



ARTICLE

Domestic Dinner

Representations and practices of a proper meal among young suburban mothers

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore contemporary representations and practices of the domestic dinner in the context of households in the process of establishing themselves and families in suburban Norway. The concept of a 'proper dinner' is the result of complex social and cultural processes. Cooking dinner is not only an act of caring for others, preparing a proper meal is also an act of positioning oneself. Cooking dinner is an important part of the symbolic production of socially and culturally acceptable feminine subject positions. The empirical analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 25 mothers of young children about how they think and act in their everyday dinner practice. The material shows clear limitations on individuality when it comes to dinner patterns. There is a network of social and cultural conventions that frame eating practices and distinguish between different dishes. These distinctions follow a clear temporal and spatial order. Dishes prepared from a common Norwegian ingredient, minced-meat, are used as an example of how dishes carry quite different social and cultural meanings. While there are several discourses surrounding dinner that offer different possibilities for action, some representations and practices are more 'proper' than others. Three distinct dinner models for proper meals are identified: the traditional, the trendy and the therapeutic.

Key words

class • consumption • cooking • discourse • family • fashion • food • gender • generation • identity • life phase

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore representations and practices of the 'proper meal' in a contemporary Norwegian context. The British term 'proper meal' and its precursor, 'cooked meal' (Douglas, 1972; Douglas and Nicod, 1974), have dominated much of the food sociological literature in recent decades. In the early 1980s, Murcott (1982, 1983) studied people's concept of a proper meal in South Wales. A proper meal was defined as 'meat and two veg'. Some years later, Charles and Kerr (1988) described a proper meal as a meal containing meat, potatoes and vegetables. They also reported that most of their sample of 200 women described a proper meal as consisting of fresh foods, and home-made food was considered as better than processed food. Several Nordic studies (Bugge and Døving, 2000; Kjærnes et al., 2001) have been inspired by these British studies. However, like recent British studies of the perceptions of the proper meal, these Nordic studies show some shifts towards culinary pluralism (James, 1997; Mitchell, 1999). Although the Norwegian dinner pattern has been characterized by an increasing multicultural complexity over the last decades, conventional Norwegian dishes still have a dominant position (Bugge and Døving, 2000; Bugge, 2005).

British studies (Murcott, 1983; Charles and Kerr, 1988) have shown how cooking proper meals was something women did to care for their family. DeVault (1994) demonstrates how proper meals were perceived as an important part of producing a home and family. Lupton (1996) describes the dinner table as symbolic of ideal family life. In this article, we will show how women's dinner practice should be understood not only as an act of caring for others (care work), but also something they do for themselves, a kind of identity work. In this context, we will look more closely at how the women both internalize cultural values and how they actively construct social identity through their dinner practice. Applying Warde's (1999) analytical concept of *social appetite*, we want to show how food habits both shape us and are shaped by us (Germov and Williams, 1999).

The article is based on a study of Norwegian dinner practice (Bugge, 2005) where women in suburban Oslo with young children were interviewed. In spite of living in a society where gender equality is the official policy, women most often have the major responsibility for preparing family meals (Vaage, 2002). Young mothers are in a phase of life where they are in the process of establishing a family's eating pattern. This position means that they have to face many of the conflicts and dilemmas that concern postmodern female identity. Among other things, these include competing demands from household chores, work life and leisure activities. Our

assumption is that there are complex social and cultural processes involved in everyday cooking. The study explores the ways in which representations of proper dinners are produced in younger women's discourse. It also involves a consideration of the negotiations and constructions of identity that take place in women's dinner practices. In this context, we take a closer look at how the women use food ingredients, dishes and eating methods in order to position themselves in the social 'foodscape', as well as how their practices become socially and culturally valid.

The central research questions we try to answer are:

- How do women use the available discourses to present themselves and their dinner pattern?
- What are the social consequences of these representations?
- How do they talk about ingredients, recipes, dishes and eating?

A theoretical goal of this article is to show how thorough qualitative analyses of 'food talk' can provide much valuable information about the many subtle codes and rules that surround our everyday food practices. In line with Ashley et al. (2004), we believe that qualitative data may reveal the complexity of the meanings that people bring to their consumption practices.

BACKGROUND

The Norwegian meal pattern

Studies of the Norwegian meal pattern (Bugge and Døving, 2000; Kjærnes et al., 2001; MMI, 2004) show a generally stable and set pattern of behaviour in relation to meals. The Norwegian meal pattern typically involves two to three cold meals and only one hot meal per day. The overall trend is that bread is eaten for breakfast and lunch. The typical Norwegian lunch meal consists of a packed lunch of sandwiches brought from home (*matpakke*). The main meal of the day is the hot meal (*middag*), which in the text below is referred to as dinner. The meal is eaten in community at home normally between 4:00 and 6:00 pm. There have been changes during the last decade with respect to when dinner is taken. Many families, especially in urban areas, eat dinner somewhat later than in the mid 1980s (MMI, 2004). This may be explained by the fact that most mothers participate in the labour force and children spend most of their day in kindergarten, school or post-school-day institutions. A typical Norwegian dinner consists of traditional dishes: meat or fish with boiled potatoes and vegetables. Meat is the most common ingredient (Bugge and Døving, 2000). The considerable increase in Norwegian meat consumption over the recent

decades must be seen as connected to rising affluence (Lavik and Kjørstad, 2005).

Dinner: the disintegration of a daily ritual?

