Eating the Family Dinner and Digesting Active Citizenship

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The family dinner is an important social event that contributes to children’s growth as active citizens in their community. This sociological study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to study the family meal and finds that this meal is strongly correlated with the development of social cohesion and strong relationships among family members. There are many obstacles to achieving the family meal such as social class, work schedules, TV, and gender expectations. When families overcome these challenges and develop meaningful family routines and traditions, parents often teach their children societal, cultural and familial values during the family meal. Furthermore, the family dinner is correlated with how children develop self-confidence, think independently, form empathy and compassion for others, and learn to contribute in meaningful ways to their community. This study examines how the family meal summons both individuals and their society to the dinner table while family members overcome obstacles to eat together, form a sense of social cohesion, share their beliefs and practices, create family traditions, and teach children to become active citizens who will shape the 21st Century.

Introduction

Sharing the family dinner is not only enjoyable, but it has many positive effects on children’s growth as independent people who are culturally aware, give back to their family, and often translate these skills into serving their community. Why is eating together as a family important to civic education? Both cooking and sharing the family dinner are extremely influential in forming a strong sense of cohesion within a family. Social cohesion can be defined as the development of strong relationships and, in this paper, I will use the term to refer to bonding specifically within the family. Social class, a sense of the family’s culture, and religion can affect both the frequency and the nature of a family’s shared dinner, which can consequently affect the strength of their social cohesion and the meaning they derive from family traditions. My research shows that the family meal serves to socialize children with societal, cultural, and familial values while promoting a strong sense of community and durable support networks within the family. Subsequently, a stronger sense of family relationships can influence to some extent how a child chooses to participate in their family as well as the community at large as an active and compassionate citizen (DeVault 1991; Fiese 2006; Blum-Kulla 1994). I argue that the family meal summons both individuals and their society to the dinner table while family members overcome societal obstacles to eat together, form a sense of social cohesion, share their beliefs and practices, create family traditions, and
develop children into active citizens who will shape the 21st Century.

What are the challenges that families face in trying to sit down to a meal together? Furthermore, how do individuals use the family meal to develop social cohesion and, consequently, what are the positive implications of cohesion and why is it important for the future of developed nations? My research and that of others (Fiese and Marjinsky 1999; Fiese 2000; Fiese 2002; Brody and Flor 1997; Grusec, Goodnow, and Cohen 1996; Kloseck, Crilly, and Mannell 2006) shows that social cohesion is important in how it serves to strengthen an individual’s sense of belonging in a community, whether it is within the family, a group of friends, a university club, an interest group, or the society as a whole. Social class, work schedules, TV, and gender expectations are all obstacles to having a family dinner and developing family cohesion. When individuals are able to develop this social cohesion, they excel both academically and socially (Fiese 2000; Fiese 2002).

To explore the positive implications of the family meal and social cohesion, this study uses both quantitative and qualitative measures. A survey of university freshmen provided quantitative data evidencing strong correlations between the eating the family dinner and the strength of their family cohesion. Furthermore, these students’ free-response answers and my qualitative field notes from a participant-observation study of one New Zealand (Kiwi) family provided valuable qualitative data about the family dinner, social cohesion, cultural and religious traditions. I examined the challenges that families face in achieving a family dinner and why social cohesion is important.

I found that a sense of social cohesion enables individuals to feel a greater sense of self-confidence, to have better relationships with their family members, to think independently, and to learn how to contribute to a community. Social cohesion also helps to prevent negative phenomena such as depression among the citizens of developed nations who increasingly rely on indirect social communication through the use of computers and the Internet. In studying the face-to-face interactions taking place over the shared family dinner, this study shows how social cohesion is developed and consequently serves as a base from which individuals can participate in enterprising work and can effect social change through active citizenship. Although simply eating together as a family does not guarantee that children will change the world, the socialization that takes place during the family meal does help to instill in children the values of compassion and concern to help others so that children develop the skills, beliefs, and practices of active citizenship. Active citizenship is defined in this study as community-oriented actions to help others that are carried out by independent individuals who are self-reliant but not self-centered. I argue that families who eat the family meal together develop a stronger sense of social cohesion that, in turn, gives children a base of support from which they can become active and successful citizens who benefit their society. Active citizens aim, as President John F. Kennedy stated famously, to “ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country” (1961).
My research centers on the family dinner and how it can aid families to develop a sense of social cohesion that can promote individuals’ active citizenship in a community. There are several common obstacles that families face that may prevent them from sitting down together for a family meal. These obstacles include the societal influences of socioeconomic status; work outside of the home; watching TV; and the common phenomenon of the mother taking on the majority of the housework and cooking, which some see as a burden. This said, there are of course many positive outcomes to the family meal. Women and men alike can feel empowered by contributing to the preparation of the family meal. Furthermore, sharing dinner as a family can help to socialize children in positive ways because parents have the opportunity to teach children cultural and religious traditions while the family also develops their own special traditions. I show that engaging in these activities during the family meal develops social cohesion within a family that, in turn, influences members’ values and personal choices to become citizens who actively engage with the wider community.

Social facts are units of analysis that can serve to form and reinforce social cohesion Durkheim 1972 [1960]: the family dinner, for instance, is one such social fact. Durkheim studied social facts that, by default, must be external to individuals, diffused throughout society, studied empirically, and have the power to coerce (Gingrich 1999). In my own research and in Marjorie DeVault’s (1991), the family dinner is studied in such a way to understand how it can influence and socialize children (positively coercing them) while forming social cohesion within the family. DeVault (1991) studies the processes of food preparation, provision, and sharing the family meal. She explains that dinners are complex social events that enhance relationships within the family and develop the family’s unique, collective identity (DeVault 1991, 1987).

It is clear to sociologists that societal structures play a large role in influencing individuals (DeVault 1991; Durkeim 1972 [1960]; Mintz 1985; Bourdieu 1998). Durkheim argues that there are two types of consciousness, one individual and one collective (1972 [1960]). The collective consciousness represents the influence of society on individuals who internalize common values, beliefs, and practices respective to their society whereas the individual consciousness relates to personal identity. Sidney Mintz’s theory expands on this concept of power with respect to food: he argues that the “outside meaning” of a food commodity can be expressed by general trends and structures in the society that affect and control the actions and choices of individuals (1985). Such societal structures include colonization, capitalism, social class, and globalization. Mintz’s theory is especially important with respect to analyzing how an individual’s identity is located within the realm of a greater community. Individuals derive “inside meanings” from food and give it special significance in their lives through personal choices and traditions, but these personal meanings are only formed within the context of “outside meanings” (Mintz 1985: 150). Similarly, Bourdieu’s concept...
of habitus (1984, 1998) shows that individuals can only make choices and have agency within the framework an existing social system that they have no power to change. I use these concepts of the collective consciousness, outside meanings, and the habitus in my work to examine the role of the family in socializing and instilling in its members societal values and practices that, in turn, help to reinforce each family's own sense of social cohesion.

During the 21st century, the outside meanings of capitalism, technology, and globalization can serve in many cases to weaken a sense of social cohesion between individuals. Because the nature of cohesion within families, communities, and nations is changing, I am concerned about the level of social cohesion in families and the level of active citizenship within larger communities. McDaniel (2003) addresses the concern that globalization is changing the world and is perhaps emphasizing the role of the individual rather than the collective. Globalization promotes the values of capitalism and competition, and it may decrease the level of social cohesion in society today as compared to the 20th century. Therefore, McDaniel and I question whether globalization is an obstacle to achieving social cohesion because it may diminish one's sense of responsibility for the success of the community as a whole (McDaniel 2003: 44).

Socioeconomic status is another outside meaning that, for many, serves as an obstacle to achieving family cohesion. Devine and her colleagues’ research on the working-class shows that their job pressures tend to spill over into their lives while changing the nature of their family meal (2006). Devine et al. found that work conditions, changing work shifts and long hours tend to affect the working poor in their food choices, priorities, and expectations for the family meal. Similarly, Orrell-Valente and her colleagues describe the different methods that parents use to socialize their children during meals and, in particular, how socioeconomic status affects these methods (2007). They found that families of lower classes are less likely to eat together at the dinner table and are more likely to have the TV on during dinnertime (2007: 40). DeVault (1991) also considers social class, but with respect to food provisioning and shopping for the family meal. DeVault examines not only the financial constraints on the budgets of the working poor but also the role of societal structures (outside meanings such as wealth, poor housing, and inadequate transportation) and how they affect the consumption patterns of members of the lower classes. In my own research, I also look specifically at the role of socioeconomic status and explore the ways in which it influences family cohesion.

The outside meaning of gendered roles in the household, particularly with respect to dinner preparation, also affects families. The term “second shift” describes how many women tend to return home after a long day of work to start a second shift of work at home: they care for the family and tend to do most of the housework (Hochschild 1997). To some extent, women still uphold the sex role theory (Connell 1987) because household work tends to be divided by gender in a simplistic dualism that dictates that women should do the daily...
cooking for the family. Women cookery icons such as Betty Crocker have shaped traditional gender roles and the societal norm of women’s work in the kitchen (Shapiro 2005). Although this phenomenon is changing and men are starting to help with more household chores, women often face doing the majority of the housework in addition to their professional work outside of the home (DeVault 1991; Kemmer 2000; Guendouzi 2006; Bianchi et al. 2000). When women feel that preparing the family dinner is a chore to be completed during their “second shift” of work, cooking becomes an obstacle to the family meal.

Many women, however, do gain fulfillment from making dinner and caring for their family. One positive outcome of the family dinner includes the pleasure that some women derive from preparing a meal that she may see as a gift to her family (Devasahayam 2005). Many women like cooking for their family because they demonstrate their love through cooking and do not want to relinquish this task to men. Furthermore, some women consider meal preparation as an expression of their identity (Devasahayam 2005; Hocking et al. 2002; Valentine 1999; Beoku-Betts 1995; Counihan 1988). Although cooking the family dinner may be burdensome and an oppressive duty for some women, others see it as an empowering experience that enables them to fulfill what they see as their role of caring for the family.

