that's why she wants to do stuff at the weekend as well. (Peter, step-dad)

Peter explained that the parental employment roles had altered in the last few years due to Siobhan taking on this full-time position. Initially Peter had become a stay at home dad, before returning to part-time employment at the local college. This change in employment had created an increased focus on the importance of weekends for family life, with Peter noting "I think we value time a little bit more at weekends for just being". Of the three family members, Siobhan's account focused on her anxiety about not being there and her dislike of working later and missing cooking for her family:

> I really miss being at home and cooking food for the children and family so at the weekends I will cook the food and I do like cooking the food, I miss cooking the food, like the evening meal. **Why do you like it?** Just that it's looking after them and you know taking care of them and I know they do quite like to do it themselves but I do like to look after them, I see that as a role that is mine but since I started work not cooking I really miss it, I really miss not cooking and not coming home and making them a meal. (Siobhan, mother)

Siobhan clearly articulated the link between cooking for her family and caring for them, reflecting the idea that food is love (Charles & Kerr, 1988). She also expressed her anxiety around her absence, reflected in her concern about a photograph of Keira eating 'alone' at the table, which Ellie had taken, whilst Siobhan was at work.

Image 9.3 – Keira eating her dinner, with Ellie's hand in the shot

She noted that she 'kept on seeing Keira at the table on her own' (indicating that she had looked through the photographs taken on the digital camera by Ellie) and she questioned why Keira was alone:

> … a couple of pictures of her at the end of the table and I said why is no one sitting with Keira while she's finishing her food because I don't think I would be clearing up the table before anyone has finished and I wouldn't be leaving the children sitting at the table eating which I found a little bit funny when I saw the pictures… I don't think she's disturbed by it, I was. Yeah but you see a lot of the time I come in late and I don't like it, it's something that I really don't like, work when it does that to me and I have to work on trying to get a better balance for being at home because I do, they need me here as well still doesn't matter about their age and I still want to be here. (Siobhan, mother)

Siobhan's anxiety at seeing Keira alone at the table is apparent, reflected in her statement 'I don't think she was disturbed by it, I was'. However a closer inspection of both photos indicated that Ellie was also sitting at the table, her plate evident in one photo and her hand evident in another. However Siobhan did not see this and assumed Keira was alone. One wonders whether Siobhan's anxiety '*I kept on seeing…'* led to her mis-perceiving the photograph (or constructing it in a different way) and not seeing Ellie in the shot. Also in the photograph was Siobhan's knife and fork indicating that she had not eaten with the family, which could also have created additional anxiety for Siobhan. Later in the interview Siobhan spoke about feeling guilty at not being home with her family:

> I feel guilty that I am not here, that I think about the time, my children growing up and them thinking I am not here for them, you know I don't want them to feel like that, I want them to feel I am here for them and I want to be here for them so yeah that does make me feel guilty. (Siobhan, mother)

This desire to be with her family and do routine things together, such as eat together, is presented as a powerful driving force for Siobhan, but it has been confounded by her busy job, leading to feelings of guilt and anxiety. The impact of her employment on the family paradigm of wanting to always be there for each other is creating conflict within her work-life balance and may be an indication that the underlying family paradigm is about to change and evolve.

Family Paradigm – Being together and always being there for each other

From exploring these themes it is possible to illuminate an underlying family paradigm that guides and influences day to day life in the Turner family home. I argue that the underlying Turner family paradigm that drives and shapes their interactions with the social world can

be conceptualised as '*being together and always being there for each other'*. This paradigm creates a tension with Mark's growing independence and explains the anxiety Siobhan feels with her long employment hours and her concern at Peter's strictness. Support for this underlying family paradigm can be found in the enjoyment of eating together, the family's seating positions, the differing views of public and private eating, and Siobhan's need for routine.

Siobhan's early childhood trauma would inevitably have shaped her personal constructs (Kelly, 1955), which would have evolved, when she formed a relationship with Peter, into her family paradigm. For Siobhan, the need to keep her children close, always be there for them and always cook for them, have become very powerful drivers for her. But equally her concerns to provide for her children and give them material things, linked to her impoverished childhood, is also paramount. In contrast, Peter's account provided less childhood trauma although there is evidence, within Siobhan's account, that Peter was unhappy as a teenager, "Peter is different to me, he will be stricter and I try and remind him of his childhood: 'Remember your childhood, why did you want to leave home?' This account reflects Siobhan's concern that Peter's strict rules may drive the children away, and thus challenge her family paradigm of being with her children.

Family paradigms evolve and change in times of stress, and the Turner family paradigm may be evolving in a response to the stress created by both Mark's increasing desire to spend time away from the family home and Siobhan's long working hours. Peter's position of encouraging independence may become in conflict with Siobhan's powerful desire to keep her children close to her, creating a paradigm shift, and the need for the family paradigm to evolve. Siobhan's final comment within her interview indicated that she was aware of this stress and the need for something to change, "I feel bad about the amount of hours that I am away from my family life because that is the most important thing to me, I need to sort that out". As mentioned earlier, it is always important to reflect on the reasons that families agree to take part in research. Like the Wilson family, whilst Ellie brought the letter home from school, it was Siobhan that emailed me to volunteer her family to take part in the research. So my first direct point of contact with the Turner family was via the mother. Siobhan's comment that "I need to sort that out" indicates that she is not happy with her current work-life balance and she may have perceived my research as an opportunity to address this.

9.5 The Mitchell/Webb family

The Mitchell/Webb's are a white British family who live in a small council house, on a small estate in a rural village. Neil Mitchell, 47 is an unemployed labourer, and has lived with Linda Webb, 39, also unemployed, for over 10 years. Linda has two children from her first marriage – Amy, 15 years old, and Toby, 14 years old. Both children spend every other weekend with their father and their step-mother. Linda also has two children with Neil – Lily, 9 years old, and Mark, 4 years old, who has Downs Syndrome. Neil also has an older daughter, Nina, who is 21 years old, and lives in her own place with her new-born baby (Neil's first grandchild).

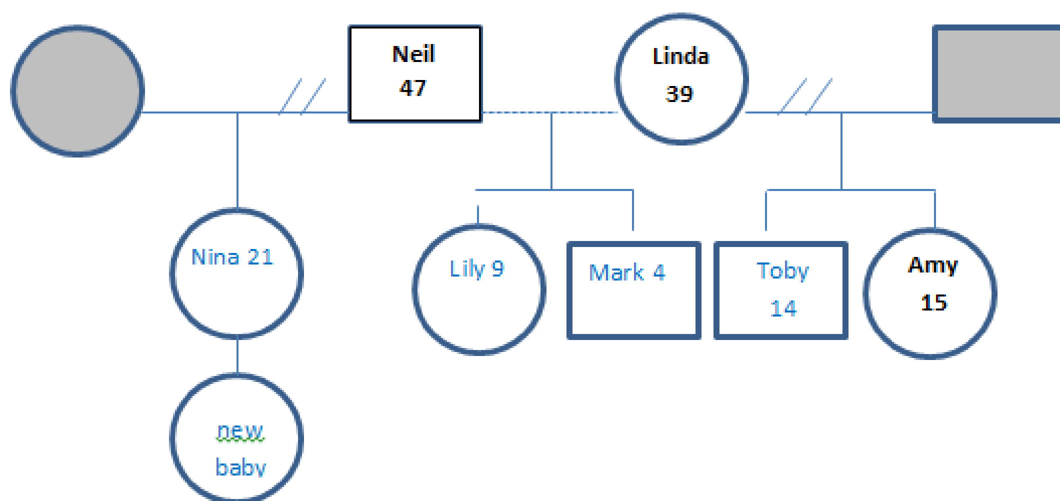

Figure 9.5 The Mitchell/Webb family genogram

When I visited the family to introduce myself and explain my research, the conversation was dominated by discussion of Mark, the 4 year old youngest son with Downs Syndrome. Most of the initial meetings with my research families had lasted approximately 10-15 minutes but this meeting with the Mitchell/Webb family lasted over 40 minutes. Neil, Linda and Amy all spoke in detail about his very restricted diet, the particular routine he demands, and the control he has over all of them. Lily and Toby were in the lounge, but did not speak during this initial meeting.

The Interview themes

The interviews took place during one visit to the family home on a winter's evening. All three family members mentioned Mark's routine and the rules around food and eating, but only the parents spoke about their younger daughter, Lily's eating problems. A lack of confidence in cooking was discussed by both Linda and Amy, and Neil, as the primary cook,

indicated the stress of feeding the family. Within Linda's account, a key focus was on food being functional, her desire to avoid conflict around food and the importance of being family orientated.

