



Dining with dad: Fathers' influences on family food practices

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have documented multiple influences on family food practices. This article examines an overlooked contributor to family diet: fathers. Using 109 in-depth interviews with middle and upper-middle class mothers, adolescents, and fathers in the United States, I show how fathers can undermine mothers' efforts to provision a healthy diet. While family members perceive mothers as committed to provisioning a healthy diet, many fathers are seen as, at best, detached and, at worst, a threat to mothers' dietary aspirations. Fathers not only do little foodwork; they are also viewed as less concerned about their own and other family members' dietary health. When tasked with feeding, many fathers often turn to quick, unhealthy options explicitly avoided by mothers. Mothers report efforts to limit fathers' involvement in foodwork to ensure the healthiness of adolescents' diets, with variation across families by mothers' employment status. Fathers' dietary approaches reflect and reinforce traditional gender norms and expectations within families. In highlighting how and why fathers can undermine mothers' efforts to provision a healthy diet, this study deepens our understanding of the myriad dynamics shaping family food practices.

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Poor diet-related health among children and adolescents in the United States presents a significant public health challenge (Fryar, Carroll, & Ogden, 2014). High rates of type 2 diabetes, as well as the prevalence of and adverse consequences associated with early obesity, are top concerns (Daniels, 2009; Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). Family diet contributes to these health outcomes, with parents helping shape their children's food intake (Daniel, 2016; Larson & Story, 2009). Parents model eating behaviors (Savage, Fisher, & Birch, 2007), structure mealtimes (Hammons & Fiese, 2011), and mold tastes and preferences (Skinner, Carruth, Bounds, Ziegler, & Reidy, 2002).

Yet much of the scholarship examining parental influences on children's and adolescents' diets equates the term "parent" with "mother" (Francis & Birch, 2001; Maynard, Galuska, Blanck, Serdula, & 2003; Savage et al., 2007). While a focus on maternal dietary influences may reflect the reality that mothers continue to serve as primary caregivers within families (Sayer, England, Bittman, & Bianchi, 2009; Offer & Schneider, 2011), increases in women's employment and fathers' involvement in family life suggest that a maternal-centric focus on dietary influences curtails a fuller understanding of family food practices (Fraser, Skouteris, McCabe, Ricciardelli, Milgrom, & Baur, 2011; Khandpur, Blaine,

Fisher, & Davison, 2014; Khandpur, Charles, Blaine, Blake, & Davison, 2016a; Khandpur, Charles, & Davison, 2016b). In this study, I shift the analytical focus to the overlooked parent by asking: How do fathers influence family diet?

I take up this question using 109 in-depth interviews with mothers, adolescents, and fathers from 44 families in the United States. I find that family members view fathers and mothers as wielding distinct, and at times, conflicting influences on families' diets. Mothers are seen as committed to healthy eating, while fathers are often perceived as a barrier to healthy eating. When tasked with feeding, fathers often turn to quick, less healthy options such as fast food and processed meals explicitly avoided by mothers. Adolescents are not only aware of these distinct parental approaches to food, but exploit them: when craving less healthy products restricted by mothers, adolescents turn to fathers. In obliging adolescents' requests, fathers can undermine mothers' attempts at healthy eating within families.

1. Background

1.1. Fathers' influences on family diet

Families are the primary setting for the establishment of food choice and consumption patterns in childhood and, later, in

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adolescence (Dietz & Gortmaker, 2001).¹ Adolescence poses specific challenges to healthy eating within families: adolescents' augmented freedom, preference for unhealthy foods, and increased independent eating occasions contribute to a decline in diet quality (Sargent, Yagi, Shoob, Corwin, Rogan, & Drane, 2002). But even in the teenage years, parents remain an important influence on adolescents' eating habits (Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2007; Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Harnack, Wall, Story, & Eisenberg, 2008; Neumark-Sztainer, Larson, Fulkerson, Story, & Hannan, 2010).

Much scholarship on parental influences on adolescents' diet has focused on mothers, devoting little attention to the role that fathers play in shaping family diet. Some of this research mentions fathers in passing before turning to a fuller examination to mothers (Backett-Milburn, Wills, Roberts, & Lawton, 2010; Cairns & Johnston, 2015). One reason may be that despite fathers' progress in assuming more housework, mothers today remain almost exclusively responsible for childcare and foodwork (Kan, Sullivan, & Gershuny, 2011). By foodwork, I mean "the work of meal planning, food purchasing, meal preparation, and after-meal clean up" (Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003: 32) and the invisible work of thinking about what everyone will eat (Beagan, Chapman, Johnston, McPhail, Power, & Vallianatos, 2017; Daniels, 1987). In the United States, this unequal distribution of labor holds regardless of maternal employment status (Beagan, Chapman, D'Sylva, & Raewyn Bassett, 2008; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Hook, 2010; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015).

