

**The Meaning of Food
To Kids in Working Families**

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THE MEANING OF FOOD TO KIDS IN WORKING FAMILIES

I usually warm up something for dinner for my mom
if she's late from work (Maria, 13 years-old).

Numerous studies explore women's roles as caregivers to kids¹ (Abel and Nelson 1990; Gordon, 1996; Noddings 1996; Tarlow 1996; Waerness 1996). Abel and Nelson's (1990) study describes caregiving as an activity that encompasses both instrumental tasks and affective relations. Caregivers are "expected to provide love as well as labor" (p. 4). These authors describe caregiving as vital to the social fabric of our society because it feeds and nurtures those who receive the care. Therefore, to care and to be cared for requires an emotional bonding between those involved. Hochschild (1998) defines care as an emotional bond "between the caregiver and cared-for, a bond in which the caregiver feels responsible for others' wellbeing and does the mental, emotional, and physical work in the course of fulfilling that responsibility" (p. 528).

Very little research examines kids' perceptions of themselves as caregivers. Nor is there much research on kid's perceptions of adults as caregivers. This void in the literature may be due to the belief that a kid's primary role is to attend school and be socialized into a future adulthood of productive and/or reproductive labor (Morrow 1996). Until kids become adults, they tend to be viewed mainly as recipients of care (Prout and James 1990; Qvortrup 1985).

Kids' viewpoints and agency have been hidden behind a powerful conceptualization within sociology of "the child" as merely a recipient of parental care (Morrow 1996; see also Boulding 1980). If kids are the focus of a study, they are viewed as social problems (Prout and James 1990) or as one item among several on which parents can be shown to spend their time (Morrow 1996; Qvortrup

1985). As Thorne (1987) suggests. “[A]dult interests and perspectives infuse three contemporary images of kids: as threats to adult society, as victims of adults, and as learners of adult culture” (p. 89).

We fail to examine the acts of kids in their own terms (Boulding 1980) or the various ways in which they may be active participants in caring for the significant people in their lives (Coltrane and Adams 1997). As Boulding (1980: 187) points out, “Kids share the emotional and task burdens of family life”. If we want to view caring, as Tronto does when she argues, “[C]aring about, taking care of, responsibility, care-giving, competence, and care-receiving, responsiveness” ideally all take place in a holistic way, then we must see kids as people who are “constantly enmeshed in relationships of care” (Tronto1995: 142).

How are kids enmeshed in relationships of care? This paper explores the ways in which kids’ ages 11 to14 years talk about the meaning of food in their lives. I suggest that an examination of the role of kids in meal preparation and their assessment of preparing, cooking, eating, sharing, and receiving food from others, will allow for a deep and textured picture and analysis of kids and the process by which they construct their relationships (see, also Briggs 1992). It is, after all, food that gives kids the capacity to nurture others, to learn from others, and to demonstrate their caring to others. Indeed, kids’ discussions of food may help us understand how the world is organized in the minds of kids (see Morrow 1996; Orthner 1990; Nock and Kingston 1988). Participating in food activities may be one of the first ways kids begin to demonstrate caring for others.

I propose to explain the relationship between food and care by drawing on Barthes’s (1997) theory of food as a signifier and Call’s (1996) theory of “possible selves.” According to Barthes (1997), this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes information; it signifies. As Barthes puts it, “Food, then, is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication.

By this I mean, not only the elements of display in food, such as foods involved in rites of hospitality, for all food serves as a sign among the members of a given society” (p. 21). That is, food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations and for a group’s way of life.

Another way to understand the link between food and caring is to apply Call’s (1996) concept of the “possible selves.” According to Call possible selves are representations of the self in the future that help organize and make sense of past and present experiences. Given that they are approaching the transition to adulthood, adolescents may be actively formulating possible selves as members of society. Competence is integrally tied to the adult role. Images of possible selves serve to direct behavior as persons who are motivated to pursue and realize their future goals (i.e., to become the person they would like to become or resist what they are afraid of becoming). Thus, kids who are able to carry out or be the recipients of acts (for example, giving or receiving food) may feel they have the ability to care for others when they become adults and able to play an influential role in their communities. I suggest that kids are not simply passive vessels waiting to be socialized by adults; to some degree, they can determine what messages are paid attention to, how to respond to those messages, and how those messages might affect the development of their “selves.” Of course, the quality of care in kids’ relationships with adults influences the kind of messages and attributes they learn to value and consequently the kind of care they give and receive.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of the relationship between food, care, and meaning as they relate to family, culture, and gender relations. I review the existing literature on changes to the family as a result of women working. I then briefly describe the research methodology used and present interviews in which kids describe their involvement with food activities with their families and at school. This paper suggests that kids’ interviews show elements of caring in the way they talk about food

activities and their observations about food, especially in the meaning they make of food and care in the private arena of the family and food and care in the public arena of the school. I conclude that kids' perspectives can inform our understanding of their perceptions of early adolescence and of culture and class differences. Throughout the interviews, the kids describe engaging in or resisting the kind of emotional bonding work Hochschild (1998) defines as being necessary in fulfilling the responsibility of caring.

Background of The Study **Food as Care**

Few sociologists study the relationship between food and care (see DeVault 1991), although most people have strong emotional feelings about the food they eat (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997; Murcott 1983) and the care they receive from their families (Nock and Kingston 1988; Morrow 1996). As Counihan and Van Esterik (1997) assert, food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food. Activities involving food often provide families with opportunities for interactions. Food sustains the social and emotional life, as well as the physiological being, through the cultural rituals of serving and eating (DeVault 1991). Food can also be used to illuminate the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of the family as well as reflect its cultural and economic background and parenting patterns. Using food as a basis of analysis can help to illuminate tensions, contradictions, and conflicts within families and demonstrate the forces of the social order (Delphy 1979; Charles and Kerr 1988; Douglas 1997).

Research on the meaning of food come from studies by anthropologists. Counihan and Van Esterik's (1997) study examined some of the meanings of food and eating across cultures, with particular attention to how men and women define themselves differently through their foodways.

Anthropological research on food has focused on how food exchanges develop and express bonds of solidarity and alliance, how exchanges of food are parallel to exchanges of sociality, and how commensality corresponds to social communality (see, for example, Levi-Strauss 1997). Authors in this tradition generally focus on food as an instrument of social solidarity. According to Meigs (1997), food and eating are intimately connected with cultural conceptions of self. Food as object and eating as act resonate with attitudes and emotions related to the individual's understandings.

From Agricultural to Convenience Food

Throughout history, family tasks such as cooking and preparing food and growing and harvesting food have been closely tied together. Only relatively recently have housework and paid work seemed like separate things, although they are still closely intertwined (Coltrane 1998). A few generations ago, when most households were agricultural ones and when work was usually closer to home, families were more likely to eat together three times daily (DeVault 1991). They had little choice because there were few other places to be fed. Cooking for an entire household was time-consuming and heavy work (Gillis 1996). Technological developments—new products and appliances—have made the material tasks of cooking much easier than in earlier times, and more and more of the arduous work of processing food has been transferred from home to market (DeVault 1991). Vanek (1974) and DeVault (1991) argue that between the 1920s and the 1960s, for example, with the introduction of “convenience” food, time spent on food preparation decreased somewhat.

