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FAMILY DISCOURSE AND EVERYDAY PRACTICE

Gender and Class at the Dinner Table

MARJORIE L. DEVAULT

© 1991 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. From: *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. To be published by The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

1. M. DeVault, "Doing Household Work: Feeding and Family Life," in *Families and Work*, ed. N. Gerstel and H. E. Gross (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

2. For example, the contributors to Barrie Thorne with Marilyn Yalom, eds., *Rethinking the Family* (New York: Longman, 1982); Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (London: Verso, 1982); Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, *What Is Family?* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1990).

3. Rayna Rapp, "Family and Class in Contemporary America: Notes toward an Understanding of Ideology," in *Rethinking the Family*, ed. B. Thorne with M. Yalom (New York: Longman, 1982), 168–87.

4. Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 75–77; idem, "Textually-Mediated Social Organization," *International Social Science Journal* 36 (1984): 59–75.

RECENT FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP has focused attention on activities traditionally undertaken by women and too often neglected or trivialized in the past. Once these activities come into view, we often find that apparently mundane and "private" aspects of household life are in fact integral to the organization of "public" life. In this paper, I explore connections between the day-to-day organization of family eating and the enduring social divisions of class. The data come from a larger study of the work of "feeding a family," which describes household work as a gendered project of care. Elsewhere, I have emphasized the constructive, mediational character of feeding work: in any household, the work of organizing, planning, and conducting meals connects individuals and produces sociability.¹ Here, I examine a divisive aspect of household work and show how it becomes work that maintains stratification among households. I will suggest that a distinctive pattern of family eating—organized through a cooking discourse—supports the involvement of professional and managerial couples in class-related social activities and trains their children for later access to these circles.

This analysis can be located within recent scholarship on the paradoxical character of the concept "family."² People live their material lives in households rather than families, in quite diverse groups of individuals involved in various sorts of economic and social relations. At the same time, ideas of what family *should* be are quite powerful and organize people's activities within actual household groups.³ A multitude of textual representations of household practice provide public, ideal images of "family life," and these images become part of a complex, sometimes contradictory discourse that both reflects and organizes experience.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, textual materials have become increasingly pervasive and powerful sources of ideological control.⁴ Texts not only reflect and enforce prevailing ideals but become constituent parts of everyday practice, for at least some groups. With the growth of bureaucratic forms of work organization, texts of various sorts have developed—from organizational records and charts to texts explaining the use of organizational records and to fictional materials educating a broader public about new organizational forms. Such texts provide sites for connecting activities in various material settings with more general discourses (of managerial "science," for example) that serve to coordinate processes of

social organization and control.⁵ Although the growth of textually mediated social organization is a general societal phenomenon, it has had particular significance for the social construction of gender relations. The “theory” of bureaucracy, emphasizing position over person and formal qualification acquired through training, had the potential to weaken barriers to women’s participation in economic activity outside the home, as did the expansion of women’s education. At least partly in response to the emerging emphasis on bureaucratic organization and education for access to positions of power and control, reformers and scientists began to develop ideologies of domesticity that reinforced women’s household roles and that included increasingly detailed instructions on the specifics of household practice. As more and more middle-class women were educated, their education was increasingly constructed as education for family life. Twentieth-century women were taught a “feminine mystique”⁶—and a set of practices associated with it—supporting family relations that feminists are now struggling to re-form.

As I trace class differences in family eating patterns, I attempt also to show how these discursive family ideologies become part of everyday activity. One of my aims is to show how family ideologies work in the service of class relations as well as of gender divisions. Class, like all social processes, is fundamentally gendered, and the maintenance of social classes is built upon distinctive household roles for working-class and middle-class mothers and fathers. Further, the production of class as invisible is part of its organization. Because gender categories such as “wife” and “mother” appear to refer to class-neutral positions, they become constituents of ideologies obscuring class differences while also producing them.⁷

My analysis is based on a series of semistructured, taped interviews in which women (and the few men who shared in the work of feeding) provided accounts of their everyday practices and routines. All of the households studied (thirty) include children, but they are ethnically diverse and include single-parent and two-paycheck families. In addition, the households discussed here represent two different class groups: working-class and white-collar households, in which parents have blue-collar or lower-level white-collar jobs; and professional and managerial households, in which husbands are mainly “true” professionals (and one is the owner of a small professional firm) and employed wives work (often part-time) in similar jobs or in “women’s professions” such as teaching or nursing. I have excluded from this analysis data on five households made up of single mothers and children living on incomes below the poverty line that were part of my larger sample.

