



Exploring unequal class logics of mealtime food socialisation. An ethnography of family meals in France and Australia

Fairley Le Moal^{a,b,c,*}, Maxime Michaud^c, John Coveney^a

^a College of Nursing and Health Sciences of Flinders University, Australia

^b Centre Max Weber UM5283, France

^c Institut Paul Bocuse Research Centre, France

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ABSTRACT

Regular family mealtimes are occasions to model food consumption and have been associated with health and well-being benefits for children. This study aimed to investigate children's mealtime food socialisation in socially diverse households. Nine families from France and five from Australia were recruited, ranging from lower middle-class to upper-class positions, with children mostly between the ages of five to eight. The data is composed of the observations of 47 mealtimes and semi-directive interviews with both parents. The results showed that food socialisation and parents' understanding of children's taste development were linked to the household's social class position as well as to the temporal, cognitive and emotional resources parents possessed at mealtimes, in a similar manner across France and Australia. The more capital and resources the parents had, the more they were able to perform an intensive food socialisation style, which led them to prepare balanced menus and get children to eat the food served. The less capital and resources the parents had, the more they engaged in a hands-off food socialisation style, leading them to serve more child-oriented and less diverse menus. Importantly, all parents strived to serve healthy food, but limited resources prevented some of them from doing so. These food socialisation styles were also connected to the development of different social skills in children: with the intensive model, children were closely managed by their parents at the table but also learnt negotiation skills, whereas with the hands-off style, children learnt to be quite autonomous in their eating. The findings presented here contribute to Hays' intensive mothering concept and to Lareau's class-based parenting models. They also challenge Bourdieu's differentiation between a taste of necessity and a taste of luxury.

1. Introduction

Eating together is commonly thought of as a healthy ritual. Everyday family mealtimes are advanced by public health authorities, the media and private organisations – in France, and in many Anglo-Saxon countries, such as in Australia – for health, well-being, and social benefits (Le Moal et al., 2021). In France, eating together was promoted in the previous dietary public health program as a way of achieving a better diet and reducing the risk of obesity, thus positioning shared meals as a medium for dietary and weight normalisation (Dallacker et al., 2017; Dyen & Sirieix, 2021; Hammons & Fiese, 2011)^{1,2}. Similar promotion

happened in the United States (Bowen et al., 2019) and in the United Kingdom (Jackson, 2009; Murcott, 2012). In Australia domestic commensality is also encouraged through education programs or via organisations such as the Healthy Kids Association³ (Dagkas, 2016).

This public promotion of regular family meals happens despite a causal link or strong evidence establishing them as beneficial (Middleton et al., 2020). Studies have associated regular family mealtimes with a better diet of children, possibly thanks to modelling healthy eating behaviours during mealtimes, a higher quality of food served and longer meal duration (Dallacker et al., 2017). These results do not demonstrate *ipso facto*, however, that it is family members gathering to eat together

* Corresponding author. College of Nursing and Health Sciences of Flinders University, Australia.

E-mail address: lemo0020@flinders.edu.au (F. Le Moal).

¹ Ministère des solidarités et de la santé. *Programme National Nutrition Santé 2019–2023*; ministère des Solidarités et de la santé: Paris, France, 2019.

² It is notable, though, that the studies included in these meta-analyses were most conducted in the United States; few of them were conducted in Europe and none in France.

³ <https://healthy-kids.com.au/parents/dealing-with-family-meal-times/>.

that causes these outcomes. It may well be that the reverse is true; that is, families with better eating habits are more likely to engage in communal practices at mealtimes. It is unlikely that causal evidence on this matter will be once and for all confirmed, as social practices can difficultly be analysed in a clinical manner. These findings can nevertheless be interpreted, and sociological research can deepen our understanding and give additional context to these correlational results. The type of sociological research presented here provides important results that help interpret the existing evidence, yielding leads as to how family mealtimes might be beneficial or not.

Beyond this debate about the association or causality of mealtime benefits, studies across disciplines have also indicated that parents in households across various jurisdictions and from diverse backgrounds view shared eating as a healthy practice (Bowen et al., 2019; Daragan et al., 2023; Middleton et al., 2020). Family meals are described as a norm many try to live up to; a view which is possibly sustained by the family meal imperative promotion and an ideological context buttressing an idealisation of family meals and home-made food (Fielding-Singh & Oleschuk, 2023; Le Moal et al., 2021). Overall, family meals are idealised and highly valued in countries throughout the Global North – like in North America, Western European and Nordic countries, Australia – and their institutions, especially in middle-classes and upper-classes backgrounds. Family mealtimes – also called domestic commensality (Grignon, 2001; Jönsson et al., 2021) – are thus positioned as a so-called ‘orthopaedic device’ for shaping eating practices and achieving better overall health (Foucault, 1993).

Other studies in social sciences research have shown that family mealtimes can constitute a context providing opportunities for socialisation to various meanings and values concerning food, family and how to behave in society (Anving & Sellerberg, 2010; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Cappellini & Parsons, 2012a, 2012b; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). They can be especially an opportunity to get children to taste and get used to new foods (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2015; Morgenstern et al., 2015; Ochs et al., 1996). These studies are, nevertheless, mostly based on families with rather high socio-economic resources.

The expectations that shared mealtimes should provide opportunities for socialising children to varied and healthy food are underpinned by the intensive mothering ideals, which exhort women to invest significant physical, emotional and cognitive labour as well as financial resources into maximising the development and potential of their children, in a neoliberal context dictating children are mostly a private responsibility (Hays, 1998). According to this concept, mothers must be ‘children’s primary caregivers, regard their children as priceless, and utilize child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive childrearing methods’ (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2023). This intensive mothering style is nevertheless mostly adopted in high income households (Brenton, 2017; Fielding-Singh, 2021). Following the intensive view of mothering, sociologist Brenton has developed the ‘intensive feeding ideology’, according to which being a good mother requires providing intensive food work (Brenton, 2017). She examines the limits of this concept and the ways that mothers fully adopt, are ambivalent with or reject this ideology. The prevalence of the intensive feeding ideology marginalises poor mothers and mothers of colour across different classes. For some white middle-class mothers, intensive feeding is too time consuming and costly, so they adopt a mix between intensive and balanced feeding – understood as an approach to feeding the children based on providing rather varied menus but without worrying too much about it – whereas poor and working-class mothers mainly adopted a balanced approach. Although not all mothers across social classes parent according to these ideals, most of them feel they are held to these standards and feel the emotional load that comes from them (Elliott et al., 2015). In this study, we set out to understand how family mealtime food socialisation is viewed and practiced according to socially differentiated households.

The concept of socialisation is understood here as an internalisation process, as a ‘way that society forms and transforms individuals’

(Darmon, 2016, p. 6). During childhood, children are in contact with their parents, these ‘significant others’ who ‘mediate’ the world through aspects inherent to their own social position, their individual characteristics and their life trajectories (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). According to Bourdieu, individuals are socialised differently to practices depending on their social position. The primary socialisation children go through constitutes their background experiences shaping their *habitus* – their internalised dispositions that will lead them to behave, think and view the world in a certain way – and determining their *capital*; that is, the amount and form of resources they have to navigate different *fields* or institutions, throughout their life (Bourdieu, 1979). Additionally, individuals take up practices in references to the social group that adopts them, but in opposition, or in distinction to other groups, therefore establishing a social hierarchy of practices (Bourdieu, 1979). Food socialisation is thus highly linked to the adoption of specific parenting style which varies according to class and race.

