



Class and eating: Family meals in Britain



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines social differentiation in eating patterns in Britain. It focuses on family meals among individuals with under-age children. Eating with family members has been associated with improvement in wellbeing, nutritional status, and school performance of the children. Modern lifestyles may pose a challenge to commensal eating for all groups, but the scale of the impact varies between social classes, with some groups at higher risk of shortening or skipping family meal time. Eating patterns are differentiated by individual's social class; they have also been associated with educational attainment, work schedules, and household composition. The objective of this study is to disaggregate the effect of these variables. Using data from the 2014/2015 UK Time Use Survey I analyse the net effect of social class, education, income, work and family characteristics on the frequency and duration of family meals. Individuals in the highest occupational class dedicate more time overall to family meals. However, class effect becomes insignificant when other variables, such as education or income, are controlled for. This study finds that higher educated individuals have more frequent family meals, and more affluent individuals spend more time at the table with their household members. Work characteristics are associated with frequency of meals, but not with their duration. Finally, household composition matters for how people eat. Parents of younger children eat with their family members more frequently than parents of teenagers. Single parents, a notoriously time-poor category, spend the least amount of time eating with their families and have fewer commensal meals.

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1. Introduction

Eating is strongly regulated by cultural norms and social modelling (Cruwys, Bevelander, & Hermans, 2015; Hetherington, Anderson, Norton, & Newson, 2006; Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999). Though people often eat unreflexively, this routinized behaviour is certainly not a random act. Analyzing eating calls for recognizing its 'collective and unreflective elements' (Warde, 2016, p. 6) which shape daily practices and link them to higher-level structures such as social class, or national culture. Eating and attitudes towards food reflect individual values, beliefs, and identities (Hauck-Lawson, 1998). Social context has profound implications for what people eat (Bevelander, Anschutz, & Engels, 2011), and meals may serve to enforce particular norms among those who share them. Though some studies report a decline in the number of commensal meals over the last few decades, most food is still consumed in the presence of others (Cheng, Olsen, Southerton, & Warde, 2007; Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009).

Within the social context of eating family meals play a special role. Family is the primary commensal unit and a majority of daily meals are consumed with family members (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Family gatherings around the table provide space for transmission of values and cultural capital (Wills, Backett-Milburn, Roberts, & Lawton, 2011); they also offer an opportunity for 'checking in' with the children (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004). Eating with a family is associated with better child nutrition (Gillman et al., 2000; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003), better school outcomes, and lower probability of substance abuse (Eisenberg et al., 2004). On the other hand, meal time can be used to exert control or reinforce the authority of some family members over others, and family meals might be a source of tension (Wilk, 2010). In these cases, they may be shortened or avoided altogether.

A propensity for having meals together is thought to be related to respondent's social class, and as such it might form a part of their habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Habitus is a set of dispositions that shape people's perception of themselves and the way they act on daily basis. It is rooted in individual's structural position and as such it reflects internalized values and beliefs acquired through the

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process of socialization. With regard to food consumption, middle-class respondents put greater emphasis on eating together and having a 'proper meal' (Backett-Milburn, Wills, Roberts, & Lawton, 2010), whereas in working-class families eating together sometimes seems secondary to other demands. Daily difficulties that lower-status families face may make healthy eating appear unimportant (Warin, Zivkovic, Moore, Ward, & Jones, 2015; Backett-Milburn, Wills, Gregory, & Lawton, 2006). Parents in lower-income families often lack time and energy to prepare food or arrange a meal together with others (Devine et al., 2006). Meals can be consumed at different times and in different places by family members (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006). Replacing meals with snacks, using convenience food or visiting fast-food outlets are common strategies used to cope with time shortages and daily stresses (Devine et al., 2006), even though resorting to food for stress release has been linked with weight gain (Boggiano et al., 2015). Lower parental education and health awareness, both more common among individuals with lower social status, have also been linked with a less healthy diet (Crawford, 2006). Knowledge about the importance of nutrition may motivate parents to persist with having family meals at home even in the situation of time scarcity (Jabs & Devine, 2006; Mothersbaugh, Herrmann, & Warland, 1993).

