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Deconstructing family meals: Do family structure, gender and employment status influence the odds of having a family meal?

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MZ Sharif would like to dedicate this paper to the late Dr. Suzanne Bianchi who was her mentor and introduced her to this data-set as well as the idea of studying how time-use can help advance our understanding of health disparities. MZ Sharif would like to extend her deepest appreciation to Dr. Bianchi who guided and supported her throughout the process of developing this manuscript. Dr. Bianchi is the impetus, passion and energy behind this paper and the authors hope that she would be proud to read the final version.

ABSTRACT

Objectives: We assessed the odds of having a family dinner by parental gender, family structure and parental employment.
Methods: This study used data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) (2006–2008). Multivariate analyses assessed the odds of two outcomes among parents: 1) eating at all with children and 2) having a family dinner.
Results: Single men had lower odds of eating at all with children and eating a family dinner in comparison to partnered/married males. Partnered/married women had increased odds of eating at all with children and eating a family dinner compared to their partnered/married male counterparts. While single women had increased odds of eating at all with children compared to partnered/married males, no difference was detected in the odds of having a family dinner. Among dual-headed households, women had lower odds of eating a family dinner when both parents were employed compared a dual-headed household with employed male/non-employed female. There were no differences among men regardless of their employment status or that of their partner/spouse.
Conclusions: Family structure, parental gender and employment status all influence the odds of having a family dinner. Future research on family meals should consider all of these factors to better understand trends and disparities across household compositions.

1. Introduction

Family meals have been considered an “American tradition” since the 1960s (Larson, Branscomb, & Wiley, 2006) and have been recognized as the most significant parental influence on children's eating habits (Scaglioni, Arrizza, Vecchi, & Tedeschi, 2011; Videon & Manning, 2003). There are multiple pathways through which parents can influence their children's eating habits and weight status during family meals including: feeding practices, modeling of healthy dietary attitudes and behavior, providing access to healthy food, establishing family routines and traditions related to food (Gable & Lutz, 2000; Kitzman-Ulrich et al., 2010; Levin & Kirby, 2012; Patrick & Nicklas, 2005; Schmeer, 2012).

The importance of family meals are also increasingly recognized in obesity prevention research as more frequent family meals are associated with lower obesity risk (Berge et al., 2015; Lee, Lee, & Park, 2015) Specifically, family meals have been associated with positive eating habits such as lower soda consumption, lower frequency of skipped breakfasts and higher intake of fruit, vegetables, and key macro- and micronutrients (Berge et al., 2015; Boles & Gunnarsdottir, 2015; Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & French, 2007; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003). Moreover, family meals are inversely associated with adoption of negative habits and “risky behavior” among adolescents (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Musick & Meier, 2012) including disordered eating, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide

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attempts (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Fulkerson, & Story, 2008; Jones-Sanpei, Holmes, & Day, 2009; N.; Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2007). Family meals during childhood and adolescence can have positive health implications across the life-course as they have been demonstrated to predict dietary habits and "social eating" in young adulthood (Larson et al., 2007). Overall, dietary habits and preferences established earlier in life are likely to continue throughout the lifecourse.

Time plays an important role in family meals and dietary behavior. Families are becoming "time poor" as a result of the demands on time caused by parents' jobs (Crouter, Head, McHale, & Tucker, 2004). Employed parents report time constraints as the main barrier to having regular family meals (Fulkerson et al., 2011). Having less time available for preparing meals has led families to either eat more prepared meals or eat out more often (Boutelle et al., 2007; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Hamrick, Andrews, Guthrie, Hopkins, & McClelland, 2011; Lytle et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003). Research on family meals has predominantly focused on mothers and has yielded mixed findings on the role of maternal employment on family meals. Full-time maternal employment has been associated with less frequent family meals than among their part-time or non-employed counterparts (Barnett, Gareis, & Brennan, 2008; Bianchi, 2011; Hearst et al., 2012) or has been shown to have no association.[10] While women's time allocated to housework has declined, time allocated to children has increased for both employed and non-employed mothers since the 1960s (Bianchi, 2011), suggesting women are still reserving time for their children despite competing demands. Others argue that maternal employment does not affect the likelihood of having a family meal, but instead increases the likelihood of eating store bought or prepared dinners (McIntosh et al., 2010). Some of these discrepancies are likely due to various measures of employment.

