

Family Practices and Temporality at Breakfast: Hot Spots, Convenience and Care

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Abstract

Drawing on 34 semi-structured interviews, this study investigates the temporality of family practices taking place in the hot spot. It does so by looking at how breakfast is inserted in the economy of family time in Italy. Our data show that breakfast, contrary to other meals, allows the adoption of more individualised and asynchronous practices, hinged on the consumption of convenience products. These time-saving strategies are normalised as part of doing family. Although the existing literature suggests that convenience and care are in opposition, and consumers of convenience products can experience anxiety and a lack of personal integrity, such features were not a dominant feature of our participants' accounts. These findings suggest that the dichotomies of hot/cold spots and care/convenience are not always experienced in opposition when embedded within family practices. Hence, this study furthers understandings of family meals, temporality and the distinction between hot and cold spots.

Keywords

breakfast, convenience food, doing family, hot spots, Italy

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Introduction

This article investigates how family life is practised and accounted for during time pressed meals, by focusing on 34 interviews with Italian participants on their experience of breakfast. Following Morgan's seminal works on family practices (1996, 2011: 6), we investigate 'doing family' during a mundane activity which 'appears to be trivial or meaningless' but which can provide a valuable understanding of the sense of the everyday, the 'doing' and the effort that individuals invest in re-producing and maintaining family life. As well as looking at what is done during family practices, it is also useful to see how such practices are accounted for, that is how they are explained by participants. Breakfast is one of the family practices that 'seems unremarkable, hardly worth talking about' (Morgan, 2011: 6), as shown by the very limited studies dedicated to this neglected meal. Most of the literature on family meals refers to dinners and to lunch, the meals mostly consumed together (Brannen et al., 2013; Milani and Pegoraro, 2006; Yates and Warde, 2017). This silence is important in itself, revealing the way in which much existing research tends to implicitly perpetuate the idea of lunch and dinner as the quintessential family meals, overlooking other eating occasions.

Responding to this scant attention, this study explores the link between eating and standards of care at breakfast. Thus, it contributes to an understanding of less studied family practices as well as providing insight into the relationships between meals, temporality and moral accounts. In looking at such relationships we take inspiration from Warde's (2016) understanding of mealtimes where he argues that through their necessity and frequency, meals offer a useful window through which we can gain a deeper understanding of family life. As he says: 'Meals have considerable analytic potential because they pull together social aspects of household organisation, temporal rhythms, practical priorities, social (and actor) networks, social convention and rituals' (2016: 20). In understanding the analytical potential of breakfast for investigating family life, we look at how people organise their morning routines around ideals, temporal rhythms and priorities. The Italian context is particularly relevant since breakfast is a relatively recent meal, heavily shaped by marketplace representations of convenience bakery products which were positioned around the exclusionary ideal of the middle-class and patriarchal 'cereal packet' family (Arvidsson, 2003; Maestri and D'Angelo, 1995).

Drawing on interviews on breakfast with participants from various family arrangements, this study engages with the literature on family meals and temporality. Among the works on temporality, the notion of hot spots (Southerton, 2003) was particularly relevant for informing our analysis of domestic breakfast. According to Southerton (2003: 19) who coined the term, hot spots are predictable moments during the day 'characterised by a compression of tasks into specified time frames so that "time" was "saved" for more "meaningful" social activities'. These are alternated with 'cold spots' which may also be called 'quality time', 'potter time', 'chill time' and 'bonding time', and are usually 'devoted to interaction with significant others' (Southerton, 2003: 19). Daily experience of time is thus characterised by a sequence of hot and cold spots. In his theorisation of hot and cold spots, Southerton (2003: 21–22) points out that:

Hot and cold spots are metaphors for the tensions between care and convenience, or concerns about maintaining social standards and personal integrity. [. . .] Hot spots not only refer to a

density of practices allocated in time frames that intensify senses of haste; in addition, and because hot spots often involve the use of convenience devices and services, they also magnify anxieties that a lack of time leads to a compromise of normative social standards expressive of care.

The notion of the hot spot (Southerton, 2003) is useful for understanding the temporality of family practices since it refers to moments of the day in which the goal of completing tasks in a limited and fixed time frame, such as having breakfast in a rush, often causes feelings of time shortage. Thus, harriedness is generated from the need to designate time frames in which to schedule activities, in order to free up cold spots for quality time and care (Southerton, 2003).