Men are also increasingly helping to cook the family meal. Specifically, younger men, men from households in which women also work, and men from low-income households tend to assume more responsibility for cooking (Harnack et al. 1998). When men cook, however, it tends to be a somewhat rare event that is glorified as a special event and is highly praised and glorified as a special meal (Hollows 2002; Inness 2001). Although it is commendable that men are starting to contribute more towards cooking the family dinner, many women feel that their daily cooking is taken for granted and that it is not appreciated while their husband’s cooking is disproportionately lauded compared to the amount of time he spends in the kitchen. Brown shows, though, that in a community of men such as firefighters, these men cook and care for each other in what Brown calls a “motherly” manner (2007: 731). This shows how men provide for male-only communities on a regular basis, but in mixed-gender environments such as the family, men tend to shy away from what many think should be viewed as the gender-neutral activity of cooking (Harnack et al. 1998; Hollows 2002; Inness 2001).

When families can overcome the outside meaning that can be obstacles to the family meal, they are often able to enjoy positive outcomes from the family dinner such as developing a strong degree of family cohesion. One important aspect of social cohesion in the family is socializing children to teach them (or coerce them to internalize) familial, cultural, and societal values and practices. Both Harbottle (2006) and Allison (1997) show that socialization affirms collective identities. Harbottle (2006) explains how many Iranian immigrants in Britain form a new cultural identity by combining their traditions with those of the British. Similarly, in examining social cohesion and socialization on a nationwide scale, Allison (1997) show how the socialization
methods of the Japanese government reinforce national identity through the lunch meal. Socially obligatory preparation and eating of obento box lunches socializes both mothers and children with Japanese values of obedience, dedication, and persistence. These researchers both show how cultural narratives influence the socialization of children and how they also create a sense of a social cohesion within a larger cultural group or nation composed of individual families that socialize their children in similar ways.

Others also study socialization while focusing on cultural values as well as hierarchical traditions. Ochs and Shohet (2006) examine how mealtimes serve to socialize children to uphold certain values and practices that form a social order within a culture. Through cultural narratives surrounding food preparation and mealtimes, children “appropriate culture within their own frames for thinking, feeling, and acting in the world” (Ochs and Shohet 2006: 36). Blum-Kulla also studies cultural socialization through examining the active participation of children, parents, and guests at family meals among three culturally variant cohorts: Israeli, Israeli-American, and Jewish-American families. Blum-Kulla examines how meals are “sociocultural constructs” (1994: 2) that socialize children with the rules of the family that tend to be set within particular cultural contexts. In different ways, families of each cultural group create a sense of shared identity and social cohesion. DeVault (1991) also addresses how particular cultural customs and traditions influence the family meal and, in turn, the socialization of children. Outside of the home and at the restaurant, Finkelstien (1988) examines different styles of eating that reinforce group identity and membership within a particular status and/or cultural group. These researchers’ insights prove contextually insightful in reinforcing my research concerning culture and how traditions create a sense of shared family cohesion and identity.

Barbara Fiese analyzes how a family’s routines and rituals affect individuals in positive ways. Fiese (2006) shows that rituals play an important role in family life: they establish traditions that link the past to the future and they reinforce family members’ common values. Although there may be patterns in how culture and social class affect the socialization of children, each family is of course unique. Feunekes and her colleagues (1998) explain the diverse means through which family members influence the socialization of children. These factors include instilling in children familial or culturally variant rules of what, when, how, and with whom food should be eaten (Feunekes et al. 1998: 650). Consequently, each family is different and maintains its own social norms. My own work seeks to acknowledge these differences while also understanding trends that point to how families of similar nature form a strong sense of social cohesion while also instilling in children the value and practice of active citizenship.

My study references individuals’ different forms of capital as examined through their family dinner. Bourdieu’s social theory explains that individuals possess varying degrees of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (1984). During dinner preparation and conversation, family members compete
amongst themselves and with others for power, and we can examine how families display various forms of power through the family dinner. Even though children typically acquire different forms of capital from their parents, this paper studies the agency of individuals in how they exchange one form of capital for another to gain power within the social fields of the family and wider communities to become active citizens who effect positive social change.

I have hypothesized that individuals need a base of social cohesion to support them before they can become truly active citizens, and this sense of collectivity tends to stem from family life. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) claims that an individual must fulfill certain basic needs before fulfilling higher ones in the following order: physiological needs (shelter, water, food); security and safety (control over one’s own environment); social needs (familial support and love); self-esteem (the need to be accepted by others); and self-actualization (self-expression and social action). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs stems from the idea that basic needs must be satisfied before more complex ones. I believe that individuals must fulfill the need to feel a strong sense of social cohesion before they can become truly active and successful citizens.

To support this idea, there is a strong body of literature outlining the positive effects of social cohesion that can lead to the development of a personality inclined to participate actively in society. Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) studied families who value the time they spend together over dinner and also those who see dinnertime as a time of conflict. They found that families with a greater degree of social cohesion had children with a more positive disposition and who were better behaved during the meal. Furthermore, Brody and Flor (1997) showed that the stability of routines in rural, single-parent, African-American households help mothers feel less stressed and more able to cope with financial constraints. These mothers develop a greater sense of self-esteem and are able to form a stronger relationship with their children.

Family routines and rituals that deepen family cohesion also have extremely positive academic and social effects. First, there is a correlation between four-year-old children’s level of family routines and their academic achievement when they are nine (Fiese 2000). In her 2002 study, Fiese repeated this finding in showing that children engaging in fewer family routines and rituals performed more poorly on achievement tests and appeared to teachers as not as socially adept compared to children who actively participate in family routines. Brody and Flor (1997) also found that, among their cohort of rural, single-parent, African-American families, routines helped children to learn to regulate themselves while gaining social awareness, both internalizing and externalizing problems, and achieving academic success. Routines help not only children but also their parents: Fiese and her colleagues (1993) showed that couples who more highly value family rituals tend to be more satisfied with their marriage. Fiese also argues that parents who develop routines tend to be seen as more competent parents (2006: 54).

Research also shows that social cohesion positively influences active
citizenship. Fiese shows that adolescents have a stronger sense of self-confidence when they share with their parents the value of participating in family rituals and routines (1992). Similarly, Grusec, Goodnow, and Cohen (1996) found that household chores help children. Especially when older children are expected to do chores that benefit others, they develop a greater sense of compassion and concern for others. Lastly, among an older cohort of senior citizens, Kloseck, Crilly, and Mannell (2006) found that the personality trait of extroversion and a sense of social cohesion found in support networks are important attributes of volunteers as compared to non-volunteers. In these ways, social cohesion can be seen as one way to help an individual develop into a compassionate and active citizen who has empathy for others and who actively participates in the community.

Methods

This study uses a mixed-method approach to explore the family dinner and why social cohesion is one reason why some individuals become passionate and active members of a community. I used both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore these topics both on a generalizeable level in one sense and in a detailed and personal manner in another sense. First, I conducted an in-depth field study of one Kiwi (New Zealand) family’s everyday dinners, Kiwi traditions, and the family members’ own routines and rituals. I lived with this family and used participant-observation research methods for four months to gather rich field notes about their food and eating practices. Because this field study produces in-depth, qualitative, albeit non-representative data, I also conducted a survey that is representative because it produced data that is representative because it had high statistical significance.

I surveyed students at a select, liberal arts university to gain both quantitative and qualitative insights about their food and eating habits, family traditions, and activity both within and outside of the family. College students tend to be at an interesting transition in their lives in which they gain new independence from their family but, at the same time, continue to be influenced by their parents to some extent. College life offers a wide variety of clubs, community service activities, sports, and work choices that are open to all students. College freshman have the opportunity (and challenge) of managing their time, making new friendships, and deciding in which activities to participate. Furthermore, freshmen should have more clear and precise memories concerning the frequency and nature of their family dinner because they most likely lived at home recently on a full-time basis, whereas older college students tend to live at home more sporadically. Although this university is not as demographically diverse as the general American population, time and budget constraints as well as ethical boundaries of working with high school students factored into my decision to survey college freshmen as the most efficient and effective manner of carrying out this research.

I surveyed freshmen to learn about the nature of their family dinner and how this meal ultimately provides them with much more than food: they
also gain family traditions and social bonds. Systematic sampling methods employing probability theory helped to ensure that participants are representative of this university’s freshman class as a whole. Using an alphabetical list of the class of 2011 and starting with its second member, I systematically sampled every second freshman. In this way, the survey was sent to 374 freshmen, and 64 of these students participated in the study. I attribute this low response rate of 17.1% to the many activities in students’ lives and events such as a short vacation and parents’ weekend activities that fell during the sampling period. Also, because of budget constraints, students were not offered financial compensation for their time, which is a factor that could have strongly enhanced informants’ response rates and, consequently, the statistical significance and generalizability of some data.

Even with constraints on the ability to sample large numbers of informants, the data proved to be insightful with many strong and significant associations between variables. Using quantitative measures, this study explores bivariate associations between social cohesion and active citizenship by asking informants about their routines and rituals (both secular and non-secular) surrounding the family dinner. This survey also addressed from a qualitative vantage point (using free-response questions) the nature of the preparation for and the sharing of the family meal in each informant’s household. It is both an advantage and a disadvantage that students were asked about their family meal while not precisely defining the term “family.” The wide variety of family structures present in American society is not directly addressed and consequently enables each participant to define “family” for him/herself. Therefore, it is an advantage that this study does not impose on informants one particular notion of “family.”

In learning directly about the family meal, many survey questions addressed social cohesion within the family while including variables of social class, cultural background, race, and religion affecting the socialization of informants. This survey examines the family as a unit of analysis while also focusing on individuals and their respective roles within the family. Qualitative field research conducted in New Zealand and survey questions of American students also probed the topic of active citizenship while considering the role of informants in helping family members to prepare meals during high school, the meaning of their family traditions, and the informants’ level of participation in and contribution to their respective communities.

Quantitative Results

The results also confirm that family cohesion is strongly associated with the frequency with which families dine together and how they value the family meal. 41.4% of informants strongly agree that their family shares a strong degree of social cohesion, that they are close, and that they get along well together. With varying degrees of conviction (slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree), 91.4% of informants agree that their family does
share a sense of social cohesion (see Figure 1). Furthermore, 65.5% of students agree to varying extents that their parents value sharing a family dinner (see Figure 2). In analyzing the relationship between these two ordinal variables, I found that family cohesion is strongly associated with the degree to which a family values the family dinner: the gamma value is 0.590 showing a strong degree of association, and this data is highly statistically significant and can be generalized to other populations because it has a chi-square significance of 0.000 (thus, it would be true for 1,000 people sampled out of 1,000).

