

3

Two anthropologists treat mealtimes as cultural sites for socializing children into commensality, communicative expectations, and the symbolic, moral, and sentimental meanings of food and eating. Using ethnographic evidence, they indicate how mealtime comportment is embedded in practices and ideologies relevant to children's competent membership in their families and communities.

The Cultural Structuring of Mealtime Socialization

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Anthropologists have long considered ways in which food preparation, distribution, and consumption authenticate both social order and moral and aesthetic beliefs and values. Less frequently examined are the socialization processes that promote continuity and change across generations in the sociocultural life of food.

This chapter considers mealtimes as cultural sites for the socialization of persons into competent and appropriate members of a society. Cultural sites are here conceptualized as historically durable yet transformable, socially organized and organizing, and tempospatially situated arenas, which are laden with symbolic meanings and mediated by material artifacts. Cultural sites are given life through recurrent social participation and longevity through efforts to socialize novices into the predilections, sentiments, and actions that undergird meaningful participation. This notion of cultural site assumes that members will act in conventional ways, yet not necessarily share common understandings and knowledge of the situation at hand (Eagleton, 2000; Garfinkel, 1967; Geertz, 1973; Sapir, 1993). It follows Bourdieu in approaching culture as an ever changing set of dispositions, strategies, and social positions that members contingently enact in relation to one another within situations and fields of local relevance (1977, 1990a, 1990b).

With this notion of cultural site in mind, mealtimes can be regarded as pregnant arenas for the production of sociality, morality, and local understandings of the world. Mealtimes are both vehicles for and end points of

culture. As vehicles, mealtimes constitute universal occasions for members not only to engage in the activities of feeding and eating but also to forge relationships that reinforce or modify the social order. In addition, mealtimes facilitate the social construction of knowledge and moral perspectives through communicative practices that characterize these occasions. Yet mealtimes are also objects of cultural import in themselves. They are more or less conventional and demarcated as a kind of social practice that requires certain sensibilities of participants. Mealtimes vary within and across social groups in relation to participation, setting, duration, meal items, meal sequence, and attributed significance.

These considerations inform the cultural structuring of mealtime socialization. Rather than a bundle of mealtime traits, customs, symbols, and rules that experts transmit and children and other novices come to master, cultural knowledge and practices associated with mealtimes are recreated and altered through socially and experientially asymmetrical relationships. A good deal of scholarship has been devoted to eliminating an either-or approach to culture and nature. These approaches instead emphasize mutually organizing influences, wherein culture pervades the development of children, while children are endowed with the agentive capacity to appropriate culture within their own frames for thinking, feeling, and acting in the world (Cole & Cole, 1996; LeVine, 1999; Mead, 1934; Rogoff, 1990).

Two processes are central to the cultural structuring of mealtime socialization: apprenticeship and language socialization. Apprenticeship is learning through active observation and direct participation in activities together with a more knowledgeable participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). Apprenticeship is embedded in and organized by community ideologies and social arrangements for learning. This chapter considers ways in which families and communities may apprentice children into mealtime practices by soliciting their attention and involvement and positioning them as either observers and overhearers or as more central participants (for example, as mealtime preparers, servers, consumers, or communicators).

Language socialization is the process by which children and other novices acquire sociocultural competence through language and other semiotic modalities (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984, 1995). Through mealtime communication, more experienced participants engage less experienced interlocutors in the collaborative construction of social order and cultural understandings. In some cases, the sociocultural messages are conveyed explicitly to the less experienced participants through speech activities such as directives, error corrections, and assessments. In other cases, sociocultural orientations are socialized through less direct strategies such as irony, inference, pragmatic presupposition, metaphor, and noticeable silences. Both direct and indirect communicative strategies can co-occur in the same mealtime and can be embedded in genres such as prayer, storytelling, and planning at the meal.

Socialization into Commensality

Commensality is the practice of sharing food and eating together in a social group such as a family. Universally, commensality is central to defining and sustaining the family as a social unit. In ancient Greece, for example, *oikos* (family) was stipulated as “those who feed together” (Lacey, 1968, p. 15). Similarly, on the Micronesian island of Fais, the family roles of father and mother are rooted in the mealtime functions of provider and preparer of food, and extended family relationships are maintained through redistribution of important food items such as yams (Rubinstein, 1979). Fais children are socialized into the importance of food sharing in the family unit through accompanying others in continuous cross-household visits that involve preparing, offering, and consuming food. Children are also warned to eat only with close relatives or face dire consequences.

