

Barriers and enablers to the family meal across time; a grounded theory study comparing South Australian parents' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Family meals are positively associated with numerous beneficial health and social outcomes. Current discourse however claims that parents are faced with numerous barriers when trying to bring the family together to share a meal. Solutions for overcoming barriers to a positive shared family meal are often individualistic and do not address the systemic pressures and burdens families have faced for decades. The aim of this study was to explore the systemic and novel barriers and enablers to shared family meals as experienced by families across time. To achieve this, a qualitative study informed by grounded theory was conducted. Parents of South Australian families were recruited and interviewed in the 1990s, and a new sample of parents were recruited and interviewed in 2020. Transcripts were analysed using grounded theory and comparative analysis methods. Thirty-two parents from 16 families were interviewed in the 1990s, and 22 parents from 10 families in 2020. Ten factors were identified presenting as either enablers or barriers to the family meal, depending on the context they were experienced. Barriers and enablers were largely consistent across time. Scheduling and flexibility, children's disruptions and children's independence, privileges required to have family meals and motivation and commitment to the family meal were identified as persistent enablers and barriers across time. These findings indicate that parents are faced with similar challenges they have been facing for decades and are still not being adequately supported to execute family meals regularly. Recognising that factors present as either barriers or enablers to the family meal provides us with opportunities to transform barriers to enablers and support families to have regular, meaningful family meals.

1. Background/introduction

Family meals have been shown to be positively associated with health and wellbeing outcomes for children and parents (Dallacker et al., 2017; Fulkerson et al., 2014; Goldfarb et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2015; Robson et al., 2020). Popular discourse posits that the family meal, although treasured by families across the Western world, is becoming harder to achieve (Thompson et al., 2021). Frequency of family meals have been reported to be declining (Cheng et al., 2007; Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009), and families are increasingly relying on strategies that move them away from the traditional construction of the family meal where all members of the family come together in the same place, at the same time, to consume the same home-cooked meal in harmony (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Daragan et al., 2023), such as eating on-the-go, consuming convenience meals, eating in front of the television or other technology, and eating separate meals at separate times (Alm & Olsen, 2017;

Litterbach et al., 2023; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2013). This narrative has perpetuated a moral panic, where families who are not able to share regular family meals together in the traditional format are vilified for not providing their children with the protective benefits of the 'traditional' family meal (Murcott, 2012; Wilk, 2010).

The rising pressures on parents resulting from modern family life have been proposed as part of the problem for why family meals are declining (Berge et al., 2013; Fulkerson et al., 2011; Skeer et al., 2018). With an increase in mothers moving into the paid-workforce in recent years (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017; Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), 2010, 2018; OECD, 2020), there are fewer households with a member of the family available to dedicate to undertaking the work required to execute the family meal (Middleton et al., 2022). Recent literature posits that parents face a range of barriers to coming together for the family meal, including limited time, difficulty lining up family schedules, contending with family member food

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preferences, children's fussy eating behaviours, and high stress at mealtimes (Ayre et al., 2023; Berge et al., 2013; Fulkerson et al., 2011; Middleton et al., 2020; Skeer et al., 2018; Woolhouse et al., 2019). But are these barriers new and exclusive to parents today, or are they something that parents and families have been facing for years?

Public health initiatives and intervention research promoting regular shared family meals suggest that the ability to overcome the barriers families might face is within the control of parents (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Fulkerson et al., 2011). To overcome conflicting schedules, researchers have suggested parent's coordinate nights when they can be home together and limit their children's activities that may interfere with dinner time (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). To overcome the time required to purchase and prepare foods for the family meal, researchers have suggested re-framing the time as an 'investment in freshness' and as an opportunity to teach children to be smart consumers and skilled cooks (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). This narrative on parental responsibility for overcoming these barriers is echoed in the family meal intervention literature, where families are encouraged to increase the frequency of family meals, improve the nutritional quality and work on creating a positive environment, with minimal instruction or support on how to do so (Middleton et al., 2020). There are also new services and technology that exist to assist with planning, purchasing and preparation of meals (Doub et al., 2016), such as online grocery shopping, meal delivery services, menu planning and recipe websites and smartphone applications, and meal box schemes (Doub et al., 2016; Mauch et al., 2021). However, despite the consistent messaging and the arrival of new technology and services, research reports parents are still struggling to get their family to come together for regular meals.

This study set out to explore the systemic barriers to the family meal as experienced by parents over time, and the novel barriers families are experiencing today due to changes in contemporary society. Additionally, we sought to identify any systemic enablers to the family meal over time, or novel enablers, that could be used in future programs or interventions to effectively support parents in achieving them regularly. This investigation will further our understanding of the persistent barriers to family meals that are still not being addressed in contemporary society, and the enablers we may be able to draw on to make the family meal more achievable today.