My description of these households incorporates two assumptions about social class. First, I assume that class position, though produced primarily through occupation, is assigned more accurately to households than to individuals: the point is not that a woman (or man) simply shares the position of a spouse but that households are the actual units that mediate class, by making resources available to the group of individuals who live there (though not always equally).⁸ Second, I assume that distinctions between traditional blue-collar and white-collar occupations are misleading and that the proletarianization of white-collar work has blurred distinctions between these groups.⁹ By contrast, professional and manage-

5. For a discussion of the organizational changes: Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1977).

6. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963).

7. Rapp, “Family and Class in Contemporary America.”

8. Heidi I. Hartmann, “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework,” *Signs* 6 (1981): 366–94.

9. On blue-collar and white-collar work: Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990). On proletarianization: Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

10. See Dorothy E. Smith, "Women, Class and Family," in *The Socialist Register 1983: A Survey of Movements and Ideas*, ed. R. Milliband and J. Saville (London: Merlin Press, 1984), 1–44, esp. 8–9. For discussion of these locations as contradictory: Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1979); as constituting a distinct professional/managerial class whose position is antagonistic to both capitalist and working classes: Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. P. Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

11. For a discussion of consistency and conceptual labeling in feminist writing: Marjorie L. DeVault, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis," *Social Problems* 37 (1990): 96–116.

rial workers, though not technically part of an owning or ruling class, occupy positions that are typically part of a broader ruling apparatus.¹⁰ In general, the conceptual distinction between working-class/white-collar and professional/managerial households fits the empirical findings from my interviews: the sharpest differences in food patterns appeared at the boundary between the households of professional and managerial workers and those in blue- and white-collar jobs, who can be taken to represent a broadly defined working class. In the discussion that follows, I will refer to households in the working-class/white-collar group sometimes as "working-class households" for the sake of brevity, and sometimes with the full label for a more accurate empirical description. I will usually refer to the other group of households as "professional/managerial," occasionally as "professional," or, sometimes more generally, as "middle-class" households.¹¹

LEARNING TO COOK

I began to notice class-related differences in food patterns as I talked with women about learning to cook. Women from working-class and white-collar households described the process as a relatively simple one. They relied heavily on their mothers or other female relatives, and they tried to learn to reproduce the meals they had grown up with. By contrast, women in professional households often reported that they cook very differently from their mothers, and they were often quite critical of their mothers as cooks: "She was a very plain cook, a very unimaginative cook." Or, "Often I think that she served the same thing twice in one week. That didn't bother me when I was a child, but I don't do that." These women repudiated their mothers' reliance on custom or tradition, and instead emphasized general skills applicable to cooking as an abstract task. One of the interviewees explained:

You know, Jewish cooking—they always prided themselves on their cooking, so food was an important part of our lives. But my mother didn't ever read cookbooks, or try to learn fancy new recipes. It was whatever you knew, it was the tradition of the cooking rather than the creativity of the cooking. It never occurred to her to look in a cookbook to figure out something new to make. You made whatever it was that you knew about.

This woman, upwardly mobile through marriage, learned new attitudes toward food from her husband's family. Her story underlines the class character of the orientation toward new kinds of knowledge. Her mother, she said, had taught her about "plain cooking":

What you would cook for your family. Like you take a chicken, and you put it in a pan, and you throw paprika on the top, and stick it in the oven for an hour. That's plain cooking. With two baked potatoes. Or hamburgers. And string beans. Or a piece of fish with salt and pepper on it, broiled. . . . I used to think that my mother's cooking was the best. But it turns out that she wasn't a particularly gifted cook. . . . She never got into any of this stuff as an end in itself, it was always a means to an end.