Children getting older

From the inductive thematic analysis of the interviews, another theme I selected was the changing nature of family time as the children got older:

> A lot of the time they, Mark and Ellie at weekends would be involved in their own things, if we ask them to can we all go for a walk together round the Broads or something, there would be a real reluctance from Mark more than Ellie but both of them, they are at a teenage level of I have got things to do, other places to be… Mark is out with his mates and doing his friendship thing, yeah the weekends are sort of a little bit more, they do their own things and we give them their space to do that…. I would like more family time, we would like to do more as a family but I am conscious of what I wanted to do when I was young, freedom to go off and do their own things, I don't force the issue. (Peter, step-dad)

> I go on the computer quite a lot or go out, me and my brother because we are older the stuff everyone watches on TV isn't really interesting to us, because my mum and dad need to look after my sister so they would go the library for a fun day or something and we wouldn't really be into that so, those are really the reasons we don't spend much time together. (Ellie, 15 year old)

Whilst Peter and Ellie presented this change in family time in neutral tone, Siobhan adopted a more concerned voice acknowledging her lack of experience in this situation,

> Ellie and Keira are still there, but Mark is going off the edge of that familyness. Being an outwardly social person … it's new to me as a mother there will be lots of people who have experienced that before me, their family going away and when they come back I talk to people about their family's coming back home to them and they enjoy cooking the food the mothers seem to enjoy cooking food for the family and sitting round the table again, it's something in you as a mother I think you like to do, it's part of what you want to do for your family. (Siobhan, mother)

From this account, Siobhan presents essentialist notions of motherhood, linked to cooking and providing food for the family (DeVault, 1991). She is able to make a clear link between her role as a mother and food, and reflects on how Mark's increasing distance and move away from eating with the family is challenging her social construct of being a mother. Whilst Siobhan indicated her lack of experience in dealing with this change in family life, Peter took a more pragmatic approach, focusing on encouraging both Mark and Ellie's independence in cooking:

> Mark is 17 in a couple of weeks in September so Mark has started to do one meal a week, not every week, he's only done spaghetti bolognaise at the moment and he's developing that … that's important for me when they grow up … I would like to see them do a bit more cooking to develop their independence skills … I do give him hints and tips but if I say too much he'll go against it, this is fine, he won't add any vegetables to it, he would rather have the spaghetti and mince and you know put a pepper in it and you are pushing it too far. (Peter, step-dad)

The above accounts indicate that Ellie, Peter and Siobhan have a different view of the changing nature of the family system as the children get older and the links with food and eating. Ellie notes the differing needs of her and Mark, compared with her younger sister and Peter acknowledges the need for both Mark and Ellie to have more freedom and responsibility. His account indicates less emotional links between food and being a parent, and instead provides a more practical link between food and Mark and Ellie's growing independence. However for Siobhan, this change in the family system indicates a more profound change in family life, illustrated by her use of the phrase 'Mark is going off the edge of that familyness'. Siobhan's account reflects her unease with this evolving family system and makes clear her emotional links between feeding her children, being a mother and being a family.

Mark's routines

During the interviews, all three family members spoke about Mark's particular routines – both in relation to food and daily life:

> His routine has to be exactly the same… he's a lot brighter than what people think children with Downs Syndrome are… because he know exactly what he's doing. He knows exactly how to play people to get them to do what he wants.
> (Neil Mitchell, step/father)

> Well we can only go out like in the morning cause Mark has his sleep in the afternoon, so everything we do is like in the morning… well like I will sometimes go out and meet with friends and stuff but yeah, I usually have to work out the times 'cause Mark and his sleep and everything 'cause we work all round Mark always so… (Amy Webb, 15 yrs old)

Neil began his interview by explaining Mark's routine, highlighting Mark's ability to control the people around him, and Amy's account highlighted how her social life and family life has to always be structured around Mark's sleeping routine. In contrast, whilst Linda did note Mark's control "somebody has to sit here and he'll tell you who it's going to be" she presented Mark's unusual eating rituals in a more matter of fact manner, focusing on her attempts to solve the 'problem' of his refusal to eat crisps at school:

> Ah, there's Mark eating his Wotsits (Linda looking at photo 14)… I think this was packet number 4. But he won't eat them at school – he's now decided that he won't eat them at school. And I thought maybe it was because he has a little jar and then he has two yoghurts so I thought maybe because at school I was only giving him one yoghurt. So I tried two yoghurts on Monday and he still wouldn't eat his crisps. So then I thought on Tuesday I'll try taking them to have his bib but he still wouldn't eat his crisps, so... he obviously doesn't want them at school… He ate his jar and his two yoghurts and he had 1 crisp but he normally has 2 packets. Well at home, today, he's had 4 packets. I don't know if he had 4 or 3, 3 or 4? So, he does like Wotsits as you can tell by his face. (Linda Webb, mother)

Throughout the interviews, Linda presented life with Mark in a more descriptive way, detailing what he will and will not eat, how he will eat it, who he kisses goodnight, the numerous hospital appointments they have to attend and his afternoon nap routine. For Linda, Mark's disability provided her with a status as the knowledgeable adult who knows how to handle Mark. She was able to position herself as the 'expert' with Mark, providing her with a strong maternal identity and enabling her to recreate her view of motherhood in the face of her non normative mothering experiences. In contrast, both Neil and Amy's accounts, whilst noting Mark's particular routines and rituals, emphasised how these dominated family life and often prevented them from socialising with friends. Bateman (2011) found in her research on mothers who had a child with a disability, that many of the mothers felt unable to meet society's expectations of being a 'good mother', and felt

unable to deal with the challenges of their child's atypical behaviour in social situations. Consequently many of the mothers in her study chose to self-isolate, to protect both themselves and their child. As Greenspan (1998) notes, "…inability to meet society's expectations and the resultant sense of inadequacy creates self-enforced silencing among many mothers of special needs children" (p43). Whilst Linda did not directly discuss her maternal identity, she did indicate that Mark's needs dominate the family system and this focus on Mark's disabilities may have perpetuated the dominant family paradigm of it is '*better to isolate ourselves than be rejected and isolated by others'.*

Lily's eating behaviour

Both parents spoke about Lily's problems with eating, although Amy only briefly mentioned this in relation to how slowly her sister eats. Linda introduced Lily's eating difficulties at the beginning of the interview:

> She (Lily) decides normally before she even tries it and she won't eat it. Doesn't matter what you do, she won't eat it. She has tears and goes to bed normally because she doesn't eat very much, 'cause she says she's fat. (Linda Webb, mother)

> Lily's got – I wouldn't say eating problems but she, sometimes she won't eat nothing at all for days, obviously she's been to the doctors so sometimes it's easier just to give her something what she'll eat. (Neil Mitchell, father)

Neil introduced the phrase 'eating problems' but instantly dismissed it, despite his assertion that Lily sometimes eats 'nothing at all for days'. He also positioned the whole family as fussy eaters, "a lot of the times we'd have vegetables but with so many in the house everybody is so fussy about what they eat", including Amy and Mark who according to all three family accounts eat everything on their plates whether they like it or not. This raises the question of what Neil means by fussy eating. It may be that Neil identifies all the family members as fussy, despite the difference in how the older children eat, compared to Lily and Mark, to normalise the younger children's eating. In relation to Lily's eating, Neil explained how Lily eats differently away from the family home:

> She (Lily) has a roast at school but if she has a roast here she'll say she don't like the meat. She don't like beef, she don't like pork … but if we've been out somewhere she'll always have beef or pork! So, that's... I think it's just an awkward age, if you know what I mean **Funny that she eats it out** Yeah she'll eat a lot of

> things out but if you ask her if she want it here, she don't like it.
>
> (Neil Mitchell, father)

This account from Neil indicates that when the family go out to eat, Lily's eating pattern changes as Lily will eat 'a lot of things', suggesting that she eats differently in different environments. This raises the question of what is different about the home environment that prohibits Lily's eating.

Rules around food and eating

All three family members discussed the rules around food and eating in the family home, with a slightly different emphasis. Amy was accepting of the rules as part of her family routine, signified by the phrase "it's what we've always done really":

> …usually we're quiet 'cause if not Lily won't eat her tea. She'll be yapping, sometimes we'll be sitting here for ages just waiting for her to finish. So it's a bit of a nightmare at times! … I'll see how much is on Lily's plate 'cause me and Toby eat a lot quicker than her and we just don't want to sit here for hours… We're not normally allowed to leave the table until us three have all finished.
>
> (Amy Webb, 15 years old)

Neil indicated that there are clear rules in the house and emphasised that every family member has to abide by them, "… there's so many in the house, you have to have rules, and them rules apply to everybody if you know what I mean". Whilst Neil presented a stricter line on rules, the rule of not leaving the table until everyone has finished does not apply to him or Linda, as they do not eat at the table, reflected in the figure below.