In popular Norwegian food discourses, there are often assertions about the disintegration of the meal. A common feature of many of these descriptions is concern regarding the form and content of meals. In a public health brochure, the reader was encouraged to support the communal meal. There are warnings about the increase in the use of 'one hand food', i.e. fast-food dishes that can be eaten anytime and anywhere. This 'food culture' is relatively widespread in the USA, and many people fear that we Norwegians may follow their example (Nasjonalforeningen for folkehelse, 1998: 1). This is, of course, a part of the more general European critical discourse on the disintegration of family life and the commercialization of food habits, which is illustrated, for instance, by the Slow Food® movement (Slow Food, n.d.).

Many of the claims about the modern Norwegian meal pattern may be seen as a criticism of the working woman. As a trend researcher said to a Norwegian newspaper: 'Mom has quit her job as a housewife. We hurry along between work, school and leisure activities – and on the way we grab a hamburger or a pizza at a fast food place' (*Fylket*, 1996, 11 Nov.). Such pessimistic descriptions are also found within the social sciences (Murcott, 1997). Fischler (1980) introduces the concepts 'gastronomy' and 'gastro-anomy'. Falk (1994) argues that one characteristic of the modern consumer society is that food habits disintegrate (e.g. a reduction of ritual dinner meals). Mintz (1985) ties these tendencies to the rapid spread of fast food consumption in the western world. However, surveys of the Norwegian population's eating habits (Bugge and Døving, 2000; MMI, 2004) and studies from other European countries indicate that eating dinner at home is still an important everyday ritual in most people's lives (Murcott, 1997; Kjærnes et al., 2001; Moisió et al., 2004). There is a growing literature on the importance of eating together in the context of the time trap. Several theorists discuss the emerging significance of 'family time' (Daly, 2001) and 'quality time' (Hochschild, 1997), and Southerton (2003) highlights the mealtime as a 'hot spot' of daily life. Warde (1999) discusses how hurriedness generates anxieties over the use of convenience food that symbolically threatens expressions of care.

At first glance, the everyday dinner at home and all it entails carries little prestige; it is practical, commonplace and repetitive. It is a process where the same tasks are repeated every day: buying the ingredients, putting

them away, preparing the dinner, eating the dinner, cleaning and doing the dishes. In feminist narratives, there is considerable emphasis on the routine aspects of women's housework and cooking dinner is regarded as boring and mechanical. However, empirical studies show that the feminist narrative of cooking as a kind of female straitjacket is only part of the story (DeVault, 1994; Bugge, 2003; Hollows, 2005). A closer look at the many social and cultural aspects of dinner contributes in a number of ways to complicate our understanding of food and its meaning in women's lives. The meal has considerable cultural, social and emotional potential. For this reason, it is more like a ritual than a mere routine.

The changing status of home cooking

There is also much to suggest that domestic dining and home cooking has been elevated in status over the recent decades (Heldke, 1992; Bugge and Døving, 2000; Moisió et al., 2004). A characteristic trend in domestic cookery is the increase in money spent on exclusive and fashionable food products, expensive kitchen interiors, kitchen technology and cooking utensils (Southerton, 2001). In a modern Norwegian middle-class kitchen, one will find everything from blenders, food processors, electric woks and gas ranges to various designer utensils and glamorous cookery books. Although these kinds of investments correlate with the urban middle-class consumption pattern, there is little doubt that this has also extended to other consumer groups (Bugge, 2003; Amilien et al., 2004). In the marketing of commercial foods and the presentation of foods in newspapers, magazines, films and TV programmes, much attention is given to sophistication and experiments. In these gourmet narratives, food is not regarded primarily as a service to the family in the provision of a good and nutritious dinner, but as an element of self-presentation. An earlier analysis of Norwegian food discourses revealed that the domestic cook is portrayed as everything from a gourmet, a therapist, a traditionalist and a politician to a good mother and wife. It is precisely these kinds of portrayals that make food and cooking something more than just routine housework. There is also a considerable identity work involved (Bugge, 2003).

A practice between life choices and life chances

The increasing variety of tastes and practices is also crucial to one of the other great individualization narratives. As a consequence of the variety of modern food practices in affluent societies, it is often argued that the individual to an increasing extent creates his or her own self-image and social life styles, for instance through the choice of particular foods and

eating patterns. According to Giddens (1991), the expression 'being on a diet' in the narrow sense of the phrase is only a particular version of a much more general phenomenon – the cultivation of bodily regimes as a means of reflexivity influencing the project of self (p. 105). However, several studies indicate that key sociological variables such as gender, age and class are still quite decisive for people's eating patterns. The fact that there is a statistically significant relationship between food habits and such variables is well documented in a vast number of studies (Ekström, 1990; Tomlinson and Warde, 1993; Crotty, 1999; Roos and Prättälä, 1999; Bugge and Døving, 2000).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The epistemological and methodological starting point for this study is Potter and Wetherell's (1987) phenomenologically inspired discourse analysis. Their research interest was particularly related to the rhetorical patterns of everyday life. Three of their concepts in particular have been useful analytical tools in this study: interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positioning.