When she married, this woman encountered new kinds of food:

Eggs Benedict. It was a big treat, Sunday morning brunch. . . . Things like beef Stroganoff, I mean, what did I know from beef Stroganoff, I didn't know anything.

From her husband's family she began to learn a new kind of "attention to food." She said, from her present vantage point, that as a newly married woman she "didn't know anything." She continued to learn about new kinds of food, however, because of the kind of entertaining that she and her husband participated in as a couple:

We used to—that's how we entertained each other, people had dinner parties. So I had the New York Times Cookbook, and I used to read it, and try to decide what to make, and follow the recipe. And then, I don't know, I watched "Julia Child," that kind of thing.

For this woman and others, participation in new social circles both provided and required a particular kind of learning about food. Learning to cook like her mother was not sufficient. Instead, with marriage, she entered a period of new class relations and new learning that required her to look beyond her parents' ways to a more generalized set of styles and codes. This woman, like most in professional households, told of using cookbooks to learn a new kind of cooking. Her story foreshadows two themes in my analysis: the importance of textual sources for the production of meals and the relevance of entertaining for middle-class couples.

COOKING DISCOURSE

Texts related to food work include cookbooks and books of instruction for domestic work, newspaper and television features about cooking, and the nutritional advice offered by physicians, dietitians, home economists, and the mass media. I use the term cooking "discourse," following Dorothy Smith, to refer not only to such texts but to the activities involved in their production and use as well.¹² The images and codes of discourse, expressed in particular texts, are public and transcend local settings, but local expressions of the code are specific to particular individuals and are products of individual effort. Smith's analysis of "femininity as discourse," for example, displays the relation between textual images of female beauty and the activities of shopping and makeup through which women work on their bodies as expressions of these images.¹³ This extended concept of discourse provides a way of understanding how such media representations are linked to actual practice.

The body of textual material I refer to here as part of cooking discourse has developed in the context of the nineteenth-century social and economic changes outlined earlier. In response to the "domestic void"¹⁴ produced by the movement of much productive work from household to market, the founders of home economics—largely women trained in the sciences but unable to find work in their fields—carved out a new discipline, arguing that housework should be a full-time profession based on scientific principles and knowledge. Middle-class women were educated, increasingly,

12. Smith, "Textually-Mediated Social Organization."

13. Dorothy E. Smith, *Texts, Facts, and Femininity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

14. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor, 1978).

for domestic roles. Smith points out that one of the significant results of this kind of education was the acquisition of an orientation toward expert advice:

*Women of the dominant classes learned to treat the academic and professional sources of guidance with deference and to look to the expert for guidance in child rearing and in the management of interpersonal relations in the home.*¹⁵

15. Smith, "Women, Class and Family," 25.

16. On recent history of food styles: Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). On the health food movement and industry responses: Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change* (New York: Pantheon, 1990).

17. These particular phrases come from field notes on my observations of a "Food Trends" panel at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Cooking Schools (Chicago, 20 March 1982). Most readers will be able to supplement these examples by glancing at the food section of any major U.S. newspaper (now often named "Living" and typically appearing on Thursdays to support advertisers' enticements for weekend shoppers).

18. On U.S. families: Lee Rainwater, Richard P. Coleman, and Gerald Handel, *Workingman's Wife* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1959); Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage* (New York: Random House, 1962); Lillian Breslow Rubin, *Worlds of Pain* (New York: Basic, 1976); and Esther R. Benjamin, "Divorce, Friendship and Social Class" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., 1988). On British families: Elizabeth Bott, *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms, and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families* (New York: Free Press, 1957); and Graham A. Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979).

Gradually, an older form of the organization of family work—based on the interdependence of men's and women's productive activities—was superseded by an organization of different gender roles based on quasi-scientific and managerial theories of household life. The development of nutritional science and its promotion through domestic science meant that technical knowledge came to seem essential to good housekeeping. As corporations began to use domestic science to sell their products, women's magazines provided a combination of professional advice and advertising both supported by and supporting these new kinds of knowledge.