While commensality is considered essential to sociality in many social groups, everyday realities indicate that members are not always eager to share their food items. Among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, for example, young children are socialized through prompting to obtain food from another person either by issuing a demand or by appealing to the person to feel sorry for them (Schieffelin, 1990). Similarly, one of the first words that young Samoan children produce is the affect-marked first-person pronoun *ita* (poor me), which they use to beg for food. Samoan children acquire this word before the neutral form of the first-person pronoun (Ochs, 1988), indicating the pragmatic role of food sharing in language development. On Fais island, children who fail to notice when food is ready may be taunted and find nothing left to eat (Rubinstein, 1979). They become wary of how food is distributed and display “a pattern of covert grumbling and gossip over others’ stinginess or greed” (p. 211). In Northern Vietnam, as in other patriarchal societies, gender plays a role in food distribution: girls are reprimanded for their greed, while boys come to expect prime selections of food (Rydstrom, 2003).

In many communities, commensality involves eating together at the same time. For at least the past three decades, the ideal in the United States and Western Europe has been for family members to come together for the evening meal (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973; Murcott, 1982; Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996). When children violate this ideal by beginning to eat before all family members are seated at the table, they may be explicitly reprimanded, as in the American family dinner interaction below (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 233):

MOTHER: (*agitated*) Come on. Don’t start eating yet. You know better . . .
 (*All kids keep eating*) Put your forks down. Come on. Can’t you have some manners? (*Mom checks to see if Jimmy and then Laurie are seated properly, pushing their chairs in.*) Put your forks down.

LAURIE: I wanna pray. (*clasps her hands*) Jesus? . . . Jesus?

MOTHER: Wait a minute Laurie. (*irritated, throwing arms up in semi-despair*) I'm not sitting down.

Dinnertime where everyone sits at a common table is a vanishing ideal for many families in the United States, in the face of busy schedules of working parents and highly engaged children involved in a plethora of extracurricular activities that leave little room for commensality. In their study of American family dinnertimes during the 1980s, Ochs, Smith, and Taylor (1989) found that mothers and children sometimes dined before the father returned home, or that children ate before their parents, often while watching television. Even when families managed to eat together, children often wanted to leave the dinner table as soon as possible rather than linger and interact with their parents, leading to extended negotiations about obligations to remain together at the meal.

In other communities, the ideal is not for family members to always eat together. Rather, children are socialized into commensality that involves a social order whereby certain members eat before others, according to generation, gender, or social rank. In China, for example, older-generation family members take food before the younger generation, and “on formal occasions when guests are present, children may even be excluded from the dining table until the adults are finished, or seated at a table separate from the adults” (Cooper, 1986, p. 181). In Samoa, older children are expected to help young untitled adults to prepare and serve meals. During important meals, older, titled adults generally eat the main meal before untitled adults and children, although they may bring a very young child next to them to share their food (Ochs, 1988). During more intimate family mealtimes, adults and children may eat at the same time. A similar pattern holds for the egalitarian Matsigenka, who dwell in the Peruvian Amazon, where men eat before women and children when several family units assemble, but in smaller nuclear family meals, the entire family eats at the same time (Izquierdo, 2001).

Families and communities also differ in moral and social priorities surrounding quality and amount of food according to generation, gender, and social rank. For example, in a study of Italian family mealtimes, parents favored children over themselves in the distribution of food (Ochs et al., 1996; Sterponi, 2002). In contrast, in the United States, parents emphasize that children should not take food at the expense of other family members but rather should leave enough for all, as illustrated below:

MOTHER: (*quite annoyed*) Adam? There are other people at this table. Now you put back two of those peaches! (*0.6 second pause*)

ADAM: Okay okay.

As indicated above, socialization into commensality is also socialization into sociocultural embodiments of generation, gender, and other social positionings. Embedded in the socialization of commensality are messages regarding the morality of food distribution and consumption and the rights of adults and children to determine how, when, and how much family members will eat.