The degree of a family’s social cohesion and how strongly they theoretically value sharing a family dinner are each strongly related to how often this family eats together in reality. This is true for how family cohesion and valuing the family meal both strongly and directly relate to how often the family generally ate together when the informant was a child, the average number of times per week that the family ate together when the informant was in high school, and where the family eats dinner: together at the table amid animated discussion, some conversation, sporadic conversation, watching TV at the table, together on the sofa watching TV, or not usually eating together (Table 1). Therefore, these data show that there are extremely strong associations between a) family cohesion and valuing the family dinner as compared to b) the frequency of family meals and the practice of spending time conversing at the table. All of these correlations are strongly statistically significant and are applicable to other populations besides my sample of university freshmen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1- Family Meal Affecting Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Value Family Dinner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family ate together when informant was a child</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.625*</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.849*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times per week</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.491*</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.787*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
family ate together when informant was in high school (scale variable)

Where family ate and amid conversation or watching TV (ordinal variable)

| Gamma: 0.623* | Gamma: 0.721* |

* extremely strong statistical significance, chi-square ≤ 0.001

Other variables often affect a family’s level of social cohesion, such as social class, nationality/background/culture, race, religion, and gender roles. The strongest of these variables appears to be social class, which affects families in their value and frequency of eating dinner together. Strong indicators of social class in this study include financial aid status and how many hours per week a student works at a job during the school year. Other indicators of class are the highest degree of education an informant’s mother and father each obtained as well as the status of the father’s job as measured by the Occupational Title and Socioeconomic Prestige Scores developed by Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi. However, this set of scores did have limitations because it is several years old and does not adequately account for the status scores of CEOs, CPAs, or the like. Similarly, the mother’s occupation was not ultimately used in this study to indicate social class because the occupational prestige scores do not address the status of homemakers. In assessing social class, I also look closely at an ordinal variable concerning the quality of fruits and vegetables bought most often during the summer, ranging from organic fresh, farm-fresh/Whole Foods fresh, grocery store fresh, frozen (a response not chosen by any respondents), and canned fruits and vegetables (see Figure 3). The quality of these purchases strongly indicates social class because it evidences a family’s purchasing power to buy the best quality of fresh produce. Statistically significant correlations showed a strong correlation between this variable and the number of hours students work at a job as well as their father’s occupational prestige.

**Figure 3:**
Social Class and Quality of Fruits and Vegetables

During the summer, what types of fruits and vegetables does your family buy most often?
My research shows that a family’s social class is directly related to social cohesion. This shows that families of lower social classes tend to have a weaker sense of family cohesion. In examining students’ reports of fruit and vegetable purchases, 48.9% of students’ families purchase fresh fruits and vegetables most often from the grocery store. However, these results also indicate that 34% of families purchase fruits and vegetables at a farm store, farmer’s market, or specialty store such as Whole Foods. This latter statistic most likely indicates that students who attend the private university where the survey was administered tend to be more affluent than the general American population. This said, students who report that their family buys a lower quality of fruit and vegetables also state that their family does not tend to value sharing a family dinner together (see Table 2). Furthermore, the number of hours a student works at a job (including work-study, which can be a requirement of financial aid) is indirectly associated with the degree to which their parents value the family meal, and this data is strongly statistically significant. Similarly, a direct association indicates that, as the father’s occupational prestige decreases, the sense of family cohesion produced by eating together is lower. This reinforces the findings that households from lower social classes do not tend to value or participate often in a family dinner just as they do not tend to converse over dinner as often as middle- and upper-class families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2- Social Class Affecting Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Family Cohesion</th>
<th>Valuing Family Dinner</th>
<th>Where Family Eats and Presence of TV during Dinnertime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of fruit/vegetables (ordinal variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.385</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.143*</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.337*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours per week student works (scale variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.060</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.178*</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s occupational prestige (scale variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.156</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.272</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.346*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* extremely strong significance, chi-square ≤ 0.005

Table 2 also indicates that families of lower social classes tend to eat together at the table less and watch TV more during dinnertime. There is a strong, indirect association between the types of fruits and vegetables a family buys and where they eat dinner: as the quality of fruits and vegetables purchased (and social class) decreases, the family tends to eat together in less-structured environments and family cohesion suffers. Furthermore, students who work more also do not tend to eat at the table or participate in family discussions over dinner. In these ways, social class is directly related to a family’s sense of social cohesion.

Although social class is the most prominent variable affecting social cohesion, the results of this study show that dinner preparation still continues to be largely the work of women. In the families sampled, respondents enjoyed a home-cook dinner an average of four times per week (57.1% of the time). This statistic evidences family members’ busy schedules. It also shows that, compared to even half a century ago, families are now able to
fulfill the family dinner without investing as much time and effort into dinner preparation because they can purchase pre-prepared dinners to heat up at home, take-out, or restaurant meals much more easily than in the past. This said, the family dinner is often a testament to women’s work because 79.5% of informants in my study report that their mother prepares dinner alone for the family, while additional students report that their mother prepares dinner with their father.

A family’s nationality or background can also influence family cohesion to some extent. 93.1% of informants were either American citizens or dual citizens of the U.S. and another nation. American respondents typically report that their family background includes several nationalities including a mixture of English, Irish, Jewish, German, Polish, Latino, and/or Asian nationalities. Over half of informants (52.6%) agree to some extent that their family background/ancestry does affect their food choices and/or eating habits (see Figure 4). Table 3 shows that those who feel that their family background influences them also tend to eat together with their family more as children and as high school students (evidencing social cohesion); they also tend to help their family members to a greater extent than others to prepare the family dinner (showing cohesion and active citizenship). Feeling a strong sense of family background or ancestry also tends to influence directly how often family members eat together at the table amid animated conversation as opposed to watching TV on the couch or not eating together at all. In these ways, feeling a stronger sense of family background or tradition helps families to develop a stronger sense of family cohesion.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Affecting Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Family background/ancestry affects food choices and/or eating habits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family ate together when informant was a child (ordinal variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times per week family ate together when informant was in high school (scale variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which the student would help to prepare dinner (ordinal variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.299*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where the family ate dinner (ordinal variable)</td>
<td>Gamma: 0.127*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* strong statistical significance, chi-square ≤ 0.050

On the other hand, race did not strongly affect a family's social cohesion in this study. 82.8% of respondents are white/Caucasian, and there are low levels of informants who are Asian (8%), Hispanic (6.9%), and Black (3.4%). This data is somewhat consistent with the demographic characteristics of the entire student body at this liberal arts university: 75% white, 7% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 5% Black (U-Can 2007). Perhaps because of this low representation of minority groups, racial background does not tend to affect social cohesion among informants in this study. There are some direct lambda associations between a student’s race and their family cohesion, the frequency of eating together both when the informant was a child and a high-school student, and whether the informant learned from a family member how to cook. However, none of these data are significant in terms of chi-square values, so these findings are not generalizable to the greater society.

Some respondents do feel that their race affects their food choices and eating habits. These students tend to feel that their family enjoys a slightly stronger sense of family cohesion (gamma value of 0.098, chi-square value of 0.063), their family values the family dinner more, and they eat more home-cooked dinners as compared to students who do not think that race influences their food and eating habits. Although these findings are interesting, they are not statistically significant. Therefore, the idea that race affects social cohesion among informants’ families is a topic that should be studied in more depth in the future among a more diverse population.

It is also interesting that, among my respondents, religion positively influences their family cohesion. My data show that, as an informant’s religiosity increases, their family cohesion increases as well. These respondents also tend to value the family meal more, eat together as a family more, help family members with grocery shopping and preparing dinner more as compared to those who are not religious. Perhaps because only 31.1% of informants state that they agree or strongly agree that they are religious, these data are not statistically significant. In working with only a small sample of religious individuals, these data can not be generalized to other populations, but religiosity is an interesting subject to consider in the future with respect to social cohesion within families and religious communities. One finding concerning religion is strong statistically: the strength of an individual’s religiosity strongly affects their food choices and eating habits (gamma value of 0.478, chi-square significance of 0.001). This is understandable because those who are
more religious will more closely follow dietary prescriptions and guidelines set out by their faith.

It is clear that eating dinner together on a regular basis can help families to develop a stronger sense of family cohesion and that a variety of factors can help to strengthen social cohesion, which in turn can also directly affect the level at which an individual chooses to participate actively in the family, the university community, and the society at large. My research shows that a family’s strong sense of social cohesion, regularity of eating together, and conversing at the dinner table are all directly associated with and perhaps contribute to socializing children to think independently from their friends and participate actively in the family (see Table 4a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4a - Social Cohesion Affecting Active Citizenship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Cohesion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informant is an independent thinker from friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informant would help family members to prepare dinner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* strong statistical significance, chi-square ≤ 0.050
** extremely strong statistical significance, chi-square ≤ 0.005

Furthermore, when informants are presented with hypothetical scenarios, those from families with a stronger sense of social cohesion are more likely to make the choice to be a more active rather than passive citizen. As seen in Table 4b, a variety of indicators show that individuals who come from a family that is more closely bonded report that they are more likely to cook dinner with friends (by actively working together to produce a tangible meal and intangible social bonds) rather than to order pizza passively and have it delivered.
Table 4b: Social Cohesion Affecting Active Citizenship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong Family Cohesion</th>
<th>Weak Family Cohesion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“I would prefer to cook dinner with friends rather than ordering pizza”</strong></td>
<td>Agree that family shares social cohesion: 77.8% prefer to cook actively&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Disagree that family shares social cohesion: 25.0% prefer to cook actively&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Voluntarily help prep. dinner: 81.3% prefer to cook actively&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Do not help prep. dinner: 37.5% prefer to cook actively&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In high school, family ate together 6-7 times/week: 81.8% prefer to cook actively&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>In high school, family ate together 0-1 times/week: 50% prefer to cook actively&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6+ people attend dinner: 75.0% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0 people (no family dinner): 50% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“I would prefer to attend a club meeting rather than play videogames”</strong></td>
<td>Agree that family shares social cohesion: 69.4% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Disagree that family shares social cohesion: 50% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voluntarily help prep. dinner: 68.8% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Do not help prep. dinner: 37.5% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In high school, family ate together 6-7 times/week: 72.7% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>In high school, family ate together 0-1 times/week: 50% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6+ people attend dinner: 100.0% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0 people (no family dinner): 50% prefer to attend club&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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Table 4b also shows that social cohesion is directly related to whether a student prefers to attend a club meeting (to share interests actively with others and work towards common goals) rather than tending to be more socially isolated while playing videogames. Although the aforementioned findings show a correlation between social cohesion and active citizenship, students sampled representatively from the freshmen class in this study did not appear to be extremely active citizens in general: 48.4% of students do not attend any lunch discussions, lectures, or other such popular events on campus and 47.5% of respondents spend only two hours or less per week at club meetings or community service activities. Therefore, some of the data concerning active citizenship is not highly applicable to other populations. Lastly, there is some evidence that individuals with a stronger sense of social cohesion will choose slightly more often to volunteer and participate in community service as opposed to attending a football game. This is not to say that attending a football game is not fun or does not serve other means of achieving social cohesion through supporting a team, but going to a football game could be seen as a means of achieving more individualistic or more social aims rather than choosing to help those who are less fortunate.
Discussion
Outside Obstacles and Positive Rewards to the Family Dinner

I argue that there are many positive outcomes for the family dinner that come from the enhancement of social cohesion within the family during the mealtime. For instance, individuals can feel empowered through cooking, building relationships among family members, socializing children with family values, transmitting culture through the preparation and sharing of the meal, and teaching children the importance of active citizenship within a community. Despite these benefits, it is often difficult for families to find time to actualize the family dinner on a daily basis. To examine several outside meanings that are obstacles to the family dinner, it is interesting to consider the work of Durkheim, Mintz, and Bourdieu examining constraints that the society places on individuals.