According to Southerton, during hot spots normalised standards of care are compromised and harriedness is supplemented by anxiety. To support scheduling, convenience devices and services are used, resulting in a feeling of having compromised in relation to care (Southerton, 2003) and the ideals of a proper family meal, which will be illustrated further down. This is contrasted with cold spots, which are seen as quality time in which social standards of care are maintained within family practices (Southerton, 2003). Thus, sustaining acceptable standards of care is linked to morality, as these standards reflect an ideal of how functional families should behave. Not respecting these standards is therefore seen as necessarily triggering anxiety. Our findings critique the notion that using convenience food when time is short is associated with anxiety. Instead, we illustrate more nuanced experiences of convenience food, care and time management.

Our findings show that breakfast is part of the family time economy (Maher et al., 2008), commonly as a hot spot where expectations around synchronicity and presence around the table are negotiated without questioning togetherness. Participants experience breakfast as an informal, routinised food occasion in which care is enacted via individualised consumption of convenience food without being associated with ‘a dereliction of familial duty’ (Jackson, 2018: 2517). The lack of conviviality and synchronicity does not appear to cause anxiety among our participants, who imply that breakfast is a ‘different’ meal which does not follow the same standards which are applied to other meals. Theoretically this article extends our understanding of family meals and temporality by showing that a clear-cut distinction between hot and cold spots does not represent the complexity of family life, since care is enacted in moments of harriedness through the consumption of convenience food. The findings also show that breakfast practices where individual priorities prevail over commensality do not necessarily cause anxiety. We argue that this is because they are not seen as lacking care.

Family Practices and Temporality

The concept of family practices (Morgan, 1996) provides a tool that allows us to foreground mundane routines and habits through which we make sense of and produce/reproduce family as a set of relationships (Morgan, 2011). By focusing on what families do, the family practices concept intervened at a moment when substantial attention was focused on family structure (Morgan, 1996). While the term conveys a sense of routine, family practices operate on a number of levels from the everyday to the occasional, from

the mundane to the more spectacular (Morgan, 1996). Analytically, the concept ‘opens up the possibility of movement between the perspectives of the observer and the perspectives of family members’, and allows the wider contexts of history and biography to be part of the analysis (Morgan, 2011: 6). In *Rethinking Family Practices*, Morgan (2011: 80, emphasis in original) highlights that ‘family practices are conducted within time and space and involve the *use* of time and space’.

Family life unfolds and evolves through events and rituals which mark the passing of the days and seasons (Morgan, 2011). Meal times help to structure the day but also provide a sense of the passing of time through celebrations such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. Maher et al. (2008) employ the term ‘family time economy’ to illuminate the ‘interrelated and complex temporalities of work and care in contemporary family life’ (2008: 547). Family time is not infinite, given the limited hours in the day and the juggling of aspects of family life with other commitments such as work, school and leisure (Maher et al., 2008, 2010). Families with children may be negotiating and splitting time between paid work, school schedules, travel and extra-curricular arrangements for children to name a few (Maher et al., 2008). When exploring family temporality, we refer to scheduling and commitment, two measures of coordination of family timetables (Morgan, 2019). Scheduling refers to the allocation of practices to a time frame (Southerton, 2003), and it implies the effort of coordinating everyone’s schedules (Southerton and Tomlinson, 2005). Personal commitment is the effort of doing that activity *together*, synchronising schedules (Morehead, 2001).

The trade and supply of family time can generate tensions, such as a feeling of ‘chasing time’ in the effort to preserve some ‘free’ time dedicated to care and presence (Maher et al., 2010). This is particularly exacerbated for working mothers given the gendered expectations around care and domestic work, combined with the way in which the timetables for schools do not reflect those of the workplace (Maher et al., 2008). Such tensions can be related to the subjective experience of time, as shown by mothers who synchronise the linear time of work with the cyclical time of care even when at home (Morehead, 2001), or by children who prefer ‘mush time’ – free time uninterrupted by external timetables, intrusions or demands – which involves being together in a relaxed way while apart in the home (Baraitser, 2013). Maher et al. (2010) argue that there is the need for further analysis of family time schedules beyond time use, in order to understand family pressures in contemporary family life. We use hot and cold spots (Southerton, 2003) to understand such a pressure during breakfast as a morning family meal.