2. Study design

The results presented in this paper are part of a larger grounded theory study, aiming to construct a theory and understanding around family meal experiences over a thirty-year period and how they have evolved (Middleton et al., 2022). This research was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and all individuals gave informed consent prior to participating in this research. Ethics approval was granted at the time of data collection by the Committee on Clinical Investigation, Flinders Medical Centre (application number 67/92), and approval for the secondary analysis presented in this paper was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in 2019 (#8473). The 2020 data was collected by GM and ethics approval was granted by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee in 2019 (#8461). This manuscript was prepared in accordance with the COREQ checklist for reporting qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007).

3. Methods

3.1. Philosophical position and methodology

The epistemology underlying this research is social constructionism, where we acknowledge that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed, subjective and value laden (Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998). Accordingly, an interpretivist paradigm was followed, which was informed by grounded theory methodology and methods (Charmaz,

2014). This paper focuses exclusively on the results pertaining to the barriers and enablers to family meals identified across the two datasets, other results from this grounded theory study are published separately.

3.2. Recruitment and data collection

To allow for the identification and comparison of barriers and enablers to family meals across time, two datasets were used. The first dataset consisted of qualitative interview data on family meal practices collected from parents living in South Australia in 1993–1994. The second dataset consisted of qualitative interview data on family meal practices collected from parents living in South Australia in 2020. The comparative nature of the study was built into its design, and thus recruitment and data collection in 2020 mirrored recruitment and data collection in the 1990s. Details of how participants were recruited for each dataset are published elsewhere (Coveney, 2004; Middleton et al., 2022). The 2020 participants had no connection to the 1990s participants.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participating in an interview and were invited to fill out basic demographic information forms. Semi-structured interview guides informed the interviews. The 1990s interviews were conducted by JC, and the 2020 interviews by GM: dietitians and doctoral candidates at the time of data collection. There were no existing relationships between participants and interviewers, and participants knew the purpose of the research. Interviews lasted between 45 and 95 min, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and participants were provided with the opportunity to review their transcripts. The 2020 interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and were conducted via Videoconferencing software Zoom.

Theoretical sampling was employed when selecting interview transcripts from the 1990s dataset and when recruiting participant's for the 2020 interviews (Charmaz, 2014). This process involves simultaneous collection and analysis of data until developing categories are analytically saturated, and new data does not reveal new findings (Charmaz, 2014). Interview transcripts from the 1990s sample were purposefully sampled and analysed, and data was collected and analysed in 2020 until theoretical saturation across the entire grounded theory study was achieved. The authors felt that the identified barriers and enablers were saturated when there were no new barriers or enablers identified in subsequent sampling of 1990s transcripts or further interviews in 2020 that did not fit within our developing understandings or conceptualisations.

3.3. Data analysis

The transcripts and participant demographic data from both samples were transferred to NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). The 1990s transcripts were analysed before the 2020 data were collected and analysed. Data analysis was informed by grounded theory methods and included line-by-line inductive coding of the interview transcripts, focused coding and categorisation, along with constant comparison across all stages (Charmaz, 2014). Both datasets were coded following these processes, before being compared and contrasted to determine similarities and differences. The overarching theory that was generated from this analysis was The Family Meal Framework (Middleton et al., 2022), which represents the cyclical process of the elements involved in the family meal, including the cognitive and physical work required. However, what is not captured in The Framework are the barriers and enablers to the family meal that were identified through the analysis process. The codes and categories specific to family meal barriers and enablers were directly compared and contrasted across the two datasets through the process of memo-writing, and are the findings presented in this paper. All families in the 2020 sample were invited to participate in a follow-up interview to discuss, clarify and confirm findings. Five families participated in these follow-up interviews and affirmed the study findings.

GM, a woman with no children and a background in health and nutrition research, was responsible for data analysis. Regular consultations occurred with the research team, who consisted of one man and two women, all with children of their own, and with varied research expertise in the fields of health and nutrition.

Participants, and their children, have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities and all have been given family identification codes (e.g., F1 = Family 1). Participants who were interviewed in 2020 are prefixed with '20', and those in the 1990s with '19' (e.g., 19F1 = Family 1 from the 1990s sample).

4. Results

As no standard, universal definition of the family meal exists (Dargan et al., 2023; Martin-Biggers et al., 2014), the definition used in this paper is what was used by participants i.e., most members of the immediate family present, and consuming a meal together in the household.