The study can be described as a social text analysis. Rather than assessing the reliability of the women's discourse, it was important to look at the construction process in itself. Thus, it was not important to find out whether or not it was true that the interviewee 'had fish for dinner three times a week' or 'never ate convenience food', but rather to analyse how the women talked about these ingredients and dishes. In other words, we wanted to study the images, perceptions, metaphors, descriptions and narratives that emerged in the women's food discourse. In the interviews, we tried to ask questions in a slightly provoking and unexpected way. The objective was precisely to reveal the many unwritten rules and codes surrounding dinner patterns: 'Why don't you call that dish a dinner?', 'Why is it not suitable to serve *that* on a Sunday?', 'Why can't you leave the cooking to your husband?' etc. Thus, the phenomenologically inspired discourse analysis has given us several useful analytic tools for our analysis (Wetherell et al., 2001a, 2001b).

The empirical material is based on in-depth interviews with 25 mothers of young children about the practices and values of preparing the hot meal. These women were recruited through kindergartens in a suburb of Oslo, the capital of Norway, and they were interviewed individually in their homes. The guiding principle for the selection of study area and interview subjects was to find families that can be said to belong to the more or less diffuse middle layer in Norwegian society – those who have an

average level of education, income, family situation and occupational conditions – popularly referred to as ‘ordinary people’ (Statistics Norway, 1998). We also recruited some representatives from the urban middle class, women with higher education and income. This method of selection was chosen to ensure a broad representation of family dinner practises in the context of households in the process of establishing themselves in suburban Norway.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and additional observations and reflections were noted in a research log. The qualitative data analysis programme Atlas.ti (available from Atlas.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH) was used in preparing the text analysis. Qualitative analyses will be based on much broader material than that which the reader has direct access to. The selected quotations primarily serve as illustrations. However, an important criterion in the selection process was that the quotations should reflect the most important findings in the study.

The research topics included questions about, first, the *practical repertoires* of dinner: what are the women’s intentions, strategies, limitations and arguments for a certain dinner pattern? Second, *social repertoires*: which social values, relations and identities do the women wish to realize through their dinner practice? And third, *biographical repertoires*: how is dinner managed and changed from mothers to daughters or between life phases, and how is food competence transferred? The goal was not to find a representative ‘truth’ about the Norwegian dinner practice, but rather to show the complexity and multifaceted nature of such practices.

DINNER AS A DISCURSIVE ACT

Proper eating and gender positioning

Norway has been a pioneer with regard to advancing equality between the sexes, and promoting such equality has been official policy for many decades (Furre, 1992). Despite this, there has not been much change in the practical division of chores in the household. Tasks connected with food are by and large the woman’s responsibility in Norwegian homes (Vaage, 2002). The study shows that dinner plays a more important role in women’s lives than in that of men. To cook dinner for one’s family is typically a female task. The qualitative descriptions demonstrate that the women generally feel a little uncomfortable with admitting that they have conventional roles in the kitchen. Ideally, men and women should ‘share alike’, but this is rarely seen in practice. This fact is explained and morally justified in several ways.

The fact that women manage and do most of the chores associated with dinner is particularly evident from the follow-up questions asked

when the women answer, 'we both cook dinner'. One of the women explains: 'I decide what we are going to eat and take it out of the freezer . . . then he cooks dinner when I work late shifts.' Another woman, when asked when her husband last cooked dinner, says: 'Cooked dinner?! I guess he reheated some chicken on Monday.' The empirical material shows that the authority in the kitchen is rather unequally distributed. While the women have a management role, men are described as having more of an assisting role. In many cases, the husband's participation is not directly concerned with the food or the meal: 'He takes care of the children while I cook.'

The immediate explanation the women give for the systematic gender difference is that it is 'more practical' that she cooks. The women usually work fewer hours outside the home than the men. Many of them feel that they have more knowledge about food and cooking than their husbands. They express it like this: 'I have more experience doing this cooking bit'; 'I do it faster'; or 'I'm more experienced at it'. There are many indications that there is more than pragmatism behind such observations. To cook a proper dinner for one's family is an important part of a woman's understanding of her own identity and an implicit part of realizing the ideal family and the ideal home. Compared to British studies (Murcott, 1983; Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1994; Murcott, 2000) it seems as if Norwegian women to a lesser extent cook food for 'him'. For instance, none of the women interviewed said that: 'I like to cook for him. That's what a wife is for, right' (DeVault, 1994: 10). The typical answers to questions about why they cooked dinner were related to caring for children and the production of 'the family' and 'the home'.

Through the descriptions of dinner, it becomes clear not only how they position themselves and see themselves, but also how they criticize themselves and others, as well as how they justify their own practices. It is also evident that the women seek verification of their dinner practice by looking at the value it has for others, be it significant others such as mothers, friends, children or husbands, or generalized others such as, for example, Norwegian food discourses conveyed through the media or opinion leaders (Bugge, 2003). There is a network of social and cultural conventions that allow certain acts. It is socially safe to be portrayed as 'valuable' – for example, to be a good mother. However, in everyday rhetoric it will be unacceptable to claim that 'I am a proper woman'. This message is hidden in expressions like: 'I think it is very important to come together around a proper dinner – and we try to do that nearly every day.' This shows that cooking dinner is something one does in relation to others. The relational basis is maintained through the actors' mutual confirmations.

From the women's descriptions, it is clear that 'those women who do not cook or rarely cook' are generally looked down upon. Women who 'only make a few sandwiches' or 'serve macaroni with ketchup for dinner' are typical examples of ideological 'others' – people the women do not want to be associated with. It is generally somewhat unsuitable for women to say things like 'we usually order food delivered to our door,' or 'my children don't like dinner much, so I rarely cook dinner,' or 'we mainly eat frozen pizza and products like that.' The study shows that women's efforts in the kitchen are an important indicator of a woman's womanliness and motherliness. Consequently, cooking dinner is not just connected with the physical production of a dish, but it must also be seen as an act of caring for the family's emotional and social well-being.