Food and Gender

The studies cited previously reveal how food habits and beliefs both present a microcosm of any culture and contribute to an understanding of human behavior (Meigs 1997). Most studies generally focus on food activities as being tasks carried out by women for their families (DeVault 1997;

Hochschild 1989, 1997; Hood 1983). The sociologist DeVault's (1997) study of food explores the responsibility of feeding the family from the women's perspectives. In most American families, women consider it their duty to worry about family members and to take care of their everyday needs. Often, mothers (and sometimes fathers) focus on making sure everyone is well fed. But mainly, in these studies, women do the cooking and feeding while children are to be fed (Abel and Nelson 1990; Mead 1997). DeVault (1997) argues that women feel pride in feeding the family because they see it as an invaluable act of caring for the family. She reveals the effort and skill behind the invisible work of planning, shopping, and serving meals. Preparing and serving food are thus more than just work because they represent love and care that are given to family members (DeVault 1997; see also Coltrane 1998).

Food and The Time Squeeze

Today, so many women have joined men in the labor market that it is unlikely that many mothers are able to cook a traditional evening meal. Employed women want to stay employed (Gilbert and Dancer 1996), and often they do work that takes them away from home for long periods of time. In the households DeVault (1997) studied, men and women who worked outside their homes ate breakfast quickly, often before the rest of the household. In almost half of the households, kids were fed in the morning while their parents were busy getting ready for work. Many families were no longer able to share evening meals, or at least not as often as they used to do. Hochschild's study of work schedules of working families led her to conclude that many were "openly struggling with the time bind in which they found themselves." Most were "scaling back" by buying timesaving goods and services (Hochschild, 1997: .237; see also Shor 1998). One problem of the "time squeeze" (Shor 1998) may be that parents and kids will spend less direct time with each other than they did in the past, especially

because mothers are employed and fathers often are disengaged from child rearing and care, whether or not they are actually present in the home (Arendell 1997; see also Glass and Comarigg 1992). In studies of families and the time squeeze, we learn that “Kids are fed quickly” (DeVault 1991: 37; see also Coltrane and Adams 1997), but we learn little about the recipients of the quick meals.

In most people’s minds, mothers are still perceived to be the family cook (DeVault, 1991; 1997) even when they are employed full-time. In reality, they may be putting the food in microwaves instead of in roasting pans. According to DeVault (1991), working mothers’ food preparations were helped by the growth of restaurant trade and the tremendous expansion of fast-food franchising that provided new options for purchasing meals. Food industry analysts claim that we now live in a “grazing society . . . where individuals no longer come together for meals, but grab quick snacks here and there during the day” (DeVault 1991: 38). In fact, “convenience” has become the most important word in the food industry (*Los Angeles Times* 1999: March 7, H 30). The newest product coming from Nabisco, one of the largest business organizations in the food industry, features cold cereal already in the bowl, with boxed milk and spoon. According to Nabisco’s press release, “Kids can make their own morning meal while mom puts on her pantyhose” (*Los Angeles Times* 1999: March 7, H 30). The dominant idea is that convenience food, which has brought us frozen food, microwave meals, instant noodles, Instant Breakfast, Wendy’s Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell, has become a way of life for most children of working mothers.

Study Participants Method and Sample

The interviews in this study of 30 children ages 11 to 14 years were taken from a larger qualitative study of 90 children and parents conducted by Rivka Polatnick and myself.² Twenty-two

children attended Harper Middle School, a public school located in a primarily middle-class community.

Two attended another middle school in the same community. Six lived in an affluent suburban community. Harper Middle School, with an enrollment of around 600 students in grades 6 to 8, was located in a primarily middle-class city, where the reported median income for two working- parent- households was around \$65,000 annually (30 percent of the city's population) and where over 30 percent of the population consisted of college graduates.

Harper was selected as a site for several reasons. First, we would be able to gain access to a large population of children because one of the researchers knew some of the staff, teachers, kids, and parents. Second, Harper had a diverse racial and ethnic population: 34 percent white, 45 percent Black, 10 percent Latino, 9 percent Asian American, and 2 percent from American Indian and Pacific Islander backgrounds. Third, although many of Harper's students were middle class, there was also a small population of upper-middle- and lower-income students, which would allow for a diverse group of participants. We attended parent/ teacher meetings and diversity committee meetings where we discussed our research with a large audience of parents. We sent letters to all students, informing them of our research and asking them and their parents to participate in our study. We were able to compile a list of 150 parents and kids (90 of whom have been interviewed) from the meetings and responses to our letters and from a large list of parents we met at a parent/teacher conference. Most of the interviews in this study took place in a room in Harper's library. The library was selected as an appropriate place because almost no one was there after school hours. Because they were familiar with the library, it was well lite, and the Librarian was close by, the children would feel more comfortable talking with someone they did not know. The rest of the interviews took place at their homes at their request.

I conducted 24 in-depth interviews which generally lasted 45 minutes and three focus group interviews (consisting of three children each), which lasted 1 hour. Several kids who took part in the in-depth interviews had little to say or mumbled or tapped their pencils on the desk. Those reactions helped me decide to use a focus group setting because it would allow the kids to interact with other kids in an informal setting, to use their own language and their understanding of the world, and to set the tone of the interview and discussion (Lingua et al. 1992). There may be problems with this approach. For example, the researcher may miss the kind of nuances in-depth interviews can bring out, or if one of the participants decides not to contribute to the discussion, others may decide not to do so as well. But the benefits far outweigh the problems because most of the kids used the opportunity to discuss issues in an open and honest manner.

Of the 30 kids, 17 were boys and 13 were girls ranging in age from 11 to 14 years old, (4 were 11, 10 were 12, 11 were 13 and 5 were 14). They were from diverse racial and class backgrounds (14 were white, 10 were Black, 2 were Asian Americans, 2 were Latino, and 2 were of mixed race; 10 were upper-middle income, 14 were middle-class income and 6 were lower income). Twenty-one were from two parent households, and 9 were from single-parent households.

Information from the larger study on the Harper parents indicates that over half of the parents were college graduates, had some college or junior college educational backgrounds. Some parents were employed in occupations such as executive directors, business and computer consultants, and administrators. One parent owned a small business. Some parents were employed in occupations such as social work, junior college and elementary school teaching, and school counseling. Other parents were employed as office clerks, janitors, and waitresses.

The six suburban kids were included as a basis of comparison. Five attended private schools,

and one attended a public school that served an upper-middle-class student population in a suburban neighborhood. All six were white adolescents ages 13 and 14 years and from upper-middle-class, two-parent households. These parents were professors, medical doctors, and lawyers.

In this paper, I used the deductive method approach of letting the material direct the interpretations and conclusions and hypotheses. In exploring the theme of food, I asked a range of questions about what was prepared, cooked, and eaten: how it was cooked, and who did the cooking, preparing, and eating, all questions concerned material and social relationships. I also asked questions regarding their emotional feelings about food. The quotations chosen for this study represent the typical answers and emerging patterns.