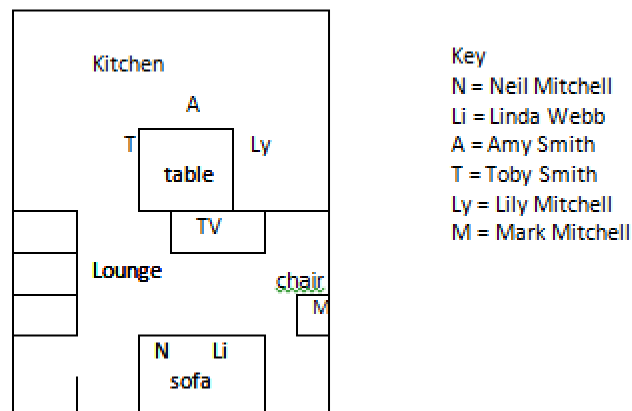

Figure 9.6 Floor plan of Mitchell/Webb mealtime eating positions

Linda also suggested that both her and Neil have to follow the rule of eating things they do not like “we all have to eat things we don’t like”, although Neil’s account reports that he does not cook pasta because he does not like it and so will not eat it. Although Linda accepted the family rule of eating things you do not like, she also indicated that she perceived herself as less strict than Neil:

> I think I would just let everybody have what they want and then like, for Lily, for example, would probably go the wrong way because I’m anything for a quiet life really, so just you know if she wanted her nuggets, she’d have the nuggets. So Neil was a bit more perhaps in control over it whereas I’ll just like ‘yeah, have whatever’. He does keep a little bit of an eye on it, I can’t be doing with the arguing or hassle so … (Linda Webb, mother)

Within this account Linda positions herself as having little agency within the family in relation to food due to her strong desire to avoid conflict around food and eating.

Lack of confidence cooking

Both Linda and Amy indicate their lack of cooking skills, both using humour in their self-depreciating accounts:

> ….I can do beans on toast, the kids like my beans on toast but that’s about as far as it goes really, confidence I think, so ... And I don’t think Mark would eat it if I cooked it cause I think, in my theory, if it’s black then its cooked, you’re not gonna die! (Linda Webb, mother)

> **Was that a weekend?** Yeah that was in the weekend. That’s just... I made everyone lunch. It was just egg sandwich and some crisps. **And you made it all? And boiled the eggs?** Yeah, that’s one thing I can do that’s not disastrous!
> (Amy Webb, 15 years old)

When Amy looked at the photo of her egg sandwiches she had made for everyone she seemed to be quite proud of what she had made. However, when Linda looked at the same photo she said, ‘Amy’s famous egg sandwich!’ She spoke in a flat tone, rather than a proud voice, which served to denigrate the sandwich that Amy had made. When I questioned her phrase ‘famous’ she replied ‘Yeah she thinks she’s good’. At the time of the interview this comment sounded rather critical and I wondered if Linda was critiquing her daughter’s attempts at cooking to maintain her shared identity with Amy as ‘bad cooks’. Or

alternatively Linda may have been mirroring the way her cooking attempts had been denigrated in her childhood, being compared with her brother who was a chef. When asked about her role in relation to food provisioning, Linda explained that she hated cooking, but she knew this was wrong, "I just don't like doing it. I know it's wrong". Her comment that she knows it is 'wrong' may reflect her awareness of the changing but still persistent societal norm that women should cook and feed their family (DeVault, 1991). To reconcile this issue with her maternal identity, Linda positions herself as being the primary carer for Mark, 'I look after Mark, Neil does the cooking' a role she appears to enjoy.

Being isolated

The concept of isolation came up several times during all three interviews, both directly and indirectly. Linda's account indicated that she felt isolated as a child, due to living on a farm, which led to her own childhood eating problems:

> … when I got to about 14, because of where we lived I was being bullied at school and then I decided that eating wasn't such a good thing, which is perhaps why Lily worries me. And I had to go into hospital for a little while for them to teach me how to eat again. (Linda Webb, mother)

She indicated that as a child she dreaded mealtimes and tried to avoid sitting at the table as she felt she'd have to communicate her feelings of isolation and rejection,

> I think eating was, you know, not, it was just something, you know, if you're all sitting together I think then I don't know, if you're all sitting together then somebody could say something and then you can, you know, you'd have to sort of say I don't like living here anymore because people don't like me because of where we live and I want to live in the town with all my friends. (Linda Webb, mother)

This issue of isolation was also raised by Linda in relation to Lily, "… you feel a bit sort of isolated to everybody else and I think sometimes Lily feels like that with Mark" (Linda Webb, mother). From the above extracts Linda identified with Lily's eating issues and made a link with Mark, and the demands he places on the family system. Amy explained her difficulties in going out with her friends, because of Mark's afternoon nap routine, so I asked for clarification:

> **So why do you have to work out when you can go out?** Erm, it's just like 'cause obviously we have to do everything in the mornings, like usually I wouldn't end up going out 'til one unless I go out right early in the morning. But I haven't really been going out that much really. (Amy Webb, 15 years old)

Amy's account provided a reason for her limited opportunity to go out and she appeared to accept the limitations placed on her time by Mark's routine. Neil also provided an indication of his acceptance of their situation with Mark:

> I think we're all sort of happy in our own sort of company if you know what I mean doing what we do. It ain't as if we sort of mix with many people 'cause you can't really do a lot with Mark, if you know what I mean. (Neil Mitchell, father)

In contrast to Mark and Amy's accounts, Linda took a more defiant tone, in relation to the amount of socialising she does:

> To us, wherever we go, then our family come with us. If our family is not invited then we don't go. Me and Neil, the last time we went out was about 4 years ago, without the kids, of an evening. And that's through our choice, cause we're a family and we do things as a family. (Linda Webb, mother)

Linda's account positions herself and her family as having agency over their lives and choosing not to interact with the social world, unless they are invited as a family. This account indicates a *closed* boundary (Barker, 1992), and links to the dominant family paradigm of *'better to isolate ourselves than be rejected and isolated by others*'.

Family Paradigm – Better to isolate ourselves than be rejected and isolated by others

From exploring the themes of isolation and issues with food and eating it is possible to conceptualise the underlying family paradigm that guide and influence the day to day lives of the Mitchell/Webb's. I argue that the underlying Mitchell/Webb family paradigm that drives and shapes their interactions with the social world could be conceptualised as '*it is better to isolate ourselves from the social world rather than be rejected and isolated by others'*. Linda presents the family as a close, tight family unit that is self-supporting, confirmed by Neil's assertion that we are '*happy in our own company*'. To explore the evolution and transmission of this self-isolating family paradigm, Linda's childhood

recollections provide some clues. As discussed above, Linda reported feelings of isolation as a child, due to living on a farm. As a child she dreaded mealtimes and tried to avoid sitting at the table as she felt she'd have to communicate her feelings of unhappiness and not being liked by her school friends. Her dread of mealtimes, and consequently her eating difficulties, culminated in time spent in hospital as she was not eating. Now as an adult she avoids sitting at the table with her older three children, instead choosing to eat in the lounge with Neil and Mark (justified by the need to supervise Mark). This choice of meal pattern could be her attempt to prevent anyone in the family communicating any negativity, and thus serve to protect herself and Neil from any negative emotions. However, the result of this organising paradigm is that the three older children are now isolated during mealtimes. Lily's response to this isolation may be a contributory factor in her difficult eating, which is now 'supervised' by Amy, who has to take on this role in her parents' absence, often sitting with Lily for 'ages'. Supporting evidence for the belief that the isolation may be a contributory factor in Lily's eating problems is provided by the account from Neil that Lily eats well when the family eat out.

Whilst the family accounts indicate that they do not go out very often, presumably when they do the family eat together at a table. Thus Lily's difficult eating patterns are less evident when the family are eating out, sat together around a table, and more apparent in the family home, where Lily eats with her siblings in a separate room to her parents. Brannen et al (1994) suggest that, "Conflicts about eating can be associated with children's sense of powerlessness in respect of family events and situations which make them unhappy (Brannen et al., 1994, p.151). Thus Lily's eating refusal may be due to her sense of powerlessness and feelings of isolation and lack of parental attention during the evening meal, feelings which may be compounded by the individual attention received by Mark during this time. As mentioned above, family paradigms evolve in times of crisis and stress. For the Mitchell/Webb family Mark's birth, his diagnosis of Downs Syndrome, and the numerous on-going hospital appointments are all likely to have been, and continue to be, stressful events, which have enabled this self-supporting, self-protecting, isolating paradigm to be sustained. By focusing on Mark and the strict routine Neil and Linda have developed around him, the family has been able to remain isolated, and not engage in activities outside of the family home. This is something that all the family members appear to buy in to, including Amy, who sacrifices her time with her new friends because of Mark. It is interesting to note that during her interview, Amy reported that the family have "moved around quite a lot" though she did not provide a reason for these moves. As both

Linda and Neil are long-term unemployed and have no family based locally, the moves were not employment or family related. It may be that moving location on a regular basis enables the family to maintain their isolation by preventing close relationships forming with the wider community.