Socialization into Food as Symbol and Tool

In every society, food is highly symbolic, in the sense that members imbue particular kinds and qualities of food with sentimental, moral, religious, and health-related meanings. Adults and children can also use food as a symbol of communal identity over historical time as well as to affirm or diminish affection and social bonds. A number of studies have reviewed the symbolic significance of food and eating among different social groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas, 1975; Farb & Armelagos, 1980; Goody, 1982; Mintz & Du Bois 2002); less attention has been devoted to the practices through which children come to regard food as charged with specific sociocultural meanings.

Children's development is often linked to contact with or avoidance of particular foods. While breast milk universally is a possible, if not desirable, food item offered to infants, all children are eventually weaned. In the highlands of Indonesia, for example, this is accomplished by mothers enforcing a separation from the nursing child. Later in life, children assert their autonomy while reclaiming the privileges of early childhood by "stealing" foods from village fields (Hollan & Wellenkamp, 1996). In Papua New Guinea, Kaluli mothers keep children away from taboo foods that are thought to interfere with their mobility and social and language development. Rather than directly refusing a child's request for prohibited food, Kaluli mothers distract or fool children or prompt them to tell others, "I don't eat x," thereby encouraging them to take responsibility for the food taboo (Schieffelin, 1990, p. 69).

At mealtimes, different aspects of the food may be accentuated in different social groups. A comparative study of U.S. and Italian dinnertime socialization, for example, found that U.S. parents urged children to eat their meal, emphasizing that it is nutritious and part of a social contract, which yields a reward, namely, dessert. Italian parents emphasized food as a pleasure over the above three attributes in conversing with children about the meal (Ochs et al., 1996). The U.S. parental emphasis on food as nutrition and eating as a social and moral obligation led to protracted food negotiations and tensions at the dinner table, as illustrated below (pp. 14–16):

FATHER: If you don't eat a good dinner you won't . . . get any either. But I'm especially concerned about eating your vegetables, okay? They have minerals in them.

...

JANIE: I would like to leave this (*pointing to one item on plate*).

FATHER: Eat the vegetables? (*looking down at Janie's plate*)

...

JANIE: And eat that (*pointing to another item on plate, looking up at Father*) and eat three vitamins.

...

FATHER: You eat one piece of corn and two pieces of the green . . . some broccoli (*pause*) and you eat all that (*points to plate*) and take three vitamins.

In cases as the above, children's compliance with eating their meal dominated mealtime interaction. Such a here-and-now topical focus may preclude children from participating in mealtime discussions that would expose them to family and community frameworks for interpreting past and future events.

Socializing children into food as a reward focused in the United States exclusively on the dessert. As in the warning below (Ochs et al., 1996, p. 22), parents use dessert as a carrot or a stick to get children to eat the main portion of the meal, framing meat and vegetables as food the children must eat while dessert is cast as food the children want to eat:

FATHER: Whoever does not finish their vegetables does not get any ice cream for dessert.

The emphasis on dessert as a reward competes with the purported value of food as nutrition. In other words, some U.S. parents articulate mixed messages about the goodness of food. A separate study of U.S. middle-class families evidenced this contradiction at the family dinner table, as illustrated below (Izquierdo & Paugh, 2003, p. 9):

SANDRA: (*asking for lemonade*) Mommy please?

FATHER: Drink your milk first. You heard Mom.

...

LAURA: Mommy? (*pause*) Can I have Coke mixed (*pause*) with milk?

FATHER: Yeah (*pause*) yeah.

In contrast, Italian family dinners in the study did not include a dessert, and Italian parents did not use sweets to cajole children to eat. Indeed, Italian parents did not expect children to eat everything on the table; rather, they assumed that children, like adults, develop tastes and preferences for certain food items as part of their personalities and sought to affirm these preferences. Adults and children alike in the Italian dinners used a rich grammar of positive affect to praise both the food and the person who prepared or

purchased it. In the excerpt below, for example, a child augments the word *pezzo* (piece) with the diminutive, affect-loaded suffixes *etto* (nice little) and *ino* (little) to form the word *pezzettino* in requesting a piece of meat (Ochs et al., 1996, p. 28):

CHILD: Mamma questo pezzettino lo voglio
[Mamma this appealing nice, little, delicate piece, I want it].

In addition to commending the food and its preparer or purchaser, parents at the Italian family dinners would also recount their own positive childhood memories of particular dishes on the dinner table. In this manner, food items were not only imbued with positive sentiments but also served to link family members across generations, and in some cases to bring family members no longer alive into family members' consciousness.