4.1. Participants

Thirty-two participants from 16 families in the 1990s, and 22 participants from 12 families in 2020 were involved in this study. The participant demographics for each sample are presented in Table 1. Across both samples, most participants were married or in a domestic partnership, with three single parents across the two samples. Households had approximately two children living at home in both samples, with a mean age of 8 years in the 1990s sample, and 10 years in the 2020 sample. Over the period, rates of education changed, with more participants completing tertiary education in the 2020 sample. More women were employed and consequently there were more households with dual employment in the 2020 sample, which aligns with population trends. Home ownership was consistent across the two samples, with more participants paying off their mortgage than owning outright in 2020 than in the 1990s.

4.2. Barriers and enablers to family meals over time

The comparative analysis set out to identify the systemic barriers and enablers to family meals that have remained persistent over time, and to identify the novel barriers and enablers that have resulted as family life, working life, services and technology have evolved. However, it was found that most of the barriers identified and/or experienced by participants remained consistent over time. The analysis did not identify any specific novel barriers to family meals, relevant only to parents and families in a contemporary setting. Rather, parents were still having to contend with the same barriers they have been facing for years, but with the added pressures of modern life and increased schedules. Thus, the systemic barriers and enablers to family meals are presented, with attention paid to where these barriers and enablers have evolved over time.

Enablers were defined as factors that made family meals possible or more achievable. Barriers were defined as factors that made coming together for family meals difficult. Through the analysis of the interview transcripts across both time periods, ten factors were identified that presented as either a barrier or an enabler to the family meal, depending on how they were experienced.

Of the ten identified factors, some were experienced exclusively as either a barrier or an enabler to family meals, where others were experienced as both a barrier *and* an enabler to family meals depending on the conditions with which they were encountered. Fig. 1 presents the factors identified and/or experienced by participants and describes the conditions that indicate whether the factor acts as an enabler or a barrier. For example, education and skills to plan, purchase and prepare the family meal was identified as being either an enabler or a barrier to family meals, depending on whether participants did or did not have the

Table 1

Demographics of family meal interview participants in 1990s and 2020
All data presented as n/total, unless otherwise specified.

Participant characteristics	1990s TOTAL participants n = 32	2020 TOTAL participants n = 22
Gender of adults		
Male	16/32	10/22
Female	16/32	12/22
Age of adults (years) mean (range)	38 (26–46)	43 (34–55)
Highest level of education^a		
Secondary school	13/32	2/22
Some tertiary education	0	3/22
Trade or business qualification	4/32	0
Degree or tertiary diploma	10/32	16/22
Higher Degree	4/32	1/22
Employment status		
Paid employment	20/32	19/22
Females	8/16	9/12
Males	12/16	10/10
Homemaker	7/32	2/22
Females	7/16	2/12
Males	0	0
Unemployed	5/32	1/22
Females	1/16	1/12
Males	4/16	0
Family characteristics		
	1990s TOTAL families n = 16	2020 TOTAL families n = 12
Two-parent family	15/16	10/12
Single-parent family	1/16	2/12
Number of children living at home mean (range)	2.4 (1–3)	2.4 (1–4)
Age in years of children living at home mean (range)	8 (0.5–19)	10 (2–24)
Household employment status		
Two parents employed	7/16	8/12
One parent employed	6/16	3/12
Neither parent employed	3/16	1/12
Household status^a		
Provided by state	0	1/12
Renting from housing trust	4/16	1/12
Renting privately	3/16	2/12
Paying off mortgage	3/16	5/12
Outright owners	5/16	3/12
Annual household income^{*, a}		
Lowest quintile	0	0
Second quintile	2/16	2/12
Third quintile	3/16	1/12
Fourth quintile	5/16	5/12
Highest quintile	3/16	3/12

*Missing data for level of education n = 1, household status n = 1, household income n = 4.

^a Quintile's based on census household forms in 1991 and 2016.

education or skills required to plan, purchase, and prepare a meal. The conditions presented on the left of the figure describe how they act as an enabler, and the conditions presented on the right of the figure describe how they act as a barrier. It should be noted that not every factor has a complementary enabler and barrier. This figure only presents the conditions that participants identified or experienced as making the factor a barrier or an enabler. However, it would be fair to assume that the opposite of those conditions would change the factor from being experienced as a barrier or an enabler. For example, although no participant identified having well-behaved children at the meal as an enabler to the family meal, one can assume that this would be the case.