Through a Durkheimian analysis, the family dinner can be studied as a social fact 1972 [1960]. The family dinner is external to and shared by individuals to fulfill their physiological and social needs, and this meal is also diffused throughout society because each family separately shares a collective dinnertime. Researchers can use both quantitative and qualitative methods to study empirically the nature and importance of family meals. Furthermore, Gingrich writes that social facts are “endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him [the individual], independent of his individual will” (1999: 1). The social fact of a family dinner has the power to coerce individuals in a variety of ways by socializing children and evidencing how the transnational agri-food industry influences the content and quality of the food shared during the meal.

Furthermore, both Emile Durkheim 1972 [1960], Sidney Mintz (1985, 1995) and Bourdieu (1984, 1998) show that society greatly influences the individual. Durkheim states that there are two forms of consciousness: “The first represent only our individual personality and constitute it; the second represent a collective type and, consequently, society, without which it would not exist” (1972 [1960]: 128). Even though each individual is unique and has their personal preferences and tastes, Durkheim uses the collective consciousness to examine shared values and behavior in each society because the collective consciousness is “a body of collective beliefs and social practices which are held in common by all members of society and which determine the relations of individuals to one another and to society” (Morrison 1995: 328). Furthermore, Sidney Mintz (1985) shows that “outside meanings” are forces of the society that influence the actions of individuals. Outside meanings such as capitalism and globalization, for instance, are at the core of food production and distribution systems today, and these forces have the power to control the availability and the price of commodities on our dinner table. Bourdieu (1984, 1998) also shows that individuals only have agency within the set social structures that control citizens’ actions in their lives.
I will examine here the outside meanings that present themselves as obstacles to families and also the various incentives that would inspire families to try to overcome these obstacles. There are several prominent obstacles that encumber many families from gathering to share dinner: disadvantages of the poor such as public transportation and lack of reasonable supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods; long and often irregular work schedules of both unskilled and skilled workers; the intrusive presence of the TV; and the oppression felt by some women cooks who take on the “second shift” of domestic work to fulfill the societal and familial expectations that they will cook dinner for the family. This said, eating together as a family can produce a wide variety of positive outcomes. Cooking to prepare the family meal can be fun and rewarding for both men and women. Furthermore, mothers and fathers alike can use the family dinner as a time to socialize their children with their values, maintain and pass on their culture to children through traditions, and promote children’s active citizenship in their community.

**Obstacles Confronting the Poor**

It is clear that there are many different factors that promote or inhibit the formation of social cohesion. I found that social class is directly associated with social cohesion: as social class decreases, social cohesion within the family tends to decrease. As shown through my examination of how social class affects the quality of fruits and vegetables that low-income families purchase, social class and car ownership in particular (DeVault 1991; Fiese 2006; Kotlowtiz 1991) affect a family’s purchasing power. DeVault explains that individuals without cars find it more difficult than those with cars to shop at stores providing the best choices of food commodities that are also cost-effective (1991: 66-67). Car ownership also strongly influences the number of times per week a family can go grocery shopping and the amount of time and effort that is required to provide food for the family.

Mintz (1985) argues that both inside and outside meanings affect people, and this is certainly true in how social class can affect individuals’ food choices. Even though individuals’ food preferences and tastes are important inside meanings that do affect the products one purchases, outside meanings such as institutional structures within the society strongly influence a family’s shopping. As a country that believes in the American Dream and values individual merit and hard work, the American social system is set up in a manner that promotes the interests of the wealthy while the poor flounder. For instance, fixed budgets for the poor often do not permit them to buy much more than they need for the present, whereas middle-class families can plan ahead by taking advantage of buying in bulk at supermarkets during sales and/or at wholesale retailers such as Costco and B.J.’s. DeValut found that:

Most informants [in her study] in higher-income households reported that they compare prices, watch for sales, and use some coupons or generic items. But the calculus of cost, need, and preference is quite flexible for these families, and they discuss the cost of food as one factor to
be considered among others [such as the quality and variety of food] (1991: 175).

Therefore, the outside meanings of the American social system clearly affect families even at the grocery store by disadvantaging the poor.

Another outside meaning that perhaps leads to a lower level of social cohesion among low-income families is a lack of social cohesion in poor communities. Stafford, Bartley, Sacker, and their colleagues quantitatively studied the influence of social class on social cohesion and found that, “At the neighbourhood level, material deprivation is associated with low levels of trust, sense of attachment, practical help, and tolerance or respect” (2003: 1472). Similarly, Edin and Kefalas used qualitative methods to learn more about poor, teenage, single mothers and found that many of these women feel isolated in their communities because of a pervasive lack of trust and friends on whom they could rely (2005: 174). Therefore, the outside meanings of a lack of trust, respect, and social cohesion within low-income communities may also perpetuate a weaker sense of social cohesion within poor families as compared to middle- and upper-class families.

The outside meaning of family structure in low-income families also exacerbates their level of social cohesion. Poor families tend to have a lower percentage of parents who are married and live together (Edin and Kefalas 2005), and most of these single-parent families are headed by women. This leads to a feminization of poverty that is perpetuated by a gendered division of labor that continues to exist in the twenty-first century that results in lower incomes for women. For example, in 2002, women earned 78% of men’s salaries (Rothman 2002: 101). Other factors leading to lower salaries for women are their fewer educational credentials, interrupted or part-time careers to care for their children, and discrimination based on gender and race that continues to exist within the workplace (Rothman 2002). Because of these factors, family routines can be disrupted by the varied job shifts of blue-collar workers from low-income families in general and from female-headed, single-family households in particular.

Furthermore, high job demands on the working class disrupt family life and negatively impact their values and practices. Although it is clear that middle- and upper-class parents also work hard and can have sporadic work schedules including weekend travel, this can be ameliorated by the job perks and status, the parent’s choice of job, and perhaps one parent can choose to stay at home with the family if their financial circumstances permit. By contrast, members of the working-class tend to have less control over their work schedules and feel that their income is often inadequate even through they work hard during extremely long hours (Devine et al. 2006). My data shows that low-income families not only eat together less, but children of these families also report that their parents do not tend to value the idea of sharing a family meal. Devine and her colleagues show how this could be the case because the work life of low-income parents tends to pervade their food choices, priorities, and expectations for the family meal (2006). Consequently, the working-poor tend to
lower their expectations for the frequency of the family meal and/or its quality (in terms of nutrition, preparation time, spending time together cooking and/or eating). In this way, the outside influence of work and the instability of income and home life (Rothman 2002) can negatively affect low-income families’ routines and even their values surrounding the family dinner.

Fiese’s research (2006) also shows that families of low-income households tend to engage less in family routines, including but not limited to eating dinner together. Fiese suggests that this finding “calls into question the link between adequate resources and family routines . . . low-income [single] mothers were not unmotivated or ill-equipped to carry out routines . . . What is missing from this picture, however, is the ability to translate routines into predictable and reassuring patterns of behavior” (2006: 102). These mothers not only face financial challenges of shopping for and feeding the family, but their time-intensive shopping routines resulting from the lack of a car and their complex work schedules “often led to feelings that daily routines were out of the personal control of these hardworking [poor] mothers” (Fiese 2006: 102). Perhaps because of this sentiment and a lack of control over their complex work schedules, parents of low-income families tend to actualize and value the family dinner less. In turn, family cohesion is negatively affected.

Social Class and Social Cohesion: the Middle- and Upper-Classes

Even though members of the middle- and upper-classes are in a more privileged social position than the poor, the former must often confront obstacles that hinder the development of their family cohesion. Unlike the poor, the more affluent are privileged in a variety of ways. First, they can often afford cars more easily. Furthermore, the affluent tend to have some cash reserves that affect, but do not determine, how they buy food and houses (often in safe suburbs or “good” sections of a city). Members of the middle- and upper-classes often have secure jobs so that it is somewhat easier for them, as compared to the poor, to develop household routines such as sharing dinner together on a regular basis. However, high job demands can also present members of these more affluent classes with challenges when they try to form a strong sense of family cohesion.

Many upper-middle and upper-class American respondents to my survey indicated that their father’s demanding work schedule, in particular, affects their family dinner. For instance, Anna stated, “We rarely eat meals together, because my Dad works a lot.” In considering this response and those of others speaking about the few dinners their fathers attend because of long work hours or travel, we must also look at the social norms surrounding work in Western cultures and how work demands can powerfully affect the family. As Weber explains, the “iron cage of capitalism” (Rothman 2002) forces individuals to compete to work longer and harder to perform well. Consequently, individuals in some fields create a “norm” of working 60, 70, or even 80 hours per week and this norm forces all others in this sector to work to keep up with the others. As a result, the outside meaning (Mintz 1985) of work in capitalist societies forces individuals to
adopt certain work practices and hours that challenge traditional family time and their shared dinners.

Similarly, in New Zealand, the middle-class Bailey family showed how demanding careers also affect the family dinner. Bob Bailey works as a funeral director and, as such, is on call every third week. On one occasion, Bob was called out just before dinner was served and I later spoke to him about having to miss the family dinner because of work. He good-naturedly replied: “The dead never take my dinner into consideration before passing away.” Bob considered the situation in a realistic manner and, as such, headed out the door to work and missed the family dinner. However, if unexpected work events in the evenings become a social norm, then a sense of family cohesion can suffer. Even though parents work hard to provide financially for their family, I would argue that money can not buy social cohesion because “being there” for dinner counts strongly in terms of family relationships.