Invoking spirits of ancestors in the consumption of food is common across many societies, where children and other family members are enjoined to partake of food as a means of reinforcing the continuity of the family (Bloch, 1985; Feeley-Harnik, 1994; Watson, 1987). The emphasis on continuity of traditional foods contrasts with the practices of many families in the United States, where new foods are constantly introduced to children during mealtimes. Such novelty introduces stress at meals, both when parents express uncertainty over whether their children will eat the food they have prepared or purchased ("I don't know if the kids'll really like it") and when children indeed refuse to try something new (Ochs et al., 1996, p. 36).

Regardless of whether food is explicitly used to link present and past generations, it operates as a symbol of care in all social groups, yet at the same time it can be used as a weapon or threat. Mealtimes can thus be cultural sites for socializing children into conflict, for example, when children refuse others' attempts to get them to eat, when others reject children's demands for a desired food, or when alignments between family members are formed around food preferences and dispreferences.

Eating disorders such as anorexia and compulsive overeating are associated with issues of care and control in the family. In the case of anorexia, rejection of food is literally and figuratively a rejection of others' care and control (Katzman & Lee, 1997). Though anorexia is multi-determined, its increasing prevalence (Anderson-Fye & Becker, 2003) may be socialized in childhood and throughout the life span through gender- and class-related mass media messages about body norms and eating practices (Bordo, 1993). A sociocultural perspective may shed light on eating disorders, in that these messages are embedded in local ideologies about food and the body. These messages have been exported to and appropriated by social groups in which anorexia was not formerly manifest (Anderson-Fye & Becker, 2003). Often treatment of eating disorders involves clinical attempts to resocialize sufferers through a variety of

modalities into different sensibilities about food and the body that are less self-destructive. Those undergoing resocialization, however, may find these attempts infuriating and infantilizing and reject intervention (Gremillion, 2003; Shohet, 2004).

Socialization into Mealtime Communication

Mealtimes are cultural sites not only for eating but also for communication. Who participates in which kinds of communicative practices during mealtimes is linked to historically rooted ideologies and practices. In addressing children's socialization into mealtime communication, it is important to consider both norms of appropriate mealtime communication and the social positioning of children in mealtime communication.

Norms of communication may include the norm that all participants will largely remain silent during the course of the meal, as among the Matsigenka of the Peruvian Amazon (Izquierdo, 2001). Alternatively, in some families and communities, children are expected to generally remain silent while adults converse, as in the adage, "Children are to be seen and not heard." A study of New England family mealtimes found that parents significantly dominated the conversation, with children producing only one-third of the talk (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973). A study of urban Swedish family mealtimes similarly found that parents dominated conversation, with mothers providing more than half of all comments at the dinner table (De Geer, 2004). In societies where children are expected to be silent or eat separately or are positioned as servers, minimal or no communication may be directed to them, but they may nonetheless acquire critical sociocultural knowledge and skills through observing and overhearing the communication of others.

If there is communicative activity at mealtimes, children are socialized through different communicative roles into norms for participating in different kinds of mealtime genres considered appropriate by family and community. Children may assume different forms of participation such as author (person who composes message), animator (person who utters message), principal (person whose views are represented), recipient (person to whom message is directed), and overhearer (nonrecipient who attends to communicative activity) (Goffman, 1981). Across social groups, expectations concerning children's communicative roles take into account a child's developmental competence as well as the semiotic activity at hand.

In examining children's socialization into mealtime communication, we focus on children's participation in the construction of moral discourse. It is striking how not only feasts and rituals but also everyday family meals are rich cultural sites for reaffirming moral sentiments of the family and community. Mealtimes are pervaded by talk oriented toward reinforcing what is right and wrong about both the family and outsiders. Morality is socialized through grammatical markings of deference and authority, directives, assessments,

justifications, excuses, apologies, prayers, storytelling, and other forms of communicative exchange in which children participate.