4.2.1. Scheduling and flexibility, and time available

This category incorporates the first three factors identified as a barrier and/or enabler to family meals in Fig. 1. Work and education schedules of children and parents were some of the most pervasive barriers to family meals identified by participants over the two time

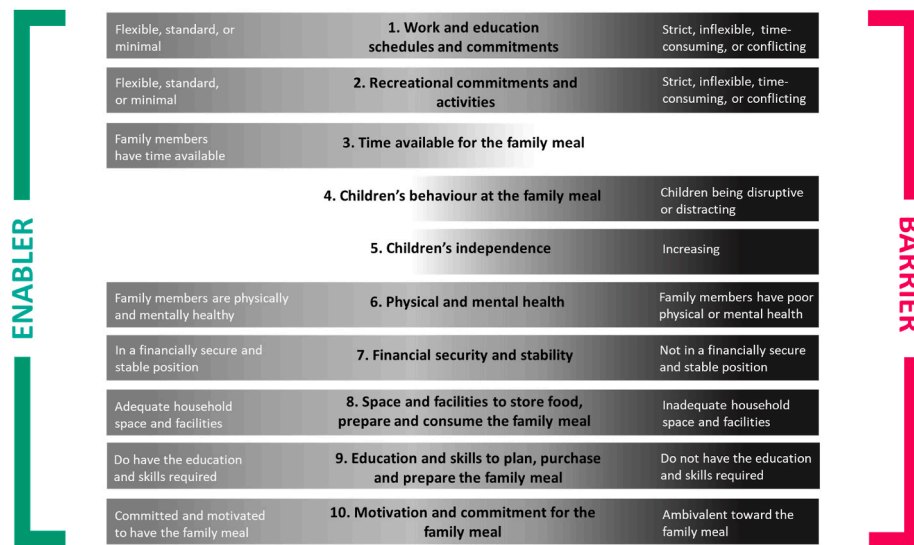


Fig. 1. Factors identified and experienced by participants that present as 'enablers' and 'barriers' to coming together for family meals.

Factors were identified or experienced by participants as either barriers or enablers, depending on the conditions or context within which they were encountered. Factors identified or experienced as enablers *only* are indicated by the light grey sections with text on the left of the figure, and no colour or text on the right. Factors identified or experienced as barriers *only* are indicated by the dark grey sections with text on the right of the figure, and no colour or text on the left. Factors identified or experienced as both a barrier and enabler depending on the context with which the factor was encountered, are indicated by both light grey sections with text on the left of the figure and dark grey sections with text on the right.

periods. This barrier, while identified by participants across both time points, presented a more frequent barrier to family meals in the 2020 sample, likely due to the higher number of dual-employed households. The higher number of dual-employed households also resulted in either or both parents' work schedules interfering with family meals in 2020, where it was more common that only the father's work schedule would interfere in the 1990s sample. Conversely, when work and education schedules were typical, consistent, or flexible, they were no longer identified as a barrier to family meals. In many of the 2020 households, where one parent worked consistent hours, the other parent typically worked shorter, or more flexible hours. Whether by design or coincidence, this appeared to make the family meal more achievable.

Brooke: It's rare that we actually have a family meal at the moment, because what we - because Tim [partner] is tending to get home between seven and seven thirty, Ryan [son] goes to bed and seven and Josie [daughter] wouldn't eat a meal at that time, so I have to cook the children's meal and then my own meal with Tim. (19F10, father employed, stay-at-home mother, two children aged 3 and 1 years old)

Suzanne: What allows us to do that [have family meals] though?

William: I've got a nine-to-five job, pretty much, yeah, no one's doing shift work or anything.

Suzanne: No, that's right, yep.

William: So that's a big part of it. (20F11, both parents employed, three children aged 15, 13 and 11 years old)

Christopher: Sometimes Claire [partner] will work after dinner, or I'll work after dinner... like one of us might be preparing while the other one's working, but as soon as dinner hits, we make time for it and then it'll be waiting until the kids are in bed, usually, before going back to work. (20F12, both parents employed, two children aged 6 and 4 years old)

Recreational activities of parents and children presented a consistent barrier to family meals across time. While children's activities remained stable, the nature of parent's activities changed. For participants in the 1990s sample, parent's exercise and organised recreational

commitments were more likely to interfere with the family meal, but parent's social commitments were more of a barrier for participants in the 2020 sample. These recreational activities, on top of work and education commitments could make family meals difficult. However, when family members' schedules aligned with one another, they presented a time when all were available to have a family meal. In this way, just having time available for a meal was identified as a systemic enabler to family meals across time. While some families in the 2020 sample had less of these opportunities due to increased work schedules, having available time was still viewed as an enabler to family meals, regardless of how frequently it occurred.