Family Meals

Defining ‘family meals’ is a slippery exercise since both terms – family and meals – are problematic and complex. As an essentialist view of family is inadequate to capture the complexity of family forms, we adopt an approach which sees family not as a ‘naturally occurring collection of individuals’ but rather a social unit which is formed and re-formed through everyday activities including the preparation and eating of meals (Jackson et al., 2009). Defining what constitutes a meal is also challenging since it implies engaging with interpretations of meal propriety, including moral accounts of what constitutes ‘appropriate’ food, and the broader notions of care and feeding, as care needs to be

expressed in a way that is morally acceptable. If some have engaged with a structural approach looking at the composition and sequencing of dishes (Douglas, 1972), others have gone beyond and looked at the symbolic meanings around the materiality of the meal (see, for example, Valentine, 1999). Indeed, commensality round the domestic dining table (Fischler, 2011) and the sharing of the same food are part of a powerful symbolic myth – the myth of the family meal – propagated in the marketplace by brands, products and media around the mantra that good families eat together and stay together (Pirani et al., 2018). Through everyday practices such as food consumption and preparation, family is constantly reproduced (Morgan, 1996). Commensality produces bonding (Fischler, 2011), and eating together as a family, sharing the same table, time and food, reproduces the togetherness of family (Brannen et al., 2013). Studies confirm that the dining table is an ‘important symbol or even metonym of the family’ (Lupton, 1996: 39). The valorisation of family mealtimes around the table is considered a measure of doing family well (Gillies, 2011), a discourse consolidated by advertising representations of happy families consuming breakfast together (Pirani et al., 2018).

Reflecting on the normative power of the ‘happy family’ meal, Wilk (2010) remarks how this ideal is connected to the middle classes. As studies adopting a Bordieusian perspective have shown, middle-class families often see the evening meal as an opportunity to transmit an extensive culinary taste involving a particular appreciation for healthy options to their children (Wills et al., 2011). Likewise, Italian middle-class family meals are used to educate children over food appreciation, leading children to interiorise a focus on nutritional content and table manners (Oncini, 2020). Taking one’s time is part of the picture of what is seen as an acceptable culinary habit in Italian middle-class households, as ‘feeding oneself is secondary to the fact of doing it in the way that is believed the most culturally appropriate (sat at the table, with no rush)’ (Sassatelli et al., 2015: 101).

Consuming a family meal regularly remains ‘a goal that most parents would like to achieve, not only because it is a way of “doing family” but also for practical and budgetary reasons’ (Brannen et al., 2013: 428). The ideal of regular family meals consumed together is met with the fear of losing such tradition, although it has been noted that this is based on an illusion of the past rather than empirical evidence (Mestdag, 2005), and eating together is still remarkably common (Yates and Warde, 2017). Research has shown how the ideal of a cooked meal eaten together increases women’s time and labour in feeding the family in accordance with conventions (Brannen et al., 2013; Bugge and Almas, 2006; Moisio et al., 2004; Pirani et al., 2018). Literature suggests that this effort is sustained because the prioritisation of individual meals can be seen as a source of ‘shame’ (Brannen et al., 2013: 426), as solitary or asynchronous eating is perceived more negatively than eating together as a family (Fischler, 2011). This study shows how breakfast is one meal where eating asynchronously and consuming convenience food seems to be acceptable and does not open up spaces for negative moral judgement.

Considering the pervasive ideal of eating together, it is not surprising that parents feel harried and anxious to prepare and share meals ‘on time’ (Brannen et al., 2013; Bugge and Almas, 2006). As previously mentioned, Southerton (2003) sees daily life as comprised of a sequence of cold and hot spots and the routinely family meal is an example of the latter. Following Southerton, certain meals can be seen as hot spots when they are inserted before timed events that take priority, such as a rushed breakfast before morning