The study shows that both obligation and choice are involved in constructing a daily dinner. On the one hand, it is something the women want to do, and on the other hand it is something they have to do. Even if there is broader variation in how to be a woman in the younger generation, data show that even for younger women, the repertoires are to a large extent predefined – not all choices are equally possible or desirable. Not cooking a proper dinner is judged as an improper form of femininity. In practice, even for younger, more 'equal' Norwegian women, the shame of not having achieved gender equality will be less than the shame the women would feel if they could not give their family a proper dinner. As in Warde's study (1999), the interviews show that the women are characterized by ambivalence between preparing dinner with passion, love and care or 'throwing something together in a hurry' (i.e. convenience foods).

Proper eating and class positioning

Norway is often portrayed as a country characterized by economic and social equality. As a consequence, it may be less legitimate to discuss differences – 'there is no arguing about taste'. In a number of ways this study shows how food tastes indeed have an important function in how people classify themselves and others, as well as in how they legitimize their own tastes. Depending on where the women place themselves in the social hierarchy, there are some tastes that should be regarded as 'good' and others as 'bad' or 'foul'.

The women that were recruited for this study were mainly representatives of the lower middle class or working class – generally referring to themselves as being like 'most people' or 'ordinary people'. We also recruited some typical representatives of the urban middle class. When the women place themselves in the social hierarchy, they do not use concepts such as

working or middle class. The women who describe themselves as being like 'most people' are typically representatives of working or lower middle class, while those who describe themselves as 'different' are typically representatives of the urban middle class.

A typical description of dinner habits among the women who define themselves as ordinary people is: 'I don't really like all this new and strange and spicy food.' This contrasts sharply with the middle-class women's description: 'If we have meatballs I have to make something that is a little different. It's important to put other things in so that it isn't ordinary Norwegian meatballs, you know.' The middle-class women's project is precisely to be creative and different and to distinguish themselves from most people in important ways. It is crucial to be open to new tastes and to show that you are in step with the times and have the right food-cultural competence. Statements like this also show how the choice of dinner dishes is a more or less conscious expression of the women's social status and aspirations in social life. Through the use of particular ingredients, dishes and styles of eating, the women try to indicate or reinforce their own prestige in the eyes of others. In other words, cooking is not something the urban middle-class women do only to produce home and family, but also to place themselves in the class hierarchy.

One of the urban middle-class women in the study said that she and her family had sushi for dinner the day the interview was conducted. However, many of the dishes that the urban women describe as central in their own dinner patterns are almost non-existent in data from surveys of the Norwegian population's eating habits (Bugge and Døving, 2000; MMI, 2004). When it is claimed that, for example, sushi and chicken tikka have become popular in Norway, it is not in the sense that they are common or widespread, but rather that they are fashionable and modern. There are numerous sources that communicate what is fashionable food, for instance TV cooks, movies, magazines, commercials, cookery books and food producers. It appears that knowledge about fashionable food is particularly important to the urban middle-class women.

To follow fashion is often regarded as a differentiation or distancing strategy (Bourdieu, 1984). One differentiation strategy in the preparation of a fashionable dinner is mixing unexpected ingredients. Another strategy is the use of strange and exotic taste combinations – 'a little shocking' and 'unusual'. Lupton (1996) argues that one characteristic of the food habits of the middle class is indeed to cross the cultural boundaries of the edible and the inedible. One example of this in the Norwegian urban middle class is how seaweed over recent decades has gone from 'kelp' to 'food' through

dishes like sushi and sashimi. The urban middle-class women's descriptions indicate a constant need for variation and for challenging familiar taste rules.

In the study, it appears that Mediterranean ingredients such as fresh garlic, potted basil and olive oil (extra virgin) are the most prominent taste markers in the dinner patterns of the urban middle class. These are the ingredients you 'should like' if you aspire to be a part of the food-cultural system of the urban middle class (see the Nigellas kjøkken website, NRK, 2006). Similar results emerge in British studies. The exclusive balsamic vinegar is described as a typical example of a British middle-class ingredient (Ashley et al., 2004). From our data it is also evident that there are several examples of foods and dishes you 'should not like'. When, for instance, Mexican foods fill the shelves in the large retail chain stores, they no longer taste 'good' to the food-cultural elite. When middle-class women say that they do not eat tacos because they 'taste bad', they do not refer to the sensory taste, but to the fact that this type of food is unfashionable. Taste is perhaps first and foremost distaste, disgust or intolerance of other people's taste – in other words: 'You are what you do not eat.' A crucial element in these differentiation or distancing strategies is expressing conformity with one's own group, combined with distancing from others (Bourdieu, 1984).

To show the most important orientations in the food choices of British consumers, Warde (1997) created the 'four antinomies of taste'. One of the dichotomies was precisely custom and novelty. Our study shows that custom seems to appeal particularly to working-class women, while novelty particularly appeals to middle-class women. Similar results also appear in DeVault's (1994) study of US women. Working-class women were generally less innovative and experimental than the middle-class women. In our study, it also emerged that the working-class women frequently felt slightly alienated from the great narratives of contemporary dinner patterns: 'I'm not so good at using all these new things that have appeared', or 'I guess I make more ordinary and boring food than most people nowadays'. Some of them also distanced themselves from what they felt was 'food snobbery'. Similar processes are also described in Caplan's (1997) book about food, health and identity. Even though the working class can reject middle-class food, it is nonetheless typical that this kind of food is described as 'normal'. The Norwegian dictionary (Landrø and Wangensteen, 1997) has the following definition of the word 'fashion': 'dominant taste and style', something that is 'modern' and 'in step with the times'. The concept of dominant taste reveals that there is a hierarchy of taste.