Mara: Dinner at night we try to always eat together, but that's not always possible either because... the kids play a lot of sport. (19F13, both parents employed, three children aged 13, 12 and 10 years old)

Colin: Breakfast is a disjointed meal. I swim three days a week so I leave the house about six o'clock to get up to North Adelaide so I have breakfast when I get into the office, take it with me. (19F12, father employed, stay-at-home mother, two children aged 9 and 7 years old)

George: Like some nights of the week... you've got cricket at one time, and ballet overlapping... you get home at six o'clock and go, "we haven't stopped". (20F9, both parents employed, two children aged 8 and 5 years old)

Leslie: Maybe I had plans to maybe meet someone, a friend, or someone else for a reason, and keep me away from getting home for the meal, but that's not very often. (20F3, both parents employed, one child aged 12 years old)

Donna: I think what enables us to come together for the meal is, we've deliberately chosen a day that all of us are free. (20F5, both parents employed, three children aged 20, 18 and 8 years old)

4.2.2. Children's disruptions and children's independence

This category presents factors 4 and 5 identified as a barrier and/or enabler to family meals in Fig. 1. Children presented two distinctive systemic barriers to family meals over time. Young children presented a barrier to the family meal through their disruptive behaviour at

mealtimes, and older children presented a barrier to the family meal through their increasing independence. Participants in both the 1990s and 2020 samples identified poor concentration, food refusal, tiredness, disruptive moods, and argumentative and uncooperative attitudes of young children made family meals challenging. As children grew older, the disruptive behaviour at family meals appeared to diminish, however older children's growing independence, in terms of entering the paid workforce and engaging in social activities in the evenings, presented a new barrier to family meals.

Alison: I think Derek [partner] and I are so tired, these two [daughters] can put up such a battle and they'll just refuse to eat. (19F4, father unemployed, mother employed, two children aged 9 and 7 years old)

Hank: My son works, they've got activities, my son likes to keep fit and active, well both sons do. They'll go to the gym in the evening. (19F11, both parents employed, three children aged 19, 17 and 10 years old)

Griffith: There'll be a fair bit of procrastination, but yeah, it, we eventually get there, it just dampens the experience, because you're working. You want to sit and eat and enjoy and instead you're working hard to keep one moving along. (20F4, both parents employed, two children aged 9 and 4 years old)

Donna: Work and as the kids are getting older now, their own independence, so, they're definitely the barriers to us having more frequent dinners. (20F5, both parents employed, three children aged 20, 18 and 8 years old).

4.2.3. Privileges required to have the family meal

This category presents factors 6 through 9 of the identified barriers and/or enablers to family meals in Fig. 1. These have been grouped together as 'privileges' that enable or prevent families from coming together for a family meal. These were factors such as mental and physical health of family members, secure and stable living arrangements, financial resources to purchase foods, education and skills to purchase and prepare foods, and space and facilities to safely store, prepare and consume foods. Most participants in both samples were fortunate to be in stable living accommodation and have the financial resources to procure foods for their families, enabling them to have family meals. There were some families who were dealing with limited financial resources, poor mental or physical health of family members, inadequate storage space for food, and minimal room for all family members to eat a meal together, which presented as barriers to family meals for these families.

Richard: We've got a house which has rooms that we can meet together and do it, so even having our room here, we can invite people along, it's the material circumstances. (20F7, father employed, mother casual volunteer, four children aged 19, 18, 13 and 11 years old)

Patrick: Not unless the next dole cheque is 2 days later, and then you're desperate and you're drinking water. (19F3, father unemployed, stay-at-home mother, three children aged 15, 11 and 8 years old)

George: We're fortunate that... we've got a roof over our head we're not fighting off the enemy in some conflict ravaged part of the world... we've got worries but they're I s'pose at the moment not overly pressing... some people, it's more of a, *where's the next meal coming from?* (20F9, both parents employed, two children aged 8 and 5 years old)

Helena: That was a huge barrier to us being able to have the mental capacity and energy to have a meal together, because during that time I think it was just awful, it was awful. And everybody felt sick after dinner, nobody really wanted to eat dinner, everybody was

stressed, it was horrible, so that was the barrier. (20F2, single-mother family, stay-at-home mother who home-schools her children, three children aged 24, 12 and 10 years old)

Scott: I think the main one of those that we didn't have before is the space and facilities, because we were kind of using our dining table just as a storage area. (20F8, both parents employed, two children aged 5 and 2 years old)

4.2.4. Motivation and commitment to the family meal

This category presents factor 10 identified as a barrier or enabler to family meals in Fig. 1. Regardless of other enablers or barriers to family meals participants were facing, without motivation and commitment for family meals, they were not likely to happen. Participants and families who were committed and motivated to have family meals attempted to overcome barriers so they could share a meal together as often as possible. Conversely, absence of this commitment or motivation to have family meals could act as a barrier. Ambivalence towards family meals was not common, but where it occurred, it generally resulted in less emphasis and effort in executing family meals. This remained consistent across the two time points and shows the dedication and commitment many parents and families had for sharing a meal together, despite the barriers they needed to overcome to do so.