routines. These meals, in which quality time and care is not a priority, are contraposed to other activities which are moments of the day wherein care is exchanged. The use of convenience foods has been considered by scholars as compromising standards of meal propriety and care (Bugge and Almas, 2006; Moisio et al., 2004). This is also the view of scholars including Warde (1997) whose work on the dichotomy of care versus convenience has influenced many studies on domestic food routines. The consumption of convenience products is a typical strategy that many adopt to cope with the anxiety of time shortage, although people may worry they will be criticised for compromising 'normative social standards expressive of care' (Southerton, 2003: 22). Further literature evidenced the way in which convenience is not always seen as an acceptable shortcut, raising concerns about the affect and morality of the consumption of convenience products (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006; Jackson, 2018). Using convenience food to save time can lead to a sense of guilt because it feels like 'cheating' given the dominant cultural script of the homemade family meal (Moisio et al., 2004). Recently some have criticised the negative and moralising connotation that convenience food has received in the literature (Meah and Jackson, 2017). Others have shown that in many families, convenience food is combined with fresh products and participants do not make a distinction among different types of food (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006). Meah and Jackson (2017) have also highlighted how many see convenience food as caring food, since through providing such products parents enact care for their children.

In reviewing the scant literature on breakfast conducted in different geographical contexts, studies have illustrated how the consumption of convenience items has often replaced the consumption of a cooked breakfast (Green, 2007; Schneider and Davis, 2010). Squeezed between inflexible working and schooling schedules (Veeck et al., 2016), breakfast is considered an important meal of the day (Marshall, 2005), but skipping it or reducing it to the consumption of snacks is a common trend across different geographical contexts (see, for example Le Pape and Plessz, 2017; Pirani et al., 2018). Unless there are children in the household, breakfast is a quicker and more solitary meal in comparison to those consumed later in the day (Mestdag, 2005; Yates and Warde, 2017). As such, commensality at breakfast is unusual (Le Pape and Plessz, 2017). Some research suggests that parents try and enforce breakfast for their children even though they may end up skipping it themselves (Le Pape and Plessz, 2017). In Italy this meal is still in its infancy. What is today known as the 'Italian breakfast' is a relatively recent meal and it consists of hot milk with coffee and pastries, biscuits and other confectionaries (DOXA-AIDEPI, 2015; Milani and Pegoraro, 2006; Pirani et al., 2018). Scholars report that people are gradually introducing breakfast into their daily routines, especially in households with children (Mortara and Sinisi, 2016). Considering how breakfast differs from other meals and how a more complex relationship between care and convenience might happen within this meal, it is surprising to see how little research has been conducted on it.

Methodology

This article draws upon the dataset of a larger project that collected semi-structured interviews with 34 participants conducted between November 2016 and May 2017. Participants

were recruited from two towns in the same region of the north of Italy using snowball sampling techniques (Silverman, 2001). A diverse definition of families was adopted, based on marriage, civil partnerships and long-term relationships, with or without children. The sample evenly comprised both heterosexual and lesbian/gay families (Carrington, 2013), with a majority of participants being female (23). The sample was predominantly white, with an average age of 41 years old and they generally self-identified as middle class. Interviews were carried out individually, with the majority of participants coming from different families, in order to focus on individual accounts of collective practices and meanings (Orbuch, 1997). All the interviews were conducted in Italian by the first author, who tape-recorded, transcribed and translated them.

Ethical approval was gained from the institution where the researchers were based at the time of the fieldwork. Participants have been granted confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and they received a report of the findings at the end of the research. Interviews were manually coded, using a thematic coding frame that aimed at unpacking how respondents structure their morning routine and what meanings they attach to it, using codes both derived from literature and from data. We adopted a two-step coding process: first each group was coded separately and then it was compared for more re-coding. Following the principles of collaborative coding (Cornish et al., 2013), the second author coded a subset of data to check for reliability, while the third author was involved as auditor of the emerging codes. The interpretation aimed at unpacking family practices at breakfast.