Despite the fact that Norwegian society is characterized by smaller class differences than many other western societies, women's food discourse shows that also in Norway there are differences that can be tied to Bourdieu's (1984) work on how food contributes to producing, reproducing and negotiating class identities and cultures. In this context, we should mention Mennell's (1985) argument that a general consequence of the modernization of food production is smaller contrasts between food habits and tastes in different social classes. In a larger historical perspective, there is little doubt that he is right. However, this does not mean that class differences have disappeared (Warde, 1999; Lupton, 1996; Tomlinson, 1998; Holt, 1998; Southerton, 2001). Our analysis of women's food discourse may indicate that the variations in how different social classes express themselves through food are often so subtle that they are barely noticeable in large, quantitative surveys. One example of this is small and seemingly insignificant details such as the use of ketchup, thousand island dressing, salsa or red pesto. However, there is no doubt that the choice of different tomato-based sauces is just one of many examples of how ingredients can work as social narratives that tell much about the women's class affinity and social mobility.

Proper eating and lifetime positioning

In sociological theories, a generation is often defined as a collection of individuals in the same age group with a common age position in relation to the social and historic processes that occur in a society. In the empirical material, generational differences are evident in comments such as 'my mother was a housewife' or 'she stayed at home and I don't'. The descriptions also show that this led to a number of different dinner practices. In the study, generational differences are often exemplified by the typical housewife's dinner ('stew') and the typical working woman's dinner ('wok'). The two dishes tell us a lot about the differences between the action patterns and interpretive schemes of the housewife and the younger woman. While the housewife could let the dinner simmer for hours, the younger working woman chooses dishes that are 'quick and easy to make'. Frequent statements are, for instance, 'my mother always had to make everything just right', 'everything had to be home cooked', or 'she put her heart and soul into this dinner thing'. It was common for the women to follow up by saying, 'I'm not that way', 'I don't', etc. Their explanation for this is: 'but then again I'm not a housewife either'. Younger Norwegian women do not consider themselves as housewives, but what are they then? Hollows (2005) explores how the post-modern feminine subject position may be characterized as a domestic goddess. Her reference figure is the British food

writer and television cook Nigella Lawson. She has also become an influential opinion leader in the Norwegian food discourse (Bugge, 2003). According to Hollows (2005), Nigella's position as a domestic goddess should be regarded as a negotiation between the housewife and the feminist. Nigella's 'food talk' touches on the many dilemmas and conflicts of late modern female identity. One example is her references to one of the key constraints in the life of working mothers, 'time': "I love eating quick food, and preparing something in a hurry does not give me a nervous breakdown," says Nigella' (NRK, 2006).

Although the women in our study are distancing themselves from the housewife's way of thinking and acting, it is clear that the younger women in many ways mirror themselves in their mothers' dinner practice: 'You know, I wish I could make more of the kind of food my mother did.' The dinner practices of childhood contribute in important respects to the women's understanding of their own identity. One woman said: 'My upbringing has actually left quite a lot of traces in my conscience.' The women feel a strong bond to their own mothers' practice – and there is sufficient evidence to show that the mother becomes a particularly important figure in the women's lives when they become mothers themselves. However, this does not mean that they choose 'to do as their mother did'. Part of the reason is that the younger women experience that there are new ways to be a woman (increased activity in working life), new gender roles (the man is more active in the practical and social life of the children and family) and new family relations (cohabitation, remarriage). Such structural social changes help to explain the differences on the individual level between the dinner practices of the older and the younger generation of women.

The transfer of dinner habits from one generation to another is characterized by what may be called solidarity and separation processes. The relationship between mother and daughter is characterized both by the daughter's wish to do as mother did and her desire to set herself apart from her mother. On the one hand, the daughter wants to reproduce the family's routines and rituals and, on the other, she wants a dinner pattern that fits with the life of modern Norwegian women, as well as with her understanding of herself as a woman of her time. Indeed, it is such dual relationships situated between biographical narratives and societal structural changes that contribute to the fascinating complexity of dinner practices.

In the great narratives of generational changes we can also read statements such as: 'In Norway, old people are living potatoes and gravy, while young people are made up of tuna fish and pasta.' Even though there are many generational differences in the Norwegian dinner pattern, there are

also a number of generational stereotypes. Food habits change throughout life. In part, this is due to social changes over time, but it is also a result of changes in the life situation of the individual (Henson et al., 1998; Kemmer et al., 1998). Many of the women mention that their own mothers changed their dinner practice after their children moved out. A number of them also comment that their mothers have started using many of the new dishes and cooking techniques that have entered Norwegian food culture over recent decades. As one woman puts it: 'I almost fainted last time I came home to dinner. My mother had made wok!' The same is true for the young women's description of the transitions in their own life phases.