In the USA, Lareau has developed two class-based models of child-rearing based on ethnographic observations of working and middle-class households (Lareau, 2002, 2011). These models help us understand the structural effects of resource inequalities, symbolic frontiers and distinction rationales on daily family practices like eating and feeding (Bourdieu, 1979; Lamont, 1994). According to the ‘concerted cultivation’ model, favoured in middle-class households, the ‘parent actively fosters and assesses the child’s talents, opinions and skills’ (2002, p. 753). Children are enlisted into multiple activities that have a huge influence on family life, creating extra work for parents. Through these activities children acquire important life skills. Language use is central in this model as is the development of reasoning and negotiation skills. This concerted cultivation approach leads children to benefit from a wide range of experiences but it also ‘creates a frenetic pace for parents, a cult of individualism within the family and an emphasis on children’s performance’ (2002, p. 748). This concerted cultivation model is akin to the intensive mothering concept.

With the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ model, adopted in working class households, parents believe that ‘as long as they provide love, food, and safety, their children will grow and thrive’ (2002, p. 749). In these households, the children participated in few organised activities, and they had much free time during which they kept busy on their own or with other extended family members. The parents from these households did not focus as much on developing their children’s special talents, and they issued more directives to them.

We know there are high expectations across society as to what family members might achieve by eating together, especially health wise, but this remains a normative vision mostly coming from upper-class norms and our understanding of the unfolding and logics of commensal socialisation is still limited. In the study reported here, we investigated how the socialisation of children to food and taste during mealtimes might unfold differently according to class-based parenting styles, thus investigating how commensality is practiced and conceptualised according to socially differentiated households.

Although parents also keep learning as adults, and socialisation is ongoing throughout life, this paper is child-centred as it focuses on the way parents socialise children to eating at mealtimes. We aimed to better understand the eating process during everyday family mealtimes from an empirical perspective. Our current knowledge on the way mealtime socialisation unfolds in practice needs to be enriched by studies based on methodologies that can capture routine, embodied and interactional aspects of eating at home and feeding a family (Fielding-Singh & Oleschuk, 2023; Le Moal et al., 2021). To do so, we observed how the family’s class position was linked to the type of food socialisation adopted during mealtimes. We investigated as well how active children were in this socialisation process.

The research reported here closely examines from an empirical perspective the ways in which families from different backgrounds negotiate the multiple contingencies comprising everyday life. There have been few attempts to examine, from an empirical perspective, the

ways in which families work their way through the milieu of roles and responsibilities which constitute feeding the family. Despite this, dietary guidelines, and other recommendations for 'eating well' often render the needed changes as unproblematic.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

Family food practices are eminently subject to social desirability biases as parents are affected by norms and pressure about how to be a mother, how to be a father, and how to feed a family. Interviews can lead to the creation of incomplete or inaccurate materials due to these biases. In addition, daily practices are highly routinised, which encloses them in a 'black box', making reporting about them all the more difficult (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2006; Dupuy & Rochedy, 2018). These practices often fly under the radar, which means individuals are barely aware of them, making them difficult to recall. Since these practices are routinised, studying them through observational methods provides considerable advantages over the use of questionnaires or interviews for the study of everyday domestic commensality, where accurate recall might be problematic (Lareau, 2002, 2021). Studies on family mealtimes have been predominantly based on interviews although more recently, more and more researchers have used observational methods such as filming family mealtimes (Ayre et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2019). Ethnographic research based on in person observation methods provides in depth materials, a textured understanding of daily life, and highlights both the nuances in the daily attitudes and the impact of social structural forces, which cannot systematically be done through in-depth interviews (Lareau & Rao, 2016). The richness allowed by the ethnographic approach provides the possibility to witness repeatedly and document practices that often go unnoticed.

Compared to the number of studies that have focused on family mealtimes, very few are based on in person ethnographic observations (Le Moal et al., 2021). Amongst the existing in-person ethnographic studies on family mealtimes, the focus has rarely been on how class affects mealtime food socialisation differently according to the household's socio-economic background. Some of the existing ethnographic studies compare mealtime practices of middle-class households across two countries (USA and France, USA and Italy) (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2015; Ochs et al., 1996). The positions of the households are nevertheless similar, and the focus is on the national differences rather than on the class variability. Other studies, taking place in one single jurisdiction (USA, UK and France) are also based on a socially homogeneous group of households, usually of middle-class positions (Bowen et al., 2019; Cappellini & Parsons, 2012b; Kremer-Sadlik & Morgenstern, 2022; Morgenstern et al., 2015; Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Sjögren, 1991). An Australian ethnographic study on family mealtimes was based on a heterogeneous group of families, but this social variability was not analysed as such (Grieshaber, 1997). In a way, this makes sense as small samples of participants are usually constructed on rather homogeneous selection criteria. However, qualitative research does not set out to be representative, as with studies based on quantitative methods (Lareau & Rao, 2016). Conducting ethnographic research with a small, heterogeneous group of participants allows to document inter-class variability.

The design of this study is uniquely based on a combination of in-person participant observation of mealtimes, as well as family produced video documentation of mealtimes, and separate interviews with mothers and fathers. This approach is also unique in that the observation of mealtimes were either audio or video recorded and transcribed verbatim, providing a ground-breaking and extremely rich set of empirical data on family mealtimes. Additionally, the home visits lasted for longer than the mealtimes in themselves, which meant numerous informal conversations about food and family life were also recorded. Pursuing multiple entry points allowed to document in depth and through different angles everyday family food events. This depth of the

observation permitted a low number of cases, situations and families to be observed (Lareau, 2012; Lareau & Rao, 2016). It also appeared central to compare family mealtimes in France with commensal practices in an Anglo-Saxon country, in order to investigate how social class affects commensality across cultures. Fairley Le Moal (FL) conducted all the fieldwork of this study, led the interviews and did the in-person visits.

Ethics approval was granted for the collection and use of the data in Australia by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in 2020 (#8596). Ethics approval was granted for the collection and use of the data in France by the Collège universitaire de médecine générale de l'Université Lyon 1 in 2020 (#2020-01-14-03). The COREQ checklist for reporting qualitative research has been a tool in the preparation of this manuscript (Tong et al., 2007).

2.2. Population

The purpose of this research was to closely examine family mealtime socialisation in lower, intermediary and upper middle-class as well as in upper-class families. The participating households were screened and recruited accordingly. This demographic was chosen to be able to compare inter-class variability in family food practices. Bosc's conception of the broader middle classes was followed (Bosc, 2008). The later considers that social positions can be defined according to professions and socio-professional categories, which are built according to the work status (independent/employed), the sector of employment (private/public), the function exercised and the level of education. At the lower end of middle classes, there are employees, and at the higher end, there are executives and intellectual professions.

Family food habits are also strongly influenced by work constraints and time stress (Devine et al., 2006; Grignon, 2001; Hochschild, 1997; Jabs et al., 2007), as well as by lifestyles in general (Bourdieu, 1979; Grignon & Grignon, 1980). Additionally, time is socially and gender constructed in its experience and management (or lack of), and it constitutes, like income, a social determinant of health (Strazdins et al., 2016). The parents thus needed to be working professionally a minimum of 80 percent of a full-time job. Social class was also determined based on the income of the household and the socio-economic index of the neighborhood where the family lived. The greater urban areas of Lyon (France) and Adelaide (Australia), which had similar socio-demographic characteristics, were chosen as the geographical areas of recruitment.

To be eligible to participate in this study, the households also needed to be dual headed families (blended or intact), with children from 4 to 12 years. This age range was defined according to our subject of interest: our aim was to investigate how children food socialisation happened during family mealtimes. With children within this age range, parents take decisions concerning children's food socialisation, but the later are also old enough to negotiate and influence those decisions (Mathiot, 2014).

The mealtimes of interest and targeted for observation were those where most of the family members were likely to be present at home, that is to say the dinnertime. In the context of the lockdown periods during the COVID-19 pandemic, some lunches were of interests and included for observation as well, as the whole household could be at home during the day as well.