Single parents, particularly employed single mothers, face additional stressors due to time constraints (Hearst et al., 2012) and are therefore less likely to have a family meal as they have less time and financial resources. This can partially be explained by the fact that women are disproportionately employed in low-wage occupations, juggle multiple jobs and have less flexible schedules (Blake et al., 2009). In addition, single-headed households are not only more likely to be female-headed but are also more likely to be below the poverty line (Jabs & Devine, 2006). On the other hand, two-parent households are better able to provide more support, resources and structured routines (including family meals) than other household compositions when one parent is employed less than full-time (Garasky, Stewart, Gundersen, Lohman, & Eisenmann, 2009; Jones-Sanpei et al., 2009).

Forty percent of children live in "nontraditional" families, therefore, there is a need to understand how variations in family structures may influence health (Stewart & Menning, 2009) and health behaviors including the frequency of family meals. Yet, there has been limited research on how time influences eating practices and how these behaviors vary across household composition (Hamrick et al., 2011; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Jones-Sanpei et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2015). Research is needed on the employment of both parents given demographic changes including the increase of women employed in the formal labor force. In addition to the rise in women's participation in the formal labor force, the levels of fathers' engagement in childrearing tasks and household duties have surged over the decades (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Fernández, 2013). This new trend is motivating research on fathers' roles and influence on children's dietary habits and obesity risk which are currently understudied topics (Fraser et al., 2011).

There is growing recognition of fathers' influence on children's health and development (Yogman, Garfield & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child Family Health, 2016). Moreover, there is a burgeoning body of literature on fathers' engagement in specific child feeding practices, particularly of young children (Vollmer, Adamsons, Foster, & Mobley, 2015b, 2015a; Khandpur, Charles, Blaine, Blake, & Davison, 2016). In regards to the family meal, there are limited studies that include data on fathers and either examine the association between the frequency of a family meal and parental weight status and/or health behaviors, but they do not capture the father's participation in the meal itself (Berge et al., 2012; Chan & Sobal, 2011). In other words, there is a gap in our understanding of fathers' presence at family meals which can inform our understanding of how fathers participate in the broader family environment that can influence children's eating practices as well as their obesity risk. Moreover, there is a need for more research on fathers' roles in family meals given that there is no other activity that occurs with as much consistency and regularity as eating dinner as a family, in the US context (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). This study attempts to address these limitations by using time-use data collected by the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) to better understand the current practice of family meals in the United States (US). In specific, the primary objectives of this study are: (1) determine if there is an association between family structure and the occurrence of a family dinner; (2) determine whether parental employment influences the frequency of a family dinner in two parent households and (3) determine whether the odds of having a family dinner varies by parental gender.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. American time use study (ATUS)

This study pools data from the 2006 to 2008 American Time Use Survey (ATUS) and the ATUS Eating and Health Module. The ATUS is the only federally funded and continuous time-use survey in the US (Reifschneider, Hamrick, & Lacey, 2011). ATUS provides a valid and reliable measure of time use over one 24 h period (Zick, Stevens, & Bryant, 2011). Respondents, 15 years of age or older, are selected from households that completed the final interview of the Current Population Survey. Interviews are conducted over the telephone. Respondents are asked detailed questions about their time use over a 24 h period beginning from 4 am on the previous day. For each activity indicated, respondents were asked to provide information on the duration and location of the activity, as well as whether anyone else was present during the activity.

This study is based on the Eating and Health (EH) Module implemented between 2006 and 2008. This module aimed to better understand the context in which Americans prepare and consume food (Hamrick et al., 2011). Weights were applied to the individual ATUS and EH Module respondent data to produce nationally representative estimates for an average day.

A total of 37,832 ATUS and EH Module interviews were completed between 2006 and 2008. This study focuses on the role of family structure, gender and employment on having a family dinner. Therefore, the sample was restricted to respondents who reported being a parent to at least one child under the age of 18 in their household. This resulted in a total sample of 14,704. To differentiate between parents who do and do not eat with their children, and whether these patterns vary by family structure and gender, the sample was further restricted to parents who reported eating at least 1 min between 4 pm and 9 pm on the diary day, yielding a sample of 8498 (Subsample 1). This timeframe has been used in previous research of family dinner using ATUS (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Wight, Price, Bianchi, & Hunt, 2009) as dinner is the meal families eat together most frequently (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). In addition, to explore how employment status influenced

the odds of having a family dinner in dual-headed households the sample was restricted to respondents who reported having a partner/spouse in the household and also reported eating at least 1 min on the diary day, which yielded an analytic sample of 7057 parents (3875 women and 3182 men) in two-parent households (Subsample 2).