The texts of more modern food discourse—advertising and food journalism, cookbooks, and the instructions of health and food professionals—have continued to be legitimated through scientific authority and closely linked to commercial projects. During the 1960s, for instance, nutrition researchers began to highlight problems of excessive consumption, and the health food movement contributed to a growing public concern with nutrition and diet. Food industry managers fought this critique of the U.S. diet, but they have also incorporated these new nutritional concerns into production and marketing strategies.¹⁶ Food journalists, combining these nutritional concerns with an emphasis on food as entertainment, have promoted elaborate styles of eating that activate new kinds of consumer interests. Their discourse emphasizes aesthetic interest in food and a "spirit of adventure," as they refer to foods that are "light and lively," "comforting," or "titillating."¹⁷

Everyone in a contemporary industrial society is exposed to some sort of food and nutrition discourse, and many of the principles of nutritional science have become embedded in the ordinary practices of the food industry, marketing, and household work. Nearly everyone I talked with, for example, mentioned the importance of "balanced meals," and many spoke of "the four food groups." They talked of avoiding "junk foods," reducing cholesterol intake, and eating a variety of fresh foods, all significant themes in contemporary discourse. Members of professional and managerial households, however, use cooking discourse in different ways than those in working-class and white-collar households; they approach the work of feeding their families in a more studied, elaborated fashion. Their distinctive uses of cooking discourse are related to class differences in the organization of social meals.

FOOD AND SOCIABILITY

Family and community studies have documented contrasting patterns of family and social life in working-class and middle-class households.¹⁸ Both U.S. and British studies indicate that working-class families live

relatively close to their relatives and spend a large part of their social time with kin. Wives and husbands often have separate social groups, and their friends tend to be local people they have known for many years. Middle-class couples tend to draw friends from a wider geographic area and a greater variety of settings. They are geographically mobile and less likely than working-class families to be near their relatives; they spend most of their social time with the immediate nuclear family or in joint social activities with other couples.

Many analysts label such differences “cultural” and attribute them to differences of attitude or social skill. These patterns, however, are best understood in relation to the differing material bases of working-class and middle-class families.¹⁹ Working-class families survive by sending out household members to work for wages. Domestic labor is devoted to protecting and supporting wage-earners, whose needs are accorded priority. Larger networks of kin spend time together and often pool material resources in times of trouble. Thus, working-class families often supply mutual aid as well as “a sense of continuity and permanence.”²⁰

Middle-class nuclear families tend to have more stable resource bases; in addition to salaries, they can rely on such nonfamilial resources as expense accounts, pensions, and access to credit, and thus have less need for resource pooling through extended families. Relationships with extended kin are not unimportant, but material support and even joint activities are relatively infrequent. The distinctive middle-class pattern of social life emphasizes joint friendships outside the family and entertainment with other couples.

Middle-class entertaining, then, seems to be based on “enjoyment of interaction with one another for its own sake.”²¹ Whether the activity is experienced as enjoyable in particular cases, this kind of interaction is also significant in the mobilization of these individuals as actors in their class. This form of sociability has taken on a new significance because of changes in the form and dynamics of capitalism. Accumulation increasingly occurs through corporations and trusts rather than through individual ownership, and economic activity and class have come to be organized nationally or internationally rather than locally or regionally. People become agents of a ruling apparatus through their positions in organizations (and the series of positions we know as a career) instead of directly through kinship ties or particular local alliances. The ordering of these positions is expressed through the development of various codes (of dress, behavior, and social activity) that identify insiders and outsiders to the system. Styles become the “visible signs”²² that constitute class as an everyday phenomenon. Styles of eating become a ground for intraclass socializing among professional couples, facilitating meetings among those brought together by position rather than by joint history.²³

For people in the working-class and white-collar households I studied, social meals occur when extended families assemble. In most of these households, relatives routinely meet to eat together once a week or every few weeks. Such meals are important events. As one woman explained:

That was the time we talked over things, at meals. . . . And we always have all the little kids—kids have always been in the same party, right in the same room.