2.3. Participants and materials

The final groups of participants were constituted of nine dual headed families with heterosexual parents in Lyon and of five dual headed families with heterosexual parents in Adelaide. The families' and participants' characteristics are described in Table 1 and Table 2. The names and surnames of the participants have been changed, and pseudonyms have been used for the sake of confidentiality. The substituted names were chosen to reflect the actual names of the participants in terms of cultural origin and age.

The significant difference in income across the households meant

Table 1
Family and participants characteristics.

	Family characteristics		
	Total families n = 14	Families Lyon n = 9	Families Adelaide n = 5
Intact dual headed	11/14	7/9	4/5
Blended dual headed		2/9	1/5
Number of children living at home per household mean (range)	2,2 (1–5)	2,2 (1–5)	2,2 (1–3)
Age of children living at home mean (range)		7,9 (4–12)	5,6 (1–8)
Household income mean (range)		41,500–105,000 euros	120,000–300,000 Australian dollars
Social class			
- upper class	5/14	4/9	1/5
- upper middle-class	2/14	1/9	1/5
- intermediary middle-class	4/14	3/9	1/5
- lower middle-class	3/14	1/9	2/5
Hired help	5/14	4/9	1/5
Participants characteristics			
	Total parents n = 28	Total parents Lyon n = 18	Total parents Adelaide n = 10
Mothers	14	9	5
Fathers	14	9	5
Highest level of education of parents			
- Secondary school	2/28	0/18	2/10
- Trade or business degree	2/20	0/18	2/10
- Technical degree	5/28	2/18	3/10
- Bachelor's degree	2/28	0/18	2/10
- Master's degree	14/28	14/18	0/10
- Doctoral degree	3/28	2/18	1/10
Full time paid employment	26/28	16/18	10/10
Part time paid employment	2/28	2/18	0/10
Race			
- Caucasian	27/28	17/18	10/10
- Black	1/28	1/18	0/10
Recent immigration	4/28	4/18	0/5
- Hungary	1/18	1/18	0/5
- Mali	1/18	1/18	0/5
- Romania	2/18	2/18	0/5
	Total children n = 31	Total children Lyon n = 20	Total children Adelaide n = 11
Girls	17/31	11/20	6/11
Boys	14/31	9/20	5/11

that the upper middle-class and upper-class families could benefit from advantages that freed up time in their daily life. These privileges could be, for example, being able to hire domestic help (for cleaning, taking care of children), being able to send the children to vacation camps, to extracurricular activities and after school care, being able to order food instead of cooking, being able to buy or outsource the reparation of domestic items instead of mending oneself. Such advantages meant parents and in particular mothers had more time to focus on food socialisation at the end of the day and on weekends.

In France most of the households recruited were inhabitants of Lyon's predominantly middle-class and upper-class neighbourhoods. Their occupations were varied and included positions in the following sectors: the pharmaceutical industry, engineering (environmental, transport, informatics), childcare, education (middle school and tertiary), human resources, sales, secretary. Five of the French families were recruited by FL through Facebook parenting and neighborhood groups

that had thousands of members at the time of the recruitment, and neither of these families knew the fieldworker FL or any other of the authors of this paper before the recruitment began (Imbert, Comescu, Franquet, Obecanov and André families). FL advertised a call for participation in these groups, and the interested families contacted her via private chat. Four families were recruited through FL's personal and professional network: the Bourdon family through a previous colleague's professional circle, the Ferret family through FL's involvement in a local non-profit sustainable food organisation, the Lebrun family through the professional network of a friend of FL and the Nimaga family were friends of FL. These families were contacted about this study via mail. The five Australian families all lived in individual houses in suburbs of Adelaide of similar Socio-economic Index for Area, positioning them in middle-class and upper-class neighbourhoods (SEIFA). Most of the parents from Adelaide were public servants (teaching, youth worker, firefighter, housing, informatics, social services) and all of them worked full time or more. Four families from Adelaide were found through a recruitment company – via mail – and the Andrews were recruited through FL's personal network, in person: this family was newly acquainted with FL before the study began.

In total, 45 households from Lyon responded to the recruitment message by communicating an interest to participate. Thirty-five of the respondents were mothers and 10 were fathers. 18 of 45 households were not eligible to participate, of whom seven were single mothers, the 11 others had children outside the designated age range. Of the 27 eligible and interested households, 10 did not respond further once FL had sent them the complete information about the study and two responded that the study was finally too 'burdensome' for them. Of the 15 households who finally agreed to participate, contact was lost with three of them before their participation began, possibly due to the burdensome aspect of the study and the COVID-19 related lockdown period. Two other households did not take part in the whole study and were not included in this paper. One single headed household was included in the study, but the results were not reported here. One of the six families from Adelaide who initially agreed to participate, one never answered further.

Most of the mealtimes observed were weekday dinnertimes, except for seven weekend mealtimes, four lunches and three dinners. The focus of the study reported here was in majority on the week dinners as we looked at how mealtime food socialisation happened in households where both parents worked and experienced time constraints. The parents chose when they wanted to have the fieldworker over for the observation visits; however, if they invited the fieldworker for meals on the weekend as well, this was accepted to observe differences with week dinners. The overall focus of the study was on domestic food work and mealtimes, and the participants were told more generally that the study focused on 'family food practices' and how parents who work professionally manage to 'feed the family'. The recruitment message indicated that the fieldworker was a female PhD student in Sociology.

The fieldworker FL usually arrived at the family's home when the first parent got home from work and usually left after the table was cleared – or partially cleared – and part or all the dishes were done. For the video recorded or video-conferenced meals, the instructions were for parents to start the video before the table or other eating area was laid and end after it was cleared. All the observations were audio or video recorded and notes were also taken right after the visits. The whole fieldwork was conducted between January 2020 and April 2023, including some follow-up in-person visits at the Andrews, Bennet and Brown households in Adelaide between January and April 2023 (which were delayed because of the COVID-19 related restrictions). Most of the results of the present study come from a fieldwork conducted by FL for her PhD thesis in Sociology, a white female Caucasian in her thirties of French and Canadian nationalities. (Table 3).

Table 2

Family and participants' names, social class, family composition and age of children.

Family surname	Name mother (recent immigration: country of origin)	Name father (recent immigration: country of origin)	Social class	Composition	Age of children
Lyon					
Bourdon	Marie-Cécile	Benoit	Upper	Intact	8, 6
Imbert	Magali	Stéphane			8, 5
Ferret	Céline	Jérôme			7
Comescu	Irina (Romania)	Laurent			10, 7
Franquet	Nathalie	Lucas	Upper middle class		12, 10
Obecanov	Sophie	Viktor (Hungary)	Intermediary middle-class	Blended	6
Lebrun	Laëtitia	Pierre			11, 10, 9, 8, 6
Nimaga	Ana (Romania)	Issa (Mali)			12, 5
André	Angélique	Pascal	Lower middle-class	Intact	7, 6, 4
Adelaide					
Andrews	Megan	Jack	Upper	Intact	7
Bennet	Vanessa	Craig	Upper middle-class		7, 3
Brown	Alison	Luke	Intermediary middle-class		8, 6
Chapman	Amy	Glen	Lower middle-class		7, 5, 1
Davies	Sally	Adam	Lower middle-class		7, 5, 5

Table 3

Fieldwork materials: number and duration of visits and interviews.