The relationship between class and meal patterns is not straightforward and there may be different factors behind it. Particular eating habits may be due to class-specific norms acquired through socialization, or differences in health awareness and educational attainment, but they may also be related to objectively existing constraints such as work schedules, or time and money shortages. Work conditions play an important role in how people eat (Jabs & Devine, 2006). The spillover from work to family life contributes to time scarcity (Doumas, Margolin, & John, 2003; Senia, Jensen, & Zhylyevskyy, 2014). Long working hours (Devine et al., 2006) and shift work (Dixon et al., 2014) negatively affect the frequency of meals and the time dedicated to food preparation. Individuals engaged in shift work or working during 'unsocial' hours find it more difficult to arrange time for social activities (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012; Fagan, 2001). In particular, weekend jobs pose a challenge to social participation (Bittman, 2005), and commensal eating is also likely to be affected. All of these, including less predictable work schedules, are more common among individuals with lower occupational status.

At least some of the challenges faced by working class families may be attributed to their lower income. Cost of food is an important barrier to healthy eating (Hendrickson, Smith, & Eikenberry, 2006). Furthermore, financial constraints limit the ability of families to reduce their workload by hiring housekeeping support (Cohen, 1998), which leaves them with less time available for eating or food preparation compared to those who can afford it.

In addition to being money-poor, low income families are frequently also time-poor. This stems primarily from the aforementioned difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance (Jabs & Devine, 2006). Time poverty leads to families cutting down on eating time (Kalenkoski & Hamrick, 2013). Hurriedness may result in skipping meals or moving eating to a secondary role (Hamermesh, 2010), that is, replacing meals with snacks. Meanwhile, less frequent eating has been associated with higher BMI values (Hamermesh, 2010), and skipping meals, in particular breakfasts, has been linked with other unhealthy lifestyle factors (Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metz, 2005).

There are also other factors that influence family eating patterns. Households differ substantially in how they eat depending on their composition (Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009). Sobal and Nelson (2003) list the number and age of children as characteristics that might affect eating patterns. Cheng et al. (2007) report less time

spent eating and drinking in households with dependent children in the UK. Finally, being a single parent has been associated with less frequent meals due to much greater time poverty (Devine et al., 2006).

Family meals have mostly been analysed from a qualitative perspective (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010; Devine et al., 2006; Sobal & Nelson, 2003), which provides valuable insights but does not allow disaggregating the effect of specific factors. Quantitative analyses, though very few, suggest that eating habits in families with children are associated with working patterns as well as individual sociodemographic characteristics (Guthrie & McClelland, 2009).

2. Material and methods

The study uses the 2014/2015 UK Time Use Survey (UKTUS) collected by NatCen Social Research. Fieldwork was conducted between April 2014 and December 2015 on a representative sample of the British population following a multi-stage stratified probability sampling. A total of 11,860 households were sampled in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, which resulted in 4238 households interviewed and 16,550 completed diary days. Respondents in most cases provided a record for two diary days, one for a weekday and another for a weekend day. Each diary collects the data on main and accompanying (secondary) activities as well as when, where, with whom, and for how long the activity was carried out. Respondents are not asked about any activity specifically, so their accounts of eating are unlikely to be biased. Time diaries are seen as a reliable and precise method for the measurement of how time is allocated across the day (Gershuny, 2000; Robinson & Godbey, 1999).

A subsample of adults living with under-age children was selected, i.e., parents or guardians (including single parents) of children aged between 0 and 17 years. Observations for which information on occupational class (also referred to as social class) is available were used, which resulted in the total number of 3943 diary days. For regression analysis a separate category for missing values was used in order to maintain the subsample size. Mean estimates for the population and subsample were calculated using the sampling weights provided with the dataset. These adjust for person and household-level unequal response probability by age and sex, region, household type, tenure, household income and economic activity.

Initially, the number and duration of all meals in the subsample of parents was compared against the whole population. This was followed by a closer look at the amount of time dedicated to family meals. 'Meal' is defined as any episode of primary eating (in UKTUS coded as 'eating and drinking') that is eating recorded as the main activity at a given time. Eating and drinking reported as a secondary activity, i.e. activity carried out alongside something else, is classified as 'snacking', and corresponds to what other authors using time-use data call 'grazing' (e.g. Hamermesh, 2010). Secondary eating was reported in 30% of all diaries. Due to low prevalence and relatively short time recorded in secondary eating, further analysis was not carried out.

The main analysis focused on the number of family meals and their total duration. Family meals include all meals for which a co-presence of one or more family/household members was reported. They were analysed as dependent variable in multivariate ordinary least square (OLS) regression models. Main independent variables were: occupation-based social class, education, income, work schedules, and family characteristics. OLS models allow estimation of the net effect of each of the variables included.

The number and total duration of family meals were analysed in four steps. The first model included social class and employment status as explanatory variables. It controlled for age, gender,

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