19. Rapp, “Family and Class in Contemporary America,” esp. 170–71; Smith, “Women, Class and Family.”

20. Nancy Seifer, *Absent from the Majority: Working Class Women in America* (New York: National Project on Ethnic America, American Jewish Committee, 1973), 47; also Jane Humphries, “The Working Class Family, Women’s Liberation, and Class Struggle: The Case of Nineteenth Century British History,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 9 (1977): 25–41.

21. Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship*, 52.

22. Smith, “Women, Class and Family,” 21.

23. Common food styles are not the only bases for sociability within the professional/managerial group; for example, the training that provides access to position can be seen as providing a kind of joint history that substitutes for the experiences family members have in common.

These meals are important because they bring people together; the food and conduct of the meal are secondary. The food served at such meals is not everyday food, but it is traditionally based:

Maybe I'll make a roast, and with it, everything that one would have with a roast—potatoes and salad and all that kind of thing. . . . I tend to cook as my mother cooked.

These “special” meals are routinized and based on custom; they are special because everyone is together.

24. Distance from kin seems greater for this group in my sample than in the wider population, perhaps because the group is composed primarily of professionals rather than of managers and entrepreneurs, who would more likely have ties to local areas. Class differences in kinship ties, however, are consistent even when there is less geographic dispersion for the middle class.

Professional/managerial couples have more difficulty maintaining such relations, because their kin are less likely to live nearby. Only one of the ten professional families I studied had relatives living in the same metropolitan area, compared to fourteen of the fifteen working-class families.²⁴ Thus, social meals for professionals are usually meals with other couples outside the family group. In these situations, people cannot rely on family traditions; instead, food becomes a potential common interest that can be used to promote sociability with relatively new acquaintances. For example, several professional couples had lived overseas, and they knew about and enjoyed exotic cuisines. They reported that their special knowledge is often useful in social situations: a woman of Asian descent said that she often “performs” when she entertains by preparing an elaborate Chinese meal, and another woman stated that she and her husband and their friends often talk about food when they get together, and added, “Because our friends have lived in various parts of the world, we can get into these interesting kinds of discussions.”

There are generalized standards (referred to by one woman as “unspoken laws”) for social meals with other couples:

Rather fancy, with some kind of a special recipe. . . . A really acceptable menu, with a fancy dessert. It has to be beautiful, and it has to be on platters, and it has to be served a certain way.

This kind of cooking is not traditionally based; in fact, unusualness is an important element. One woman reported proudly, “If my friends want roast beef they can roast it themselves.” The implicit assumption is that all of these couples can afford food that is merely good; the requirement for their social gatherings is that the meal be interesting enough to serve as a focus for conversation and sociability.

Both working-class and professional couples use food as a vehicle for sociability, but for professional and managerial families, sociability has a problematic, extralocal character: it must be constructed on more tenuous bases than traditional kinship ties. In this context, food becomes a tool to be deployed with a different sort of skill. It constitutes a common code that can mediate relations among professional/managerial couples and that these couples bring back into their everyday family lives.

FAMILY EATING AS ENTERTAINMENT

Although they recognized the importance of food for nutrition and sustenance, people in professional households also described their food habits as important sources of entertainment and “pleasure.” As one woman explained:

Bob and I gain great pleasure from food. I mean, it's pleasurable. Eating is fun, you know. And I enjoy going out, and having people over, and having a pleasant dinner talking and being sociable.

Here, pleasure is thought of not just as simple enjoyment of taste but in terms of new and entertaining aesthetic experiences. Another professional woman explained that she tries to cook healthy foods but wants her daughter to “eat affirmatively” as well:

Of course I have to get things that Marilyn will enjoy. And eat affirmatively—it isn't just that it should be this terrible burden on us, to eat healthy food, it should be a pleasure, right?

In their efforts to make meals entertaining, these people design elaborate routines involving special attention to experimentation and the presentation of their food. The setting for meals and the appearance of food are important. One woman reported that she likes to make food look “as beautiful as a picture.” Her husband shares this concern; he explained the difference between his mother's meals and theirs in simple but revealing terms:

They weren't bad meals, they were just poorly prepared and poorly presented. We like to make the meal more of an attractive thing.