	In person visits	Video conf. meals	Family produced videos	Total observation visits = total mealtimes observed	Total hours observations	Interview mother (median duration 1h)	Interview father (median duration 1h)
LYON							
Bourdon	5			5	8,45h	1	1
Imbert	3	3		6	7h	1	1
Franquet	3			3	5h	1	1
Comescu	3	1		4	6,5h	1	1
Ferret	1			1	4h	1	1
Obecanov	4	1		5	10,5h	1	1
Lebrun	7			7	19h	1	1
Nimaga	2			2	4h	1	1
André	1		1	2	4h	1	1
Total Lyon	29	5	1	35	68,45	9	9
ADELAIDE							
Andrews	3			3	6h15		
Bennet	3			3	9h	1	1
Brown	3			3	4h	1	1
Chapman						1	1
Davies			3	3	2h	1	1
Total Adelaide	9		3	12	21h15	4	4
TOTAL	38	5	4	47	90H	13	13

2.4. Analysis

The core of the data analysed for this paper is constituted of the transcribed verbatim of the audio recorded visits, the transcribed verbatim of the mealtimes video recorded by the families themselves and the transcribed verbatim of the interviews with the mothers and fathers. Photographs were taken during the visits and field notes were taken directly after each visit, but these were not coded; they were instead used as a means to verify information that did not appear in the recordings, such as time of arrival and departures or what was left on the plates after dinner.

This is a qualitative study, and the analysis sits between an exclusively inductive approach and a deductive one. A solely inductive approach would have implied going into fieldwork without previous conceptualisation of the research topic nor particularly set research questions, which was not the case here. The materials of this study were analysed by Fairley Le Moal (FL) according to the grounded theory with the aid of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (Charmaz, 2014; Lareau, 2021).

The coding process happened in several stages and was done exclusively by FL. First, some large, thematic categories of codes were created, based on the literature review (existing results and gaps). Most of the codes, however, were created afterwards in an open manner,

when going through each transcript. Once this first level of coding process ended, the codes were reorganised into new thematic categories according to a focused coding process (Charmaz, 2014). As 'writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of inquiry' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 1423), a last level of analysis was thus done during the writing stage (Lareau, 2021).

3. Results

3.1. Unequal food socialisations

The findings revealed that the food socialisation observed in these households varied according to socially differentiated understandings of children's taste development as well as according to the type and amount of resources parents possessed at dinnertime. There were more similarities between the French and the Australian households observed in terms of social class positions than there were differences in terms of cultural origins. Put differently, the households with significant cultural and economic capital in France resembled the households with similar capital in Australia in terms of mealtime food socialisation, and the French households with less capital bore similarities in the mealtime food socialisation with the similar ones from Australia. This is not to say

that there were no cultural differences observed, but the similarities according to social class positions were more striking, and thus more worthy of analysing and reporting in this paper.

3.1.1. Hands-off food socialisation

The lower middle-class and some intermediary middle-class parents of this study mostly resigned themselves to the idea that their children's taste was different than theirs as adults and that they would develop their taste buds later. They thus allowed their children to be rather autonomous in their eating, adopting a rather hands-off food socialisation and parenting style during mealtimes.

This did not mean that there were not attempts to socialise children to new and various foods, in particular, vegetables. Parents from these households were indeed well aware of the norms of serving varied and balanced menus within the family. At the Nimaga household, a reconstituted intermediary middle-class family from Lyon, the parents usually put out a dish of vegetables on the table for themselves. Even though the children – 12 and 5 years – would not necessarily accept any, Ana Nimaga, the mother-in-law, felt that it was still beneficial for children to get used to seeing vegetables being an integral part of a proper menu for commensality. She argued during her interview: 'We try to have a bit of vegetables, even if they do not eat, but you know, that they [vegetables] are there'. The youngest daughter of the Nimaga household did not like eating vegetables so portraying themselves as vegetable eaters was the first step in socialising her into accepting vegetables.

Another type of socialisation strategy to get children to eat vegetables was reported. The André parents from a lower middle-class household in Lyon tried mashing or cutting up vegetables into small pieces, mixing them up with other ingredients that their children – 8, 6, 4 years – usually liked to eat. Pascal André, the father, acknowledged, however, that this dissimulation technique remained a failed attempt at socialising children to green vegetables as they usually 'figured out the trick' and still refused to eat them. Pascal André reported during his interview: 'We generally focus on what the children will eat [...]. It's hard, because the children eat a lot of rice, pasta, potatoes, so we eat a lot of that because feeding them vegetables, it's complicated'. This concealed socialisation technique was also tried at the Davies home, the lower middle-class household from Adelaide with three children of 7, 5 and 5 years. This strategy revealed what parents considered important. Despite viewing children's taste as inherently different than adults, leading them to accept that they will learn to like vegetables later, they still showed concern for the ingestion of healthy food and feeding their children a balanced menu.

In the lower middle-class and some intermediary middle-class households, the children had more autonomy during mealtimes to eat what they liked, within certain limits. Amy Chapman, an intermediary middle-class mother in Adelaide, described her own eating behaviours as a child and how she was a 'picky eater' who would only eat fish fingers for dinner, giving her parents 'absolute grief'. During her interview she justified as a hereditary trait her children's difficulty to eat what she tried to serve them:

Amy Chapman: So, I say to Glen [her husband], we can't blame them. It's in their genes! If that's what they're gonna eat (such as Bolognese, hotdogs, carbonara) ... [laughter] unfortunately, that's just what they have to eat! So, I think we've come to that realization, that they'll grow their taste buds, they'll develop.

Most important for her children's health was for them to eat, notably in sufficient quantity ('a lot of carbs to fill up the kids'), so they would then have a good night of sleep. In the Davies family (Adelaide, lower middle class), the children – 7, 5 and 5 years – normally had dinner in front of the TV, without their parents. Sally, the mother, used screens to get her children to sit still and eat. They were given a certain time to eat, which they could appreciate by the number of TV shows they got to watch, and she expected them to manage their eating rhythm on their own. However, they often resisted fulfilling their mother's expectation,

leading her to put on hold the food preparation she was doing in the next room or other domestic activities to feed them. She reported during her interview: 'I usually just get impatient with them, to be honest, and say, 'Sit down and eat your dinner, you're five and seven, like just eat it'. This was also observed at the third dinner:

Sally Davies: (from another room, to all three children): Eat please!
Reminder: you've got ten minutes, and we're having a bath.

Dinner 3

Combining Sally's reports from the interview with the video observation of this dinner showed that the mother's focus was on the quantity of food eaten and her children's eating rhythm. This may be linked to the type of menus served: all three meals observed at the Davies family mostly contained carbohydrates and dairy and little vegetables (other than on the pizza) and the children usually enjoyed these menus.

The families observed who adopted this hands-off mealtime food socialisation often chose meals that they thought their children were going to eat, which meant either they adapted the whole menu towards their children's preferences, or they made some adjustment for the kids' dinners, without making two entirely different menus. This was the case for the André, the Davies, and the Chapman families. Amy Chapman, an intermediary middle-class household in Adelaide explained: 'So it's got to be quick; it's got to be something they like [...]. We choose meals that are gonna be what they eat, and we choose it that we all eat the same meal just to keep it simple'. Amy Chapman explained that both she and her husband were lacking time and energy during the week to find out and cook a menu that was both 'healthy' and that their children would eat. This rather hands-off, child autonomy oriented food socialisation style contrasted with the more controlling style of parenting observed in other families, which led to forms of intensive food socialisation, described in the next section of this paper.

Whatever the type of perception the parents had of their children's taste development, most parents – across all social class positions – considered that it was a linear process, food preferences eventually becoming set once they first liked something. Children's dislike of certain foods was indeed often considered by parents as being temporary: they were expected to eventually like the food they tasted and accept to eat it, on a long-term basis, whether at a very young age or later in their teenage or adult years. However, the children observed challenged this linear view of food socialisation, and often demonstrated shifting tastes, from one meal to another, commonly refusing to eat food that they previously liked. This type of confrontation between parents and children, happening across all the social class positions, is a well-known fact, but the results from this study show how parents react differently to children's refusal to eat.