2.2. Measures

There are two main outcome measures in this study: eating at all with children and having a family dinner. Both outcomes were restricted to primary eating (i.e. the primary activity is the "main activity" listed) between 4 pm and 9 pm at the respondent's home. First, a dichotomous variable measured primary eating with a child for at least 1 min between the hours of 4 pm and 9 pm (yes/no). Second, a dichotomous variable measured having had a family dinner defined as primary eating with a household child under the age of 18 for at least 20 min between the hours of 4 pm and 9 pm (yes/no).

The predictor measures in the current study were family structure, gender and employment status. Family structure was measured by whether or not the respondent had a spouse or partner present in the household. Responses were dichotomized as "no spouse or unmarried partner present" to represent single-headed households and "spouse present" or "unmarried partner present" to represent two-parent households. Parental gender was self-reported (male/female). These two variables were then combined to create four potential family structures (single woman, single man, partnered/married woman and partnered/married man). Employment was dichotomized as not employed versus employed (in the formal labor force) by combining responses of "unemployed - on layoff," "unemployed – looking" and "not in labor force" to represent non-employed respondents and "employed - at work" and "employed - absent" to represent employed respondents. Partner/Spouse's employment status was similarly dichotomized. A variable was created to represent whether one or both partners/spouses were employed in the labor force (both employed, employed man with non-employed partner/spouse, employed woman with non-employed partner/spouse, neither employed).

Demographic measures including race/ethnicity, education, day of the week and whether the interview took place on a holiday served as control variables. Education was categorized as less than high school, high school graduate or some college/AA degree, or college graduate. Employment has previously been described and was included in models when it was not a predictor variable. Day of the week is controlled for in order to differentiate between weekend and weekdays (weekday/weekend). Finally, a variable for holiday (yes/no) was included in the models as a control variable.

2.2.1. Analyses

All analyses were conducted using Stata 14, using appropriate weights. Descriptive statistics were calculated for independent variables. Unadjusted and adjusted logistic regression models were fitted predicting the odds ratios of eating at least 1 min with a child and eating a family dinner for the four family structure and gender categories (single woman, single man, partnered/married woman and partnered/married man). Partnered/married men served as the reference group.

In order to model the effect of spousal/partner and respondent employment on family dinners unadjusted and adjusted logistic regressions were fitted to predict the odds of having a family dinner. Separate models were run for women (N = 3886) and men in the subsample (N = 3187). Employment was captured using the following categories: 1) both employed and 2) employed woman with a non-employed partner/spouse 3) dual-headed households in which the male is employed and the woman is not. Category three served as the reference category. Results for households within which both parents are non-employed are not presented as they do not help explain the focal relationship of interest. Among all logistic regression models, adjusted models controlled for race, education, employment, day of the week and whether the diary day was a holiday.

3. Results

3.1. Sample characteristics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the two analytic samples. Respondents were predominantly female, White, employed, had a high school diploma or some college and had a partner/spouse present in the household. Roughly three-quarters of the interviews took place on a weekday and very few (less than 2%) took place on a holiday (Table 1).

3.2. Parents who ate at least 1 minute from 4 pm to 9 pm with their child (subsample 1)

Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression predicting eating with a child at all and eating a family dinner among parents who reported eating for at least for 1 min between 4 pm and 9 pm. Partnered/married men served as the reference category.

3.2.1. Ate with their child

As Table 2 shows, single men had 49% lower odds of eating with their child compared to partnered/married men (AOR = 0.51). Partnered/married women had 44% greater odds of eating with their child (AOR = 1.44) when compared their partnered/married male counterparts. Single women had 62% greater odds (AOR = 1.62) of eating with their child when compared their partnered/married male counterparts.

3.2.2. Family dinner

As Table 2 shows, single men had 42% lower odds of having a family dinner, when compared to their partnered/married male counterparts (AOR = 0.58). Partnered/married women had 24% greater odds of having a family dinner, when compared to their partnered/married male counterparts (AOR = 1.24). Single women did not differ in odds of having a family meal (AOR = 1.53), when compared to their partnered/married male counterparts.