A result of this family paradigm has led to mealtimes being a difficult/stressful time of the day. Neil reports mealtimes as a “horrible time of the day”, although he indicates that he likes cooking as it enables him to “get away from everything”. For Linda meals are very functional – something you have to do but also stressful if she knows that Lily is not going to eat the food. Amy accepts the family routine without question, although she does indicate that she enjoyed the last Christmas meal when all the family sat at the table (and Mark was in bed). In terms of general “family time”, the parents provide very different accounts – Neil suggests that the children “don’t do a lot – they don’t go out anywhere as such” a view supported by Amy’s account. Neil indicates the reason for this is Mark, “It ain’t as if we sort of mix with many people ‘cause you can’t really do a lot with Mark, if you know what I mean”. In contrast, Linda suggests that she does not spend enough time with her family, answering the question very quickly and assertively, “I do think it would be nicer to spend more time together”. She explained that whilst the children are in the house, they are usually using technology – Amy on her laptop, Toby on his iPod and Lily on her netbook. It is possible that the children are choosing to distance themselves within this physical environment and ‘escape’ this isolating family paradigm via this new technology. As Hammond and Cooper (2013) note, digital technologies enable young people to be remotely ‘connected’ even though they may be locally isolated.

9.6 Conclusion

A fundamental aim of the study was to *explore the underlying family processes that occur within a family meal.* By exploring the everyday topic of food and eating in the family home, this study was able to illuminate this usually private area of family life, and conceptualise the underlying dominant family paradigm that guides and shapes each family’s interactions with the social world. The Wilson family paradigm can be conceptualised as *‘avoiding conflict at all costs’* which I argue has shaped the Wilson family life, leading to William eating a restricted alternative diet, Sharon taking complete responsibility for food provisioning and the family not eating at the table, despite Sharon’s preference. The Turner family paradigm was about ‘*being together and always being there for each other’* which I argue has created a powerful drive to eat together at the table.

However Siobhan's long work hours and Mark's growing independence challenged this family paradigm, and gave an indication that this dominant family paradigm is in the process of evolving and changing. In contrast to the Turner's, the Mitchell/Webb family had a more protective, yet isolating, family paradigm of '*it is better to isolate ourselves from the social world rather than be rejected and isolated by others'*. In relation to their family meal patterns, I argue that this dominant family paradigm may have contributed to the separate eating locations for the older children to avoid any family discussion of being unhappy.

Family paradigms are believed to develop and evolve in times of stress and within each of the family groups it is possible to locate specific events and experiences which may have shaped and created these dominant family paradigms. For the Wilson family a central theme was the impoverished unhappy childhoods of Barry and Sharon, whereas for the Turner family, Siobhan's maternal bereavement at a young age has fundamentally shaped her own personal constructs, which have evolved, when meeting Peter, into the family paradigm. The Mitchell/Webb paradigm has evolved through both Linda's childhood experiences of isolation and the stressful family experience of having a child with Downs Syndrome (due to Mark's on-going medical needs and his perceived socially limiting behaviour). In relation to food and eating, it can be argued that the mealtime routine provides the time and space for families to affirm, assess and reassess their existing family paradigm. If families do not have this opportunity to interact, it is possible that family paradigms become fragmented, contested or stuck, creating conflict and stress within the family system.

Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This final chapter discusses how the key findings from this small scale study of food and eating in twelve East Anglian families add to the existing body of research and knowledge on family meals. Additionally, this chapter provides an evaluation of the methodological approach adopted and concludes with a consideration of the messages for future family meal research and family policy.

10.2 Findings

A central focus of this study was to explore the underlying family processes that occur during the family meal and compare and contrast the different family members' perceptions of this everyday activity. As discussed in chapter 8, a fundamental family process discussed within all of the individual accounts was the opportunity for communication, such as questioning, answering, joking, challenging, ignoring and remaining silent, which can all serve to convey affect, power and meaning within the family system. For many of the parents in this study, mealtimes provided the time and space for families to interact in a non-threatening environment, without an additional time or energy commitment, whilst for the young people mealtimes were perceived as primarily providing nourishment, with the secondary goal of having family interaction (with the potential to convey affect and meaning). Many of the parental accounts indicated their awareness of the changing nature of family life, viewing mealtime interactions as particularly important now that their children were getting older and were beginning to 'disconnect' from family life. From observing the young people in their home environments during the interviews it was apparent that most if not all of the young people were very connected to their digital technologies, via on-line gaming and social media sites such as Facebook, so their mealtime interactions appeared to provide an important counter-balance to this digital world. One mother referred to mealtimes as an important 'pit-stop' in daily life, providing the opportunity to connect and reconnect in an increasingly fast paced world. These perceptions of increasingly harried lives were evident throughout the parental accounts, but not within the young people's accounts. This may reflect the influence of technology on our sense of time, with young people feeling less rushed or this pattern may simply reflect the increased amount of responsibility within parental lives, which was not apparent in the young people's accounts.

Another family process evident within the mealtime interactions was how the families dealt with conflict. During a meal conflict may occur over the choice of food, the preferred seating position, the restriction in television viewing and other technologies, the rules surrounding eating their food and more generally conflict brought to the mealtime interaction from a previous encounter. Within the individual accounts, conflict around food choice appeared to be carefully controlled by the mothers ensuring that the food served was enjoyed by their partners and son/daughter. The accounts also indicated that the mothers frequently sat in the least popular seat (often near a doorway), they were primarily responsible for serving the food (controlling quantities), and the mothers guided the conversation to control the emotional content of the meal. In contrast, the fathers within this sample took less of a role in food choice and guiding the conversation, but the individual accounts indicated that many of the fathers were more vocal in enforcing the 'rules' around eating – such as table manners and use of technology during a meal. Whilst some of the mothers did comment on the importance of table manners, the young people's accounts indicated that this role was primarily their fathers' responsibility. Several of the fathers sat in the seat at the end of the table, which one family referred to as the 'Kings seat', and were served before and by their partner. This mealtime pattern was also reflected in the young people's accounts who reported that they usually sat in their preferred seat, were served first (or second) by their mother and usually responded to questions rather than initiated conversation. Whilst these patterns were evident in some of the study families, there were obviously differences both within and between family accounts, for example four of the families did not regularly sit together at the table and so spoke less about table manners and etiquette. The mealtime interactions also provided an opportunity for the family members to make plans for the future, and reflect on what had happened during the day. The fathers in the study spoke about meal times being important for finding out both what had happened and for *being told* what they needed to do in the future, which links with the idea of 'process responsibility'. This is conceptualised as one parent maintaining overall responsibility for family tasks, and providing the necessary directions, with the other parent taking a supporting role (Coltrane, 1996).

Thus within this small scale study, the family accounts indicated that mealtime interactions provided an opportunity for family members to communicate, deal with conflict, establish their position within the family system, and reflect on the past and make plans for the future. This finding addresses the call from Larson et al (2006) for family meal research to understand and conceptualise the on-going processes that occur during the family meal.

The extent to which these everyday family processes strengthen family relationships and enable families to achieve their goals (of affect, power and meaning) was not directly explored within this present study but would be an important area for future research to address. For families that are unable to, or choose not to, invest time and energy into this daily activity, the implications are that individuals within the family system may miss out on these important family processes, unless they are able to find alternative times to experience these everyday interactions.

Chapter 9 outlined how utilising a mixed methods approach enabled this study to obtain rich description of the participants' everyday family lives, both in relation to food and eating, and in relation to deeper family processes, conceptualised as family paradigms. Family paradigms are highly abstract schemata, incorporating beliefs, values and viewpoints, which guide and influence family life (Day, 2010). For this study I believe that the topic of 'food and eating in the family home' allowed me relatively easy access into these private family homes and provided me with a valuable 'window' into their family lives (Jackson, 2009). Whilst one can question whether full access is ever possible, with an awareness of front stage behaviour (Goffman, 1959) and family displays (Finch, 2007), I argue that this study's innovative methods, combining interviews, photographs and floor plans, allowed me to gain insight into these private family lives. By interviewing in the family home I was able to meet them within their personal space and whilst this often raised practical issues this enabled me to observe them in their home environment. Whilst I was not able to achieve full immersion, defined by Gilgun (2012, p. 86) as "sustained engagement with research participants, typically in the settings in which they live", I achieved partial immersion by visiting the family home at least three times and interviewing multiple family members.

Many of the interviews were very open, with the individuals describing personal information about their family life, not always directly linked to the topic of food and eating. For example one father spoke about hating his mother, another mentioned being disappointed in his children, and a third father reflected on his feelings of being a failure after his recent redundancy. Whilst the young people's accounts were less emotive, the mothers also divulged very personal information - one mother spoke about her childhood eating disorders, another discussed her alcoholic father and a third spoke about her frustrations about never being as good as her sister. Thus the interviewees provided very rich, detailed and often emotional accounts of their experiences of food and eating, and

more widely their experiences of family life. This finding has implications for researchers attempting to explore the privacy of family life and highlights both the benefits of adopting a mixed methods approach and the advantages of focusing the interviews on an everyday family activity.