In these professional households, the concern with day-to-day variation that is part of everyone's meal planning is expanded to include an emphasis on creativity and experimentation. One consequence of the value placed on novelty is that women in professional households use cookbooks and recipes more often than those in other households. Few women feel they need recipes for everyday cooking, but most women in professional households said they cook from recipes at least some of the time. A typical comment:

I have an enormous collection of cookbooks. And I'll pull something out and say, “I haven't made this in ages,” or I have to refresh my memory, or I'll look for something new.

Another reported:

We're both great recipe collectors. We'll clip anything out that we think sounds interesting. And I'm always interested—you know, if you go to someone's house for dinner, or whatever, trading recipes. . . . And of course, you know, you watch “Julia Child,” and “The Frugal Gourmet.”

By contrast, women in working-class and white-collar households said they rarely use recipes. One laughed and pointed to her cookbooks, saying, “They look real nice on the shelf.” Another explained:

If we have any questions we'll go to my mom's old cookbooks. A lot of the stuff is pretty dated in there, but it usually gets us through whatever's wrong. Things like how many minutes a pound to cook a roast, that kind of stuff.

People in professional households stressed the importance of “trying new things” and often talked about doing so consciously: “We try to try

something out once every two weeks or so.” They often mentioned how they watch out for new recipes, and even those who are not particularly interested in food spend time studying cuisines and searching for new information. Many described their cooking in terms of various “cuisines” and spoke of routines that emphasized varieties of ethnic food. One woman, for example, listed the soups she makes regularly, carefully labeling each: “Dutch split pea soup, and an Algerian soup. And a cream soup with fennel in it, that’s definitely a North African thing.” Another reported that, unlike most of her friends, she is not very interested in ethnic cooking. Then, needing a label for her own practice, she suggested, “I think maybe it’s more of the country style.” Her sense of needing to identify her cooking reveals the influence of the very categories she claims are unimportant. In many working-class households, ethnic food is an expression of heritage; indeed, for immigrant groups, movement toward a more standard “American” diet is associated with assimilation and social mobility, though ethnic foods are often the last element of cultural identification to be dropped.²⁵ The professional/managerial interest in ethnic food is different because it involves borrowing from various cultures or sometimes “deploying” special dishes from one’s own cultural group in social settings with friends.

Children in professional households learn that food should be different and interesting, and that eating should be an adventure. One woman explained:

I get a lot of positive feedback for experimenting. Even my little one will say, “Mom, this is fantastic.” And he’s very diplomatic, you know, he came up to me and he said, “I know you tried your hardest, but this doesn’t have any zing to it.”

By contrast, a working-class woman commented that her children like “pure, basic foods”:

I guess it makes them feel more like home. Because they’re used to it. And if you have something else, they’ll say, “Oh, who’s coming over?” and they’ll feel a little bit uncomfortable.

Women in working-class and white-collar households expressed little concern with gathering new information. They may read about food and cooking, or trade ideas with friends, but they do not particularly value experimentation for its own sake. When I asked about their current sources of information, about one-half of them said they are “not really interested” and left it at that. Others reported that they like to read about food in the newspaper or magazines (*Family Circle*, *Woman’s Day*, and *Good Housekeeping* were most frequently mentioned); when they talked about this kind of reading, however, they described it more in terms of curiosity than as immediately practical knowledge they would use (e.g., as “just looking at pictures”). One woman explained that she does not need to collect new information:

I cook all my meats the same, you know. And as long as he doesn’t complain, why should I change it? He likes it, so there’s no reason for me to change it.

25. On food and ethnicity: Mary Douglas, ed., *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984); on changes with mobility: Amy Swerdlow et al., *Families in Flux*, 2d ed. (New York: Feminist Press, 1989).

These women have developed standard repertoires to satisfy the members of their households, and because they feel little need for experimentation, they rarely use recipes.