Generally, life phases seem to play an important role in the shaping of a dinner pattern. Indeed, the empirical results indicate that the meal functions as a symbolic system that contributes to expressing ceremonial transition rites. In the women's descriptions, there are numerous examples of how changes in dinner habits also contribute to regulating the women's own life cycle. The primary example of this is the transition from the individual and simplified dinner pattern that the women had when they were young and single, to a more sociable and proper dinner pattern after establishing a family. In the period when they were young and living alone, it was also more common to experiment with new flavours and dishes, whereas once they had a family, they often chose more conventional dishes. Descriptions of dinner habits also show that the women had used the meal as an opportunity to rebel against the codes and rules of the dominant dinner culture during adolescence. Typical examples mentioned by the women are the rejection of mother's 'meat dinner' in favour of dishes of a more vegetarian kind, or replacing mother's 'proper dinner' with 'junk food' or 'snack meals'. However, when they had their own children, mother's dinner dishes had a renaissance in their own food practice.

Our results show that mothers are an important point of reference in the process of establishing a dinner pattern. When the women are asked to explain their own dinner practice, a typical answer is a variation on the theme: 'It is something I have brought with me from home.' Generally, it is evident that dinner practices are socially reproduced in the family – especially from mothers to daughters: 'My mother always made a real home-cooked dinner with potatoes and stuff – that is something that I try to do as well.' Like other studies (Meyer, 2001; Moisio et al., 2004), our results show that there are strong bonds between mothers and daughters mediated by food and eating patterns. Adopting elements of childhood dinner patterns seems to be an important part of the social reproduction of family identities across generations.

THE DISCURSIVE SPACE OF A PROPER DINNER

The temporal and spatial order of different dinner models

We like to portray ourselves as free and independent people: ‘On weekdays I often choose something that’s easy and quick to make,’ or ‘On Saturdays we don’t have dinner, we eat something at the mall in connection with the shopping round, and then we make something nice in the evening,’ etc. However, as interviewers, we were soon able to identify some fairly fixed rhetorical patterns in the women’s descriptions of their dinner pattern. A central interest in this study was to look more closely at the circumstances in which the different typical dinners are perceived as proper (valid) and in which situations they were perceived as improper (invalid). This distinction follows a clear temporal and spatial order. The women’s use of the central ingredient *minced-meat* is an example of how this is reflected in the material. How are the social and cultural codes and rules in the use of minced-meat expressed in the Norwegian dinner pattern?

Everyday minced-meat dishes

Time: Monday through Thursday around 17.00

Place: Kitchen

Dish: Minced steak, meatballs, Bolognese sauce, meat casserole

Served with: Boiled potatoes, spaghetti, macaroni, rice

Description: ‘Everyday dinner’

Friday and Saturday minced-meat dishes

Time: Friday and Saturday around 19.00

Place: Living room’s ‘cosy corner’

Dish: Tacos, enchiladas, hamburger, pizza, risotto, lasagne, mousakka, polpettes, albóndigas

Served with: Rice, pasta, pita, taco shells, potato pancakes (Norwegian ‘lompe’)

Description: ‘Weekend evening meal’ (Norwegian ‘lørdagskos’, lit. ‘Saturday enjoyment’)¹

Sunday minced-meat dishes

Time: Sunday around 17.00

Place: Dining room

Dish: Homemade meatballs

Served with: Boiled potatoes and vegetables

Description: ‘Sunday dinner’

The problematic minced-meat dishes

Time: Weekdays and Sundays

Place: Fast-food takeaway

Dish: Kebab, hamburger

Served with: Ketchup, thousand island dressing, French fries

Description: 'Junk food'

This list is an attempt to show how social and cultural codes and rules are expressed in the women's descriptions of dinner dishes based on minced-meat. The different minced-meat dishes carry different meanings. While meatballs in gravy connote ordinary Norwegian food, Italian meatballs (polpettes) and Spanish meatballs (albóndigas) connote something modern, fashionable and exciting. Furthermore, what is seen as an appropriate or inappropriate minced-meat dish will vary from context to context. A dish that can be served on Mondays is often not an alternative on Saturday nights. What can be eaten at the kitchen dinner table is not a good alternative at the living room table. A typical example of this would be to serve meatballs in gravy for a Saturday evening meal. The women respond: 'No, that would be completely wrong – that's for Sunday!' This list also shows how certain types of minced-meat dishes are morally problematic dinner alternatives. Particularly hamburgers or kebab dishes will fall in this category, but also meals that the women refer to as semi-fabricated or frozen dinners (frozen minced steaks).

When the women choose between different dishes, they do it on the basis of meanings and conventions available in contemporary Norwegian dinner culture. This means that the different dishes that constitute a dinner pattern can be seen as a result of the possibilities and limitations that unfold within this dinner culture. However, there are indications that the choice of dishes has more to do with social and cultural constraints than changing possibilities. Thus the common question 'What do you want for dinner today?' is not as open as it seems at first glance. Of the many possible dinner recipes that the women can choose from, the choice is typically narrowed down to relatively few variations depending on time and place.

This may seem paradoxical with regard to the many individualization narratives that characterize the food cultural debate. As a consequence of the diversity of modern food habit patterns, it is often argued that the individual to a greater extent creates his or her self-image and social life styles. However, the women's descriptions show that there are clear limitations on individuality in everyday life. The women's choice of dinner dishes follows

a relatively strict social, cultural and moral logic. Violations of the codes and rules must be excused and justified.