The focus on kids allow us to examine the relationship between food and caring from the perspective of an age group rarely heard from (see Thorne 1987). If we take seriously their perspectives, we may be able to understand how kids create meanings of giving and receiving or demonstrate how kids care for adults as well how adults care for kids. The perceptions of this age group are important, because it is at the beginning of the adolescent years that kids begin to assert their rights (Gecas and Seff 1990; Erikson 1968), search for their identity (Kaplan 1997; Keener and Boykins 1996; Gibbs 1990; Mau 1992), and rebel against authority (Hazen and Shaver 1987; Fisher 1990). It is this age group that has the ability to interpret and influence family dynamics (Kaplan 1997; Fisher 1990), may be actively involved in their families (Fisher 1990; Hazen and Shaver 1987), and may be old enough to take on certain family responsibilities (Fisher 1990; Kaplan 1996), such as preparing, cooking, and serving food. In other words, they may have something to say about the way they care for and are cared for by adults.

Although the findings from this intensive study may not be generalized to other groups of kids,

these interviews are nonetheless important. If we explore the symbolic perspectives of food from the vantage point of kids and challenge the current conceptions of children and care, we may be able to see the various ways in which children use food to create meanings of giving and receiving or see how kids see food as a way to demonstrate their ability to care for their parents and significant others.

The Kids

Knowing what we do about women's work for the family, it is not surprising that most of the kids talked about their mothers' ability or inability to cook "real food" for dinner. These comments were typical: "My mom, in the morning, she'll make breakfast of sausages and eggs." Another child said, "Sometimes, she takes me to McDonald's for breakfast, when we don't have time, or she'll make me a cup of noodles." Or as 13-year-old Kenny put it: "If my dad's making lunch for himself that day and I'm not going to buy in the cafeteria, he'll make something along with his. But normally, while I'm getting ready for school, it's my mom who is making my sandwich." Several kids said that their fathers fixed an occasional sandwich or meal. Only one child said that her father cooked most of the family dinners. The interviews show that mothers did most of the cooking, followed by the kids. Eleven-year-old Timmy's interview reveals what other studies have spotlighted (Hochschild 1987;1997) that fathers may help by doing some household tasks, "My dad really likes to cook, so sometimes he teaches me how to make things." But a great deal of involvement with cooking (or other household activities) by men is rare: "Well, I don't usually do things with him alone or anything. I usually do things with my mom."

In the following sections, girls and boys will say that they perceive cooking for their parents or giving food to parents or friends as a way to demonstrate competence and interact with their families. These themes indicate that most of the kids felt emotionally connected to their families and friends. They

were compelled to take an active role in helping their families by eating “an Eggo in the car” on the way to school, by buying microwave food or egg McMuffins at McDonald’s, or by doing without breakfast so as to accommodate their parents’ work schedules. In some instances, the kids used food as a way to be critical or supportive of, cultural and class differences.

The Private Realm of the Family Food as a Demonstration of Competence

Some kids’ discussions of food show that they saw cooking food as a way to assert their competency and creativity to themselves and their working parents. Twelve-year-old Sonny proclaimed proudly, “Sometimes I make steak.” In case I did not believe him, he added, “Yeah, I’m serious.” Sonny had been cooking “since I was like first grade. I used to watch my mom. ‘Can I help with that juice?’ ‘Can I crack the eggs or make the grits?’” Like most of the kids, Sonny told of learning to cook eggs as his first experience with cooking. He liked cooking with his mother: “I kinda like got inspired. Cause I wanted to know how to cook like that.” A 13-year-old girl put it this way: “I want to know ingredients like what my mom put in her peach pie. It’s great.” Another 13-year-old proudly asserted: “I make my own dinner. I like being independent. Besides, I can cook. Just like microwave stuff.³ But like one time I made chicken. I had like one of those little chickens and I popped it in the oven. I can do spaghetti and stuff.” Thirteen-year-old Kenny was delighted to discuss his ability to cook a variety of food: “Sometimes, I’ll make barbecued chicken sandwiches. Sometimes I’ll make fish—like fish and potatoes. Sometimes I make Chinese salad, and sometimes I make burritos, all kinds of things.” Although it was not clear whether the kids were putting the food into the microwave or cooking it from scratch, pride over performing the cooking tasks were evident in these comments.

According to 13-year-old Maria: “Lots of time I am late [for school] but get dressed, take my

shower, brush my teeth. If I have time, hardly ever, I might put some toast in the toaster . . . you know. Get some butter and jelly, whatever I have time for.” I asked Maria if her mother or father ever fixed breakfast. “No, Everyone is trying to get to work.” Maria’s description of fixing her own breakfast can be considered from two different perspectives. Some studies (Aldridge and Becker 1993; Morrow 1996) see kids’ cooking as merely examples of caring for the self. For example, Morrow (1996: 66) describes kids’ discussions of fixing their own breakfast as “self-maintenance” (see also Aldridge and Becker 1993).

Call (1996) offers a more complex analysis of kids’ cooking and one that fits more closely to Sonny’s and Maria’s assessments of their intentions. Call describes kids who fix their own breakfast as being engaged in “helpful behavior” (p. 63). Maria was being helpful: “I make dinner if [my mom] doesn’t want to make dinner.” That is, Maria was engaged in doing more than caring for herself, she was demonstrating that she was an involved family member and could participate in helping the family cope with its busy schedule. Maria saw herself as an active participant in her family’s mornings. Although there is little research on kids as part of the family’s support system (Ray 1987; Ray and Miller 1994) Maria’s interview indicates that she certainly believed she was part of her family’s support system. While engaging in “helpful behavior,” Maria was also proving her competency.

Bird and Kemmerait (1990) studied the emotional stress reported by young adolescents in two-earner families. The authors found that kids who live in families that foster autonomy and self-directedness were able to adapt to the daily stresses of living with two working parents. According to Demo (1992), kids in two-income households experience growing up quite differently from those with stay-at-home mothers. When compared with one working parent households, households with two-working-parents report that their kids were independent and capable of learning new tasks (see also

Orthner 1990).

Food as a Gift

Despite the tendency to see kids as passive and dependent, kids can provide reciprocal care and services within their families (Morrow 1996): “But because we classify the relationship between kids and parents as one in which the former are dependent on the latter, we ignore what may well be elements of exchange and reciprocity” (p. 61). Several kids saw cooking for their families as a way to repay them for their care. When I asked 12-year-old David, “Do you do things for your family?” he responded:

Just last night I was hungry, and my sister, she kept on bugging me to cook some chicken or something like that and I did that for her, cause sometimes she does it for me. And if its Mother’s Day and I don’t have any money, I might make my mother breakfast in bed or something like that.