However, just because fathers don't spend as much time on food provisioning as mothers does not mean that they do not influence how families eat. What is consumed within families is a product of the negotiations and compromises by all family members, parents and children alike (Backett-Milburn, Wills, Gregory, & Lawton, 2006; Eldridge & Murcott, 2000). Moreover, the few studies on paternal influences show that fathers do shape children's diets and diet-related health outcomes (Stewart & Menning, 2009; Fraser et al., 2011; Freeman, Fletcher, Collins, Morgan, & Burrows, 2012; Taylor, Wilson, Slater, & Mohr, 2011; McIntosh, Kubena, Tolle, Dean, & Anding, 2011). Studies have found that children whose fathers eat more fast food are more likely to eat fast food themselves (McIntosh et al., 2011) and that having an overweight or obese father increases the likelihood of a child being obese (Freeman et al., 2012).

Scholarship on feeding also suggests that to the degree that fathers engage in foodwork, they may approach feeding differently than mothers (Khandpur et al., 2016a). Fathers may be focused more on getting children to eat and be less concerned about the specific foods consumed (Khandpur et al., 2016a). Fathers may also be more likely to pressure children to eat (Hendy, Williams, Camise, Eckman, & Hedemann, 2009; Loth, MacLehose, Fulkerson, Crow, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013) and restrict food (Musher-Eizenman, de Lauzon-Guillain, Holub, Leporc, & Charles, 2006). Fathers may be less likely than mothers to place limits on snacks or monitor consumption of a variety of foods (Hendy et al., 2009). This research suggests the importance of examining how and why mothers and fathers may approach their children's diets differently, as well as the dynamics resulting from those distinct influences.

1.2. Gender, food, and health

Scholars have offered a variety of reasons for mothers' enduring high involvement and fathers' minimal participation in domestic foodwork. For one, traditional gender ideologies deem feeding and children's health "women's work" (Beagan et al., 2017; Kan et al., 2011). Women's disproportionate responsibility for foodwork is thereby rationalized through implicit gendered assumptions such as women's innate penchant for upholding the health of the family members (Beagan et al., 2008). Food provisioning is a key medium through which women, and mothers in particular, *do* gender (DeVault, 1994; Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2010). Through feeding the family, "a woman conducts herself as recognizably womanly" (DeVault, 1994: 118). In recent years, with the rise of an "intensive mothering" ideology (Hays, 1996) and increases in diet-related diseases (Warin, Zivkovic, Moore, & Davies, 2012; Wright, Maher, & Tanner, 2015), feeding has come to symbolize mothers' commitments to their children and families. Simply put, foodwork and its relationship to cultivating and protecting children's health are central to motherhood and femininity (MacKendrick, 2014; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Beagan et al., 2017).

In contrast, domestic involvement in children's diets and health remains more peripheral to contemporary fatherhood (Yavorsky et al., 2015). While fathers today spend more time with their children than thirty years ago, their engagement in the everyday management of children's lives – and the mundane forms of labor associated with this engagement – remains largely optional (Collett, Vercel, & Boykin, 2015; Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012; Townsend, 2002). Men's fulfillments of fatherhood do not necessitate participation in either feeding the family or managing children's routines (DeVault, 1994; Bove & Sobal, 2006). Moreover, broad conventional masculinity norms discourage fathers from engaging themselves in healthy behaviors, including healthy eating (Courtenay, 2000; Gough & Conner, 2006). Such norms may similarly discourage a sense of responsibility for the diets and dietary health of their children.

At the same time, recent scholarship shows that constructions of masculinity and fatherhood are not fixed but can be negotiated and challenged. Domestic investments – including foodwork – can be incorporated into men's everyday masculinities (Aarseth, 2009; Aarseth & Olsen, 2008; Klasson & Ulver, 2015; Neuman, Gottzén, & Fjellström, 2016; Szabo, 2013; Szabo, 2014). This scholarship highlights the importance of structure and social norms in shaping men's approaches to domestic foodwork and health. Research conducted in Sweden, a national context where domestic labor has become increasingly de-gendered, shows that with gender-equal policies and public discourses, foodwork can not only become legitimate and expected for men but also incorporated into men's expressions of progressive masculinity (Neuman, Gottzén, & Fjellström, 2015). Research in the Canadian context has examined men who are atypical given their high level of domestic food responsibilities. This work reveals that through the act of engaging in foodwork, men's identities and approaches to food can shift, often toward resembling traditionally feminine approaches (Szabo, 2013, 2014). In underscoring the social construction of gendered investments in food and health, these research streams simultaneously highlight just how traditional gender roles around food remain within American families.

In the United States, traditional norms of masculinity may in part drive fathers' enduring minimal involvement in food. To the degree that neither mothers nor fathers see foodwork as father's duties, such norms may serve to keep fathers on the sidelines of family food provisioning. Relatedly, fathers' detached involvement may be reinforced by mothers' and children's perceptions of fathers as generally incompetent at cooking, unable to prepare decent

¹ Family can be understood as a societal institution that remains at the center of social life in most societies, even as families change and take different forms (Newman, 2009). While there is no longer one dominant family form in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015), I focus on the nuclear family environment given research showing the importance of the nuclear family setting, and parents in particular, on adolescents' diets (Berge, MacLehose, Loth, Eisenberg, Fulkerson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012).

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