Maureen: It's just something I've always said you know to Martin [partner], you know mealtime, you know it's the time that you have to be able to spend some time with the children. (19F7, both parents employed, three children aged 8, 7 and 4 years old)

Richard: The family of origin pattern set for us, and then the religious encouragement to it I guess, all those things work together I suppose. (20F7, father employed, mother casual volunteer, four children aged 19, 18, 13 and 11 years old)

Julianne: If I could do meals individually with them at no extra stress for me, I would almost prefer that because I would have more time with them and that, rather than having it all kind of happening at the same time. It's more convenience for me... And again I go out a lot at that time, so obviously if it meant a lot to me I would try and work around that more. (20F10, father employed, stay-at-home mother, four children, one aged 7 and triplets aged 6 years old)

5. Discussion

This study identified ten factors that act as either enablers or barriers to the family meal that have been consistent from the 1990s to 2020. Several of these factors are new contributions, such as children's independence, family members physical and mental health, adequate space and facilities, and motivation and commitment for the family meal. Other factors identified in this study broadly encompass some of the more specific barriers to family meals identified in previous literature such as limited financial resources, lack of time, limited skills or confidence, scheduling conflicts, children's food refusal and disruptive behaviour (Alm & Olsen, 2017; Berge et al., 2013; Fulkerson et al., 2011; Loth et al., 2019; Martinasek et al., 2010; Quarmy & Dagkas, 2013; Quick et al., 2011; Schuster et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2021; Trofholz et al., 2018). Factors identified by participants in previous research that were not identified in this study, such as exhaustion and tiredness, lack of help from partners and children, and the effort required to execute the meal (Berge et al., 2013, 2016; Malhotra et al., 2013; Martinasek et al., 2010; Quick et al., 2011), were discussed by participants in the present study, but were not experienced specifically as barriers to the family meal. The novelty of this research lies in the temporal comparison which shows us evolution over time, and the new identification and conceptualisation of barriers to family meals as factors that sit on a spectrum that can be influenced and shifted to act as enablers, or vice versa. For example, having the education and skills to undertake the tasks

required is an enabler to the family meal, however not having the education or skills could act as a barrier to the family meal. Identifying that factors act as either barriers or enablers is valuable, as it gives scope to work towards achieving the context that makes these factors an enabler rather than a barrier. For example, identifying strict, inflexible, time-consuming work schedules as a barrier to family meals gives scope to move toward flexible and standard work schedules to enable families to come together for meals more regularly.

While the present research confirmed, expanded, and identified new barriers to the family meal, it could not discern the barriers that were more prevalent for contemporary families today compared to their 1990s counterparts. However, there were some barriers that presented increasing pressures on parents, and they persisted across time without relief. Work and education schedules presented as a barrier to family meals in the 1990s, when there was typically one parent in paid employment. The 2020 sample saw an increase in parents work schedules with more dual-employed households, which presented a greater barrier to family meals. This resonates with prior research, with scheduling conflicts of family members often cited as presenting a major barrier to family meals (Loth et al., 2019; Martinasek et al., 2010; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2013; Quick et al., 2011; Trofholz et al., 2018). Additionally, where technology and services such as online shopping, meal delivery services, meal box schemes, and smartphone applications may present an enabler to family meals, very few participants in the 2020 sample used them and none identified them as an enabler. This indicates that either these services do not increase the achievability of the family meal, that parents are not aware of the potential ability of these services to make family meal processes easier, or that parents do not wish to use them in this way. Other research supports the argument that some of these services do not necessarily improve ease or convenience of family meals, with the cost and the work required to learn the technology acting as barriers to their use (Fuentes & Samsioe, 2020; Oberle et al., 2020). Thus, work schedules present a systemic, and increasing barrier to family meals, but as yet, there are no services or technologies that are providing families with adequate relief.