Eleven-year-old Josie also used food as a way to show her mother she appreciated her care. Josie’s mother left home every morning at dawn for the hour’s commute to her work and was often tired from the daily grind of the long drive and the stress from working at several part-time jobs. Josie would help her mother by cooking dinner for herself and her four-year-old brother: “I fix soup or eggs.” Josie’s mother, a single parent, had managed to get her family off welfare by working at various part-time jobs. Several days a week her mother left home at 6:00 in the morning for a six-hour job as a clerk at a local cleaners. In the afternoon, she left again for another six hours of work as a janitor at a hotel, and for four hours a week, she sold Avon products door to door. Although she was always home when Josie was not at school, most often she was “asleep or tired,” Josie said. I asked Josie if she was affected by her mother’s hectic schedule:

I know that she'll find space in between somehow. Like when she's off from working, she [will] come and sit down, kinda talk to [my brothers and me] for five minutes.

When she has a budget, she sometimes has to break it to provide for us. Like yesterday, we asked her if we could go to the store, and it was off her budget, but she let us anyway. [Me and my younger brother] got her a king size Hershey [candy bar] because we feel that she deserves it.

Twelve-year-old Theresa often cooked dinner for her mother "cause my mom, she's so stressed out that I help out." Although she wanted her mother to cook "Something besides those microwave things," Theresa also wanted to help her mother cope with job stress: "Whenever my mom is like down or something, I make her this nice little meal, she gets all happy." Although 12-year-old Theresa felt burdened by her cooking chores, she was still willing to be emotionally supportive of her mother.

Fourteen-year-old Angela wanted to give something back to her family: "My mom does a lot for everybody. My family, they're really nice. So I make things that are simple, that I know they'll like. Like tuna." The caring that David, Maria, Josie, Angela, and Theresa gave to their parents has characteristics in common with Mauss's (1967) notion of the gift, Gouldner's (1960) reciprocity, and Wuthnow's (1991) compassion (Tarlow 1996). As Tarlow (1996) states in her assessment of their ideas, "The essence of these theories on gift exchange, reciprocity, compassion, and caring is that they all connect human beings. To be caring of one another provides witness to the sense of family and community, and of one's identity as a part of it" (p. 81). In this study, David's, Theresa's, and Angela's uses of cooking as a way to repay their families for caring demonstrate one instance in which they could communicate the meaning of relationships: "The caring person has to attend to and be

sensitive to the needs of the other, act in the best interest of the other, be emotionally invested, and most important, do helpful things for the person cared for” (Tarlow 1996: 81). How many times the five kids cooked or prepared food for their families is of little importance. More important, at an age when many adults perceive adolescents to be completely self-absorbed, Angela could see the merit in making a simple tuna sandwich for her family. The tuna sandwich served as both a real and a symbolic counter to her family’s busy and stressful lives.

Food and Family Conflict

What these kids say about food underscores Tronto’s (1995) vision of people enmeshed in relationships of care. Some kids may feel more enmeshed in relationships of care than others.

According to Josie, her older brother did not feel the same need to care for his mother as she did.

When I asked if her brother cooked meals for anyone, she replied: “For himself.” “Why not?” I wanted to know: “Because he’s senseless,” she responded.

When kids believe that their families are unsupportive, they may become frustrated and refuse to respond to them in a caring way. In these interviews, several kids turned the discussion of food into a critique of their parents. According to 12-year-old Nick, whose parents left for work an hour earlier than he did for school:

Nobody fixes my breakfast. Well, I’ll either not eat breakfast or maybe go out or I’ll just get it myself. But my parents don’t ever make breakfast. Like they might make breakfast once a month or something maybe. If that much. If they do it, though, its on Sunday, like after church or something. I always tell them to make breakfast every morning before I go to school so I can wake up.

Nick was asked to compare his mealtime experiences with those of his friends: “I think it’s better. I

wish I was in their family because all their parents cook them dinner every night and they wake up to breakfast and they're more lenient or that's what I think."

It is interesting that Nick felt this way. His mother, who left home at 6:00 a.m. to take a bus and subway ride to her job 40 miles away from home, was an active member of Harper's PTA. His father, who had to travel a great deal for his job as a computer consultant, was also involved in school activities. Most often, their school and work demands seeped into the home. At dinnertime, Nick's mother was often on the phone discussing school issues or work problems and his dad was in his office or on a trip. Nick was not doing well in school, earning a C average the last year, and as a result could not qualify for the school's basketball team. His father blamed his mother for Nick's difficulties, often telling everyone that her involvement in so many school activities was causing her to neglect the children.

It may be that Nick agreed with his father's criticism of his mother. But he was critical of both parents: "I ask them a lot, 'Why don't we do things [on the holidays]? I'll like ask them all the time, but they just don't have any answers and they don't tell me why.'" Later in this section, Nick's sister, Deanne, and another kid will express a similar view.

Boulding's (1980) study finds that kids who are not close to their parents may care for the parents, but may not have much insight into what is causing their parents' to react to them in the way they do: "The more social experience young persons have, the more basis they have for judging the needs of others" (p. 175). Interestingly, Boulding found that the age of kids may influence the number and variety of empathic and nurturant acts. If anything, a wider and more imaginative range of acts is reported from kids aged five and below than from older kids (p. 175).

Earlier, I mentioned Nick's perceptions of his parents as being unconcerned about him. When I asked Nick's sister, 14-year-old Deanne, if she did anything to care for her family, she replied: "No.

Cause they always yell at me. I don't do anything for them." Questions about who cooked meals in her home were responded to in an angry tone: "[My parents] like to buy microwave food!" It also may be that Deanne and her brother were engaging in the kind of parent-child conflict that occurs often during adolescence (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1984). For example, I asked Deanne if she cooked or did other kinds of activities for her family. She responded: "Not really. They're bums." Like her brother, she reported that her mother and father were constantly "yelling" at her. She was reluctant to say that she received any kind of care from her parents when I asked her who cared for her when she was sick. At first she replied in a flip manner, "the bed." But she admitted after a pause she did "sometimes," receive help from her mother and father.

If Deanne is experiencing the usual parent-child conflict, then why did Theresa and many of the kids who also complained about eating microwave food, instead of what they called "real food" see it as an issue of the parents' job stress and long work hours? Theresa's earlier comments about wanting "something" other than that microwave "thing" stands in sharp contrast to Deanne's and Nick's assessments that their family's "likes" to serve microwave food, both in tone of voice and in responses to questions about caring for their parents. Although Maria (and most of the kids) said that cooking their parents' meals or cooking for themselves were expressions of their helping behavior, Deanne's microwave comments indicate that she was experiencing deeper problems in her relationship with parents whom she may have seen as spending more time with others than with her.

Food and Family Chores

Although kids most spoke of wanting to return the love and support they received from caring families and several, like Deanne, were critical of their parents' cooking methods, a few used food to paint a picture of their families as incompetent. Thirteen-year-old Sherrine complained that she had to

do all the cooking for her mother, a single parent, who worked over 10 hours a day for a computer firm: “My mom leaves before I do [in the morning]. And I don’t eat breakfast. My mom, she can’t cook. Like for Thanksgiving, I cooked the whole dinner.”