Talking about Breakfast

In asking participants about breakfast, their immediate answers were ‘it is not a big deal for us’, ‘it is a very simple matter’ or ‘well, we do not really have a breakfast as such’, positioning it as a hot spot that does not raise moral concerns. For example, this is how Beatrice and Ascanio describe breakfast in their households:

We have different schedules. Breakfast is not planned apart from holidays. (Beatrice, heterosexual, housewife, two children)

People do struggle to have time for breakfast. We do not have time for having breakfast together. Fabio leaves home at 7, I leave at 6, Francesca around 8, then Maria has breakfast later. Everyone gets up at different times, we do not manage to get up at the same time. But we make sure to save time for lunch and dinner, depending on working commitments. (Ascanio, heterosexual, sales agent, two children)

These two quotes reveal how breakfast is inserted in the family economy of time (Maher et al., 2008) and in the cosmology of the meals (Douglas, 1972) and as such it can be understood only in relation to other meals. Breakfast is squeezed between inflexible paid work and schooling schedules (Le Pape and Plessz, 2017), and people ‘do not have time’ for breakfast, as Ascanio says, reflecting its status as a hot spot. Indeed, time seems to be perceived as a scarce commodity (Maher et al., 2008) and thus it is allocated cyclically to daily meals. In Ascanio’s household, for example, time is saved for lunch and dinner,

while in Beatrice's household time for breakfast is 'found' during holidays. In other households, time for breakfast is found at the weekends. Squeezing breakfast in or struggling to have breakfast together is not seen as a morally problematic. Participants often locate their organisation of breakfast as common and generic statements asserting that 'people struggle to have time for breakfast' are frequent. If in other studies conducted in the UK and the USA participants seem to be concerned with the erosion of time for having breakfast together, our participants also report a lack of time but do not seem to express concern about it (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2008). This lack of concern is particularly relevant in understanding participants' memories of breakfast:

My dad used to stuff our faces with Nastrine [convenience pastry] before we went to school [laugh] we were obviously always late. So my dad, to save time, did not give us the chance to chew it, and would put a whole Nastrina in our mouth. (Paola, heterosexual, employee, two children)

My mum used to be out at 6.15, so even before I got up. My dad used to have breakfast at 7.00 and I did at 7.15/7.30 to gain some time, so we all had it on our own. (Fabiola, heterosexual, social educator, married)

Both Paola and Fabiola have a vivid memory of breakfast within a tight schedule requiring the coordination of time and food. Paola's memories of breakfast focus on her father's attempt at network coordination, getting both her brother and her to school on time. The connection between parental care of feeding children and time scarcity is a common feature in participants' accounts. Reflecting on their current and past routines of having breakfast, participants frame this family practice as 'normal', attaching to it a sense of regularity and indeed a sense of the everyday (see Morgan, 2011). As Pietro explains:

To be honest there is a pattern: I am the one who gets up first and prepares the coffee and breakfast for my children. The little one gets up after me and gets a merendina [convenience pastry], the eldest gets up at the last minute and he forces himself to have something before going. After all this, maybe there is time for a coffee with my wife, but always in a rush! (Pietro, heterosexual, entrepreneur, two children)

Interestingly Pietro admits that although breakfast is not 'a big deal', there is a pattern in its daily performance and there is indeed a 'being together'. While breakfast is not consumed by the entire family around the table, there is precise pattern which is a sequence of events and his execution of specific tasks at a specific time. Pietro knows by heart when, what and how his children and his wife are eating, even if they are each having breakfast on their own. Knowing other family members' preferences reflects the 'distinctiveness' of this family practice, which reproduces family ties while distinguishing family members from other relationships (Morgan, 2011). We found such intimate knowledge of breakfast a common feature among our sample, revealing how, despite the initial dismissive description of breakfast, this meal is more important to family life than first anticipated.

The Rhythm of the Morning: Between Synchronicity and Commitment

At first glance breakfast could be considered a quintessential example of a hot spot, as it has been theorised by Southerton (2003). The density of morning activities to be performed in a short amount of time and the coordination of such activities among different family members are certainly characteristics of a pressured time. This is particularly evident in households with young children, where parents need to juggle different tasks at the same time. Multitasking is not about doing more, but rather doing it all at once (Southerton, 2003). This is the case of Benedetta, who is responsible for coordinating her family's morning timetable, such as waking everyone up:

I immediately wake up when the alarm rings. Mara [her daughter] instead takes 40–45 minutes. I wake up and I put my alarm in her room, because she does not wake up immediately, and she doesn't like being touched. So I put the alarm on snooze, first 6.45, then 6.50, then 7.05. After a while she gets up and she brings me the alarm. Sometimes she cuddles a bit with Btissam [Benedetta's partner]. I prepare tea and she has zwiebacks with Nutella, we have a decaf and we have breakfast the three of us together. (Benedetta, lesbian, therapist, one child)