The intermediary and lower middle-class household parents more regularly prepared children something else to eat, thus letting the later be autonomous in their food preferences. They found it particularly difficult to deal with their children's changing preferences, and they tended to adapt the menu towards these shifting tastes, considering autonomy underlined their food preferences:

Adam Davies (lower middle class): They're very, very fussy, picky eaters. So, we'll sit there, you know, one night, they'll eat spaghetti bolognese and then eat the whole bowl, because 'Oh, it's the best one ever'. Next night, they won't even touch it [...]. The other night, I ended up cooking three different meals, because like, 'Do you know what? I want you guys to eat' [...]. It's like if they don't eat something, they'll be up till 9:00, 'I'm hungry, I'm hungry', and they'll just eat stuff that's not good for them, so ... [resignation].

As with a few intermediary middle-class households, the lower middle-class parents were concerned about children eating enough food so that they would sleep well and thus preferred to insist that they eat in quantity rather than in diversity, such as tasting new foods or foods that they already ate but did not like, such as vegetables.

3.1.2. Intensive food socialisation

The upper middle-class, the upper-class parents and some intermediary middle-class parents considered that their children could learn to like various tastes at a young age, particularly those highly valued tastes in the upper-classes such as vegetables and fish. Some parents often mentioned the rule of having to taste the food that was presented on the table (the Bourdon, Imbert, Franquet, Comescu, Lebrun, Andrews, Bennet, Brown families). At the fifth dinner at the Imbert family, (Lyon, upper-class household), Magali Imbert, the mother, had prepared four courses: eggplant puree as a starter; a carrot tops pie as a main dish, then some cheese and as a dessert fruit and ice cream. It was the first time she was serving eggplant puree. She told her daughters – 8 and 5 – at the beginning of dinner: ‘If you don’t like it, it’s not a problem, but I want you to taste anyway’. The girls tasted and ate some, unenthusiastically. Then the eldest daughter Louise Imbert commented: ‘I am not a fan’, which was a way of presenting her dislike so that her mother respected her tastes. This shows how some parents felt they had to recognise and respect their children’s individual preferences, but that the latter still had to get used to a variety of tastes from early on.

Despite this parental discourse valuing children’s choosing possibilities – steering clear of the negative image of forcing food down children that was prevalent among all the families observed – most children from the upper-class or upper middle-class households still had no other choice than to eat what they were served. Even younger children from upper middle-classes ended up eating food they were not necessarily fond of. This occurred thanks to a greater amount of inter-generational negotiation, and this was typically the case in the Bourdon household (upper class, Lyon, two children of 6 and 8), as observed during the second dinner:

Benoit Bourdon [to Lucie, his 6-year-old daughter]: Come on sweetie, do you think you will manage to eat your *three* green beans?

Marie-Cécile (mother) repeats the same thing. Lucie points out there are seven of them.

Benoit Bourdon: Well, eat *four* of them

Marie-Cécile Bourdon: ... I think you can eat the *seven* of them, no?

Benoit Bourdon: Eat *four* of them and then we will see

Dinner 2

In this interaction – which in-person observation gave access to and would not necessarily have been reported in such detail during an interview – the father appealed to his daughter’s self-control abilities that were valued for children in her social position: she should force herself a bit to eat healthily, thus controlling her dislike or overcoming her feeling of satiety. Nevertheless, Lucie tried to undermine her parents’ authority by showing she counted better than her father could. Benoit was ready to agree to his daughter’s negotiation, but her mother disputed by resorting, again, to Lucie’s self-control capacities, asking her to force herself to finish her plate. This Bourdon family (upper class, Lyon) used to have two separate evening dinners: an earlier one for the children and a later one for the parents. They gave up this arrangement during the first lockdown episode in France, in March 2020. The parents made this decision to have dinner altogether as they felt it reassured their children who were, at times, quite upset by the lockdown. Nevertheless, Marie-Cécile Bourdon, the mother, reported that they would have made this change anyway, as she considered her children were at an age when they needed to be socialised to commensal norms. In this process, the parents mostly adapted the menus towards what they, themselves, would usually eat. They tried to socialise their children to new tastes, who usually responded positively to this process, for instance by liking novel types of meat:

Benoit Bourdon: We try to avoid things that are too exotic, but at the same time, yeah, I did some pig’s cheeks, they did not like it much, but ...

Marie-Cécile Bourdon: ... Marius ate some ...

Benoit Bourdon: ... but they still eat some ...

Dinner 2

This type of management of children’s eating also showed how upper-class parents did not expect children to be that independent in their eating. They nevertheless wanted them to learn self-control, or restraint capabilities so that they would eventually learn to like a variety of food on their own.

At the Comescu household in Lyon – upper class, two children, 10 and 7 – where a lot of vegetables and fruit were served, the parents were never observed asking their children to eat more or to finish their plate. The children were not witnessed refusing food other than occasionally second servings and dessert. Irina Comescu, the mother, reported during her interview: ‘Usually they do not ask [for a specific menu], they eat what they are served’. The ability to eat something without really wanting to was a process that children learned over the years and the older children got, the more they incorporated this disposition. Ana Nimaga, a mother in Lyon – reconstituted, intermediary-middle class – compared during her interview the eating practices of her two stepdaughters:

Ana Nimaga: Lila (5) does not like to eat, like, you need to ask her [...]. And so, I ask her ‘Come on, eat your vegetables’, so we negotiate. It’s rare that she eats [...]. Naya (12) does not eat much either, I mean not for me, I think she does not eat much. But it’s not up to me to ... I mean, those are habits she has with her mother, so I do not meddle too much ... I tell her as well, ‘but finish your meat’, or ‘eat your vegetables’. She is older so obviously, if I tell her, she listens, but overall, she does not eat much either.

As a stepmother, Ana did not allow herself to negotiate much to get her stepdaughters to eat according to her own standards. At times, the negotiation to get children to eat, or as Lucas Franquet, an upper middle-class father from Lyon sugar-coated it during his interview, the ‘debates’, failed and children got to eat something else:

Lucas Franquet: We do try to force it, I mean, not force it, but to nudge them to eat. If it’s really difficult, well, we say to eat some of it. Yesterday, for example, the spinach puff pastry, Marco [10] did not like it. So as there were leftovers from the previous day and, also, vegetables, well we told him, you can switch, take the other [...].

I have the feeling that sometimes, they taste, they say straightaway they did not like it, I wonder if they really had the time to taste [laughter]. And often, we have big debates during which they tell us: ‘I do not like it’, and we tell them ‘Well, it’s the first time we’ve made it’ and they say ‘No, you already made it’, or ‘I already ate it’, or ‘I already ate it elsewhere, it’s not good’. So, we have big debates like that.

In cases like this one, taste became an instrument of intergenerational confrontation and negotiation.

Children from upper middle-class and upper-class households were also commonly witnessed trying to refuse the food served, but in these households, parents used negotiation to get children to eat anyway, thus getting them to develop their negotiation skills as well:

Benoit Bourdon (upper class, Lyon): They can try things several times. For instance, there were a lot of things Lucie [6] refused to eat and that now, she eats without much ... [of a problem]

Marie-Cécile Bourdon: ... she had an episode this year where she only ate zucchinis [as vegetables]. From one day to another: ‘I do not like zucchinis’, and finally she ate zucchinis in the ratatouille [laughter, dubitative that her daughter does not really like them]

Benoit: Marius [8] also had a little issue, in relation to his sister: that is to say that when she likes a thing, usually, he does not like it

anymore. For instance, coco beans or cauliflower gratin, that Lucie likes. Or he likes Swiss chard, and she does not.

Lunch 5

The Bourdon parents considered that their children's taste was development was linear. As a consequence, children's refusal to eat food they had previously liked could only be considered as a form of contestation of parental authority, or as a form of distinction between siblings.