Call (1996) would suggest that Sherrine’s (as well as Nick’s and Deanne’s) situations may be devastating to the adolescent emergent sense of competence. In Sherrine’s case, it is possible that she felt required to meet family needs and demands that exceeded her abilities (see Call 1996). Instead of perceiving it as in Mauss’s (1967) notions of a gift as an act of reciprocity, she presented her cooking as an expectation of her. In other words, cooking was not perceived as a gift; it was a chore that she felt obligated to do. Sherrine’s comments, therefore, serve as an example of the flip side of the gift.⁴ Cooking for her mother was not a gift because it was required—and so she had a different relation to food preparing than did, for example, Angela or Josie. Similarly, Nick’s and Deanne’s comments also serve as examples of negative reciprocity. The kids did not feel that their parents were caring enough to cook for them or to eat with them as often as they would have liked. They were not going to provide reciprocal care by doing anything, including cooking, for their parents. In this regard, the class background of the kids appears to affect their sense of reciprocity. Josie and Sherrine were from single parent, working-class families. Although Josie was acting in a helpful manner toward her mother and Sherrine may have felt a sense of obligation to be helpful, their statements about their parents were different from those of Nick and Deanne, two siblings from middle-class professional families.

The Negative Aspect of Reciprocity

The word “reciprocate” can also mean reprisal, revenge, redress—a taste of one’s own medicine—to cite a few definitions. It is still reciprocity, but with a negative content. Most interesting were the responses of six kids who were from upper-middle-class professional families to questions

about food activities. All reported that their mothers or housekeepers did most of the cooking. Twelve-year-old Casey, whose parents were doctors, said: "Mom gets up earlier than I do. She fixes breakfast and lunch, she does. Sometimes I'll make noodles or fix soup for myself. Mostly [the housekeeper] cooks dinner." When I asked Casey if he ever did household tasks for his mother, he said, "I don't feel like answering your questions," thus ending the interview. I asked 13-year-old Jennifer if she helped her parents by doing any household chores, including cooking. Jennifer, who spent most of her free time involved in a variety of dance and art classes, said she was unable to do anything for her parents:

Cause I'm not available. Sometimes I come in really tired or something. I could do more things, but I just don't. I think my mom would like me to do more cause her mom worked. So she would like me to cook the dinner and clean the dishes. She says I probably won't learn to cook until I get older because now I don't have the time.

Casey's lack of desire to talk about the caring tasks he does for his parents and Jennifer's busy schedule restricted their involvements in the kind of reciprocity and caring reported by Josie who did it willingly or Sherrine who did it begrudgingly, but nonetheless, did it. Similarly, five of the nine kids from the lower-income families, like Dwayne, whose mother, a single parent, worked the night shift from six in the evening until two in the morning, also had little to say. In comparison to Jennifer's scheduled after-school activities, Dwayne spent his afternoon watching television or "hanging out" with friends. In response to questions about who fixed his meals, he said, "Me, myself, and I." Sometimes he ate "nothing" or fixed "cereal" or "eggs and grits" for dinner. To Casey, Jennifer, and Dwayne, kids from two different class backgrounds, food was not a gift to be given or received.

Food and Age Appropriate Treatment by Parents

I asked Sherrine if there were times when she felt that she was doing more than a 13-year-old girl should do? “Yeah. Like cooking for my mom all the time.” Earlier, Sherrine had mentioned being too young to cook dinner for her mother all the time. Those statements indicate a strong sense of self. That is, she felt she knew what were and what were not age-appropriate activities for a 13-year-old girl. In Nick’s comparison of his friends’ relationships with their parents with his relationship to his parents, he focused on what he perceived to be age-inappropriate treatment by his parents: “Most of my friends’ parents, they treat them like they are as old as they are. But me and my sister whose fourteen, we get treated like we’re 10 years old or 11.” I heard comments like this throughout the interviews, starting with what term I should use when I refer to them. I asked several kids if I should call them children, teens, or middle-schoolers? One 12-year-old comments convey the sentiments of the majority: “It’s kids or middle-schoolers. We get insulted when people call us children. We’re not children. We call ourselves kids, so kids is okay.”

Food and Family Togetherness

In Garey’s (1999) study, *Weaving Work and Motherhood*, she finds that dinnertime is central to working mothers’ descriptions of themselves as mothers. According to Garey, “Many of the women I interviewed used the term “family time” to denote to me that was separate from outside activities for everyone in the family. Sometimes family time was associated with special occasions such as Christmas or birthdays, but most of the women I interviewed identified “dinnertime” as a routine and ritualized family time (p.34).” DeVault (1991) found that the “concept meal [is] an organizer of family life” (p. 38). Dinnertime is not only an occasion to sit down to break bread together as a family; it is a time to reproduce the family, and everyone’s position in it, through activity and interaction. (p. 34).

In calling for an exploration of the rituals involved in daily, weekly, and annual family occasions,

Gillis (1996) cites a 1990 national phone survey of families with kids under 18 indicating that 80 percent of the families reported that they had eaten dinner together the night before, and 46 percent reported having seven meals together during the previous week. According to Gillis (1996), two years later, a study based on actual observations of families, reported that “only a third of families with kids actually sat down to eat together every night of the week” (p. 4), a far cry from our perceptions of the sacredness of the family dinner. From the kids’ perspectives, descriptions of dinnertime matched to some degree the survey findings reported by Gillis (1996).

Of the 30 kids interviewed for this study, 13 reported that they ate dinner with their family most evenings. Several kids spoke of preparing food or having dinner with their families as a way to increase family interaction. Rather than focusing on the time their families spend away from them at work, these kids were happy to share what little time they did have with their families, usually doing some kind of cooking activity. Fourteen-year-old Letia said: “My mom taught me how to cook . . . you flip them over.” Fourteen-year-old Amanda recalled seeing the movie *Soul Food*, about a Black family reunion, and being excited about its focus on family togetherness:

[The] catfish, the collard greens, the cornbread, the macaroni and cheese. That’s soul food. After [my mother and I] saw that, you know what she said? She said, ‘Letia, that soul food [dinner] is goin’ be next Sunday . . . make a list. We’re going to make some collard greens, macaroni and cheese, devil eggs, potato salad.’ And now, we do that once a month when we get our family together. And me and my mother, we just like cooking a big meal. It’s fun and I get to see all of my relatives. She’s teaching me cause she doesn’t always feel like cooking.

Cooking with her mother reinforced the bond between the mother and daughter and allowed

her to see her mother as a mentor. At the same time, she was able to help create what became a family tradition. Cooking for her extended family allowed Amanda to display cooking skills and give her extended family something to reflect the specialness of the Black culture, and family togetherness. In Carothers's (1998) study of middle-class Black families, she found that girls were taught "concrete learning" which includes cooking. Black mothers taught their daughters to be independent, responsible, and competent through chores, including cooking. As Carothers (1998) put it: "Through shared activities, women give their children substance and sustenance by being available to them and providing an image and structure for them to follow" (p. 323). Carothers goes on to say, "Mother's availability cannot be measured in terms of the amount of time" because the mothers in her study worked long hours and were seldom home until late in the evening (p. 323). Demo's (1992) study of activities working parents and children find time to do together found that preparing, cooking, and eating food with kids was among seven major activities working parents participated in with their kids.