What distinguishes the women in professional households from others, then, is a contrast between elaborated, formal ideals and more traditional expectations. The meals of working-class families are based on knowledge of family custom, whereas the more exotic meals of professional families require drawing from an expanded field of knowledge. Professional and managerial couples' concern with unusualness and their cosmopolitan approach to food mirror the standards associated with their entertaining. The norms for social meals, the "unspoken laws," come to influence everyday cooking as well, perhaps because these couples think of their everyday meals as a kind of entertainment for the immediate family.

HUSBANDS' INTERESTS

I have argued that women in professional and managerial households use the cooking discourse—recipe books, gourmet magazines, and newspaper features—to support the production of distinctive styles of family eating. In general, this cooking discourse is aimed at women. It is differentiated, so that women of specific classes tend to know and use various parts of it, but much of it appears in the mass media; it is not only accessible but to some degree unavoidable. Thus, almost all women are aware of the kind of class work underlying professional/managerial styles of eating, whether they do this work or not. But I have suggested that the discourse has a special significance for professional/managerial couples: food serves as a basis for meeting with others, socializing within their class, and, through such activity, marking and organizing the boundaries of class. Therefore, cooking discourse is important for professional and managerial men as well as women.

In most of the professional households I studied, husbands are quite interested in cooking and eating patterns, whether or not they share the work of cooking.²⁶ In several of these households, husbands are the ones urging more elaborate patterns on their wives, who otherwise would opt for simpler routines. One of these men, the owner of a small professional firm who does a great deal of business entertaining, has quite definite ideas about what his wife should serve to visitors, even for casual meals at their summer home:

There are a few things, when people are visiting, that he feels embarrassed to serve them, and I don't. Such as spaghetti . . . he feels that I am giving them some kind of home economy meal or something.

Another woman explained that, although she "used to be happy popping a TV dinner into the oven," her cooking has become "more elaborate" because of her husband's interest in food. By contrast, several women in working-class and white-collar households are interested in food styles and experimentation, but are constrained by their husbands' lack of interest. These women described their husbands as the "hamburger and hot dog type" or as "meat and potatoes" people. One reported that she rarely uses her cookbooks and explained:

26. In this study, only two out of ten professional husbands did a significant amount of cooking, though several others cooked occasionally; one of the fifteen working-class men did almost all of the food work for his family, while the rest only occasionally or never cooked.

I went for the vegetables stuff, and he's like, "Yuck, carrots and onion, I don't eat things with onions in it, and I don't eat things with garlic in it either."

Another complained that even though she is an "adventuresome eater," she is "bound in by a picky husband and two picky little kids."

This kind of deference to a husband's tastes is consistent with a long-standing working-class pattern of preferential feeding of the male breadwinner. Late nineteenth-century poverty studies show that men in working-class families were served extra meat and fish, better-quality meats, and sometimes extra vegetables, cheese, and eggs, while their wives and children ate less. And contemporary analysts reporting on these studies argue that these patterns of inequality within the family have persisted with rising incomes, even though they seem less materially necessary.²⁷ Professional and managerial husbands make demands too, but their preferences have a different basis. These men are aware of food as a class code, and they are often willing to put aside idiosyncratic tastes in favor of more generalized standards and styles. Because they see the significance of food and food styles outside the family, they reinforce (or sometimes enforce) their wives' attention to food. In many professional households, wives are the ones who teach other family members about the standards for "interesting" meals. But sometimes professional and managerial husbands are also active users of cooking discourse. Whether or not they cook, they are more knowledgeable about the discourse than working-class/white-collar men, and their demands are more likely to be based on textual standards: many of them have learned that food should be entertaining as well as sustaining, and healthy not only in a general sense but in accord with the most recent scientific pronouncements.²⁸ Professional husbands may more likely than others share the work of feeding with their wives, but they also pressure their wives toward more complex routines. Working-class and white-collar husbands, uninvolved in the kinds of social activities outside the home that produce an awareness of the discourse, do not attach great importance to elaborate food styles. Working-class wives may compare their own practice with textual representations of varied and stylish meals, but these couples do not share motives to work toward realizing such ideals.