The different types of mealtime food socialisations observed, which varied according to the household's social class position, was linked to the parents' socially differentiated conception of children's taste and parenting styles. These types of mealtime food socialisation were also associated to the development in children of different social skills. Some children learnt how to negotiate with their parents and developed a restrained and controlled relationship to food while others learnt how to be more autonomous and less restrained in their eating. The mealtime food socialisation observed was also directly linked to class-based resources, notably to the amount of time, money and energy parents possessed. Engaging in intensive food socialisation was not only time costly and labour intensive, but it was also risking offering food to children that they would refuse, potentially leading to food waste, a loss of money and having arguments during the mealtime.

3.2. Connecting food socialisation styles to the 'happy meal' imperative

The way food socialisation happened was also linked to the mealtime atmosphere, in particular to parents' management of the mood at the table and of the imperative of happy meals, also called conviviality (Phull et al., 2015; Wilk, 2010). Nevertheless, the management of mealtime interactions was accomplished differently according to the families' social class position and the resources parents possessed.

Prioritising the need for the mealtime to be an enjoyable moment for all was sometimes detrimental to the socialisation process to new foods and other foods children regularly disliked such as vegetables. The Lebrun couple – intermediary middle-class parents, Lyon – both talked about favouring a pleasant mealtime over getting children to finish their plate:

Laëtitia Lebrun: It's really a moment when we are all gathered and well, you know, it has to go well!

Pierre Lebrun: If you put too many priorities on eating, precisely ...

Laëtitia Lebrun: ... yeah, too much pressure

Pierre Lebrun: ... yeah, too many priorities to get them to eat this or that, in the end you spoil what we are looking for, that is to spend a good moment and have an interaction with them

Dinner 7

By saying 'it has to go well', Laëtitia Lebrun was explicitly referring to the feeling rules of conviviality (Hochschild, 1979). In practice however, the Lebrun children had to finish their plates, but if they were feeling reluctant to do so, the parents – and mostly the mother – would encourage them to continue eating by engaging in so-called 'emotion work'. Emotion work is defined by Hochschild as suppressing or exaggerating one's own emotions in order to correspond to the required emotional state or/and induce an expected emotional state in others (Hochschild, 1983). In the case of this family dinner, Laëtitia Lebrun would thus encourage the children to eat in a light manner, through humorous or cajoling comments, or negotiate with them.

This type of production of an enjoyable atmosphere at the table contradicted with what was reported and observed in the lower middle-class households and some intermediary middle-class households in Lyon and in Adelaide:

Amy Chapman (intermediary middle class, Adelaide): Both Glen and I pick the battles because our days at work are exhausting. We feel like we're constantly fighting policy, fighting people, it's not just 'Go and do your job, go home'. It's 'This has happened, so then this person argues with you and then this explodes to something', and we just feel like we're constantly battling at work, that we don't want to battle at home [...].

The small time we have with the kids, it's only an hour or two before they then go off to bed, we don't want that to be an argument, forcing food down them, just, we don't want it to be a horrible time for them. We want that to be quality time.

In this case, the interview method is key to grasp the parents' feelings with regards to the mental load and emotional experience of mealtimes and food work. Amy's comment illustrates with clarity and strength the contradiction experienced by parents from lower middle classes; the lesser resources they possess – such as time, money, energy or even cooking skills – the less they are able to address the different and competing family mealtime imperatives all at once during a dinner. At times, then, these parents prioritise during these particular mealtimes what is most important for their own and their children's health and well-being. As Amy explained, the priority is not necessarily on food socialisation.

Dealing with the imperative of quality time and conviviality at the table affected the food socialisation: these parents adapted the menus before the mealtime to serve something 'easy' that they knew the children would enjoy eating, or they would give up on negotiating to get children to taste and eat what was served but disliked. Angélique André, a lower middle-class mother in Lyon, described their mealtime atmosphere: 'usually, it's okay, but it's the days when we've made something particular, when we try to get them to eat something different that it gets difficult, and I know that we then have a fight on our hands'. She then acknowledged: 'we end up anyways always eating the same thing, because the children, they only eat ... Like, for example, she [Celeste, 4] only eats steamed potatoes, rice and pasta. That's it. No meat. No fish. No veggies. No fruit'. In these lower middle-class and in most intermediary middle-class households, enjoying a moment together during the mealtime, or at least striving for a relaxed, conflict-free atmosphere, was the most important. But here, a positive mealtime atmosphere was reached through the preparation and consumption of food that children already liked, so that the parents were not obliged to manage food related conflict, have food waste and could enjoy each other's company peacefully.

In the families observed with more cultural and economic capital – who also had more resources and energy to deal with domestic activities or could outsource some of them – an enjoyable atmosphere and food socialisation were observed as being equally important. In these households, the way a positive mealtime atmosphere was reached – mostly through emotion management – and the way conversations enfolded – favouring negotiations – both played in favour of socialisation to healthy and new foods. It was a labour-intensive socialisation, but the social skills developed at the table – extensive conversations, negotiation, managing emotions – played in favour of getting children to eat diverse and healthy menus.

Fig. 1 below illustrates how the different dimensions of mealtimes – food socialisation, conversations, and an enjoyable atmosphere for all – are not prioritised in the same order according to the household's social class position. It shows, additionally, that these goals are not reached in the same manner, nor are they articulated with one another in the same way. We also see that mealtimes in the households with greater cultural and economic capital were closer to the idealised, normative image of commensality than were the mealtimes in households with less capital, precisely thanks to having greater resources.

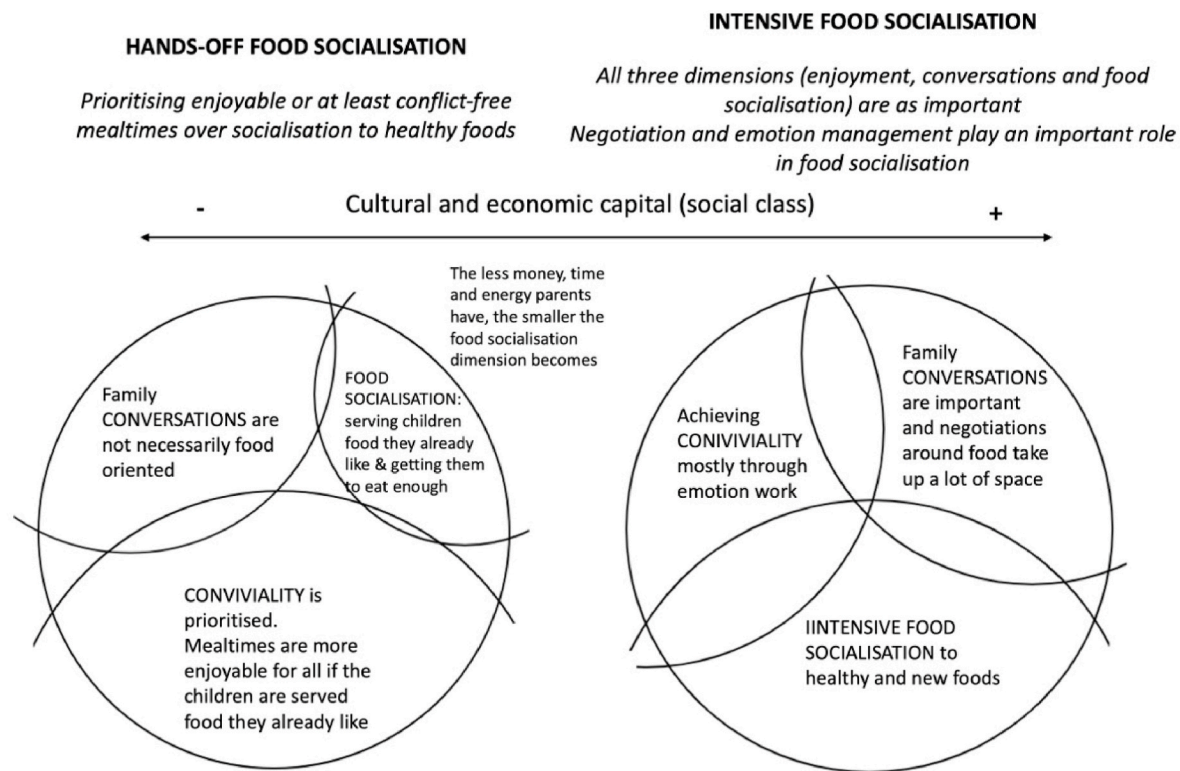


Fig. 1. Differences in the priorities addressed during family mealtimes: parents with varying resources deal differently with the imperative of enjoyable mealtimes and food socialisation.