When I asked 11-year-old Joanne if she ate dinner with her parents, she explained in detail that she was expected to participate in the family dinnertime, no matter what time they served dinner or if she was busy with homework: "They wait for me; like they'll say, 'Joanne, come down and stop what you're doing and come eat dinner with us.'"

Ten kids reported that they ate dinner with their family, as 14-year-old Deanne put it, "half the time." Four others said "sometimes." Twelve-year-old Joe, whose mother worked until late in the evening, reported: "Sometimes I don't eat dinner. Like I just munch around and just eat a bunch of snacks so I don't feel hungry. But yeah, dinner's around nine or so." In Deanne's view, the family dinnertime should have been central to her working mother's identity as a good mother. Joe's comments implied that he was willing to eat snacks or wait until late to eat dinner. He did not place

importance on his mother's role as the family cook. Three kids did not answer the questions.

Food and the Loss of Family Togetherness

Alternatively, some kids resented the loss of family dinnertime: Thirteen-year-old Martin used dinner as a basis for comparing his stepmother's care with that of his "real" mother, who cooked "real" food. During dinner with his father and stepmother:

We just eat dinner, we'll talk a little bit or we'll have an argument or something.

Sometimes there's a good dinner, but most of the time it's either bad or arguing over something I did.

Int: Would you like eating alone?

Yeah, I guess that would be better. I tell them all the time that I don't like frozen food, and they'll buy it, put it in the freezer, and they'll just tell us to eat that, and we'll be like, "Why don't you cook?" But my real mom, she cooks and I like that better. She cooks stuff whenever we're at her house. So I like that.

Making "real" food was important to Martin. As he saw it, his real mother cared. Martin used food in this case as a symbol of family disruption and longing for a time when his original family had been together.

Twelve-year-old Kevin's descriptions of cooking food underscore a story of a typical adolescent struggling with asserting his complex self and at the same time demonstrating his ability to care for others and to understand and handle family problems. In his first comments, he seeks to do what many kids do, use food to show his independence.

I cook Philadelphia cheese steaks. Nobody likes it, though. I mean I like to cook it because it's like I'll make it . . . and it's too hot for anybody to eat. I'll make jalapeno

Jack cheese, I'll put black pepper, I'll put white pepper, I'll put bell peppers in, and I'll put cayenne peppers in. They try [to eat it], but they can't cause it's too hot, but I'll gobble it up.

When he describes his mother as “always there” and as someone he wants to care for: “Sometimes I make her dinner. Cause I like to cook,” he displays an ability to overcome the urge to have his way and reveals that he is also able to show care for his mother.

Int: How did you learn to cook?

Butthole taught me. He liked to cook, and he liked to put beer in it. To make it juicier.

It worked I mean I'll drop a little beer in it, so every now and then if it's not juicy

enough, because the alcohol will just burn away, and it won't do anything to the flavor.

In his description of learning to cook, Kevin illustrates the complexity of his feelings about his stepfather, from whom he has learned to cook but about whom he has both negative feelings and concerns.

Although different from the way he cares for his mother, Kevin's concern about his stepfather's drinking voices a different kind of caring.

I'm [always saying] 'isn't it a little early to be doing this?' That's like saying it's too early for butthole to have a beer.

Although these comments may indicate that Kevin has copied his stepfather's recipes, Kevin's comments reveal that he felt he was the adult who had to take care of the child—his stepfather.

The Public Realm: Harper Middle School Food as a Cultural Identity

In the kids' discussions of food in the public realm of the school, the connection between food as a signifier (Barthes 1997), food as a way to talk about “possible selves” and the development of

competency (Call 1996) and the ways in which kids' learn the rules of presentation of self (Goffman 1959) while trying to bond on an emotional level (Hochschild 1998) with others become most salient. The three Black girls who took part in one of the focus groups used food as a signifier of cultural differences. When I asked them to talk about their food preferences, they chose instead to compare their food with that of their white classmates. According to 14-year-old Amanda:

[My] dinner, it's off the Richter scale. Not like when I go to dinner with [my white friends], I need to bring my seasonings with me. Cause I do not know why . . . the mash potatoes is so watery. I don't know why they do not know how to season food. They use that Swanson's broth.

The other girls agreed. Thirteen-year-old Stacey said: "They don't mix it [by hand]. They always say [imitating her friend's voice], 'Well the blender is good.'"

Amanda, warming up to the subject, compared her mother's cooking with that of her white friend's mother's:

Well, my mom can sure cook some mash potatoes. But [my friend's parents] they are the kind of people who have to look on the back of the bottle [for instructions]. My mom just says, Okay Amanda, fill [the bowl] up with two tablespoons of milk. She knows everything [by heart].

The girls' notions about cultural differences in cooking and food preparation tell us about how these 13- and 14-year-olds view cultural identity and race relations. While the shared cultural identity allowed the girls to reaffirm that they were part of a group with a distinct tradition and identity (see Williams 1997), I was surprised that the girls were so critical of their white friends' food. After all, all

three girls attend a middle school with a diverse population of students who are Black and where the school had taken a progressive stance in promoting positive race relations. The parents and teachers attend monthly meetings to discuss diversity issues. One would expect that the girls would have learned to be more tolerant of perceived cultural differences.

Despite the school's emphasis on diversity, the three teenagers' comments can be taken to mean that they felt somewhat isolated and alienated from the larger white culture. (Later they will question the school's commitment to diversity.) After reading the three teenagers' comments over and over, I began to realize that it may be that in order to feel good about themselves as Black girls, they had to develop a defensive strategy of creating their white friends as the "other" (Goffman 1965). Perhaps in the comparison between white and Black food, the girls were saying, "See, our food shows that we are as good as, if not better than you." After all, Amanda was the same girl who had earlier mentioned "soul food" as a way to bring her family together and reestablish her cultural identity.

While Amanda was using food as a way to establish her identity with a nonwhite culture, several Asian American kids used food to talk about the process of assimilating into a mainstream American culture. Kimmy uses food to describe the culture shock her parents experienced upon their arrival in the United States and her need to identify with a new culture: "They didn't know what pizza was until we came here. Or like lasagna or pasta, or anything of that. All they knew was, like, won ton soup and all that. Chinese food and stuff." It was hard for her family to identify with the strange American pizza. But they did finally fit in, something that Kimmy may have thought would be important if she wanted to make friends at Harper; she would have to learn to eat popular food like Pizza. In Amanda's and Kimmy's view, food is a symbol to be negotiated in the public sphere of the school.

One of the girls in the focus group had heard that Harper was going to change the food served

in the free lunch program. “I heard it from someone that they’re planning to take out the fast food, the pizzas. They’re going to put in, what they call slow food. Instead of having like pizza, you would have mash potatoes and a vegetable and stuff.” Although everyone liked that idea, they were doubtful about the quality of the food they would use. Amanda said, “Get somebody who can cook that stuff. Don’t give somebody that generic stuff, with your little patties that you get out the freezer. Get that real ground beef. You mash it up, you put your seasoning.”