On top of parents work schedules were the recreational and social schedules of both parents and children. While children's recreational activities have been noted by other authors as presenting a barrier to family meals (Alm & Olsen, 2017; Fulkerson et al., 2011; James et al., 2009; Martinasek et al., 2010), parent's recreational activities and commitments have not been cited as regularly. In the 1990s sample, parents cited their exercise and organised recreational commitments as barriers to family meals, which was not frequently noted in the 2020 sample. It was more common for parents in the 2020 sample to cite social commitments acting as a barrier, albeit infrequently. The reduction in exercise or organised recreation as barriers to family meals is perhaps again indicative of the increased working hours of parents over time decreasing parent's opportunities for recreational activities (Strazdins et al., 2004). However, the shift from exercise and organised recreation to social commitments is not clear. It may in fact be reflective of changed priorities in how individuals spent their leisure time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family life is complex and finding a suitable time for all members of the family to come together for a regular meal can be challenging (Jansen et al., 2020). While there is no simple solution to removing the barrier that scheduling presents for families, it is important that this challenge is acknowledged when promoting the family meal, to help alleviate feelings of guilt parents may face when unable to achieve family meals as a result. Additionally, sharing a meal together is a practice with deep cultural roots, and there is value in family meals beyond their frequency (Dunbar, 2017; Jansen et al., 2020; Jönsson et al., 2021; Middleton et al., 2020; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). There is scope to promote positive family meal practices at different times of day, in different settings, with different regularity to help alleviate some of the guilt and pressures families face when tasked with bringing the family together for a meal.

Across time, children presented two distinct barriers to family meals,

depending on their age. Young children's disruptive behaviour was identified as a barrier, as was older children's increasing independence. This dichotomy of barriers presented by children remained consistent over time. Young children by nature have short attention spans, changing palates, and a desire to assert their independence (Satter, 2019; Thompson et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2017), and many authors have cited children's disruptive behaviours as occurring at the family meal (Berge et al., 2013, 2016, 2019; Malhotra et al., 2013; Quick et al., 2011; Trofholz et al., 2018). Conversely, older children are generally encouraged to develop autonomy and independence (Wills et al., 2011). Parents' identification of these normal life stages as barriers to family meals speaks to both the expert advice on how to feed a family (Coveney, 2008), and the normative idealisation of family meals, as a pleasant, easy-going meal, that all family members are present for and are receptive towards (Le Moal et al., 2021). Other authors have noted the pressures placed on parents to execute family meals in a particular way can make them feel inadequate and cause undue stress (Kinser, 2016; Thompson et al., 2021; Woolhouse et al., 2019). If representations of realistic family meals, with disruptive younger children, and absent older children were more prevalent, perhaps these situations would be accepted and expected as part of family life, and no longer identified as barriers that need to be overcome.

Regardless of the barriers faced by parents, many remained motivated and committed to having the family meal. Participant's dedication to achieving the family meal, despite the many barriers they may face, is testament to their motivation. This notion was captured in Ochs et al.'s work, where it was proposed that families were able to eat together in the evening, not necessarily because they happened to be home in time, but as a result of making the decision to be home in time (Ochs et al., 2011). This was noted to be the case particularly for middle-class families in their study, where there was more flexibility with work hours, or more agency with choosing jobs that allowed parents to be home in time to share family meals (Ochs et al., 2011). Thompson et al. also reported flexible meal timings were a strategy commonly employed by their participants to achieve regular family meals (Thompson et al., 2021). Additionally, Berge and colleagues found that families who placed importance on family meals were more likely to share family meals frequently (Berge et al., 2018), and therefore recommended placing priority on family meals as a strategy for increasing their frequency (Berge et al., 2013). Conversely, as evidenced by some families in the present analysis, not having the motivation or commitment to the family meal could act as a barrier to their regular occurrence. This too has been demonstrated in previous work, with parents who do not place particular importance or value on the family meal less likely to feel the need to engage in them (Berge et al., 2018; Kinser, 2016; Kling et al., 2009). However, it should also be noted that those who have success in sharing family meals may be more likely to emphasise the importance of them, and conversely those who do not may be less likely to see its value. Nevertheless, the power of dedication to the family meal, and the importance parents and families associate with it, may act as a motivator, or barrier, to regular family meals.

Furthermore, it was identified that some of these factors may be easily modified within the household, but others require more significant, structural adjustments. Those that were identified as more easily modified within the household were those factors that are often targeted in intervention research, such as increasing education and developing skills. These sit within the context of 'food literacy', a term that describes the daily practicalities required to navigate the food system and align food choices with nutrition recommendations (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). Being food literate requires knowing both what and how to make healthful food decisions in accordance with recommendations (Bessemers et al., 2020; Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). Aiming to increase knowledge and skills around planning, purchasing, and preparing meals is in line with increasing the food literacy of individuals, and sits behind the assumption that an inability to consume a healthful diet, or indeed prepare and consume more family meals, is due to a deficit of personal

knowledge and skills (Begley et al., 2019). This assumption is even more pronounced for those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Begley et al., 2019; Bessems et al., 2020). However, participants across both samples indicated strong food literacy skills, and the barriers they were facing were rarely due to a deficit of knowledge or skills. While improving food literacy may be a strategy to help those identified with having minimal education and skills in this area, it should not be the standard strategy employed to encourage families to share a meal together more regularly.