Along with exploring family processes, this study was also sensitised to the themes of gender and generation. By interviewing multiple family members, the study was able to explore the inter-generational perceptions of the family meal, the differing roles adopted by the family members in relation to food provisioning, and the extent to which family members had a choice in these allocated roles. Whilst there were inevitably differences within the groups there were also noticeable similarities within many of the gendered and inter-generational accounts. For the young people a key perception was the functional nature of the meal (nourishment) but they also reflected on the opportunity to spend time with their family. Similarly the paternal accounts emphasised family time and the opportunity to 'catch up' with what was happening with school and other events. Distinctively the paternal accounts emphasised the importance of eating what they liked and enjoying their food. In contrast, the maternal accounts did not prioritise their food preferences, but generally emphasised the emotional content of the meal, highlighting their enjoyment of being with their family, although this contrasted sharply with their dislike of food provisioning (particularly shopping and cooking) within a pressurised time frame. The differing goals reflected between some of the accounts highlights the importance of family research seeking multiple family accounts and recognising the potential for divergence within these accounts. If assumptions are made about the importance of eating together, then intervention strategies to promote 'family meals' must understand the meanings of this interaction for each family member, rather than assuming that this activity is equally valued by all.

In relation to the family roles in food provisioning there was a noticeable gender difference between the sons and daughters within this sample. Whilst only one of the boys provided minimal help with the meals, most of the girls had some involvement in food provisioning, varying from preparing weekend snacks to cooking the evening meal. The parental accounts reflected an assumption that their daughters should be able to 'help out' but this was not expected with the sons. Whilst this small sample presented a predominantly gendered account of young people's roles in relation to food provisioning, there was more variance within the parental accounts which provides a contrast with earlier studies

(Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991). This finding would indicate that gender roles in relation to food provisioning may continue to be perpetuated, *despite* the changing parental roles in contemporary family life, and serve to reinforce the gendered expectations of feeding the family evident two decades ago (DeVault 1991). Two of the twelve fathers, Peter Turner and Neil Mitchell, were the primary cooks, eight fathers were 'helpers' who had a variety of roles from doing the weekly shopping (from a list written by the wife), to peeling the potatoes to turning the oven on. Only two fathers, Barry Wilson and Mark Johnson, indicated that they had no involvement in food provisioning and justified their role as being a 'traditional family'. Two of the mothers were presented as not being the main family cooks, though for different reasons – one of the mothers worked longer hours than her partner and the other unemployed mother disliked cooking.

Despite this variance within the parental accounts, within this sample, everyday decisions regarding meal choices, availability of ingredients, shopping and cooking, were reported as being primarily part of the mother's responsibility (linked to her assumed knowledge around food provisioning). Whilst this freedom of choice might appear to reflect her power within the family system, the women's food provisioning choices were primarily based on her partners and children's preferences, about which she appeared to hold detailed knowledge. Within a family process theory framework, through this simple activity of deciding what to eat, the mothers invested time and energy in food provisioning to demonstrate affect by choosing meals that they knew their partner and son/daughter liked. Whilst the maternal accounts indicated that food choices were based on the young people's and father's preferences, within the two families in which the father was the primary cook, this pattern was not as apparent, although both fathers were aware of the family preferences. For unemployed Neil Mitchell his priority was feeding his large family on a budget, whilst Peter Turner emphasised providing healthy meals for his family, irrespective of their preferences. For example the family accounts (and one of the photographs of salad left on a plate) indicated that Peter Turner often would put salad on a plate even if he knew that the family member did not like it. Within this sample of twelve families, he was the only parent to report serving food that he knew his children did not like, taking a position that contrasts with the majority of women in this study who emphasised serving food that everyone enjoyed. Thus Peter Turner chose to demonstrate his affect by providing meals that were healthy and nutritious for his family, prioritising health over food preferences.

The extent to which the different family members had a choice in the roles they undertook varied within the different family groups. As mentioned above, the perception of being harried and rushed permeated many of the maternal accounts and was expressed powerfully by some of the women with the use of 'hate' to describe their feelings about shopping and cooking. However the women also expressed a sense of resignation to this role, maintaining 'process responsibility' for feeding the family and situating themselves as the 'default' position, reflecting the findings of Ekstrom & Jonsson (2005). So the women invested time and energy into this role, to create affect and meaning but had little choice, reflecting either their limited power within the family system or their reluctance to relinquish this role, irrespective of their employment status. Within this East Anglian study only two of the women were employed in full-time professional roles, Siobhan Turner and Priya Armstrong, but their responsibilities for feeding the family varied. Whilst Peter Turner took on the main role due to his part-time employment hours, Dave Armstrong had little involvement in food provisioning, despite Priya Armstrong's full-time job. However the family accounts indicate that within the Armstrong family system these family roles are maintained by each family member: both Dave and Alexander Armstrong define themselves as lazy and indicate that they know they should do more; and Priya Armstrong's account indicates that she is reluctant to relinquish control of the shopping budget and weekly menu, despite her dislike of the task.

The pressure of having to shop and produce a meal within a limited time period, often at the end of a working day, was apparent in many of the mothers' accounts, although the fathers who were the primary cooks did not have these time pressures. Peter Turner worked part-time and finished early afternoons and Neil Mitchell was unemployed. Both men indicated that they enjoyed cooking, though Neil Mitchell had little choice as his partner, Linda Webb, refused to cook, and Peter Turner's wife worked long hours and was often not home in time for the evening meal. If eating together is regarded as an important and desirable element of family life, then the negative time pressures associated with producing family meals needs to be addressed. At a societal level this could include: social commentators encouraging more equal responsibility for food provisioning, rather than allowing the women to remain the default position; health educators promoting quick, cheap and healthy meal choices, and 'embracing' healthy convenience foods rather than castigating families for using them; and employers encouraged to adopt more flexible employment patterns to enable working parents to have more involvement in everyday family life (as researched by Allen et al., 2008).

Chapter 7 addressed the final research aim, which was to identify contemporary family meal patterns in this East Anglian sample and consider the extent to which these may reflect the family meal 'ideal' of eating an evening meal, at a table, with siblings and parents. The interview accounts indicated that the family meal patterns varied in relation to composition (who was present), timing (when they ate), location (where the meals were eaten), and content (both in terms of what was eaten and the social interactions), which reflected the categorisation of types of evening meals suggested by Ochs et al., (2010). Six of the families said that they usually ate the same meal together every evening sitting at the table, whilst others ate together on the sofa, or ate separate meals, at separate times, or in separate locations. The Chambers and the Wilsons spoke about their family meal 'routine', whereas the Holton's and the Carter's noted how their mealtimes had a more fluid nature, changing on a daily basis, primarily due to work commitments and out of school activities. The data from the larger questionnaire sample provided further support for the variation in meal patterns, with the analysis indicating that the young people ate their meals in a variety of locations, (including at the table, on the sofa and in their bedrooms) and with a variety of people (including with family, with siblings and alone). This variation in family meal patterns highlights the need for future research on food and eating in the family home to recognise and accommodate this diversity of experience rather than assume that the 'family meal' is a homogenous concept, agreed by all. However despite this variation in family meal patterns, the normative pattern , reported by 41 per cent of the young people's questionnaire sample, was eating at the table with their family at least five times a week, mirroring elements of the family meal 'ideal' and supporting Caplan's assertion that the family meal remains "an important template in most households" (Caplan, 1997, p. 6).

A noticeable pattern from this questionnaire sample was the link between location and family meals – the analysis found an expected relationship between location and composition, with the young people who ate at a table more likely to eat with other family members, and the young people who ate alone more likely to eat on the sofa or in their bedrooms. An important finding was that location also appeared to be linked to family structure, with young people living in a lone parent family or a couple headed step family more likely to eat in their bedrooms compared to young people living in a couple headed family. This association could simply reflect building design, with some smaller family homes having no space for a table, though this reason could not account for all the young people sampled. An alternative explanation could be that young people choose to spatially

isolate themselves when eating, particularly during times of transition in family structure, such as divorce and remarriage. This assumption would support Levin et al (2011), who suggest that regular family meals can mediate the potentially negative relationship between family structure (specifically children living in lone parent and step families) and adolescent high risk behaviours. However caution must be taken in drawing causal links from correlational data, as the direction of the relationship is not known and the relationship could be due to a third factor, such as poverty.

An additional strength of the study design was that it allowed for a comparison of accounts both *between* and *within* the families. In relation to the 'family meal' there was considerable variation in the extent to which the family members' accounts reflected or rejected the family meal 'ideal', conceptualised by Ochs, Shohet, Campos & Beck (2010) as the whole family, happily eating together around the table the same healthy meal cooked from scratch. Four of the twelve families presented a *shared* family meal ideal, three families presented a *partially shared* ideal, two families indicated *ambivalence* towards the family meal ideal and three families indicated a *contested* family meal ideal. Within the shared family meal ideal every family member agreed with their family meal patterns and noted their enjoyment of this time. Whilst these families were not always able to achieve this ideal, primarily due to work commitments or out of school activities, they presented a cohesive family account of their family values in relation to their eating patterns. In contrast, the three families who presented a partially shared ideal indicated that one family member often challenged the family meal ideal, by being absent from the evening meal or choosing to eat in a separate location. Two of the twelve families indicated ambivalent feelings towards the ideal, suggesting that meals were simply a functional part of the day and three families indicated a contested family meal ideal with the individual accounts varying in relation to their preferred composition, location, timing and content. Within these contested family accounts, individual preferences for location, content or timing were often overruled by a more powerful family member within the family system. For example in the Wilson family, the father, Barry, clearly stated his preference to eat his evening meal on the sofa watching the television (which is what the family did), whilst his wife, Sharon, clearly stated her preference to eat at the table. The diversity of family meals highlighted within this sample of families illustrates the need for any research on family meals to accommodate these diverse experiences and endeavour to separate everyday food and eating experiences from the family meal 'ideal'.