I asked them, “If you were in charge of the lunch program, what would you do?” Amanda said she would conduct classes for the cooking staff and students.

Yeah. I think we start with background on the food, why it is here, where it came from.

Hamburgers, this is mostly American food, if you break it down to the neck bones, collard greens [I would ask them] where did that come from? Well, it came from the slaves the master would bring them scraps, make the best with what they had. Then once the masters found out that the food that they were giving them was good, they wanted them cooking it for them.

Earlier, the girls had been very critical of food they perceived to be culturally different. In this discussion, however, they acknowledged a need for more culturally diverse food. Stacey said,

Like [we could have classes] on Mexican food, Chinese food, and French food. So you could learn about different cultures through cooking. Maybe we could bring in our own culture’s food and share it. And you can get a good education and it would be good to the stomach. We need more down-to-earth classes. Tell them about religion.

I’m not Catholic, but I would like to know about their culture, their background.

In the three girls’ interviews, the self/other dichotomy becomes clear, with both race (not

wanting bland white food) and in the next section, class (not wanting to be perceived as someone on welfare) tell us how food as symbols becomes negotiated in the public sphere.

Food and Class

At one point, I asked Stacey, Amanda, and Letia who fixed lunch for them. Amanda said: “Sometimes, when I don’t have time, when I go to school, I just grab a cup of noodles, warm it up here. The teachers are nice; they let me.” I asked all the girls: “Do you get free lunch here?” Amanda was the first to respond: “You can get free lunch. I mean I can, but I don’t choose to. I don’t know why.” Stacey had the answer: “I think it’s kinda [a stigma] they put on free lunch. You’re suppose to be poor.” Stacey, Amanda, and Letia responded in unison: “[You’re] on welfare!” To the girls, free food was what Goffman (1965) refers to as “stigma symbols.” Whoever is caught receiving free food is assumed to be of a devalued status.

Int: So, you get stigmatized.

. Letia: you’re not trying to have people look at you like that.

Given the popular stereotype of the Black welfare family, it made sense to Letia that she should try to prevent people from looking at her “like that.”

Int: So you guys are doing fairly well, and you don’t need free lunch. What do they serve or free lunch?

Amanda:[Making a face]. They serve like bread sticks. I had their bread sticks. Well anyway, they serve like lasagna and spaghetti and . . .

Stacey: And corn dogs [everyone talks at once]. That sounds good when you say lasagna. When you get lasagna here, you get a whole change of view about that meat . . . that phoney bologna . . . [everyone laughs].

In their minds, the “phoney bologna” became a metaphor to illustrate the supposed lower quality of food eaten by lower status kids. Despite these tough criticisms, the girls wanted to be fair:

Amanda: They have good pasta.

Stacey: Okay, I'll give them that.

Amanda: And the pepperoni . . . it's huge. It's so big.

Stacey and Letia could not contain their disapproval for long:

Stacey: The pizza is greasy to me.

Letia: You get one big pepperoni, right. [Everyone laughs.] With the cheese that is so thick, God, I was choking on it once.

It may be that Letia was choking on more than the cheese. Earlier, the girls had focused on “soul food” as a way to preserve their cultural identity. Just as those comments revealed some insecurity over their cultural identity, the remarks about the stigma associated with the free lunch program and their descriptions of the free food imply a similar idea. The girls wanted to dissociate themselves from the free food for fear of being perceived as poor. It was so important to their self-image to appear as if they were not on “welfare!” (as the girls put it) that Letia and Amanda brought lunch or money from home to spend at the snack bar. But paying for snack bar food posed a problem for Stacey, whose mother, a working-class, single parent, did not have money to give her. The other girls, both from middle-class families, could afford to buy their lunch a point Amanda stressed when I asked her if she was eligible for the school’s free lunch program; “Everybody is eligible. But the people who get free lunch basically don’t get a lot of income. My mom owns her own business, and people think I’m rich.”

To understand Amanda’s need to assert her “rich” background, it is important to understand that Amanda’s and Letia’s families were part of the new Black middle class. Only since the 1960s, with the establishment of affirmative action programs, have many Black men and women been able to attend college and obtain middle-class status (Wilson 1997). Amanda’s father was the first member of his

family to attend college, and Letia's mother had recently graduated from a junior college. Moving up the class ladder required Amanda's and Letia's families to climb structural as well as psychological barriers to upward mobility, a climb that is full of "twist and turns" (Higginbotham and Weber 1998: 167).

Trying to circumvent those "twist and turns" may have meant constantly having to reinforce their cultural identity, a task made relatively easy by making "soul food" a cultural marker. Amanda's and her mother's desire to bring the family together around "soul food" dinners may have been triggered by the fear of losing an old identity while trying to forge a new one. To shape this new class identity however, required more work on their presentation of self (see Goffman 1959). The girls did so by establishing three rules governing their presentation of self: avoid being seen receiving food at the free lunch counter, be seen bringing lunch from home, or (and the best rule of all, the kids seem to be saying) be seen paying for food at the snack bar. From their point of view, free food would cost them a sense of self.

Those kids who were not involved in the focus group made the same claim. Maria's statement was typical: "I don't like those free sandwiches for lunch. I just go to the snack bar." To prove her point, Maria launched into a vivid description of the free food: "It's nasty. They have bad lunches. Like they make people sick. I saw some moldy bread once. And they don't cook the meat; it's all red and dripping and ugly." One kid said that he did not eat lunch "until I get home [from school] because the food is so nasty." Maria and the other kids' criticisms may not be off base. According to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fraud may be rampant in the free lunch program: "swallowing up dollars that could have been used to give [better quality] and free lunch to more kids." The article goes on to say that the finding of fraud points to a lack of "integrity" on the part of those who committed the fraud and has severe consequences for the "nutritional health" of kids (*Los Angeles*

Times 1999: April 2, A3).

Stacey, who could not afford to buy lunch every day, was able to depend on Amanda for help. “Sometimes when I know Stacey doesn’t have lunch, I go, ‘Stacey do you want this? Stacey you can have this.’ So I give it to her.” In this friendship, as Amanda’s comments make clear, were aspects of the gift and of the helping behavior-- necessary ingredients in all caring relationships. It is also possible that, in this case, being friends with Stacey allowed the two girls to accept someone who should have free lunch. But that acceptance meant that Stacey was obligated to “cover” (Goffman 1965) her lower-class status by accepting free food from Amanda and Letia. According to the girls, receiving food from a friend carries with it a different connotation than the one associated with accepting free institutional food. In this case, it may be that class differences were tempered by the bonding formed through their friendship. If this is so, then Harper Middle School has been more successful in promoting a restrained kind of class diversity and less successful in promoting any kind of cultural diversity—a critical commentary on institutional care by three 13- and 14- year-old kids. In other words, food is not simply a neutral or bland item to be prepared, cooked, eaten, and forgotten. Food has taste, color, texture, and, most of all, meaning to the kids in this study.