3.3. Parents in dual-headed households (subsample 2)

Table 3 presents sub-analyses among dual-headed households. Table 3 examines the odds ratios of having a family dinner in two parent households by employment status of both the respondent and respondent's the partner/spouse, stratified by respondent gender. The reference category is employed partnered/married men with non-employed partner/spouse.

As Table 3 shows women have 37% lower odds of having a family dinner in households where both parents are employed in comparison to the reference category where a father is employed but not his partner/spouse (AOR = 0.63). Interestingly, the odds of having a family meal in households in which only the mother is employed did not differ in comparison to households in which the male is employed in the formal labor force but the woman is not. No significant differences emerged between male respondents who were not employed but whose partner/spouse was, and men who were employed but their partner/spouse was not.

Table 1
Weighted percentages of selected sample characteristics (American Time Use Survey, Eating and Health Module 2006–2008).

	Subsample 1 (N = 8498)	Subsample 2 (N = 7057)
	Parents who ate at least 1 minute (%)	Dual-headed households (%)
Sex		
Female	54.58	50.87
Male	45.42	49.13
Race		
White	65.21	67.57
Black	8.95	6.39
Hispanic	19.65	19.43
Asian	4.59	5.04
Other	1.59	1.57
Employment Status		
Employed	76.98	77.66
Non-employed/Not in labor force	23.02	22.34
Education		
Less than HS graduate	16.24	15.40
HS graduate or some college/AA degree	49.29	47.28
College graduate	34.47	37.32
Partner/Spouse		
Spouse/Unmarried partner present	86.80	100.00
No spouse or unmarried partner present	13.20	0.00
Day of the Week		
Weekday	75.08	75.49
Weekend	24.92	24.51
Holiday		
Holiday	1.41	1.31
Non-Holiday	98.59	98.69
Family Structure		
Single Mothers	10.43	0.00
Single Fathers	2.78	0.00
Partnered/married Mothers	44.16	50.87
Partnered/married Fathers	42.64	49.13

Table 2
Odds ratios from logistic regression for primary eating behavior among subsample 2: parents who reported eating at least 1 minute (8,498) (American Time Use Survey, Eating and Health Module 2006–2008).

	Ate with their child		Ate family dinner	
	OR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)[a]	OR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)[b]
Partnered/Married Male	1	1	1	1
Single Male	0.50 (0.34–0.72)	0.51 (0.35–0.73)	0.55 (0.38–0.78)	0.58 (0.40–0.83)
Partnered/Married Female	1.53 (1.30–1.81)	1.44 (1.21–1.71)	1.34 (1.15–1.55)	1.24 (1.06–1.44)
Single Female	1.43 (0.91–2.25)	1.62 (1.03–2.55)	1.35 (0.89–2.05)	1.53 (1.00–2.33)

OR=Odds ratio; AOR = Adjusted odds ratio.
[a] Controlling for employment, race, education, day of the week, holiday.
[b] Controlling for employment, race, education, day of the week.

Table 3
Odds ratios from logistic regression for family dinners among females and males in subsample 3: two-parent households (American Time Use Survey, Eating and Health Module 2006–2008).

	Ate family dinner Females (N = 3886)		Ate family dinner Males (N = 3187)	
	OR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)[a]	OR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)[a]
Employed Male/Non-Employed Partner/Spouse	1	1	1	1
Both Employed	0.62 (0.49–0.79)	0.63 (0.49–0.80)	0.85 (0.68–1.07)	0.86 (0.68–1.10)
Employed Female/Non-Employed Partner/Spouse	0.65 (0.39–1.08)	0.70 (0.42–1.16)	0.77 (0.48–1.25)	0.86 (0.52–1.40)

OR=Odds ratio; AOR = Adjusted odds ratio.
[a] Controlling for race, education, day of the week, holiday.

4. Discussion

This study adds to the body of research on family meals by measuring the effects of family structure, gender and employment using nationally representative data. These findings can help elucidate whether children in households with various characteristics have a lower likelihood of experiencing the benefits of a family dinner.