Within this study questionnaires were used to provide contextual data on family meal patterns and provide access to the interview sample, yet within this small sample there were discrepancies between the questionnaire responses and the interview accounts. For example one of the young people indicated that they usually ate their evening meal with their parents and their siblings, but the interview accounts suggested that the siblings often ate together without their parents. Additionally two of the young people reported on their questionnaire that they usually ate their evening meal sitting at the table, but during the family interviews, all the family accounts suggested that the young people usually ate their evening meals sitting on the sofa watching the television. The reasons for these discrepancies is unclear but raise important issues regarding family meal research, with its current emphasis on single respondent survey data, and supports the call for utilising mixed methods research from multiple family members. One possibility for these differences could be that when answering the anonymous questionnaire data the young person presented the 'family meal ideal', as discussed above, of eating together at the table, rather than their day to day experiences. This pattern would reflect Gillis (1996) distinction of 'the families we live with and the families we live by', and would indicate that the family meal ideal permeates through to young people as well as their parents. To address this issue, future research on the 'family meal' must strive to differentiate between everyday experiences of mealtime interactions and the family meal 'ideal', as called for by Murcott (1997) and academics should question the family meal 'ideal' by accommodating the diversity in family eating experiences.

10.3 Methodological strengths and limitations

The aims of this study were to contribute to our understanding of food and eating in the family home, and in doing so, stimulate debate and action. Throughout the research process I was guided by the five key quality criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and viewed these criteria as providing debatable principles rather than strict rules, a position taken by Searle (2002). Similarly Hammersley (2007) argued that quality criteria are better viewed as 'guidelines', rather than objective criteria, as they inevitably involve a subjective element of judgement. More recently Tracy (2010) has expanded this list to include eight key markers of quality in qualitative research, which overlap with Guba & Lincoln's criteria; a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence.

The qualitatively driven mixed methods approach produced rich, credible data about family processes and family meals and additionally led to deeper reflections on family life in general. Acock, Dulmen, Allen & Piercy (2005) acknowledge the value of adopting mixed methods, suggesting that "family researchers need a combination of methods in order to capture the complexity of family life" (Acock et al., 2005, p.60). This focus on food and eating in the family home was relevant and timely with the current media attention on family life and family health, including concerns over obesity levels in the UK. By adopting this mixed methods approach, I was able to have a prolonged engagement in the field, which provided me with the opportunity to collect a variety of data and enabled me to develop relationships with my research families.

The decision was made early on in the research design to include a visual element to enhance the richness and credibility of the data from the individual interviews. The pilot study had indicated the difficulties of obtaining detailed accounts from teenagers, so I gave digital cameras to the young people and asked them to take photographs of 'food and eating in their family home' to use as photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) at the beginning of the interviews. Alongside helping to develop a rapport with the individual family members, and provide the young people with agency in the research process, this approach also had additional unintended benefits. Firstly it meant that I visited the families three times (during the first visit I delivered the camera and arranged a second visit to collect it), which ensured I was not a complete stranger to them when I interviewed. I believe this process aided the dependability of the study as meeting many of the family members during the first and second visit, meant I arrived as a 'known person' for the interviews, rather than as a stranger. Secondly handing over an expensive (£70) digital camera symbolised a sense of trust that I had in the families. The family members often appeared surprised and pleased when I got the camera out and most of the young people spent time checking how to use it. Although I am not able to know for sure, I feel this symbolic gesture helped me to gain the trust of these families and facilitated my access into the private domain of their family life. The use of the cameras also provided another perspective to the study, enabling me to obtain (literally) a snapshot of their family life, at a given time, without my needing to be present. As this was a cross-sectional study of family life, the photographs and family meal patterns presented by the individual family members must be regarded as temporally situated, to a specific time and place, and likely to evolve and transform, as the family system changes. This position acknowledges the social

constructionist ideas of 'situated knowledges' (Harraway, 1988), and whilst highlighting the temporal nature of the research findings, also celebrates the depth of understanding achieved within this small, focused sample.

Along with the interview transcripts and the photographs, another piece of visual data I created after the family visits was a sketch of the family floor plan. As Parker (2004) notes, innovation is one of the three core principles of quality research, and my use of family floor plans offered a unique perspective to research on food and eating in the family home. By visiting the family homes I had access to a considerable amount of data on how the family navigated the available space in relation to food and eating and wanted to utilise this in some way. This illustrated where the family members usually ate based on what I had observed and the information from the interviews. Other researchers have developed floor plans to explore contemporary family life (Gabb, 2008; Graesch, 2004; White, 1976) and I argue that the use of sketched floor plans in this study provided an extra dimension to the analysis. By combining this additional visual data with the photographs and the interview accounts I was able to reflect on how the family members utilised space – a key access dimension in family process theory – in the family home for eating and meals. For example the Wilson family floor plan visually represented the considerable amount of space the family home had in relation to eating, with a very large dining table and a very large kitchen table. Yet the three family members usually ate in the lounge with their meals on trays; William, the son, in 'his' chair and his parents, Barry and Sharon, sitting some distance away on the large sofa. Combining this knowledge with the individual accounts of preferred eating locations, the reflections on their family relationships, their descriptions of family time and the individualised meals of the son, William, enabled me to construct a narrative of an emotional distance between William and his parents, most clearly articulated by his father.

Another key strength of this study was the use of multiple informants. By individually interviewing family groups of mothers, fathers and their son/daughter I was able to generate rich descriptions of their mealtime interactions and family life from multiple perspectives. From an early review of the literature on family life and family meals it became apparent that 'family' research often only sought singular viewpoints to provide a 'family' perspective, which by default was often the mother's voice. This study aimed to address this limitation by ensuring that multiple family member accounts were heard to

provide a more authentic and ethical account of their family life and to enhance the confirmability of the study. Whilst the advantages of obtaining this multi-perspective view of family life are apparent, there were issues to address such as how to approach the family 'gatekeepers', how to obtain informed consent from all family members, and how to deal with divergent accounts. Whilst initial contact was made with the families with either a letter sent via the school or via a personal contact, one family member responded by email, completing the reply slip or texting. Thus my first direct contact with the family was inevitably with one family member, the 'gatekeeper'. This had implications for obtaining informed consent as several of the women gave consent on behalf of their family but I had to insist on meeting all three family members in person to ensure that they gave their own informed consent. Within the study I had to adopt a flexible design to ensure that each family member was happy to be involved in the study. For example in one family the father seemed quite reluctant to be involved, so I left the consent forms at the house and arranged to collect the forms two days later, either signed or not.

An important point to address when researching multiple perspectives is the issue of dealing with divergence. Whilst many of the family accounts converged there were also discrepancies between the different family members interviews, and this was viewed as important to explore and retain. As Gabb (2009) notes, 'Dissonance between data from different methods and different perspectives provided depth to the emergent portraits' (Gabb, 2009, p. 42). Thus I was able to reflect on the reasons for this divergent data and explore the possible explanations, viewing any discrepancy as another piece to the complex family jigsaw (Gabb, 2009). For example in one family the father indicated that 'the family' preferred to eat their evening meal in the lounge sitting on the sofa watching the television, whereas the maternal account strongly expressed her preference for eating (and talking together) at the table. The reason for this discrepancy was of interest, and when analysing the interviews I looked for other material to explain these differing accounts. Within this example, the father reported that they were a 'traditional' family, which enabled him, as the patriarch, to present the family voice and speak on behalf of his wife and son. In contrast, whilst his wife voiced to me her preference to eat at the table, I argue that the dominant family paradigm of 'avoiding conflict at all costs' prevented her from asserting her preferences and challenging her husband's authority.

A central element of ensuring authentic and confirmable qualitative research (and arguably all research) is the importance of being reflective, 'To understand and interpret the

accounts of experiences of others, researchers…must be reflexive' (Gilgun, 2012, p. 82). In relation to this study, it was important to be reflective throughout the whole research process – considering my motivation for exploring this topic in the first place, my assumptions, my decision who to interview, my methodology, and my interview structure. I also needed to be reflexive throughout the interview stage, acknowledging my role in co-creating the interaction and shaping the interview, by my interactions and my choice of questions. And during the analysis of the transcripts and the photographs I had to continually reflect on why I was focusing on particular elements of the interviews and the photographs and carefully consider what I was co-constructing and how my assumptions had influenced the interviews.