Underlying the kids’ perceptions of food is a worldview that emphasize relatedness. According to Meigs (1997), the self is blended in and through the surrounding world, and conversely, that world is blended in and through the self. Through her or his continual acts of food exchange, both as producer and as consumer, the person is constituted as part of a community. Meigs (1997) study of the Hua people of New Guinea shows how the exchanges of food are linked to bonds of social alliance and solidarity and have important implications for the Hua’s understanding of the self: “To eat a sweet potato produced by a person with whom one enjoys a relationship of friendship is to feel confident and to be

nourished; to eat the same sweet potato produced by a personal enemy is to feel fear and to court physical degeneration, illness, possible death. To eat a food produced by another person is to experience that person, both physiologically and emotionally (p. 103).”

Mauss (1967) also uses a similar argument in his theory on the meaning of gifts; “[T]o give something is to give a part of oneself . . . in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence. (p. 10)

Summary and Conclusion

Until recently, children and adolescents have been treated as marginal figures in the sociological literature (Thorne 1987; Coltrane and Adams 1997). The general assumption about kids tended to be that the obligations they had were to merely be obedient and succeed as students. Yet, if we think it imperative for adults to make sense of the needs and cares of children (Arendell 1997), then it follows that their views of how to care for them are part of that sense making. As this study shows, the kids considered themselves to be active participants in giving and receiving care and in having some say in their families’ lives. Most of the kids perceived themselves as making important contributions to their families by taking part in cooking activities or by presenting food to family members and friends in the form of a gift. In their view, and the messages they conveyed throughout the interviews, food represents a symbol of caring, whether it is the care they gave to others or the care they received from others. This view is illustrated by Josie’s notion of the chocolate candy bar as a gift for a tired mother and by Theresa, who may have resented eating microwave food, but willingly cooked food for her tired mother.

The issue of children’s participation in care, both of themselves and others, is relevant today

because members of the contemporary working family are finding fewer and fewer hours to spend with their children (DeVault 1997; Gillis 1996; Hochschild 1998). The kids' interviews challenge the image of the family sitting around the dinner table. Rather, the interviews are full of stories of working mothers (and some fathers) unable to cook dinner until late, using microwave food as a substitute for food prepared at home, and sometimes not cooking at all. Some kids, like Josie, for example, were asked to adjust to their parents' hectic schedules. Josie saw herself as a family member and wanted to help them. Others, like David, saw the family's use of microwave meals in negative terms and declined to be helpful to the family. In this case, the use of "not real food" expresses an important symbolic statement, but not in the sense of Mauss's (1967) notion of the gift as Josie's candy bar represents. Rather, the connotation of David's nonaction was more negative--not cooking food to counter the "not real food" he received was also an act of exchange. Perhaps David was saying, "You won't cook for me, and, in return, I won't cook for you."

In some interviews, food takes on public and private dimensions. Food in the private arena of the family was perceived as something the kids could participate in by preparing, cooking, giving, and receiving it. In the public arena, the kids determined where everyone stood culturally and racially, based on their food preferences. Public food was to be negotiated and to be covered up, as if the taste, look, and appeal of institutional food had the power to affect their self-esteem. The interviews show that middle-class kids used food to signify class differences when they discussed the stigma attached to those who receive free lunch in the school cafeteria. In their eyes, public food comes with a class stigma and therefore has a price.

In the interviews, class differences may have some impact on kids' perceptions of how they are cared for and how they care for others. For example, the upper class- kids said that they did not have

to participate much in caring for their families. In this case, upper-class kids may be perceived by adults as kids are generally perceived--as merely recipients of care and not as givers of care (Morrow 1996; Prout and James 1990). Middle-class kids said they did feel the need to demonstrate caring, even if, like Deanne, they did not always do so. Lower-income kids had little to say about caring for their families. Despite the lack of comments about food (or anything else), I began to believe that these interviews were very insightful.

From the givers' point of view, care is what one is doing when one is trying to address the perceived need of another. From the receivers' point of view, care is what one is receiving when one's needs—as one perceives them—are being attended to.⁵ But class ideologies of care intervene in the giving and receiving of care--by influencing both the giver's and the receiver's ideas about what needs really are and what a gift really is. So food becomes, in this view, an expression not of "real" care, but of the giver's and receiver's particular ideas of care. For the upper-class kids, preparation of food is not even a part of their upper-class idea of care—their mother or the housekeeper will do it. It is commodified, out of their care picture. For the lower-class kids, care may be commodified, too, but they cannot participate in the game they aspire to. The middle-class kids are in between being totally cared for and not being required to care for others.

If kids learn how to become competent members of society, (Call 1996), as I have mentioned elsewhere, and here I mean not just in learning practical tasks but also in learning how to be emotionally caring of others by demonstrating helping behavior, upper-class kids who are cared for and not required to care for others may have few chances to learn that competency. And the same can be said about lower-income kids. There may be several reasons so little was said about caring in their interviews. They may have curtailed their answers because they were not used to being asked for their views on

anything. There may be so few resources available to help them learn to care that they have fewer chances to demonstrate their competency. In other words, children who are rich in material resources can grow up to be poor in emotional resources. Kids down at the lower end of the economic ladder can grow up to be emotionally poor, too, but for different reasons. Middle-class kids in this study seem to have more options regarding their caring. Some were more able to care than others. This study suggests that caring is a skill in the same way that academic competency is a skill. Most adults already consider that academic competency is absolutely necessary for kids to be successful (in whatever way they define success). They need to see that kids also need to develop emotional caring as a basis for competency in life.

In sum, this research has focused on the exploration of the social and symbolic perspectives of food from the perceptions of kids across race and class backgrounds. This study is only a beginning, but, it does suggest that kids have a worldview worth learning about if we want to approach the subject of care with the attention it deserves.

Notes

1. The children in this study preferred to be called kids. I use the term “kids” in the same way as Thorne (1993) did in her study, as a way to approach the social world of the children and to take seriously their perspectives and worldviews.
2. Six interviews were conducted by a research associate.
3. The kids used the term microwave to refer to store-bought prepackaged frozen microwave food.
4. Anita I. Garey suggested the concept of negative reciprocity as the flip side of the gift in private communication.
5. Arlie R. Hochschild contributed this summary in private communication.

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THE MEANING OF FOOD TO KIDS IN WORKING FAMILIES

Abstract

This paper is based on in-depth and focus group interviews with 30 eleven- to-fourteen-year-old preadolescent and young adolescent children of diverse racial/ ethnic and class backgrounds that adopt the grounded theory technique of theoretical sampling. Drawing from the literature on care and the meaning of food, this study expands the dialogue about children's worldviews by examining middle-school children's assessments of preparing, cooking, eating, sharing, and receiving food from others and how these activities shape their perceptions of parents and significant others. The findings suggest that children distinguish between food served in the private realm of the family and in the public realm of the school. In the private realm, they use food as a way to express solidarity and bonding with parents, as a way to express competency and as a way to reciprocate for the care they receive from others as well as to express family conflict. In the public realm of the school, the children use food as a way to express disapproval of institutional care and as a signifier of culture and class differences. Overall, this study reveals a class ideology of care and how food as a metaphor plays a part in it. As a result, this paper also addresses the broader implications in terms of adolescents' perceptions of their future selves and of work and family issues and problems.