When looking at the sample of parents who reported eating at all during the timeframe, (subsample 1), single men had lower odds of both eating with their child at all as well as for the 20 min duration of a family dinner in comparison to partnered/married

men. Both partnered/married women and single women had increased odds of eating at all with children, though only partnered/married women had higher odds of eating a family dinner compared to men in two-parent households.

The general lack of differences between single women and partnered/married men contradicted the hypothesis that two-parent households would be more likely to have a family dinner than single-parent households. These results provide an interesting insight to the existing body of literature on family dinners suggesting that single mothers face additional barriers to having a family meal than parents living in dual-headed households (Berge, Hoppmann, Hanson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Berge et al., 2012; Stewart & Menning, 2009). Rather, the findings suggest that 1) partnered/married men are not participating in this family activity as often as their partnered/married female counterparts and 2) partnered/married men do not significantly differ from female-headed, households suggesting that not all single-headed family structures, uniformly, fare worse than all two-parent households. These findings underscore the highly gendered nature of the home food environment in which women are more directly engaged than men (Hearst et al., 2012).

Despite the absence of differences between single women and partnered/married men in terms of having a family dinner, these findings support empirical work emphasizing the strong role mothers can play in shaping and maintaining their child's dietary attitudes and practices (Birch & Fisher, 1998; Hoffmann, Marx, Kiefner-Burmeister, & Musher-Eizenman, 2016; Savage, Fisher, & Birch, 2007). Moreover, although the concepts of co-providing and co-parenting are becoming more prevalent, social norms perpetuate the sense of pressure, or responsibility, of family routines involving food, including meals, more dominantly among women than men (Blake et al., 2009). Thus, the gendered division of labor influenced by social norms and gender roles may lead women to feel the onus of how employment influences their child's eating practices more so than men (Blake et al., 2009; Devine et al., 2009). Consequently, mothers, albeit facing time constraints, largely due to work schedules, cope by finding ways to have a meal with their children whether it be eating convenience or fast food entrees (Devine et al., 2009; McIntosh et al., 2010).

The current findings are consistent with previous work showing that the lowest frequency of breakfast consumption was observed among single father households (Levin & Kirby, 2012). However, a direct comparison between this and the current study is limited as that study was examining breakfast whereas the current study is focusing on the evening meal. It could be that parental participation in family meals varies not only by family configurations and parental employment status but between the meals themselves, signaling a need for future research examining other mealtimes. This notwithstanding, because the trend among single fathers eating less with their children is similar across both studies suggesting the need for more parenting and/or health programs focusing on single fathers considering the proportion of these households increased nine-fold from 1960 to 2011 (Livingston, 2013). Moreover, these findings reflect the potentially disadvantaged position children in single father households have in terms of parental modeling of dietary behavior, assuming there are not other adult figures (i.e. grandparents, aunts and uncles) to demonstrate healthy behaviors. Nonetheless, this study adds to the limited literature on children's eating practices in single father homes and is noteworthy considering behaviors established early on in life can have lifelong health implications as dietary habits and preferences shaped in childhood can prevent chronic disease across the lifecourse.

This study also addressed the issue of employment among two-parent households. Interestingly, the findings refuted the hypothesis that children in households with two employed parents would be at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers in households in which the male is employed and the female is not. Rather, the findings suggested that the odds of having a family dinner in two-parent households varied by the respondent's gender. Women reported lower odds of having a family dinner when both parents were employed relative to the women in households where the man was the primary breadwinner. However, in two-parent households in which the woman is employed but her partner/spouse is not, the odds of having a family dinner did not differ from households where the father was employed but the mother was not. These results substantiate prior research suggesting that the gender gap in childrearing activities and time spent with children could indeed be narrowing (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010) as more women employed in the formal labor force (Cawley & Liu, 2012) has coincided with the increase of time men spend with their children (Barnett et al., 2008; Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milke, 2006). These findings highlight the need for more studies focusing on how fathers' employment influences activities within the home environment, including the family meal, considering the recent economic downturn which lead to an increase in under and unemployed men (Bauer, Hearst, Escoto, Berge, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012).