As with all research the study had its limitations which are important to acknowledge and address. All the participants came from a relatively homogenous, culturally white, East Anglian location, and lived in either a market or coastal town. Thus there was little diversity in relation to race and family structure. However the study did not strive to achieve a representative sample as the purpose of the research was to explore individual experiences and perceptions of food and eating in the family home. There were also important ethical issues to acknowledge, such as issues around obtaining informed consent from all family members and maintaining confidentiality throughout the whole process. Within two of the interview families, one father seemed to be coerced into taking part and one mother choose not to take part. On reflection I realise I was influenced in both situations by the insistence of the other parent. Whilst I was aware of their reluctance, the father involved did give his consent, and the mother involved did not indicate that she was unhappy for her partner and children to be taking part. Thus whilst I did not directly disrespect their wishes, I believe that in future, any research I undertake must strive to gain genuine informed consent from all family members. Another important ethical concern was linked to the issue of maintaining confidentiality – both during the interviews and afterwards with the write up of the study. A lot of research on family life takes place within the family home which inevitably limits the ability of the researcher to maintain complete confidentiality during the interview. For this study I took steps to ensure privacy, such as requesting a private space and getting up to shut any open doors, but this was not always possible and some of the interviews took place with other family members present or within earshot. Whilst this situation was not ideal, I believe that the value of interviewing within the family home heavily outweighs this problem. Aside from the practical difficulties of bringing participants into a neutral space for interviews, such as the University, by interviewing in

the family home I was able to see the participants within their home environment and observe a lot of detail, such as the eating location and the layout of the family home. A final inevitable yet unavoidable limitation of this study is my influence on the research process. I inevitably shaped the whole research process, from the choice of topic and the theoretical framework adopted, through the study design, the interview process and the subsequent analysis of the data. Whilst I strived to be reflexive throughout, making notes of my thoughts and feelings around each stage of the process, it is essential that I am aware of and can acknowledge my influence on the complete study.

10.4 Messages for future family research on food and eating

The findings from this study contribute to contemporary family research on both family meals and wider family life in general. The topic of 'food and eating in the family home' enabled relatively easy access into a private world, and the photographs and interviews quickly produced rich, thick description of not only the family meal patterns but also wider issues about family life. Utilising a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach with multiple family members, the study was able to explore both food and eating in the family home, and also deeper family processes, conceptualised as underlying family paradigms that guide and influence family life. Future research on family meals would benefit from continuing to involve multiple family members and innovative methods, with a more diverse sample than was possible for this study, as an alternative to the established reliance on single informant questionnaire data. This multi perspective approach will enable researchers to obtain a more complete picture of family life, and accommodate alternative perspectives – for example a more diverse sample could examine issues of class, ethnicity and regional location in relation to food and eating in the family home. Additionally researchers exploring other areas of family life may choose to adopt this mixed methods approach, including innovative emerging digital technologies, to provide a 'window' into this hard to reach private world.

A fundamental implication for family meal research is that a homogenous model of family meals (reflecting the family meal 'ideal') is no longer appropriate when researching contemporary family meal patterns. This study highlighted the multi-layered nature of family meals with variation between families in relation to composition, location, timing and content. The extent to which this diversity in family meal patterns influences family processes and family relationships is an important area for future research to explore and understand. For example, although the numbers involved were relatively small , this study

found that family structure was linked with the location of the meal - young people living in a lone parent and couple headed step family were less likely to eat at the table with their family. Future research could compare and explore the meanings given to food and eating in the family home by the individual family members living in diverse household structures including lone parent families and couple headed step families.

Whilst the findings from this study show that family meals have an important role to play in family life, there are many challenges within contemporary family life to this mealtime routine. Thus policy interventions aimed at supporting families within the home, such as the Sure Start programme, Family Nurse Partnerships and the Troubled Families Programme, need to address these barriers to regular family meal routines. For example interventions must acknowledge and address the increased perception of time pressured lives often linked to the rise in dual earner parental employment, the increased availability of individualised ready meals, the rapid explosion of digital technologies inhibiting face to face communication, the increase in out of school activities and the ever-present imagery of the family meal 'ideal', which many families may find difficult to achieve. The role and influence of this 'ideal' on everyday family life is an important area to explore and researchers must be confident that their research design is able to differentiate clearly between the family meal ideal and everyday family life. By differentiating between the ideal and the lived reality, researchers and policy makers will be able to gain a greater understanding of contemporary family meal patterns and the challenges families face when trying to accommodate differing needs.

10.5 Conclusion

Utilising a family process theory framework, this study found that family meals provided an opportunity for families to communicate, to plan, to solve problems and to deal with conflict in a safe and un-pressured environment. They also provided the space and time for individual family members to negotiate their position and role within the family system and re-assert their family identity. The topic of 'food and eating' enabled the study to gain access into this private world, and the photographs and interviews quickly produced rich, thick description of not only the family meal patterns but also wider issues about family life, illuminating the underlying family paradigms that guide and influence family life. The reported family meal patterns varied in relation to composition (who was present), timing (when they ate), location (where the meals were eaten), and content (both in terms of what was eaten and the social interactions) which underlies the importance of future

research on family meals to accommodate these divergent eating patterns. The findings suggest that family meals have an important role to play in family life. However within contemporary family life there are many challenges to this mealtime routine, which may be compounded by the existence of a family meal 'ideal' which many families may find difficult to re-create. To address these challenges it may be important to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to empower individual family members to have the time, space and energy to eat together. By sharing food individual family members may be enabled to achieve their family goals of conveying affect to each other and creating meaning about themselves and their family identity.

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Appendices

Appendix I

School questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short questionnaire. There are 15 questions to answer and this should take you no longer than 10 minutes. Please ask the researcher if you have any questions.

A. The first set of questions are general things about you

1. Date of birth / /19
2. Gender: Male/Female
3. Who do you live with?..
4. Is your dad in: full-time employment/part-time employment/unemployed/student/other?
5. Is your mum in: full-time employment/part-time employment/unemployed/student/other?

B. The next set of questions are about the evening meals that you eat at home

6. Where do you normally eat your evening meals?
   At the table/ on sofa watching TV/ in my bedroom/other……............

7. How often is the television on when you eat your evening meals?
   Never sometimes always

8. In the last week how many times did you eat an evening meal with your family?
   None 1-2 3-4 5-7

C. The final set of questions are about how you spend your time

9. How often do you go on a computer (e.g. Facebook, MSN, Playstation, Wii, Twitter):

Alone?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With mum?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With dad?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

10. How often do you play sport with your:

Friends?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With mum?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With dad?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

11. How often do you play board games (Monopoly, Cluedo):

With mum?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With dad?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
All family?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

12. How often do you hang out in the streets/at the park?

	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

13. How often do you eat out:

With mum?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With dad?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
All family?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

14. How often do you go out with your family to have fun (bowling, cinema etc)?

	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

15. How often do you have quiet chats:

With mum?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day
With dad?	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Few times a week	Every day

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

Head Teacher
School
Address 1
Address 2
County
Postcode

Tuesday 14th September 2010

Dear *Name of Head Teacher*

Re: Research request

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia interested in young people and how they spend time with and apart from their families, particularly focusing on eating and meals.

To explore this topic I need to ask young people, aged 12-13 years old, to complete a short questionnaire about how they spend their time with their family and friends, and mealtimes. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

Would it be possible to visit your school and discuss with you my research and the possibility of your students taking part? I will telephone you on Monday 20th September to discuss this request. I very much hope that you will be able to help with this aspect of my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

01603 591817
k.henshaw@uea.ac.uk

24th September 2010

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia researching how young people spend time with and apart from their families, particularly focusing on eating and meals.

To explore this topic I need to ask young people, aged 12-13 years old, to complete a short questionnaire, in class time. The questionnaire will ask about how they spend their time with their family and friends, and mealtimes. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

I will be visiting your child's school within the next month to hand out the brief questionnaires. Please complete the attached reply slip if you are happy for your child to complete the anonymous questionnaire. If you would like to discuss the research further, please contact me directly (text, email or phone).

I very much hope that you will be able to help with this aspect of my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

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01603 591817 (UEA office number)

Parent/Guardian of Year 8 Child
(Name of Middle School)

12th October 2010

Dear Parent/ Guardian

I wrote to you last month to introduce myself and explain that I am researching how young people spend time with and apart from their families, particularly focusing on eating and meals. Thank you for returning the reply slip.

Today I visited XXX Middle School and your child completed my confidential questionnaire. For the second stage of my research I now need to find volunteer families, who would be willing to talk with me about various aspects of their family life, including mealtimes and daily routines. If you are able to help with the research you will receive a £10 voucher as a token of my appreciation.

I would like to interview three family members (mother, father and your son/daughter) in their family home, and would expect the interviews to last about 20 minutes each. For the final stage of the research, I need families to record a typical mealtime, using a video camera supplied by myself. You will be able to watch the recorded video footage. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

If you feel that you may be willing to help with my research, please could you contact me, either by email, text or phone, so we can discuss any questions you may have. I very much hope that you will be able to help with this aspect of my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

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Appendix V

School questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short questionnaire. There are 9 questions to answer and this should take you no longer than 5 minutes. Please ask the researcher if you have any questions.