4. Discussion

The parents from this study with the most cultural and economic capital and resources such as emotional resources and cooking skills followed an intensive mothering concept and their parenting style resembled what Lareau described as ‘concerted cultivation’. Those who had less cultural and economic capital and resources did not adhere as much to the intensive mothering concept, although they were very much aware of it and felt the pressure of these norms. They adopted a parenting style that was similar to the private manifestation of the ‘development of natural growth’. Lareau argued that ‘differences in family life lie not only in the advantages parents obtain for their children, but also in the skills they transmit to children for negotiating their own life paths’ (2002, p. 749). The concerted cultivation approach encouraged an ‘emerging sense of entitlement on the part of the child’ while the accomplishment of natural growth approach encouraged an ‘emerging sense of constraint on the part of the child’ (2002, p. 753). According to Lareau’s ‘concerted cultivation’ parenting style, children are taught to negotiate and even challenge adults, which provides them with an important feeling of entitlement. Whereas according to the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ model, children generally learn to accept adults’ authority without challenge and are taught to respect the boundaries between adult’s and children’s world. Our results have shown variation in the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ model.

In the upper middle-class and upper-class households, the parents controlled children’s eating practices to get them to taste and eat diverse and healthy foods. They therefore taught their children what should be done later in a life where, during professional and amical sociability, shared mealtimes play a role of social distinction. This food socialisation was also tightly intertwined with socialisation to other social skills that children would need to reproduce their own social position. Family mealtimes, as they were observed, were a site of reproduction of social positions and thus of reproduction of social inequalities. However, this meant that the mealtimes required many conversational and emotional

efforts from parents and trying to ‘do it all’ – following intensive mothering ideals – meant that parents, and often mothers, were left with an extra load on their plate at the table. These different commensal socialisation imperatives – getting children to taste and eat healthy and diverse foods and teaching them how to master negotiation skills – were also quite contradictory: these parents wanted children to eat healthily and master power relationships, but the more children learnt to negotiate, the more power they had, the more they were able to refuse certain foods. Previous studies have indicated that this kind of resistance from children can constitute a barrier to family meals (Middleton et al., 2023).

Family mealtimes in some intermediary middle-class and the lower middle-class households did not lead to fostering a sense of constraint, or restriction in children in terms of food practices. On the contrary, the later were led to enjoy mealtimes at their own pace, in a rather autonomous way and according to their own child-oriented tastes. These findings are discordant with widespread representations of working and lower middle-class children as being expected to eat the food served to them without protesting. However, cultural understandings of childhood have shifted. As mothers have entered the paid workforce outside of home, they have gotten busier; teaching children to become independent from early on becomes essential to facilitate daily life of mothers, especially in households with lesser resources. Additionally, when resources are scarce, giving children more freedom to eat what they want is a way for parents to demonstrate their care and love for their children (Fielding-Singh, 2017, 2021).

Following the intensive view of mothering, sociologist Brenton has developed the ‘intensive feeding ideology’, according to which being a good mother requires providing intensive food work (Brenton, 2017). She examines the limits of this concept and the way that mothers fully adopt, are ambivalent with or reject this concept. The prevalence of the intensive feeding concept marginalises poor mothers and mothers of colour across different classes. For some white middle-class mothers, intensive feeding is too time consuming and costly, so they adopt a mix

between intensive and balanced feeding – understood as an approach to feeding the children based on providing rather varied menus but without worrying too much about it – whereas poor and working-class mothers mainly adopted a balanced approach. Although not all mothers across social classes parent according to these ideals, most of them felt they were held to these standards (Elliott et al., 2015). Our results similarly show that forms of intensive food socialisation are also directly affected by class related resources. The parenting style adopted for mealtime food socialisation was connected to the type of resources parents had for the family meal food work and the mealtime in itself, and to the money they possessed. These factors also influenced the way parents conceived taste, commensality, and parenting. Engaging in intensive food socialisation was indeed time costly, labour intensive, and expensive. Studies from the cognitive sciences and psychology have shown that children need repeated exposure to new foods to be able to accept them (Keller, 2014). In households with limited resources, parents are less likely to serve children food they know will be refused, in order to avoid food waste and money loss, as well as having to management arguments (Daniel, 2016).

Family mealtimes are associated with many imperatives, and food socialisation is only one of them. Various studies have already shown how, in addition to opportunities for eating and feeding, mealtimes are notably valued occasions to communicate and bound as a family during an enjoyable moment (Berge et al., 2013, 2014, 2016; Daragan et al., 2023; Kremer-Sadlik & Morgenstern, 2022; Malhotra et al., 2013; Middleton et al., 2020, 2022; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2015; Schuster et al., 2019; Skeer et al., 2018; Trofholz, Schulte, & Berge, 2018; Trofholz, Thao, et al., 2018). Mealtime enjoyment was a priority in all the families observed in this study, from the lower middle-class households with less cultural and economic capital to the upper-class households with significant cultural and economic capital. Differences existed, nevertheless, in the way enjoyable mealtimes were performed, which were linked to the social origin of the household and the resources parents had or did not have for mealtimes.

On the one hand, in the families with the most economic and cultural capital and who possessed the most resources – including emotional resources – conviviality was reached through a quite restricted relationship to food and mainly through emotion work and conversations (Hochschild, 1979). On the other hand, in the families who had less capital and resources, conviviality happened mostly through the sharing and enjoyment of familiar foods, in a rather unrestricted manner. However, because of the conditions in which the mealtimes in the latter households took place, the aim of having enjoyable mealtimes was sometimes limited to a conflict-free atmosphere only, as parents did not necessarily have the energy to manage emotions at the table. Letting the kids do as they wished at mealtimes was thus a means for parents and mostly mothers to make it through an already hectic day without wasting food and having to spend additional energy – which they did not necessarily have much of – on the management of the mealtime. Nutritional inequalities are thus shaped as well by emotional resources, or lack thereof, and the possibilities of producing emotion work at home.

What happened during family mealtimes was also interconnected with the food work that precedes mealtimes. Some parents did not have the resources – time, money, energy – to prepare healthy menus and so they adapted the menu to achieve two goals: feeding the children enough and having a relaxed mealtime. Other parents adapted the menu to their past experience of mealtimes. As Middleton et al. argued in their Family Meal Framework, a negative mealtime experience ‘may prompt parents to reconsider the cognitions and actions so that the negative experience could be avoided in future’ (Middleton et al., 2022, p. 8). Reconsidering the foodwork strategy nevertheless depends on the type and amount of resources parents possessed. Other parents had more time, money, and energy to dedicate to anticipating menus that were both healthy and enjoyable for all, which meant they arrived with more confidence that the food would be accepted and more energy to deal with mealtime interactions.