The TV Social Divide

TV is an outside meaning that affects many Americans regardless of class, but some research shows that TV can most profoundly influence the rate at which a low-income family watches TV during dinnertime. Consequently, TV limits discussion during dinner and the amount of social cohesion that individuals take away from the family meal. I find that where a family ate dinner and how this location promotes family discussion are often factors of socioeconomic status (SES). Families of lower social classes tend to eat in less-structured environments (i.e. not at the dinner table) and watch TV more during dinnertime as compared to higher-class families. Orrell-Valente and her colleagues (2007) corroborate these findings. Sometimes, as mentioned in Kotlowitz’s qualitative examination of families who live in housing projects in Chicago (1991), the background noise of a TV can serve as a safety mechanism to prevent crime and robbery. At other times, though, TV can be used as a passive form of family entertainment during dinner that prevents the opportunity for family discussion that could otherwise deepen family bonds.

In considering the middle-class Bailey family from New Zealand, the family’s penchant for watching TV can often disrupt their family time together and hinder their development of social cohesion. Of the 70 dinners I ate with the Baileys during my four months living with them, we ate 20 of these dinners in front of the TV (44.4% of their dinners eaten at home and 28% of all their dinners). Furthermore, Lyn remarked to me that I helped them to eat at the dinner table more often because, “When it’s just the Baileys, we usually have our tea [dinner] by the TV.” I observed that TV programming strongly affected the Bailey’s dinner hour and the nature of many of their dinners. Lyn, Bob, and Jackie all tended to watch TV as a way to relax after returning home at the end of a busy day. Bob also had a routine of watching the nightly news. Because the news starts at 6pm, Lyn usually started to prepare dinner at this time, after she had finished watching the 5 o’clock soap opera. Consequently, TV programming tended to influence the Bailey family’s dinner preparation and actual dinnertime.
TV programming also affected whether or not the Baileys ate in front of the TV. Bob’s favorite TV program, “Coronation Street,” started at 7:30 on both Tuesdays and Thursdays. On these days when Lyn started preparing dinner late, the Baileys ate dinner while watching the program. The TV not only seemed to mesmerize the Baileys and separate them socially, but it also separated Jackie from her parents physically. Jackie often refused to watch “Coronation Street” and, when her parents would watch it during dinner, she often ate alone in her bedroom while watching a different show on her own TV. On a daily basis, the Baileys had tea and dessert in front of the TV.

Furthermore, their TV-watching during meals sometimes even extended to the appetizer or dessert courses when they had dinner guests at their house. The Baileys and their guests did eat dinner at the table, but before and/or after the main course everyone would have appetizers or dessert while watching the news or their favorite programs.

When is Dinner, Mom? The Obstacle of Unequal Work in Preparing the Family Meal

Although there are many different ways in which a family can share a family dinner at the table, my research shows that the home-cooked family meal is often the product of women’s work. My survey informants report that, during high school, they ate together with their family five times per week (measured by both median and mode), or 71.4% of the time. Wolcott (2001) affirms this statistic with his finding that families eat dinner together “always” or “frequently” 77% of the time. Furthermore, 79.5% of my respondents’ mothers cooked dinner alone for the family, whereas only 4.5% of fathers prepared the meal alone. My research and that of DeVault (1991), Kemmer (2000), Hochschild (1997), Guendouzi (2006), and Bianchi et al. (2000) shows that women continue to take on most of the work required to actualize the family meal, including grocery shopping, cooking, orchestrating the meal, and cleaning up. Although some respondents helped their mother to cook or reported that their parents cook dinner together, these cases were rare. Many women do enjoy cooking for and providing for their family, but daily dinner preparation can become a burden, especially for women who work outside of the home.

Even during the twenty-first century, preparing and coordinating the family meal continues to be largely the work of women during their “second shift” of domestic work for the family (Hochschild 1997). Furthermore, DeVault shows that it can take a lot of work and coordination to actualize a family dinner (1991: 84). She explains that mothers must not only cook dinner for the family but also coordinate family members’ divergent schedules. My survey informants reported that even though they ate at home a median of six times per week during high school, they ate with other family members only five times per week. Women often put large amounts of effort into ensuring that the disparate schedules of family members (parents’ work hours and travel as well as children’s extracurricular activities) coincide to allow for a shared dinner and, consequently, for the development of their family cohesion. Although it is sometimes difficult to orchestrate and
organize, this family dinner is often worth every effort because my research shows that it increases social cohesion within the family as a whole and produces many positive effects for individual family members.

When a parent is not home to prepare dinner, some children blame their mother (not their father) for not providing them with dinner. One American respondent, John, stated that his family orders take-out dinner during the evenings that his mother teaches. Perhaps to lament or to qualify this statement, he says “Before she went back to work she cooked every night.” For some readers, John’s statement might indicate that he resents that work often takes his mother away from him. Similarly, 14-year-old Jackie Bailey from New Zealand usually expected her mother to provide dinner for her. On one occasion when Lyn had had a particularly long day of work, she prepared a dinner that Jackie refused to eat with her parents and me. Then, after Lyn had settled down on a comfortable couch by the TV, Jackie urged her mother to get up and “help” her reheat the meal. Lyn is an over-indulgent mother and, even after serving her daughter and handing her the plate to reheat it in the microwave oven, Jackie asked how long she should reheat it. These examples show how children uphold society’s expectations of the mother’s role in the kitchen. Consequently, mothers, not fathers, are usually forced to uphold these expectations of providing for the family.

A mother can also feel burdened by having to think of new menus and prepare dinner every day while catering to her family members’ different tastes. I observed that Lyn Bailey was expected to stock the pantry constantly to ensure that everyone’s favorite foods were always available. Consequently, when her daughter Jackie’s favorite food was gone, Jackie considered this to be Lyn’s fault. Similarly, Lyn always tried to think of new and different meals to prepare. One day, in response to Jackie’s whining about being hungry and about her mother not knowing what they would have for dinner, Lyn responded, “You’ve got to be creative; we’ll concoct something!” Lyn, like other women, uses cookbooks and talks with friends to learn about and try new recipes while creatively preparing dinner every day.

Lyn feels that she has an easier job in the kitchen than other New Zealand women whose husbands expect traditional dinners each night to consist of meat, potatoes, and vegetables. Lyn said, “I’m lucky, really, because Bob will eat just about anything.” Nevertheless, Lyn’s work in the kitchen is limited by the external factor of her family members’ likes and dislikes. Even though Bob Bailey is not a picky eater, he does expect that a dinner must contain meat for him to consider it a “real” dinner. Jackie also limits dinner choices because she is an extremely picky eater and Lyn is often forced to modify recipes or even prepare a separate meal for her 14-year-old daughter who refuses to eat many dishes that contain particular vegetables or fish (aside from canned tuna or fried fish). In these ways, family eating habits and individual tastes can make it burdensome for some women to fulfill their role of preparing innovative, delicious, and different dinner dishes each night.
“Sharing” the Cooking

Although many couples aim to share the work involved in dinner preparation, this does not often happen in reality. When Bob and Lyn Bailey cooked together, the complete orchestration of the dinner usually continued to fall into Lyn’s set of duties. One night, as Bob cooked fish in a peanut vegetable sauce for the main dish, Lyn independently took care of all of the side salad as well as the alternative dinner option for Jackie who does not eat fish. Even though Bob contributed to the dinner by preparing the main dish, Lyn still had to cater to Jackie’s tastes, prepare the side dish, and orchestrate the meal’s timing to serve one, complete dinner at the same time to all family members.

Similarly, a husband can offer to cook although his wife is often forced to remind him and cajole him into fulfilling his dinner offer. Hochschild (1989) gives examples of this phenomenon, and Lyn exemplifies this behavior in my own study. On one occasion, Bob and Lyn had talked about cooking a fish dish together when Jackie would be out with friends. Bob and Lyn relaxed and watched the news and then Lyn asked Bob about preparing the fish dish that they had planned. Bob replied that that “sounds good” but made no effort to head towards the kitchen. Lyn proceeded to remind him that she would cook the rice but that he was the one who had to cook the fish that night if they were to have dinner. Situations such as this occur relatively frequently for women in general, and Hoschild (1998) states that they can create a sense of animosity when a wife feels that she has to constantly remind her husband to keep up his end of the bargain and fulfill even some of the dinner work.

Men can, however, fulfill other roles in contributing to the family meal besides cooking. One American respondent, Laura, recounts that “My mom makes homemade cinnamon rolls for breakfast on Sundays before church, and my dad helps with making chai and getting us out the door [to church on time].” Even though Laura’s father does not equally contribute to the cooking, his work of coordinating the family’s breakfast is equally valued. Similarly, Sam recounts, “My father would have gotten up early and brought back bagels and lox and my mom would prepare fruit and my brother would make eggs while my sister and I set up.” These examples show fathers contribute to breakfast preparation and other duties alongside mothers on the weekends when everyone is home with the family.

Is Dad in the Kitchen? Fathers and Cooking

As time progresses, more and more fathers are taking on a greater role in the kitchen to contribute to the family. In particular, young men and men who have working wives tend to take on more of the cooking (Harnack et al. 1998). Beyond fulfilling the manly role of barbecuing, though, men’s cooking in the kitchen tends to be glorified as a special event and is often accompanied with accolades to promote what is seen as men’s good behavior (Hollows 2002; Inness 2001). This was true of the fathers of the American respondents who help to prepare weekend breakfasts. Several respondents stated that their father helps to make Sunday breakfast a special event: Abby says that “On Saturday mornings,
my dad makes breakfast and we go out with my dad’s whole family on Sunday mornings.” Furthermore, as previously mentioned, both Sam’s and Laura’s families work together respectively to create a special weekend meal. In these ways, fathers can often make up for their lack of contribution to the family dinner during the week by contributing to special breakfasts on the weekends.