The first questions are general things about you

1. How old are you? ………………………….

2. Are you male or female? …………………..…

3. Who do you live with? Please list their relationship to you, i.e. brother, sister, dad etc

…………………………. ………………………………………………………………………………

The next questions are about your parents' employment. Please circle

4. Is your dad
   - a. In full-time employment (works 5 full days a week)
   - b. In part-time employment (works less than 5 full days a week)
   - c. Unemployed
   - d. A student
   - e. Other (please specify)

5. Is your mum
   - a. In full-time employment (works 5 full days a week)
   - b In part-time employment (works less than 5 full days a week)
   - c Unemployed
   - d A student
   - e Other (please specify)

The third questions are about the EVENING meals that you eat at home

6. Who do you USUALLY eat your EVENING meal with? Please circle
   - a. Alone
   - b. My brother/sister
   - c. My brother/sister and my parents
   - d. My parents
   - e. My friends
   - f. My grandparents
   - g. Other (please specify)……………………………………………………..

7. In the last SEVEN days how many times did you eat an evening meal WITH YOUR FAMILY?

   [ ] times in the week

8. Where do you USUALLY eat your evening meal? Please circle
   - a. Sitting at the table
   - b. Sitting on the sofa
   - c. In my bedroom
   - d. Sitting on the floor
   - e. Other (please specify)……..........…………………………………………

9. In the last SEVEN days, how many times was the television on when you ate your EVENING MEAL?

   [ ] times in the week

18th May 2011

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia researching the topic of food and families, particularly focusing on eating and meals.

To explore this topic I need to ask young people, aged 14-15 years old, to complete a short questionnaire, in class time. The questionnaire will ask basic questions about their family and questions about the food and meals they eat at home. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

I will be visiting your son/daughter's school within the next month to hand out the brief questionnaires. Please complete the attached permission slip if you are happy for your son/daughter to complete the anonymous questionnaire.

For the main part of my study, I will be interviewing families (mothers, fathers and young people) to discuss food and meals within the home. If you would be interested in taking part in this next stage of the research, please include your contact details on the reply slip. If you would like to discuss any aspect of my research further, please contact me directly (text, email or phone).

I very much hope that you will be able to help with my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

k.henshaw@uea.ac.uk
07561 340664
01603 591817 (UEA office number)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the project:
Families and Food

Main investigator:
Kamena Henshaw 01603 591817 email: k.henshaw@uea.ac.uk

Supervisor:
Prof Margaret O'Brien 01603 593589 email: m.o-brien@uea.ac.uk

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia researching the topic of food and families. The first stage of the research involves young people completing short questionnaires. Your name is not included on the questionnaire and all the information collected will remain confidential and stored in a secure office.

Before any research is undertaken, researchers have to obtain permission from the individuals involved. This is done by you signing this consent form, which means that you agree to take part.

1. I agree to take part in this research.

2. I know that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

3. I have been told that the information I give will be kept confidential.

4. I know I can ask any questions before, during or after the study.

5. I have been provided with a copy of this form.

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Name of participant (print) ……………………………………………………………..

Signed ………………………………………………………………………………

If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, please sign the form below and return to the researcher
Title of project: Families and Food

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed ………………………………………………………………………………

Parent/Guardian of Year 10 Student
(Name) High School

16th June 2011

Dear Parent/ Guardian

I wrote to you last month to introduce myself and explain that I am researching the topic of food and families, particularly focusing on eating and meals. Thank you for returning the reply slip.

Today I visited (Name) High School and your son/daughter completed my questionnaire. For the second stage of my research I now need to find volunteer families, who would be willing to talk with me about various aspects of their family life, including mealtimes and daily routines. If you are able to help with the research you will receive a £10 'love2shop' voucher as a token of my appreciation.

I would like to interview three family members (mother, father and your son/daughter) in the family home, at a time convenient for you. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

If you feel that you may be willing to help with my research, please could you contact me, either by email, text or phone, so we can discuss any questions you may have? I very much hope that you will be able to help with this aspect of my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
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Parent/Guardian of Year 10 Student
(Name) High School

4th July 2011

Dear Parent/ Guardian

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia researching the topic of food and families, particularly focusing on eating and meals

When your son/daughter visited the University today, they attended a psychology workshop, and as part of the session they completed a questionnaire. As part of my research I need to find volunteer families (mother, father and young person), who would be willing to talk with me about various aspects of their family life, including mealtimes and daily routines. At the moment my research is focusing on young people who live with both their parents – in the future my research will explore young people who live in other family groups, such as single parent families, grandparents, foster parents etc.

I would like to interview three family members (mum, dad and young person) in the family home, at a time convenient to the family. All information collected would be anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team. If you were able to help with the research each family would receive a £10 'love2shop' voucher as a token of my appreciation.

If you feel that you may be willing to help with my research, please could you contact me, either by email, text or phone, so we can discuss any questions you may have? I very much hope that you will be able to help with this aspect of my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

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Parent/ Guardian of Year 10 student

30th June 2011

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia researching the topic of food and families, particularly focusing on eating and meals.

To explore this topic I need to ask young people, aged 14-15 years old, to complete a short questionnaire, in class time. The questionnaire will ask basic questions about the food and meals they eat at home. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

I will be visiting your son/daughter's school next week to hand out the brief questionnaires. If you do not want your son/daughter to complete the short questionnaire or would like to discuss any aspect of my research further, please contact me directly (text, email or phone).

I very much hope that you will be able to help with my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

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07561 340664
01603 591817 (UEA office number)

Parent/Guardian of Year 10 Student
(Name) High School

6th July 2011

Dear Parent/ Guardian

I wrote to you last week to introduce myself and explain that I am researching the topic of food and families, particularly focusing on eating and meals.

Today I visited (Name) High School and your son/daughter completed my questionnaire. For the second stage of my research I now need to find volunteer families, who would be willing to talk with me about various aspects of their family life, including mealtimes and daily routines. If you are able to help with the research you will receive a £10 'love2shop' voucher as a token of my appreciation.

I would like to interview three family members (mother, father and your son/daughter) in the family home, at a time convenient for you. All information collected will remain anonymous and confidential and will only be seen by the research team.

If you feel that you may be willing to help with my research, please could you contact me, either by email, text or phone, so we can discuss any questions you may have? I very much hope that you will be able to help with this aspect of my research.

Best wishes

Kamena Henshaw

PhD researcher
University of East Anglia

01603 591817
07561 340664
k.henshaw@uea.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the project:
Families and Food

Main investigator:
Kamena Henshaw 01603 591817 email: k.henshaw@uea.ac.uk
Supervisor:
Prof Margaret O'Brien 01603 593589 email: m.o-brien@uea.ac.uk

I am a PhD student at the University of East Anglia researching young people and their families' experiences of food and eating within the family home. The research will involve family members (dad, mum, and teenager) being interviewed individually about the meals you eat in your home. The young person will be given a camera before the interviews to take photos of food and eating within the home, to use as a discussion point for the interviews. The interviews will be recorded, using a digital recorder. All information collected will be kept confidential and stored in a secure office.

Before any research is undertaken, researchers have to obtain permission from the individuals involved. This is done by you signing this consent form, which means that you agree to take part.

1. I agree to take part in this research.

2. I know that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

3. I have been told that the information I give will be kept confidential.

4. I know I can ask any questions before, during or after the study.

5. I have been provided with a copy of this form.

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me. The interview recording and transcripts will be stored anonymously.

Name of participant (print) ………………………………………………………..

Signed ………………………………………………………………………………

If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, please sign the form below and return to the researcher
Title of project:

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed ………………………………………………………………………………

Appendix XIII

Interview Prompts 24.1.11

Section 1 – Introductions

(To include overview of research, confidentiality, anonymity, access to research, consent forms)

- Can we have a look at these photos that you/your daughter/son took

Section 2 – The EVENING meal

- Please can you take me through the last evening meal you had together?

(What happened? the story of the meal, entrances and exits)

- How did you feel about this meal?

(Keep prompts emotional/feelings centred)

- Can you now take me through the last evening meal you had together at the weekend?

(Or during the week, depending on previous answer, the story of the meal)

- How did you feel about this meal?

(Keep prompts emotional/feelings centred)

Section 3 – Food provisioning

- Please can you talk me through the planning and preparing of meals in general

(Who decides, who shops, who prepares, who cooks?)

- What do you feel about the planning and preparing of meals?

(Who decides the roles, how do you feel about the roles you have, what influences these roles?)

Section 4 – Childhood memories

- Can you take me through your childhood memories of mealtimes?

(Can you remember a specific mealtime? How do you feel about these memories? Do these experiences influence your current mealtime behaviours?)

- Can you tell me about your partner's experiences of childhood mealtimes? (question for parents only)

Section 5 – Family time

- Can you tell me about the last time you all spent time together?

(Don't prompt, wait. Then delve deeper – what, where, when, how…)

Section 6 – Demographic information

Age, employment, qualifications, ethnicity, number of children and ages, household, marital status. In the last week, how many evening meals did you eat with your family? Was this a usual week?

Thank you
Re-iteration of confidentiality