Our results challenge, in addition, Bourdieu’s distinction between the taste of necessity associated to more deprived households, and the taste of freedom or luxury practiced in households with more capital, which allows them to distance themselves from necessity. Following this distinction theorised by Bourdieu, Ochs and colleagues have differentiated between American and Italian children’s commensal food socialisation (Ochs et al., 1996). The authors argue that the American parents socialised their children to what they must eat for physiological reasons – i.e., the taste of necessity – while the Italian parents socialised children to what they wanted to eat – i.e., the taste of freedom. However, based on our results, we argue that pleasure during mealtimes was valued across all the social class positions and in the households from both countries, but here again, differences existed according to the household’s class position and the resources they had for mealtimes. Socialising children to the necessity of eating healthy food as well as thriving to have an enjoyable moment, following the intensive feeding concept – in a world where food and eating are associated to many risks – has become a luxury that requires having financial, temporal, cognitive and emotional resources. In the lower and some intermediary middle-class households, serving easily enjoyable foods to have a pleasant mealtime appeared as a ‘taste of necessity’. In time-poor families, in households where parents were already overburdened and stressed from work and domestic activities and in households where parents have little other means of demonstrating care and love for the family other than through food, perhaps enjoying eating food rather than simply eating to satisfy a physiological need and a long term health objective has become a taste of necessity, as it has been reported for lower income households in the US (Schuster et al., 2019).

Connecting mealtime food socialisation to other commensal imperatives such as the atmosphere shows that, when emotional resources were limited, prioritising quality time by providing easily enjoyable foods to children really appeared to be the only option for parents to demonstrate to children care and love, especially when parents had limited options to please their children in other ways (Fielding-Singh, 2017). As sociologist Fielding-Singh argued, ‘discussions of nutritional inequality rarely, if ever, mention emotions or emotion work’ (2021, p. 184). Nevertheless, broader social and economic inequalities affect the leeway parents have to care for their children and shape their feelings regarding their own parenting practices, which directly affects how they feed their family. Other studies have similarly shown that having screens on during mealtimes was another strategy many parents resorted to in order to reduce stress and favour a calm mealtime atmosphere (Litterbach et al., 2023).

Despite the constraints many parents of this study experienced in their daily life, importantly, all the families observed aimed for some kind of commensality. The difference resided in that the time and resources possessed, and household’s class position affected how they viewed and practiced family mealtimes. This also meant that family mealtimes took varying forms and served different purposes.

4.1. Limitations

This work has some methodological limitations. The development of the Australian fieldwork was limited due to the COVID-19 restriction, which limited the amount of in-person observations in the Australian households. We still followed best practice in terms of ethnography and completed the investigation with some digital observations of family life, but this study is not a cross-cultural comparison *per se*, rather it is based on a process of putting the main results from France into perspective with the results from Australia.

An even more socially diverse range of households would have, additionally, deepened our understanding of commensality, especially with the recruitment of working-class families who remain under-represented in ethnographic studies of domestic commensality.

The topic investigated – mealtime food socialisation, domestic commensality – is prone to important research biases, as these practices

are loaded with numerous imperatives in terms of health, parenting and particularly motherhood. It is possible, in particular, that the upper-middle class parents were keener to demonstrate to the observer that they put many efforts into convincing their kids to eat healthier foods, because this fits with the intensive parenting ideals that prevail in this class. It is also a possibility that children ate 'better' during the visits as they could also be keen to demonstrate they mastered proper mealtime skills. Nevertheless, results about what family members think are best commensal practices and behaviours to demonstrate to an observer are also worthy results, as they represent the norms these families strive to reach.

4.2. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the ways in which mealtime food socialisation was affected by class and various resources that parents possessed, informed by the theoretical perspective of Hays (Hays, 1998) and Lareau (Lareau, 2011). At the lower end of the continuum, the lower middle-class parents and some intermediary middle-class parents adopted a hands-off feeding approach which meant the food served to the children was more based on children's likes than on parents' desire to socialise them to new and diverse tastes, as well as on the notion of having a pleasant or conflict-free mealtime (Table 4). This feeding style was linked to the importance of fostering children's autonomy and their individual preferences and dislikes, with the idea of an important divide between children's and adults' taste, thus letting children be children for longer (Wills et al., 2011). This type of food socialisation was connected to the type of resources these parents had: they reported adapting the menu and their parenting during mealtimes to the energy and time they had or did not have; in these circumstances, a healthy menu meant making sure children ate enough, and a proper mealtime meant spending a conflict-free, quality moment together at the table.

At the higher end of the continuum, in some intermediary-middle, upper-middle and upper-class households, mealtimes unfolded according to an intensive food socialisation style (Table 4). These parents closely controlled the children's food socialisation, which was shaped by an adult-oriented conception of taste, menus and eating rhythm. Individual's dislikes were less tolerated, based on parents' desire to foster self-control and restraint skills in children with regards to food (Anvink & Sellerberg, 2010). But children also demonstrated strong negotiation skills and awareness of power relationships, which parents valued as well for their children's later adult life (Sjögren, 1991). Such food

socialisation style was linked to the greater amount of economic, temporal and emotional resources that these parents possessed. These resources also allowed parents to address other commensal imperatives all at once, such as creating a convivial atmosphere.

4.3. Perspectives

We need to consider the incredibly complex and somewhat contradictory nature of everyday domestic commensality and its class-based variations, both in research and in the way we talk about it in society. The results from this study led us to rethink larger scale research on everyday commensal socialisation and the importance given to information collected through indirect methods rather than through direct observation or recording. We are compelled to question the possibilities of thinking about norms through the participants' discourses only. People's practices are key to understand the way norms around food, parenting and health are appropriated, negotiated or rejects in everyday life. The upper-class parents of this study under-reported during their interviews, for example, how their children negotiated around food and managed to contest their authority. The in-person, repeated visits were key in revealing this, whether through direct observation of practices or through informal conversations.

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Ethical statement

Ethics approval was granted for the collection and use of the data in Australia by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in 2020 (#8596). Ethics approval was granted for the collection and use of the data in France by the Collège universitaire de médecine générale de l'Université Lyon 1 in 2020 (#2020-01-14-03).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Fairley Le Moal: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Maxime Michaud:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **John Coveney:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Mars Food funded in majority this study as they were interested in up-to-date research on family mealtimes to be able to communicate with stronger confidence on the conditions and effects of shared mealtimes. This research was conducted according to academic research standards. In addition to being reviewed and approved by the research ethic committees of Flinders University and Université Lyon 1, the research project from which the present paper originate was also reviewed by the Mars Food internal research ethics committee. The study design presented and approved by the different research ethics committees has been built based on the research gaps in the field of family mealtimes and according to best practice in term of sociological research. This design was constructed by the principal author of this paper, in collaboration with the scientific supervisors of this project. Mars Food did not participate in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, writing and

Table 4
Difference in food socialisation according to socially based parenting styles.

<i>Dimensions observed</i>	Accomplishment of natural growth	Concerted cultivation-Intensive feeding
	Lower and some intermediary households	Some intermediary and upper-middle- and upper-class households
<i>Skills fostered</i>	• Autonomy	• Self-control, self-restraint • Learning to master power relationships through negotiation
<i>Parenting style</i>	Hands-off	Intensive, controlling
<i>Language use</i>	The mealtime unfolds without extended verbal discussion around food	Extensive discussion between parents and children around the food served to get children to eat and like it
<i>Relationship to food fostered in children</i>	Playful, pleasure (letting children enjoy foods they 'naturally' already like)	Negotiated and balanced
<i>Consequences on commensality</i>	Children eat different food than parents, less diverse, fewer vegetables Less work for parents during the mealtime	Children eat similar foods to parents, diverse and more vegetables A lot of work for parents during the mealtimes

publication decisions of the results presented here.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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