In New Zealand, Bob Bailey’s cooking habits are similar to those of the aforementioned American fathers. Bob helps out with the family dinners more often than other men and contributes by trying to share the work with Lyn or by going on a cooking frenzy and preparing an entire, extravagant meal himself. During the summer, Bob barbecues frequently and, on a daily basis, Bob helps to clean up and put the dishes in the dishwasher after dinner. Later on in the evening, when the family tends to relax while watching TV, Bob prepares tea and coffee while serving beverages and store-bought cookies to each member of the family. In these ways, Bob contributes to the family on a daily basis. On one particular occasion, Lyn’s friend Vikki came to dinner. When she saw that Bob was engaging in the particularly large task of cleaning up in the kitchen after a big dinner, Vikki complemented him on his work and said that something like that would never happen at her house. Vikki’s husband is a venison farmer and apparently leaves his dirty dishes on the table when he is finished with them and lets Vikki wash all of the dishes for the whole family after having prepared dinner.

Vikki’s complement of Bob’s housework contributions upholds Hollows’ (2002) and Inness’ (2001) research stating that men’s work in the kitchen is usually disproportionately praised as compared to the work of women. Bob was thrilled that Vikki complemented him on being a good man-around-the-house. However, Bob did say that his wife would “run him out of the house” if he did not do his share of the work. Although Bob did observe that most male farmers do not tend to help with household chores and kitchen work, Bob did not think that it was rare for city men in New Zealand to help with dinner preparation or to clean up after the meal. Bob thinks that most city men acknowledge that their wives have previously taken on much of the household work.

Bob not only sees it as his duty to help out in the kitchen when he can, but he also finds it fun to “piddle around with cooking,” especially experimental cooking in which he loves to try out new dishes and throw in the various ingredients. Every week or two, Bob prepares a big meal that Hollows (2002) and Inness (2001) refer to as a special event. Bob’s cooking tends to be resourceful, creative, and enjoyable. He usually has lots of energy for the preparation of these special meals and goes on cooking campaigns while inventorying all of the cupboards and the fridge to use up lots of different ingredients in a creative fashion. For example, on one occasion Bob concocted rice pancakes that were reminiscent of potato pancakes in an effort to use up left-over rice. During a different cooking frenzy, Bob decided to make corn pancakes and conducted a determined search of the pantry cupboard to find canned corn. Luckily, he found the last can and, even though the recipe called...
for two cans, Bob was able to manipulate
the recipe to make delicious fried corn
cakes through improvisation. As is typical
of Bob’s enthusiasm for cooking, this
dish was based on an established recipe
that he manipulated slightly while adding
in different ingredients on a whim. These
examples show how Bob enjoys cooking,
experimenting to concoct interesting
dishes, and contributing to the family
meal as a special event.

Women’s Cooking as a Rewarding
Experience

My American survey respondents,
although limited in how much they
explained about their family meal, tended
to glorify their mother’s cooking. Now
that they are at college and not regularly
sharing family dinners, many of these
students enjoyed reminiscing about their
mother’s good cooking. Alison stated,
“My mother is an excellent cook, and I
actually don’t think I really could pick a
favorite [home-cooked dinner].” Another
respondent, Brian, also praised his
mother’s delicious cooking and prided
himself on the fact that his mother’s
home-cooking was even coveted among
his friends. Brian wrote that his favorite
dinner is “this pasta/ ground meat/ chip
dish that my mom makes... [and that] my
friends will even come over to eat when
my mom makes it.” In this way, a
mother’s cooking becomes a prized form
of cultural and even social capital that is
highly esteemed among friends.

Lyn Bailey from New Zealand also
prided herself in her ability to provide
special dishes for her family although she
sometimes felt burdened by preparing the
daily meal. As Devasahayam (2005) has
suggested, women may see their food
provision as a way of giving their family a
gift that includes a piece of herself and
her culture. For example, Lyn gave her
family the gift of wonderfully prepared
picnic goodies when she spent hours
preparing an extravagant picnic that her
family could bring on their weekend day
trip to the lowland lakes around the
mountains of the New Zealand Southern
Alps. For the picnic, Lyn had prepared a
spread of ingredients with which the
family could make sandwiches, hot water
brought in a thermos for tea and coffee,
and Lyn’s homemade fruit cake. Lyn
spent several days planning what she
would buy and prepare for this picnic
and, when she was able to enjoy the
picnic by Lake Heron with her family,
Lyn felt that preparing the traditional
New Zealand picnic demonstrated her
care and her love for her family.
Similarly, for her husband Bob’s
birthday, Lyn gave him the gift of an
elaborate dinner. She prepared various
appetizers, salads, and main dishes along
with a traditional New Zealand pavlova
for dessert. Lyn enjoyed preparing for
these special occasions because she was
able to give a part of herself to her family
members while maintaining their
traditional culture. Although Lyn often
saw her daily duty of making dinner for
the family as a burden, she relished how
she could uphold the persona of the “do
it-all” working mother, wife, cook, and
hostess when she was publicly
acknowledged for all of her hard work.

Socialization and Social Cohesion

My research shows clearly that the
frequency with which family members eat
dinner together strongly influences family
bonding and the formation of social
cohesion within the family. When the
family members of an American
informant ate together more often when
he/she was a child and in high school, sharing dinners more frequently helped them to form a better sense of family unity. Furthermore, the quality of the time they spent together is also important, as evidenced by my data that families who ate together at the dinner table in a more structured environment that promoted conversation also tend to develop a deeper sense of cohesion.

Durkheim writes “of the need of upholding and reaffirming, at regular intervals, the collective sentiments and ideas which give it its unity and individuality” (1972 [1912]: 243). Although Durkheim speaks here of religious rituals, the same is true for the routine of the family meal in how it helps families to reaffirm collective practices and beliefs while also strengthening their family bonds.

The ritual of the family dinner not only produces social cohesion but also helps to serve as an occasion during which parents can socialize their children with familial, cultural, and societal values. Many of the American respondents of my survey stated that they enjoy cooking with their parents, primarily their mothers. Cooking together can be an ideal time for parents and children to talk together. Furthermore, parents often teach their children how to cook and, in so doing, pass on special family recipes and cooking skills.

In my case study of the New Zealand family, Jackie Bailey loved helping her mother with grocery shopping. However, this is often because Lyn buys her special treats at the store even though Lyn often complains that she buys too much when Jackie accompanies her to the store. As for cooking, I observed that Lyn often felt burdened by cooking and did often cook with Jackie because she did not see it as a fun way to spend time with her daughter. Jackie and Lyn often joked, though, that Jackie only knew how to cook two dishes: nachos cooked in the microwave oven with canned spaghetti on top or nachos with canned spaghetti and cheese on top. Even though Lyn urged her daughter to try cooking other easy dishes such as chicken kebabs on the George Foreman grill, Jackie replied, “But I like nachos.”

Here, Lyn tried to socialize Jackie by teaching her to expand her cooking repertoire. Although Jackie does not like to cook dinner, she does like to bake dessert on occasion. Lyn encourages Jackie to bake and, in particular, urged her to contribute to Bob’s birthday dinner by baking a carrot cake because it is Bob’s favorite. In these ways, Lyn tried to teach her daughter how to cook simple dishes and how to contribute to special family meals.

Bob and Lyn Bailey both focused on socialization while talking with Jackie during the family dinner and developing strong family relationships. Jackie tended to lead the dinner conversation and talk about her friends, her classes, and her activities. Through their conversations, Bob and Lyn learned about Jackie’s school life and helped her to work through social or academic problems. Bob and Lyn emphasized building strong relationships at the dinner table that would extend into all other areas of their family life. Through dinner conversations, they tried to socialize Jackie to be a contributing member of their household who is respectful and who has good manners. The dinner conversation is an essential means through which socialization takes place.
while also developing children’s interpersonal skills (Blum-Kulla 1994). Even though socialization varies by culture and by family, Blum-Kulla explains that dinner is “both a sociable and a socializing speech event” (1994: 6). This is true with the Bailey family because a shared dinner at the table provided them with the opportunity to socialize and talk together while Bob and Lyn also used this time as an opportunity to socialize Jackie.

**Culture and How it Influences the Family Dinner**

The family meal evokes an identity specific to each family while also calling attention to the shared practices that take place at dinner tables within and across cultures. Each family’s cultural background strongly influences when, how, and what they eat (Feunekes 1998; Finkelstein 1988; DeVault 1991). The society at large as well as the family into which each of us is born greatly influence the values and practices that parents teach their children through food and eating (Harbottle 2006; Allison 1997). The family dinner, then, can have the power to coerce individuals positively by socializing them with collective beliefs and practices that help them to form a collective consciousness of culture.

Each family has its own family culture that exists within a larger culture that they share with others. Therefore, each family derives its own inside meanings from sharing a family dinner together because they can use this time together to share stories, catch up on the day, and plan for shared events in the future. On the other hand, dinner can be a contentious time during which families bicker and do not particularly enjoy spending time together even though they feel obliged to do so. Furthermore, family structures vary greatly and roles are assigned differently within each family (Fiese 2006). Therefore, each family is its own unit and has its own family culture (Feunekes et al. 1998) that promotes either positive or negative interactions between family members.

Many of the individuals who participated in my study were eager to tell me about their family culture and their traditions. American respondents often mentioned family traditions that fell into the categories of Friday night take-out or left-over meals; special weekend breakfasts; and more formal family dinners on Sundays, religious holidays, and birthdays. Specifically with respect to Friday night dinners, several Jewish respondents mentioned sharing a Shabbat dinner with their family; several others, including the Baileys, order take-out dinners; Greg said “Sometimes we have Friday fish night,” and Liz said “When we were younger, Fridays were left-over nights and my sister called them ‘compost nights.’” These informants show that Friday nights tend to be either special nights to celebrate Shabbat for many Jewish families or, for others, an opportune time after a busy week to enjoy a dinner with little or no cooking involved. No matter how involved a Friday dinner is, these examples show that weekend meals can create important traditions specific to individual families.

Observing the family dinner—from what is eaten to the different interactions between individuals—sheds light on cultural differences and various traditions and habits shared among members of certain cultures. For example, Fiese shows that children are socialized from birth in values and practices of certain cultures.
Although families and cultures can vary greatly, traditions tend to bring individuals together to promote social cohesion. American respondents in my survey mentioned many different cultural and religious meal traditions that promote family unity. Many Jewish respondents spoke of sharing a Shabbat family dinner each Friday and Rachel also talked about her family’s traditions during Passover: “We always cook for the Seder and it’s my favorite holiday. We cook all day (sometimes the day before too) and the meal/Seder takes 3-4 hours sometimes. We also invite family friends and extended family.” Rachel and many other Jewish informants stated how religious celebrations include important family meals that deepen relationships with both nuclear and extended family members.