Children's table manners, for example, have been a focus of moral socialization across historical times and social groups. Elias's classic *The Civilizing Process* (2000), for example, documents how sixteenth-century texts were devoted to instructions concerning how French, German, and Italian elite children were to use their napkins and utensils, receive offers of food, and cut and chew meat. In contemporary times as well, families imbue children's mealtime comportment with moral meanings. We have illustrated U.S. children's socialization through and into the moral discourse of comportment in excerpts presented earlier in this chapter. North Vietnamese village families as well chastise young children, especially girls, for lapses in their comportment, for example, for failing to use chopsticks correctly, sit still and attentively, eat fast with concentration, or otherwise fail to display respect (Rydstrom, 2003). Similarly, Chinese children are socialized to display deference through eating every grain of rice in their bowl and not displaying a strong preference for certain favorite dishes by taking more than others (Cooper, 1986; Hsu & Hsu, 1977).

An important component of children's mealtime comportment may involve displaying appropriate engagement in mealtime prayers. In the United States, for example, children in certain families are expected to lead, join in, or say their own grace at the start of the meal. Dreyer and Dreyer (1973) observed that usually the oldest child led grace in families in which this genre was part of the mealtime practice. Children may be sanctioned when saying grace inappropriately, as illustrated earlier when Laurie began saying grace before her mother was seated. Similarly, in the example below, young David, in the middle of singing a Johnny Appleseed grace (from an enthusiastic children's song that gives thanks for "the sun, the rain and the apple seed"), suddenly opens his eyes, throws a fork on the floor, and switches to the Beatles' song "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" (Capps & Ochs, 2002, p. 46):

DAVID: BANG! BANG! Maxwell's silver fork!

His father models appropriate conduct by continuing to sing the Johnny Appleseed grace, while his mother quietly reprimands him:

FATHER: (*singing*) Thank the Lord.

MOTHER: (*softly*) Throwing hands aren't praying hands.

When David then laughingly shouts, "TIME FOR MAXWELL," his mother presses his hands together in prayer position and rejoins singing grace. These verbal and nonverbal maneuvers appear to have a positive outcome, as David also joins his parents in finishing the grace with a series of loud "AMEN! AMEN, AMEN, AMEN!"

For many social groups, family mealtimes are cultural sites for recounting narratives that convey moral messages. That is, exchanging accounts of personal or collective significance is often a central facet of the meal, as important as the food consumed. While in some cases, one family member dominates as narrator, in other cases, the narratives and the moral points they highlight are collaboratively produced by family members, including children (Ochs & Taylor, 1992). In a study comparing Jewish American and Israeli family mealtime narratives, Blum-Kulka (1997, p. 137) found that “socialization for storytelling in the Jewish-American families relies heavily on adult-child engagement in narrative events focused on child tellers (and protagonists); by contrast, in the Israeli families adults take up a larger proportion of narrative space, and hence socialization for narrative skills . . . relies more heavily on modeling and on allowing (limited) participation in adult-focused stories.”

Even when they are not the primary authors, animators, or principals of mealtime narratives, this genre of communication constitutes a universal, powerful medium for socializing children into moral perspectives. Below, we consider how narrative practices recruit children into morally preferred ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world.

In the United States, dinner is often the moment of the day when family members reunite after work and school and is a cultural site for recounting incidents that transpired in the course of the day or the recent past. Telling such narratives often appears to be motivated by a desire not only to update others but also to solicit their sympathies for the teller’s moral stance. A study of U.S. middle-class European American families (Ochs et al., 1989) found that family members frequently positioned themselves as morally superior to others (the “looking good” principle). In the excerpt below, the mother aligns with her daughter Lucy’s self-righteous attitude about the punishment appropriate for a classmate’s transgression. In recounting that the school principal (Mrs. Arnold) gave only one day of detention to a girl who pulled up another girl’s skirt on the playground, Lucy begins her narrative with a clear moral framing (p. 244):

LUCY: I don’t think Mrs. Arnold is being fair because . . . when we were back in school um—this girl—she pulled Valerie’s dress up to here (*gestures with hand across chest*) in front of the boys.

MOTHER: Mhm?

LUCY: She only—all she did was get a day in detention.

MOTHER: Mhm? You think she should have gotten suspended? (*pause*)

LUCY: At least—that’s—

MOTHER: Mhm?

LUCY: Not allowed in school.