HOUSEWORK AS CLASS WORK

In any household, the activities of housework are part of the social construction of family life, and in all classes, women are the ones held responsible for this constructive work of nurturance and sociability. Class differences in the meaning of "family life," however, produce differences in the kinds of work required. In working-class and white-collar households, extended family meals call for extra cooking and the planning and arranging required to serve a large group, but the women of a family network generally do this work together. In professional and managerial households, food work is more systematic and studied. Sociability—with other couples from outside the family—is based on generalized codes and fashions. Eating within the family borrows from the styles of entertaining and serves as preparation for social encounters. Professional and managerial couples look to textual standards situated in a cooking discourse closely

27. Laura Oren, "The Welfare of Women in Laboring Families: England, 1860–1950," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. M. S. Hartman and L. Banner (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 226–44; Christine Delphy, "Sharing the Same Table: Consumption and the Family," in *The Sociology of the Family: New Directions for Britain*, ed. C. Harris (Keele: University of Keele, 1979), 214–31. For contemporary evidence: Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food and Families* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

28. In this paper, I have highlighted the professional/managerial couples' emphasis on experimentation with food and eating as entertainment; but attention to the details of a scientific nutrition discourse (and the importance of personal "investment" in healthy eating) was also a prominent theme and produced the kind of extra work that this woman refers to: "My son and I use diet margarine. . . . And then one of my daughters who's a vegetarian and is so careful about what she eats—she's very concerned about fiber and roughage—she uses straight butter, and she wants me to have it in the house when she comes. . . . My husband wants everything to be polyunsaturated. So I have to read all the labels." She also reported that she tried to teach her husband to avoid salt, but he has only accepted this principle because of a conversation with an associate: "I can't convince him on these things. It has to be what he hears from someone else. . . . Well finally a man told him—somebody else told him—so all of a sudden that helped."

tied to commercial interests, and this discourse images varied and involved meals, based on constantly changing styles of eating. The work of feeding is elaborated. Women in professional and managerial households live in families with advantages but also distinctive demands. They have more financial resources, but they also tend to be more isolated from female kin than women in working-class and white-collar households. Thus, most take on the burden of producing “special meals” for their families without much help.

Cooking is often cited as the most enjoyable kind of housework,²⁹ and we might expect exotic cooking to be most common among women who enjoy the work. Personal preferences, however, seemed to have little influence on actual practice. Working-class wives who enjoy cooking trade recipes and read food magazines, but they reported cooking a standard set of meals for their families, experimenting only rarely (and usually without much success: one woman said she can occasionally “get international” with a Chinese or Mexican meal, but “there’s only a certain amount he can tolerate”). Professional wives who would have preferred not to cook at all still talked of searching for “new ideas” and of making elaborate efforts to produce “interesting,” “entertaining” meals. These women subordinated their own preferences to produce a version of family that imitates images from the “best” textual sources,³⁰ ideals that they share with others of their class and that come to serve as markers of success. Many described the exotic cooking they do as completely voluntary—as a hobby or pleasure—and it would be difficult to argue that these people do not truly enjoy experimenting with new spices and tastes; but this in no way negates the class significance of such feelings. Women (and some men) in professional/managerial households learn such attitudes toward food because they are shared in social circles, and they teach spouses and children to think of food as interesting and entertaining so that family members are prepared to participate in social encounters organized around food.

Ideologies of domesticity are changing. As more wives and mothers take on paid work outside their homes, many women claim they “don’t do housework anymore.”³¹ The woman at home, producing an orderly haven for a man and children, is no longer a central symbol of middle-class status. But the pervasive and compelling discourse that constructs an image of family and what it should be still contains instructions for “good wives.”³² Husbands are beginning to participate in family activities in some new ways, but in most households women are still the ones responsible for shepherding the household group toward some image of domestic life. And despite the mythology of family as a private domain, family discourse still constructs personal life as a terrain that expresses class alliance and division. ♦

29. For example: Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

30. Cf. Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973).

31. “Does Anybody Eat Together Anymore and Does It Matter?” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 June 1985, 51.

32. Cf. Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

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