Similarly, I observed that many other informants have fond memories of family traditions at Christmas. For instance, Wendy says:

Christmas, we always make flank steak and have dinner at our house. The first time my mom made it, my uncle saw what she was making and asked what the hell it was, and my mom replied “tongue.” From then on flank steak in our house has been referred to as “tongue.” We prepare it with mustard, ketchup and powdered sugar. [It is the] one time a year EVERYONE is present.

In this way, Wendy’s family has a running family joke surrounding the “tongue” they eat for Christmas dinner. This joke and the fact that all of her family members are present for the holiday create a special type of family bonding. For another respondent, Anna, her Latino culture enhances her Christmas celebrations because, “On nochebuena (Christmas eve) my family cooks a pig outside and invites all of our friends in town to come and eat with us. It is always amazing and most of our family from Miami even come up to stay with us.” Anna’s family continue their Latino traditions for nochebuena in the U.S. and it is a special time in which her whole family, like Wendy’s, comes together for Christmas.

The aforementioned examples of family and cultural traditions reinforce the findings from my quantitative data that informants who feel a deeper connection to their culture, family background, and heritage tend to form a deeper sense of family cohesion than those without these cultural connections. For example, Rachel’s Passover celebrations and Anna’s festivities on nochebuena helped them both to feel a greater connection to their family because they each enjoy cultural traditions that connect them to their family. Respondents who feel a greater sense of attachment to their family’s cultural background may have a greater sense of social cohesion within their family because they are able to identify well with their culture through traditions. On the other hand, if an individual from mixed cultural backgrounds and does not feel attached to any one culture in particular, they may have a slightly weaker sense of family cohesion because they do not take part in these cultural festivities that bring family members together celebrate holidays and traditions.

In New Zealand, Bob, Lyn, and Jackie Bailey enjoyed their family
tradition of Friday night take-out dinners while they also relished their own culture’s food. Jackie especially enjoyed their family tradition of ordering a take-out meal from Chinese, Thai, Indian, Italian, or Turkish restaurants. However, every week or two the Baileys would cook a traditional New Zealand meal consisting of roasted chicken (or lamb), roasted mixed vegetables (kumara sweet potatoes, white potatoes, pumpkin, and turnips), and cooked vegetables (broccoli or carrots). This traditional roast meal is reminiscent of the Sunday dinners that Bob ate with his family on the farm when he was a child. He remembers that his mother started cooking the lamb at 8am for their 1pm dinner. Similarly, these traditional roast dinners are reminiscent of the formal Wednesday lunches Lyn ate with her family at her paternal grandparents’ house when she was a child. At noon, Lyn’s father and grandfather returned from work to join her grandmother, mother, and sisters at the dinner table. Every week they enjoyed a full roast dinner. Lyn fondly remembered these big family dinners that epitomized memories of her paternal grandparents during her early childhood. The roast dinner is an important base to the New Zealand culture because it includes traditional local foods and, for many like Bob and Lyn, the dinner encompasses many family memories.

**Bourdieu: Food Displays Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu’s important theoretical work sheds light on stratification systems that he analyzed through the lens of different forms of capital (1984). Like Durkheim (1972 [1912], 1972 [1960]) and Mintz (1985), Bourdieu shows that individuals tend to inherit their economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital from their family (1984, 1998). Within these set social systems, Bourdieu argues that the individual has the power to change their position by gaining power in a field when they exchange one form of capital for another that is more highly regarded within a particular field (1984).

In New Zealand, the traditional dessert of the pavlova can demonstrate Lyn Bailey’s different forms of Bourdieurian capital. The pavlova is a widespread and popular dessert that represents tradition and indulgence in New Zealand. This dessert was traditionally made by farmwives who have a reputation of great baking skills because it is extremely difficult to make a proper pavlova with a crispy outside and a light, marshmallow-like inside. However, in the city, it is common for working women to buy pre-made pavlova cakes that they can decorate themselves. For Bob’s birthday, Lyn bought and decorated a wonderful pavlova. By buying a pre-made cake, she exchanged her family’s middle-class economic capital and symbolically evidenced her role as a working but caring wife and mother. Lyn whipped fresh cream to top the pavlova and then adorned it beautifully with chocolate chips and slices of kiwi fruit. She also exhibited resourcefulness and creativity when she and Jackie topped the cake with 7 candles: 5 candles symbolized 50 years and the extra two candles to make up the difference to add up to Bob’s 52 years. By preparing a pavlova, Lyn also exhibited social and cultural capital by preparing a traditional New Zealand cake for her family and their guests at Bob’s small birthday party. Lyn acknowledged different people’s tastes by letting the
kids and adults each choose how they would adorn their own pavlova with the additional dressings of fruit salad and two flavors of ice cream: chocolate fudge swirl or the New Zealand classic flavor of hokey pokey (honey comb). The pavlova symbolically referenced the family’s middle-class economic capital, their social capital and social know-how in the decoration of a beautiful pavlova that was sensitive to the individuals’ tastes, and cultural capital as seen through the traditionality of the dessert and its dressings of kiwi fruit and hockey pokey ice cream.

More generally, Bourdieu’s theory of the exchange of capital can be examined with respect to every family. I have shown that social class is directly associated with social cohesion, in part because of the various structural barriers in the society that make it difficult for individuals to coordinate a family meal. Therefore, the family meal tends to be a trait of middle- and upper-classes because they have a greater volume of each type of capital that they can exchange to actualize the family dinner. Furthermore, I have shown that both socializing and socialization during the family meal give parents the opportunity to instill in their children their values, beliefs, and practices that are manifested as social and cultural capital. Bourdieu explains that one aspect of social capital is “grasping the function of institutions such as clubs or, quite simply, the family, the main site of the accumulation and transmission of that kind of capital” (2004: 137). Therefore, social capital is passed on to children during the family dinner and this social capital can become important for children later in their lives when they take part in clubs and become generally active citizens in the society. Similarly, cultural know-how, traditions, and the human capital of credentials such as being able to cook different types of food are important types of cultural capital. Finally, the fourth type of capital in Bourdieu’s system of analysis is symbolic capital.

Symbolic capital uses symbols to display and manifest economic, social, and cultural capital (Garner 2004: 132). Food is symbolic in many ways because both inside and outside meanings shape individuals’ food preferences, choices, eating habits, and manners. As Finkelstein explains, social class, status, and culture can be symbolically deduced by observing what, how, and why individuals eat:

Styles of eating are elaborate gestures that enunciate and perform a culture’s specificities. Every group... evidences signs of cultural membership through the manners attached to food. The street kid, with a processed sausage in a bun, cooked in a microwave at the corner store, and the religious zealot following the dietary habits written down a millennium before, are both consciously describing a cultural location through their food habits. (Finkelstein 1988: 201)

In this way, food symbolically indicates a variety of meanings about an individual’s social class, status, values, and cultural knowledge. Through analyzing food and the family meal in a Bourdieuvian manner, we find that it can indicate a myriad of findings not only about ourselves but also about the society in which we live. Individuals use and
exchange economic capital in their purchases of food, social capital in their dinner conversations, and cultural capital taught by parents to obtain symbolic capital that manifests an individual’s social cohesion and their abilities to succeed as an active citizen in our society.

Habitus and Identity: “You are What you Eat”

Bourdieu theorizes that habitus forms the basis for an individual’s perception of the world (1984, 1998). Each individual tends to inherit their worldview and their habitus from their parents. However, within society’s set structures valuing economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, Bourdieu argues that individuals do have some personal agency to exchange one form of capital for another to form their identity (1984, 1998). I have previously shown that individuals display different forms of capital while cooking; eating the family meal; and sharing family, cultural, and religious traditions. I would now like to examine the common adage: “You are what you eat.” As Finklestein (1988: 201) showed in the previously quoted statement (page 48), individuals, families, and cultures vary in their views of what, when, how, and with whom food should be eaten. In defining these concepts for oneself, I agree with Bourdieu that individuals do have agency to create their own habitus and identity although their actions are constrained within a set sociocultural system.

Bob Bailey from New Zealand presents a particularly interesting personality to consider with respect to the saying “you are what you eat.” As I showed earlier, Bob enjoys contributing to dinner preparation transforming the meal into a special event. Bob enjoys using food and eating as a means of meeting new people, learning about other cultures, and expanding his worldview. Although Bob does plan towards the future in general, he tends to live in the moment with respect to food. In talking about the Maori native culture of New Zealand, Bob told me that the Maori eat what they want when they want. Bob agreed with this philosophy and said, “it’s my kind of culture: eat today and pay for it tomorrow.” Bob loves food, as he says, and doesn’t like to refrain from eating available food. On a different occasion, Bob criticized putting left-over food away to store for the future. He said, “That’s having to procrastinate, that is! Missing out.” He explains how he was taught at an early age at boarding school to seize the day whenever food is concerned: “that’s boarding school mentality: eat first or you miss out.”

Although Bob learned some of his eating habits at boarding school, his food preferences and his passions reinforce his identity as a New Zealand man. He frequently uses his own adage of “Eat today, don’t delay!” when he wants to encourage his family members to start eating dinner. He is a busy man who was taught to enjoy “a decent feed” when he grew up on a sheep farm. Bob is also a big man, but he does not mind this because he feels that his large figure is in accordance with his true identity. He says, “A lot of people have passions in life, and it just so happens that mine leaves a result, or an effect I should say.” It is true that Bob is a bigger man, but food is a passion for him. In particular, the New Zealand roast dinner represents traditional home cooking for him, and his identity evidences his core self and
also the portion of himself that changes because he loves to learn new things, experiment with his cooking, and try new foods from all over the world.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

Just as Bourdieu argues that one can exchange different types of capital for one another to increase one’s power, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs also emphasizes a theory of upward mobility to achieve success. Maslow argues (1954) that individuals must fulfill basic needs before higher needs and, consequently, I would argue that they must fulfill their basic needs before they can become truly active citizens. We can use the family dinner to analyze individuals with respect to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 5, from University of Maryland). First and foremost, the family dinner provides physical sustenance that fulfills individuals’ physiological needs. This meal satisfies hunger and tends to take place within the safe environment of the home. Therefore, the safe and social nature of the dinner provides a situation in which “the overall goal of the talk is framed as interactional rather than transactional” (Blum-Kulla 1994: 6). Therefore, there is a degree of equality between family members, regardless of age or gender, and they converse freely to enjoy themselves and develop social bonds with one another for communal and not personal gain. In this way, the family dinner provides a safe arena in which the family forms a sense of social cohesion and individuals develop a sense of self-esteem resulting from their active participation in family discussions.