Lucy's mother signals her willingness to go along with her daughter's indignation by voicing what Lucy would prefer as punishment for the transgression: suspension from school. After a detached, ironic commentary by Lucy's father ("Fortunately, capital punishment is still beyond the reach of elementary school principals"), both her mother and her little brother, Chuck, display rousing support for Lucy's position (p. 245):

MOTHER: Lucy was *really* embarrassed . . . I mean you really would have liked to kill the girl—huh? Cuz you were upset with her? But you were held back because you thought your school was going to do it and the school didn't do it and you feel upset.

(*pause*)

CHUCK: I think she should be in there for a *whole* MONTH or so well maybe (*pause*) *each day* she have to go there—*each day each day* . . .

Through this narrative interaction, Lucy becomes assured that she can count on the support of at least some of her family and that her mother knows her sentiments so well that she can elaborately voice them. Lucy's younger brother as well evidences that he has learned how to align with the majority family stance.

But there is a twist to this narrative interaction, which reveals the complexities of moral socialization at family mealtimes. Perhaps intentionally or perhaps unwittingly, young Chuck reveals that Lucy herself was given one day's detention the year before:

CHUCK: Lucy—you only went to it *once*—right?

Lucy's moral high ground is undermined by this disclosure. Her indignation turns out to be rooted in the fact that she and the classmate received the same amount of detention. We suggest that like Lucy, other children at U.S. dinner tables learn that it is sometimes difficult to look good when there are skeletons in your closet about which family members know.

Indeed, U.S. children often have difficulty garnering and maintaining their moral credibility when parents and siblings begin to probe their role in a narrated episode. Mealtimes in many U.S. and other households turn out to be cultural sites for surveillance not only of children's here-and-now comportment at the table, but also of their past and projected activities as narrated during mealtimes. As such, some children come to regard dinner-time as a provocative, even unpleasant moment when they are subjected to interrogation and criticism (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Taylor, 1995).

In Italian family dinnertimes, in contrast, parents almost always side with their children or position them as justified in their actions (Sterponi, 2002), as in the excerpt below (Sterponi, 2003, p. 91):

PAPÀ: Leonardo.

(*Leonardo looks at Papà*)

PAPÀ: Ascolta una cosa. [Listen to this.] Come mai oggi hai graffiato a Ivan tu? [How come you scratched Ivan today?]

(2.5) (*Leonardo looks at Papà*)

PAPÀ: Eh?

(1.0)

Come mai? Che t'aveva fatto Ivan?

[How come? What had Ivan been doing to you?]

Here the father offers the possibility that Leonardo may have been defending himself rather than wantonly aggressive. In other Italian dinner-time narratives, a parent may take the blame himself or herself for a child's apparent misdemeanor.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered language socialization and cultural apprenticeship into family mealtimes. Ethnographic evidence from various parts of the world supports the notion that food and eating are not just biologically significant for the reproduction of families and social groups, but are saturated with social import. What constitutes mealtime comportment, for example, varies within and across communities, including the sequential ordering of who eats before, after, or along with whom; the social distribution of food; and the communicative roles expected of different mealtime participants. In many communities, children are often expected to eat after adults and to be relatively silent. Through engagement in this mealtime structure, children learn their lower social position relative to others. By contrast, in many households in the United States, children are expected to eat together with the adult members of their household and to vocally contribute to mealtime discourse. This mealtime structure promotes a more egalitarian ideology. Such egalitarianism may be contradicted, however, by a focus in many U.S. family mealtime discussions on parental attempts to control their children's past, present, and projected behavior through assessments and directives.

In addition, children are socialized into culturally divergent symbolic, moral, and emotional meanings associated with food and eating. At the dinner table of many U.S. families, for example, the dominant message is that children should eat their meal because it is good for their health, that is, it is nutritious. Alternatively, Italian families emphasize the pleasurable qualities

of the meal they are consuming together. Because food is saturated with emotional meanings, children across many of the world's communities use it as a medium of resistance, including habitually refusing food as an extreme form of social control.

Meals are cultural sites where members of different generations and genders come to learn, reinforce, undermine, or transform each other's ways of acting, thinking, and feeling in the world, sometimes through cajoling, begging, probing, praising, bargaining, directing, ignoring, or otherwise interacting with one another in the course of nourishing one's body. These practices orient children both to mealtime comportment and to more encompassing dispositions expected of socially differentiated members. Though accentuated at feasts and ritual occasions, cultural apprenticeship and language socialization actually accrue and are given shape in the give and take of everyday mealtime interactions.

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