
Around the dinner table. Constructing commensality within the family. An ethnographic approach of the conditions, forms and effects of everyday mealtimes in Lyon and Adelaide

Thèse

PhD :
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Normative representations of family mealtimes are ubiquitous in contemporary western societies. The happy family meal, in particular, is a powerful image. Yet, we know little about the various aspects of mealtimes in practice. This thesis is based on an ethnography of everyday mealtimes with middle class families in France and in Australia.

Preview :
The parents strived to articulate family meals with other central social and health concerns but the challenges went beyond finding the time to eat together. Time, conversations and emotions were as central to commensality as food. Food socialisation was built around temporal structures: parents tried to get children to share healthy meals in a synchronised manner. This differed according to the children's age and social differences in the perception of the children's taste development and their biological needs. The mealtime conversations and atmosphere unfolded according to relational, affective and individualist conceptions of the contemporary family. The parents tried to get children to talk about their daytime activities to make sure their lifestyle away from home was healthy. They thrived to create a collective conscience by recalling past activities, sharing individual experiences and planning future projects. However, the children could engage in conversations on their own terms and temporality, thus negotiating generational hierarchies. The conversations also reproduced conjugal hierarchical relationships: the fathers were seen as the custodians of parental authority and the mothers as guardians of family cohesion and egalitarian sibling relationships. Conviviality was another imperative but while most of the fathers had a central role in this by performing humour, the mothers managed emotions, especially when they were too intense or negative. Overall, the families were built through normative practices and as well as their subversion. This space of negotiation also reinforced traditional commensality. The results compel us to rethink research on commensality and the importance given to information collected through indirect methods.

Keywords :
Family mealtime, commensality, conviviality, norms, practices, interactions, emotions, socialisation, ethnography

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