Appetite 89 (2015) 84–92

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Appetite

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/appet

Research report

# Eating fruits and vegetables. An ethnographic study of American and French family dinners ☆

Tamar Kremer-Sadlik [a,*], Aliyah Morgenstern [b], Chloe Peters [a], Pauline Beaupoil [b], Stéphanie Caët [b], Camille Debras [b], Marine le Mené [b]

[a] Department of Anthropology, University of California, 341 Haines Hall, Box 951553, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553, USA
[b] Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, 5 rue de l'Ecole de Médecine, Paris 75005, France

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 10 September 2014
Received in revised form 4 January 2015
Accepted 15 January 2015
Available online 20 January 2015

*Keywords:*
Ethnography
Family dinner
French and American meals
Meal structure
Children's eating practices
Socialization to fruit and vegetable consumption

ABSTRACT

The French eat more fruits and vegetables than Americans and have lower rates of childhood obesity. This ethnographic study compares various aspects of meal environment in sixteen households in LA, California and Paris, France, and offers insights on the relationship between local practices and preferences and children's consumption of fruits and vegetables. Our analysis of video-recorded naturalist data reveals that the consumption of fruits and vegetables is linked to the cultural organization of dinner – what, when and how food is served – and to local beliefs about children's eating practices. We also found that the French model for dinnertime prioritizes the eating of fruits and vegetables more than the American model does. We propose that local eating models should be taken into account in research on childhood obesity and in prevention programs.



## Introduction

Studies funded by the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Cancer Research Fund and other organizations have demonstrated repeatedly that dietary patterns, and the consumption of fruits and vegetables in particular, are critical for the prevention of cancer, heart disease, childhood and adult diabetes and obesity, and are essential for good overall health (Lock, Polmereau, Causer, & McKee, 2004; Pomerleau, Lock, Knai, & McKee, 2005; Tamers, Agurs-Collins, Dodd, & Nebeling, 2009; Vecchia, 2004; World Cancer Research Fund, 1997). For the last several decades there have been numerous international public health initiatives to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables (CDC, 2007; NIH, 1992; PNNS, 2007; USDA & USDHHS, 2010). These intervention programs have focused mostly on educating children through school curricula and adults through health care settings. Reviews of these programs reveal that none of the initiatives show significant positive effect on consumption of fruits and vegetables; a few studies show short-term benefits, and others even show a decrease in consumption (CDC, 2013; NFVA, 2010; Pomerleau et al., 2005).

In their WHO review of the various international prevention programs, Pomerleau and colleagues (2005) noted that parents and family play an important part in the effectiveness of intervention, yet very few programs include a parental component. Indeed, the recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) Guide to Strategies to Increase Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables (2011) promotes the presence of and access to fruits and vegetables in institutions such as workplaces and schools, but does not address homes and families as sites of change.

Pomerleau et al. (2005) have proposed that, in light of the difficulty in modifying individuals' behavior through the current campaigns, it is critical to understand the factors that play a role in individuals' food choices and intake. A similar approach was taken by Rozin, Kabnick, Pete, Fischler, and Shields (2003) who emphasized the ecology of eating as an important aspect of food choices, noting that much attention has been given to individuals' eating behaviors, but not to the context within which eating takes place. Boutelle, Birnbaum, Lytle, Murray, and Story (2003), who also noted the limited research on the relationship between mealtime environment and food intake, found in an adult survey-based study that the family meal environment (e.g. frequency of eating together, TV watching during the meal, planning meals in advance) are associated with adult eating patterns of fruits and vegetables and with fat consumption.

☆ *Acknowledgement:* This research has been generously supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (#2007-3-16), and the Partner University Fund (PUF) of the French FACE Foundation (2010–2013). We are indebted to the families who participated in this study for opening their homes and sharing their lives.

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail address:* tksadlik@ucla.edu (T. Kremer-Sadlik).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.01.012
0195-6663/

The present study compares various aspects of meal environment in dual-earner households in Los Angeles, California and Paris, France, in order to better understand the relationship between local practices and preferences and children's consumption of fruits and vegetables. Meal environment refers to the context within which a meal takes place and to the interaction between the different elements of a meal (e.g. portion size, meal organization into courses, eating the same dish, talk about food, etc.). A number of studies have compared French and American diet and eating habits. The comparison between the two countries is often intriguing because of the French "paradox" – the fact that a typical French meal can be rich in fat (e.g. cheese, butter, cured meat), yet on average the French are thinner and healthier than Americans (Drewnowski et al., 1996; Rozin, 2005; Rozin et al., 2003; Tamers et al., 2009). Comparing mealtime organization in the two countries is also interesting in light of the fact that national surveys indicate that the French tend to eat more fruits and vegetables than Americans (Tamers et al., 2009).