Benedetta's multitasking which combines waking up her daughter and getting breakfast ready reveals how 'getting things done' is her responsibility. The 40 minutes everyone needs to get ready are populated by a density of actions that Benedetta coordinates; her daughter and her partner seem to be free from managing time and tasks, including preparing food that can be shared. In households where young children are present, participants see breakfast as a 'good' and 'healthy' habit to be enforced regardless of their sacrifice to organise the meal, confirming what has been observed in other European contexts (Le Pape and Plessz, 2017). In fact, some share the same commitment that Benedetta has in making sure that breakfast is shared among the family members. For example, Linda (heterosexual, support teacher, two children) affirms that 'we all sit, eat, we have a chat, we are always in a rush, but the food is important for us'. In other households sharing breakfast is important even if varying ways of doing breakfast occur:

Some days of the week we are all together, others Sebastiano is in Rome, we do it differently. I must say that when my husband is not there we stay on the couch, we are a little messier. Sometimes we also have milk in bed, on the couch, we do the things you shouldn't do. (Giacomo, gay, lawyer, civil partnership with a child)

If alone with his son, ordinarily breakfast is a hot spot that prioritises the quality time of cold spots. Giacomo becomes a relaxed parent, performing 'things you shouldn't do', such as eating on the couch. Giacomo suggests that eating properly means eating at the table, but infringing this rule does not generate any moral anxiety. When Giacomo's husband is at home, breakfast becomes an opportunity to spend time together as a family, sitting together around the table and involving the child in a more elaborate version of breakfast. This more relaxed commitment to having breakfast together is also present in couples without children. For example, Michele says:

If we wake up together it means that we both have time, so we eat with no rush and we talk about the day. This is 50% of the time, while in the other 50% it means we have different schedules and we eat on our own. (Michele, heterosexual, surveyor, without children)

Breakfast is still considered as a pleasurable moment for family bonding, but not a compulsory one to attend. Conflicting schedules or tiredness are considered sufficient reasons for not having breakfast together. However, committing to having breakfast together implies focusing on quality time and interaction with the other person, borrowing elements from the cold spot even on weekdays. Later in the interview, Michele explains how breakfast with his wife often implies a tablecloth, signalling a special effort, and it would be consumed away from the television, which would disrupt the conversation. When on his own, Michele describes having other priorities and prefers to have a quick breakfast without setting the table (Marshall, 2005).

If the aforementioned examples show attempts of having breakfast together and the effort parents like Benedetta make to synchronise their own tasks with other family members' rhythms, there are also households in which such attempts are absent:

In our house everybody wants to stay in bed. We all have breakfast on our own, because we have different schedules, everyone gets his own one ready [. . .]. Someone should wake up earlier to have breakfast together [. . .] we have other moments we look at during the day. (Francesca, heterosexual, stay at home mother, two children)

Instead of having breakfast together, Francesca prioritises her own sleep. Her lack of commitment towards synchronising tasks is revealing of how breakfast is considered outside of her role of feeding the family (DeVault, 1991). In fact, later in the interview Francesca explains that her family always tries to eat together, but not at breakfast, and how other meals are her own responsibility. Her effort to share family meals goes as far as regularly postponing lunch until 2 p.m. when her eldest son comes home from school. If time is a resource to be 'saved' and 'protected' for lunch, time for breakfast competes with other tasks. Unlike other meals, breakfast can be consumed individually without jeopardising the ideals attached to doing family around the dining table.