Many of the barriers encountered by participants appeared to sit outside of the control of households and individuals, and therefore responsibility for addressing these barriers should not be placed solely on parents' shoulders. While we are promoting families to come together for the family meal, we are placing the responsibility on families to have the necessary supports, resources and facilities required to overcome the many barriers they may face. As Oleschuk discussed in their investigation of media representation and framing of the family meal, the systemic challenges families faced when executing the family meal were acknowledged in the media, however, much of the framing of responsibility for changing and achieving the family meal still fell to the individual (Oleschuk, 2020). Such an example can be found in Fiese and Schwarz's paper, whereby they suggest strategies for parents to overcome the common obstacles to family meals, identified as parent and child schedules, preparation and shopping time, and knowledge and skills (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). Their strategies were framed towards parents changing their schedules, limiting their children's activities, reframing the time involved, and looking at resources for new ideas on how to prepare meals (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). While these suggestions are not invalid, and are potentially helpful for some, they align more closely with improving food literacy, and do not address the structural systems in place that make planning, purchasing, preparing, and executing the family meal a daily challenge for many parents and families. To assist families in achieving regular family meals, these structural barriers must be acknowledged and addressed.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the 2020 interviews took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which had numerous impacts on household practices globally. In South Australia, where these interviews took place, there were not long periods of lockdown resulting from the pandemic as experienced in other Australian cities, or in other countries. Families' 'normal' family meal practices were the focus of the interviews, however, parents in the 2020 sample did describe some changes to shopping practices, family meal frequency and environment resulting from the pandemic and subsequent restrictions. These changes are not exclusive to this sample (Berge et al., 2021; Carroll et al., 2020; Hammons & Robart, 2021; Jansen et al., 2021; Ronto et al., 2021). The interviews took place early in the pandemic when it was still viewed as a transient time and any changes that occurred were discussed as temporary. This provided a unique opportunity to see how barriers and enablers could be shifted and changed. For example, enforced working from home arrangements during the pandemic could shift 'work and education schedules' as a barrier to family meals for some families to something that enabled them to occur more frequently. Conversely, converting the dining room table to a home office could change the once 'available space to consume the family meal' from an enabler to a barrier for others. While conducting interviews amid this pandemic may have influenced participant's experiences and perspectives of the family meal, the changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how barriers and enablers can be influenced and modified to make family meals more, or less achievable.

5.1. Strengths and considerations

This study has strength in its analysis of data across two time periods, allowing an understanding across time without relying on participant recall or memory. Participants recruited for the 2020 sample were intended to be as similar as possible to the 1990s sample to allow for

adequate comparison. The rigour and reliability of this research is demonstrated through the use of grounded theory methods such as constant comparison and memo-writing, with additional reflective journaling and regular consultations with the research team (Charmaz, 2014).

The main limitations to this analysis are the potential risks self-selection and social desirability bias of participants in both samples may pose to the results. An additional limitation was the challenge in identifying barriers and enablers in the 1990s sample as these participants, unlike those from the 2020 sample, were not specifically asked to identify these factors. Finally, participants in the 2020 sample were recruited and interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced their current family meal experiences.

6. Conclusion

Barriers and enablers to the family meal have not changed considerably over the last thirty years. The persistent nature of the barriers to the family meal that have been encountered across time indicates that families are still not being adequately supported, or do not have the appropriate resources to undertake family meals in the way or with the regularity many desire. The enduring enablers may be a helpful untapped resource in more achievable and realistic promotion of the family meal. Recognising that factors can present as either barriers or enablers to the family meal provides us with opportunities to change these contextual factors to transform these barriers to enablers.

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Author contributions

Georgia Middleton: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, review & editing, project administration, funding acquisition. Rebecca Golley: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing – review & editing, supervision. Karen Patterson: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing – review & editing, supervision. John Coveney: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing – review & editing, supervision.

Ethical statement

This research was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and all participants involved in this research gave informed consent. The 1990s data was collected by JC. Ethics approval was granted at the time of data collection by the Committee on Clinical Investigation, Flinders Medical Centre (application number 67/92), and approval for the secondary analysis presented in this paper was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in 2019 (#8473). The 2020 data was collected by GM and ethics approval was granted by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee in 2019 (#8461).

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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