While most studies of food consumption rely on self-reports, recall data and questionnaires, our ethnographic observations afford access to actual eating practices as they occur in our families' homes. Geertz (1973) has argued that the analysis of cultural practices is achieved through an ethnographic investigation that affords the uncovering of the meaning these practices carry for members of the community. Indeed, systematic ethnographic observations offer a detailed description of particular social practices and their organization, but they also provide information on settings and contexts, which matter profoundly to the understanding of the meaning that certain practices carry (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Duranti, 1997). Weisner (2002) explains that routine activities, like meals, are useful for studying culture and family life because (a) they are meaningful to its members, (b) they crystalize culture because they include values and goals, and (c) they are easy to observe and discuss in interviews. Focusing our ethnographic lens on the same routine activity, namely, weekday dinner, in the French and American households, we offer insights into the local organization of mealtime and the meanings that are attached to it. The analysis of the video-recorded dinners highlights the particular practices of each site and the distinct preferences for serving certain foods in certain manners. These differences, we argue, are culturally rooted and carry a critical effect on children's consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Specifically, the analysis of the ethnographic observations in this study enhances our understanding of the participating families' culinary habits as culturally organized activities; it sheds light on what family members *perceive* as a meal (e.g. what foods, including fruits and vegetables, count and are included in the meal) and how it should be structured and coordinated. Because eating, like many other family activities, is adult run and controlled – typically parents decide when eating will take place, what food is going to be served, how it is going to be served (e.g. on a platter, on plates, in separate courses), who will be participating in the meal (e.g. will the baby be fed separately; will the kids be eating alone or with the adults?) – our observations also afford insights into parents' beliefs about what children should eat, and into parents' talk and behavior patterns that socialize children into certain eating habits. In many households, dinner is often the only meal at which family members get to eat together during the working week. As such, it offers an important opportunity for parents to monitor the foods that their children consume.

A good number of ethnographic studies have explored mealtime as a site for the socialization of children into cultural values and norms and into becoming competent members of their community (e.g. Aronsson & Gottzén, 2011; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Paugh, 2005; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001; Sterponi, 2003). Mealtime has been shown to be an activity that exposes families' worldviews on food and eating, and as such it constitutes a primary locus where children learn food habits that may shape their attitudes and behaviors toward food (e.g. De Geer, 2004; Laurier & Wiggins, 2011; Ochs & Beck, 2013; Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). While these studies have explored the processes of children's socialization into commensality and food morality, only a few ethnographic studies have examined how eating practices and attitudes present in family meals socialize children into healthy habits (cf. Aronsson & Gottzén, 2011; Kaufman & Karpati, 2007; Laurier & Wiggins, 2011; Wiggins, 2004). Our study, by focusing on the availability, serving of, and talk about fruits and vegetables in family dinners, will further our understanding of how parental practices socialize children into fruit and vegetable consumption.

Similarly to the ethnographies mentioned above, this study draws on language socialization perspective in analyzing parent–child interaction around and about food. The language socialization paradigm argues that through the language used around them and through the way they are expected to use language, children (and other novices) learn how to act, feel and talk like members in their society (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Specifically for this study, the way parents talk to their children about certain foods and about eating (e.g. demanding that they eat certain items), we argue, socializes them to certain attitudes toward mealtime and food consumption (e.g. viewing certain foods as more important than others; tasting or trying food is important).

Finally, examining family dinner in dual-earner families offers particular insights. Dual-earner families are the norm today, representing the majority of families in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) and in France (Mainguené, 2011). The fact that both parents in our families were employed and returned home in the late afternoon meant that they had a limited time to get dinner on the table every weeknight (Beshara, Hutchinson, & Wilson, 2010; Devine, Connors, Sobal, & Bisogni, 2003; Jabs et al., 2007). Examination of the video-recordings of weekday dinners affords access to the food choices our American and French parents made that allowed them to manage their time constraints, providing a realistic picture of the presence of fruits and vegetables in their daily menu.

## Materials and methods

The study draws on data from two ethnographic research endeavors on dual-earner, middle-class family life in Los Angeles, California and in Paris, France. The LA data come from a large interdisciplinary, multi-method research project conducted by the Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELF) at UCLA that documented the private worlds of 32 families through video recordings of daily activities and family interactions during two full weekdays and a weekend (for a full description of all the CELF methods see Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013). Of the 32 families, 8 were selected for the present study. The French data come from a study of family dinner and food preparation in 8 Parisian dual-earner middle-class families who were video-recorded during two weekdays from the moment they got back from school and work until the children went to bed. All the families consisted of two parents who worked outside the home at least 30 hours per week. They had 2 or 3 children with at least one child between the ages of 7 and 11.

Ascription to middle-class may be difficult, given the different possible definitions (income, education, profession). In our study, families counted as middle-class if they owned their home and depended on their income to pay a monthly mortgage. Participants held a variety of professions from clerical and technical to high management and academic positions. Parents' education ranged from high school to graduate degrees with the majority holding a bachelor's degree. It is valuable to note that since this study focuses on the middle-class, we do not address the matter of access to and affordability of fruits and vegetables, a critical issue when studying families of lower SES.