Because the family meal develops social cohesion among participants and fulfills different levels of needs for family members, it is on this base of social cohesion that individuals can perform self-actualization. McDaniel explains that “Social cohesion requires the sharing of values, goals, and a sense of common purpose in community” (2003: 33). Therefore, in fulfilling the lower levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, individuals form social cohesion and gain awareness of others’ needs and values. It is at this point that individuals can express themselves through self-actualization. Thus, they can become active citizens who pursue goals that aid not only themselves but also others in their community.

![Figure 5: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs](image-url)
Active Citizenship

Active citizens work to help others and to strengthen their community. Although family cohesion is correlated with active citizenship in several ways, this is not to say that cohesion causes concern citizenry. However, based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954), I would posit that a certain degree of social cohesion is needed and perhaps predisposes individuals to work actively in their community. Through family discussions, children learn different people’s viewpoints, how to negotiate, and how to effect social change within the family to obtain what they want. Through this same process of empowerment, children can develop empathy for those less fortunate than themselves and take action by volunteering. Parents play a large role in socializing children in what they deem to be good values. In many cases, these values may lean towards helping those who are in need and working compassionately to aid others. I argue that active citizenship occurs at three different levels: developing self-confidence in one’s own actions, working to aid family members about whom one cares greatly and, ultimately, effecting positive work and/or social change in the community.

Active citizenship first starts with developing a strong sense of self-esteem and, consequently, individuals are able to become independent thinkers. I found that children of families who eat together more frequently tend to share a greater sense of social cohesion and are more likely than others to state that they think independently from their friends. Fiese (1992) similarly found that social cohesion tends to promote in children a sense of self-confidence. Furthermore, family cohesion can help children develop self-awareness and better problem-solving skills (Brody and Flor 1997). In these ways, social cohesion appears to help children to develop the first level of active citizenship in becoming self-reliant and confident in their own values and practices regardless of their friends’ beliefs.

An important characteristic of an active citizen is independence from friends so that the individual can make the right choices and not blindly follow others into situations that weaken communities or, more devastatingly, promote discrimination or abuse. Self-confidence, empathy for others, knowledge about the world, and reflecting on personal values can be displayed in daily life are all skills that help children to become active citizens who contribute to their community and fight for social justice (Facing History and Ourselves 2007). Therefore, self-reliance and independent-thinking are developed within safe communities such as the family and they promote safe risk-taking so that children ultimately learn how to become truly active citizens who defend their values and fight for the rights of others.

The second level of active citizenship occurs at the familial level. Social cohesion can lead children to take action to help family members to provision and prepare their shared dinner. From my quantitative data, I found that strength of social cohesion, families eating together more regularly, and conversations while eating together all positively affect whether an individual will report that he/she will voluntarily help family members to prepare dinner,
especially if needed and if time permits. Similarly, Grusec, Goodnow, and Cohen found that requiring children to participate in chores that aid the family helps them to develop a greater sense of concern for others (1996). Therefore, social cohesion and a strong level of bonding between family members can help children to make the time and put in the effort required to help family members since they are able to see the tangible effects of their work to aid those for whom they care greatly.

The highest level of active citizenship is effecting change and working to help others in a community. Within my sample of informants, I found a correlation between a) social cohesion, valuing the family dinner, and eating together more often as a family and b) the number of hours per week that students devote to clubs and community service. Although these data show a direct correlation that is not statistically significant and can not be generalized to other populations, this is an interesting concept to consider. I also found that students with a greater sense of social cohesion were much more likely to choose to cook a dinner actively with friends instead of ordering pizza to obtain their dinner quickly and passively. Perhaps reminiscent of cooking with family members at home, this active choice denotes that individuals often do wish to deepen bonds with friends by spending time together and working to produce a meal together.

I also found that informants with a greater degree of social cohesion at home stated much more often than those with weaker family cohesion that they would prefer to attend a club meeting rather than to play videogames. I would argue that videogames; the Internet; and superficial, online networking sites in particular create a certain type of interaction between individuals that does not produce true social cohesion. It is instead the face-to-face interactions with friends and family members that are important. Although it is an extreme action, school shootings appear to be a result of a lack of social cohesion because the child usually does not feel as though they belong in the community. In aiming to kill others and destroy the school community, a school shooter is the antithesis of the active citizen who chooses to learn about other people, empathize with and help them. Active citizens often seek out social cohesion with others who have similar interests, beliefs, or goals. Within a club or service organization, university students can become active citizens who work to foster communal interests, goals, and social change to affect a better future.

Policy Changes to Explore
This paper has examined the many positive outcomes of the family dinner while also looking at some of the obstacles that families face in trying to achieve the family meal. I would now like to examine several changes in policy that I would recommend with respect to my research. I have shown that shared meals help to develop social cohesion and, then, that cohesion can benefit individuals in a myriad of ways. I would of course generally recommend that family members should explicitly value their relationships with one another, that they should engage in shared dinners on a regular basis, and that they should maintain religious and cultural traditions while also developing their own family
traditions. I would also recommend some other changes in policy and in individuals’ habits so that we can strengthen our society.

I have shown that social class can gravely affect individuals’ ability to sit down together and share a family meal. For the working-class and the poor, I would recommend several structural changes. First, I would advocate a better food stamp program because Biggerstaff, Morris, and Nichols-Casebolt (2002) show that poor families continue to suffer from hunger and need more assistance to fill their physiological needs because the food stamp program is often inadequate. Furthermore, there is a problem in access to reasonably-priced supermarkets when individuals, and particularly members of the poor, do not have a car (DeVault 1991; Fiese 2006; Kotlowitz 1991). Consequently, public transportation systems should be strengthened and more low-cost supermarkets should be located in working-class neighborhoods. A stronger food stamp program and better access to supermarkets will provide the working-class and poor with better food with which they can fulfill their physiological needs first and then fulfill the higher levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954).

I would also expand soup kitchen programs in the U.S. because they promote “family” meals during which groups of individuals can break bread together and fulfill both physiological and social needs while engaging in a shared dinner. Muller (1987) claims that soup kitchens currently serve to reproduce social class because they do not help the poor in sustainable ways and because current programs do not often help the poor to exit the cycle of poverty in the long-term. Muller (1987) explains that soup kitchens are dependent on the charity of the wealthy to amass food supplies to help the rising numbers of poor people who seek aid at soup kitchens. Tarasuk and Eakin (2003) reinforce this point and show that there is an innate lack of stability in the supply of food at food pantries because they are almost completely reliant on donations. Therefore, I would propose that the Federal and State Governments should provide more funding to create sustainable soup kitchens because they are good proxies for family dinners.

Furthermore, I think that family-style dining should be introduced into schools. As many researchers in the field of education advocate, schools should create inclusive communities of respect and caring for others (Johnston 2006; Delpit 1995; Fine and Weis 2003). Family-style lunches promote both social and academic curricula by helping students to learn outside of class, create inclusive communities, and become active citizens in the school community. The cafeteria should not promote chaos but community. Teachers and staff members should dine with students while promoting discussions at the lunch table. Adopting this practice in the schools can help to create strong communities while also simulating the family meal for those whose families have trouble achieving it at home on a regular basis.

The obstacles standing in the way of the family meal are often a double-edged sword: they are fault of both the society at large and of individuals. Parents of all social classes should try to make changes in their lives to promote the family dinner on a regular basis. Fiese
(2006) argues that all parents can learn how to establish routines within the home. Although America should move away from what Weber identifies as the “iron cage of capitalism” (Rothman 2002), we can not only blame capitalism for presenting an obstacle to the family dinner. Parents have agency and they should try to take charge of and stabilize their work schedules (both in work hours and travel) to facilitate routines in which they can arrive home in time to dine with their family. Furthermore, parents should become more assertive in limiting the amount of TV their children watch in general, and they should not allow any TV-watching during dinner. Dinnertime should be family time.

Lastly, men should take a more assertive role at home in contributing to all chores, including dinner preparation and clean-up. Brown (2007) explains the intuitive fact that men can succeed in caring for and cooking for a community. Although I don’t advocate that men need to do all of the cooking in the home, I think that there should be more of a general balance in housework. Men should take their turn in contributing to household chores. If a woman does not want to relinquish her role of cooking for the family because she finds it rewarding (Devasahayam 2005), then men should at least help more with other chores such as cleaning. Furthermore, women’s work in the kitchen should also be given adequate credit and praise (Hollows 2002; Inness 2001). Although men have been contributing more to household chores and lessening the burden that is placed on women, I feel that they can do more to share fully in these responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

Through both quantitative and qualitative studies, my research shows clearly that the family meal is a fun social event that produces social cohesion within the family. There are many benefits of social cohesion that range from self-confidence, independence from friends, a stronger value of the community, as well as empathy and compassion for others. Even though social cohesion takes form in various ways on a micro-level specific to each family’s members, values, and practices, at the same time outside meanings and social structures are present at the dinner table in each home in how they present obstacles that influence families. Social class, connection to culture, and the establishment of family routines and traditions affect how families develop a sense of social cohesion. Although this is not to say that these factors cause social cohesion or that a poor family, for instance, can not have a strong sense of social cohesion because social class is directly related to social cohesion, there are significant correlations between these factors and social cohesion.

Furthermore, my study has started a dialogue concerning the ways in which social cohesion can positively affect active citizenship, and there is ample room for further studies concerning this correlation. Although there are clearly a myriad of factors that lead an individual to choose to become an active citizen, social cohesion within the family can lead individuals to value working with others for common goals that benefit a community. Today’s youth form and embody an active generation with lofty goals that aim to help others—whether through medicine, science, education,
law, or the work of nonprofit organizations. At the same time, we must recognize the powers that we must confront in order to effect social change: capitalism, social stratification, globalization, TV, videogames, and the Internet are all strong outside forces that can separate and weaken our bonds to one another. Instead, we must use these forces to our benefit in forming social cohesion and reaching our goals together while we confront global warming, human rights violations, and civil rights atrocities that continue to exist around the world. The values we learn at home from Mom and Dad over the dinner table resonate with us all, and today’s youth must use this process of developing social cohesion that they learn at home to develop a sense of social cohesion on a global scale with the aim of effecting social change to benefit us all.
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