On the other hand, male respondents in two-parent households did not differ in odds of having a family dinner in comparison to households in which the man was employed in the formal labor force but the woman was not for any of the three categories of employment statuses. Similar gender differences in time spent with children in two-parent households have been reported elsewhere (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). As discussed above, this can be partially explained by social norms that perpetuate the sense of pressure, or responsibility, of family routines including meals, more dominantly among women than men (Blake et al., 2009). Thus, women may still perceive that they are primarily responsible for parenting and childrearing activities and therefore may be more sensitive to how their employment status impacts family routines, including dinners, and report fewer meals. Conversely, men are perhaps more likely to miss the family dinner, in general, and therefore their eating practices with their family are largely unaffected by their and/or their partner/spouse's employment, which helps explain the lack of variation in their behavior. These results are concerning given the evidence demonstrating the positive influence fathers' engagement has on a myriad of child outcomes including their cognitive development, academic achievement and social-emotional wellbeing (Jeynes, 2014; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008; Wilson & Prior, 2011). Moreover, albeit limited, there is a growing body of literature suggesting not only that fathers of young children are increasingly becoming more involved in their child's eating practices (Vollmer et al., 2015b) but that they view their engagement in these routines "within their proximal role as a parent," thereby suggesting that the gendered division of labor ascribing women as primarily responsible for the home food environment may, indeed, be evolving (Khandpur et al., 2016).

The findings of this study can help motivate novel strategies for improving children's dietary behavior and thereby help decrease their obesity risk via health promotion programs. For example, as mentioned earlier, the results suggest that children living with single fathers may participate in family meals less often than their peers in dual-headed and female-headed households, therefore, there is a need for more programs focusing on improving food-related parenting practices that target men as they currently either only include, or emphasize, mothers. These types of programs can be implemented in a wide-range of settings, including the workplace, faith-based centers, community centers or athletic

facilities that men already attend. Furthermore, programs can focus on strategies such as time-management and "weekly meal prep" where meals for multiple days are prepared at once to address the time barrier towards meal preparations that parents frequently report. In addition to facilitating healthful food preparation strategies, by directly engaging men these efforts can also help address the disproportionate responsibility women report in regards to the home food environment. In other words, strategies that help balance the gendered division of labor in terms of food preparation present an innovative opportunity for also improving children's dietary practices and health.

5. Limitations

There are noteworthy limitations to the current study. First, the data are cross-sectional and were collected for only three years so one cannot derive causality from the results. Second, these data are all self-reported and could potentially be biased due to social desirability. Third, the generalizability of the findings may be limited because the sample was predominately White and employed. Additionally, the criterion that respondents be residing in dual-headed households for the second portion of the study may limit generalizability. Fourth, although the cut-off point for a family dinner of at least 20 min has been used elsewhere (Wight et al., 2009) it is not a validated measure and merits future investigation. Fifth, although the purpose of this study was to add to the body of literature on family meals that has focused on dinners, it could be that family processes and parental engagement in meals differ by meals but other meals (i.e. breakfast and lunch) are not captured in this current study. Moreover, the authors recognize that parental influence on children's dietary behaviors extends beyond mealtimes, including their food-related attitudes and/or food preparation, but these parental characteristics are beyond the scope of this study. Sixth, the gender of the respondent's partner/spouse was not included which limited the ability to identify same-sex households, a major shortcoming. Seventh, the results may be biased considering analyses were restricted to respondents who reported having at least one "household child under the age of 18" and the data do not allow for examination of how often the child resides with the respondent. Thus, it could be that some parents, particularly single fathers, who do not have formal/legal custody of children were excluded despite the fact that they do eat with their children. Lastly, there are limitations related to the measure of employment. For example, for the respondent the measure is dichotomized as "employed" or "non-employed" which does not identify potential differences between full and part-time employment. This limitation impedes our ability to situate our findings within the existing body of literature that has looked at how various levels of employment (i.e. part-time, full-time) influence food coping strategies, including family meals, among parents (Devine et al., 2006, 2009). Further, the data do not provide actual time spent at work (in hours) of the partner/spouse, which impedes analyses on whether there is a specific number of hours worked in two-parent households that influence the odds of having a family dinner.

6. Conclusions

The findings reflect the complexity of behavior within the family unit as well as the need for additional research that recognizes the unique characteristics and realities of households as dietary practices differ based on family structure and parental gender. The results suggest that among all parents, single men report the least amount of time in eating with their child(ren). Furthermore, our findings suggest that living in a household where both parents were employed was associated with lower likelihood of women having family meals, but not men. Finally, the study highlights specific subgroups for which health efforts promoting a family dinner may consider targeting.

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