Three distinct proper dinner models

There are many struggles in social life around how things should be interpreted and understood. Researchers studying discourses are interested in how people mobilize meaning, and how some interpretations become dominant. For Foucault (1972) power was not given, but a result of ongoing discourses. When we define something in certain ways, for example good or bad dinners, we shift the power balance between social groups. A central point in the discourse-analytical approach is that events, people and social phenomena are subject to a range of possible constructions and representations. Assuming that there will always be several discourses surrounding a social phenomenon – for example, dinner – offering alternative views and different possibilities for action, there will also be some discourses that are more dominant than others (Burr, 1995). What, then, are the dominant understandings of a proper dinner? To investigate this, we performed a systematic collection of the contexts in which the term ‘proper dinner’ and synonyms appeared. The analysis consists in assessing the contexts and connotation fields of the term. As a result, three distinct models for a proper dinner were identified: the traditional, the trendy and the therapeutic² dinner model.

The use of the term ‘model’ signifies two aspects. First and foremost, a model is seen as a pattern to copy, a standard or an ideal.³ It can also be a value standard – understood as something desirable or something undesirable. The three dinner models have different values attached. The traditional model realizes values such as tradition and family belonging, the trendy dishes demonstrate food-cultural competence and class association, while the therapeutic model signifies nutritional competence and valuation of health. In this way, these three dinner models construct rather different versions of what can be seen as a proper dinner.

The traditional dinner model

Proper dinner, well then I think like old granny – grandmother or mother. Rather good, old old-fashioned dinner where the ingredients have been sort of selected. Home-made meatballs, steak or something – no semi-fabricated things. I mean home-made gravy or soup and things like that. That is a proper dinner. And I make that very rarely. I think I have made a steak

once in my life. (Divorced woman, age 39, four children and receiver of social security)

The trendy dinner model

A proper dinner must have a first course and a main course of lamb, salmon or a good fish like that. Maybe two salads as well. We use a lot of potatoes too, but not ordinary ones, more like scarlet pimperl or almond potatoes. And some wine. Today we had raw fish – sushi – and then we had clam soup afterwards. (Married woman, age 33, one child, Masters Degree in political science)

The therapeutic dinner model

When I think proper dinner, I think of fish. If we've had fresh fish with potatoes and a good portion of real vegetables, then that's a proper dinner to me. It's the healthiest. Meatballs are a proper dinner too, in a way, but it's not very healthy. There's too much gravy and stuff with it, but it's very good! (Married woman, age 33, two children, clerical officer)

As is evident from these descriptions, dinner will be the subject of competing representations – a proper dinner can be like mother used to make (traditional), it can consist of new and fashionable food (trendy), or it can be made from healthy ingredients (therapeutic). This shows exactly how dinner cannot be said to be good or bad in itself, but only in relation to the values it is meant to realize. The different descriptions can also be seen as arguments put forward to strengthen one's own position and practice as home cook.

The poor dinner model

A proper dinner must not only be seen in relation to the values that it is intended to realize, but also in relation to what is not a proper dinner. What we mean by the term proper dinner will always be relational. A proper dinner has a meaning because there are also words and terms for what should be considered a poor or wrong type of dinner. The typical example that the women give of a poor dinner is the frozen pizza, Pizza Grandiosa. No other dish has been the subject of more debate in Norwegian food discourse. This market-leading pizza product seems to have become synonymous with everything that is 'wrong' with the modern Norwegian food habit pattern (Bugge and Døving, 2000; Bugge, 2005).

The taboo dinner model

Pizza Grandiosa is a poor dinner. It's so quickly made. It fills you up, but it doesn't taste of much. We sometimes have that too, though! (Cohabitant woman, age 39, three children, bachelor's degree in business)

This frozen pizza dish does not meet the women's requirements of a dinner – neither in terms of form nor content. This is evident for instance in images and stories the women use when they describe this type of dinner. It is seen as 'careless cooking', 'foul food', 'something to fill your stomach', 'cardboard taste', 'a tired-and-hungry thing' or an 'emergency solution'. When the women have chosen to serve this type of food, it is always explained and justified: 'My daughter was going to a handball match', 'my husband was away' or 'I had such a terrible cold that I couldn't bring myself to cook.' In other words, it is not a desired alternative, but it has happened and needs to be excused. Such stories say a lot about the home cook's agency, what possibilities they actually have in shaping a dinner pattern. It is also evident that some constructions or expressions are more accessible or possible than others. The women's descriptions show that it is a lot easier for them to say: 'today we had meatballs' than to say 'today we had frozen pizza'. This is evident in the fact that it is not necessary to explain the choice of a dish like meatballs, unless you belong to the educated middle class (married woman, 33 years, above). However, the excuse and justification is almost over-emphasized in the cases where dishes like frozen pizza have been served. It is important to stress that in the discourse-analytical approach, we are not concerned with whether or not frozen pizza actually should be considered as an inferior meal to home-made meatballs. What we are concerned with is how some foods are constructed and become a proper meal.

Analyses of the Norwegian food debate show that Pizza Grandiosa has become an important identity marker. When people describe their food habits, they typically use this product to describe themselves and their position in the social 'foodscape'. For the urban middle-class segment, this is the ultimate example of 'non-food', while the more popular segment (i.e. consumers of volume products) often says that 'we probably eat it once or twice a week'. It has also become a favourite symbol of rebellion. One example of this is the 1 percent who say that they want to replace the conventional Norwegian Christmas dinner (pork or lamb ribs) with frozen pizza.

It should be mentioned that there are situations when it is quite acceptable to make a poor dinner. A typical quotation from the study material is:

'The days when I'm alone I don't make a proper dinner.' Dinner is a social meal and the social circumstances have many consequences for the dinner pattern. Dinner is particularly important when a person lives together with other people (Wood, 1995; Bugge and Døving, 2000). Furthermore, there are a lot more strict moral requirements to the form and content of the dinner when all family members are gathered around the table than when one or more of the family members are absent during the meal.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we wanted to show how thorough qualitative analyses of the social food discourse can provide valuable information about the many subtle codes and rules that surround our food habits – in this case representations and practices of a proper meal in the context of young families in suburban Norway. Cooking dinner is a central part of young mothers' everyday life. Studying how this practice emerges among mothers therefore provides an understanding of contemporary eating patterns and changes that representative surveys do not show. The central research questions were: how do young mothers operate in this discursive field to shape a dinner pattern, what kind of representations and practices are typical, and in the context of contemporary Norwegian families, what are the distinctive features of 'a proper dinner'?

First, we showed how young women use the available discourses to present themselves and their dinner practice. Furthermore, we studied the social consequences of these representations. A typical objection against much research on food habits is that there is often a focus on the lack of correspondence between attitudes and actions. For instance, we were not interested in whether or not it was actually true that the interviewee Marit 'never had convenience foods', but in how she talked about 'frozen pizzas and instant soups', and in what contexts she mentioned such foods and dishes. In other words, we wanted to study how the women use language to construct different versions of their dinner practice. This does not necessarily mean that the women are aware of the process. The women only say what is 'natural' and 'fitting' in the context.

Second, we unpacked utterances such as 'I don't like new and spicy food', 'I don't like ordinary Norwegian meatballs', 'I like to do it a bit different', 'of course we have dinner', 'I have more experience in this cooking bit than him', 'tacos aren't suitable for Sunday dinner', 'frozen pizza tastes bad', etc. Our intention was precisely to show the complex social and cultural processes involved in everyday cooking. Such statements also show how the women negotiate and produce particular identities through their

food discourse. For instance, this is reflected in how the social and cultural codes are expressed when it comes to minced-meat dishes. When the women describe and explain their practice, they make an active selection of appropriate repertoires to explain socially distinguishing preferences and dishes, whether they refer to the discursive space of trendy, therapeutic or traditional dishes.

Third, we showed that the women's dinner pattern is something they choose for themselves only to a limited degree, but rather is a result of conformity and conventions. This makes a difference for the many individualization narratives that characterize the food cultural discourses. One common feature of these narratives is indeed that they are largely based on the idea of the individual's free choice. As shown in this article, the problem is that this kind of individuality does not work very well in people's everyday life. This is particularly evident when we explore the women's practical dinner repertoires. When the women are asked to state the reasons for their choice of dishes, the typical answers are: 'Today we had something really simple because we had to get to swimming practice.' This is also evident in the social and biographical dinner repertoires: 'The idea that dinner should be home cooked is something my mother instilled in me.' Indeed, statements like these raise the question of what we really mean by the concept of individuality within an everyday context. There will always be a number of social and cultural limitations on the women's dinner practice.

And finally, our study contributes to the comprehension of everyday cooking as something much more than mere routine housework. The study shows that dinner is a very central social and cultural resource when women talk about themselves and their life. When the women explain their dinner practice, we immediately get the impression that this is governed by the practical repertoires: 'I make the kind of food that is quick and easy' or 'I don't have time for advanced cooking.' On the basis of statements such as this it would be tempting to conclude that the women have more practical considerations in their dinner practice than considerations relating to morality, values and norms. That is not the case. When looking more closely at these descriptions, it appears that everyday rhetoric helps the women solve all the ideological dilemmas they encounter in their daily dinner practice.

The representation of women who cook food is a powerful one. Common to all women in the study is the fact that they accept the responsibility for preparing proper dinners for their families. Husbands and older children have more of an assisting role. Through their dinner practices, the

women try to meet some of the many expectations they have set for themselves, and the expectations they acknowledge from the social world around them. This generalization emerges from the many explanations, excuses, justifications and comparisons that the women make when they negotiate a valid position for themselves: 'I wish we didn't have so much semi-fabricated food, but . . .', or 'when I think about proper dinner, then that's the kind of food mother made, but she was a housewife, and I'm not.' These statements indicate that the women have many ideals that they try to live up to in their daily dinner practice. The material clearly shows that the perfect dinner is a dream that never comes true. There will always be something disturbing the order: a ready-made meal, the flavour of a burnt sauce, a child who does not like the food, an adult who has to work overtime, a glass of water that is spilled, etc.

In this article, we have tried to show how the shaping of a dinner pattern depends on a number of subtle rules and codes. A weak point of the general food surveys is that they hardly register the many subtleties in people's food practices. Further qualitative food studies can contribute in many ways to give an even more nuanced and tolerant understanding of why people eat as they do.

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Notes

1. The Norwegian word 'kos' (coziness, cozy time), which appears in qualitative data about food habits, is often related to good food with wine or beer. It also includes other components such as candlelight, TV, family, friends and dating (Roos and Wandel, 2004; Bugge, 2003; Bugge and Døving, 2000).
2. Anthony Giddens (1991) claims that focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity are: What to do? How to act? Who to be? These questions may be answered either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. An individual's future is not determined by fate, but to what extent the individual is able to take responsibility for his/her own life and make the right lifestyle choice. Among other things, this entails some sort of therapeutic control of food. Food therapy aims to increase the individual's well-being and give him/her a long and good future.
3. In nutritional terms, the term 'model plate' is used for giving practical advice about the ideal combination of, for example, meat, vegetables and potatoes in a nutritionally balanced dinner.

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