A Convenient Breakfast

A significant aspect of breakfast is that participants eat the same convenience food every day. This seems to echo international trends highlighting the predominance of daily consumption of convenience items (Yates and Warde, 2017). Interestingly, family members do not necessarily share the same preferences, and convenience food is consumed individually. Take for example the case of Sabrina and her household in which family members have individual preferences:

We have it [breakfast] in two rounds. Those who go to primary school need to be out earlier, so they eat earlier. With the two younger ones, who are not independent and need to be spoon-fed, [comes a] second round. Because breakfast is conditioned by the time at which you must be out, lunch and dinner are not self-service, we eat together. Usually my husband wakes up earlier and he starts preparing the coffee. Everyone has their own taste, we are six and we eat six different

things. He [the younger son] eats Pan di Stelle [a Mulino Bianco biscuit], the younger daughter cereals, the older bread and Nutella, the middle son bread and tomato, which is a slice of bread with my mother-in-law's tomato sauce and some salt. It is a sort of red pizza. The father has milk, coffee and biscuits. He prefers Macine [another kind of Mulino Bianco biscuit], or bread and jam [. . .]. I have cereals, but different from those that my daughter has. Each one of us eats on our own. There is the idea that since you don't eat much you can have what you prefer. With other meals you can make requests [before it is cooked] but once it is ready either you eat what's on the table or you fast. (Sabrina, heterosexual, consultant, two children)

In this detailed description of how 'self-service' breakfast, as she defines it, is organised the intricate relationship between time and food emerges very clearly: six people eating six different food items in the same space and in a short amount of time. Referring to breakfast as a 'self-service' meal, which in the Italian language is a term often used as a synonym for canteen, Sabrina describes the sense of efficiency and time management. Convenience food and individualised consumption allow Sabrina and her husband to take turns feeding the children, or to let them prepare their own breakfast. This arrangement is not simply a matter of practicality but also of gratification, as personal preferences can be expressed without affecting other family members. Convenience food allows a moment of private indulgence where everybody's taste can be satisfied. As such, convenience food is not experienced as a compromise or a shortcut (Southerton, 2003: 21) but rather as part of routine care enacted within the family (Meah and Jackson, 2017). As underlined by Sabrina, this does not happen during other meals in which care is enacted with a more rigid control on health (Wills et al., 2011) and with the moral obligation of eating what is available, summarised by Sabrina saying 'either you eat what's on the table or you fast'.

Southerton (2003) highlights how convenience products and shortcuts adopted during hot spots generate anxiety among individuals, since they are seen as lacking care or not meeting social standards of appropriate food. Instead, we found that respondents considered convenience food nutritionally adequate, and that family consumption validated this choice: 'I eat milk with biscuits and wholemeal rusks. [. . .] I have always had them with my family, as many as we wanted. They are nutritious products, and it is fine with me' (Stella, heterosexual, school teacher, three children). The example of Stella shows how convenience food is part of life-long consumption patterns, present from childhood as well as in her current household. Convenience bakery products are not seen as an exceptional indulgence, but rather as a reasonably nutritious food that can be consumed quite liberally. In fact, in our sample participants do not show any anxiety around feeding their children convenience food at breakfast and instead preferred brands of ready-made snacks are mentioned as part of caring for children:

I do not usually have breakfast [. . .]. They [her daughters] have a yoghurt, a kinder Delice or a Kinder Brioss [two branded breakfast pastries]. I selected those because they have some milk in them and since they stopped having yoghurt and they are not having milk I thought let's give them milk in another way, even if that is not really milk. (Paola, heterosexual, employee, two children)

In Paola's account, branded pastries represent a 'good enough' (Molander, 2019) option for feeding her children in a short amount of time when other tasks need to be done.

Convenience food interlaces with childcare, as it allows parents to feed ‘something’ to children who are perceived as fussy in terms of eating (Jackson, 2018). The careful selection among other branded products shows Paola’s care in feeding her daughters, and her interest in giving them food they would eat and enjoy, while revealing the moral compromises that underpin her responsibility of feeding the family.

Discussion

Our findings addressed the temporality of family routines in Italy to understand the experience of eating in the context of being squeezed for time. Applying the notion of hot and cold spots (Southerton, 2003) to these accounts of breakfast, this article makes three main contributions. First, it confirms the utility of focusing on the temporal nature of family practices, in agreement with Maher et al. (2010), Morgan (2019) and Southerton (2003). Second, it critiques Southerton’s (2003) claim regarding the anxiety about taking shortcuts by showing that participants do not experience guilt around a meal based on time-saving strategies and by offering a moral account of such strategies, which goes against the norm of most family mealtimes. Third, it affirms that care takes place in the hot spot, contrary to the original theorisation that sees care as an element of cold spots (Southerton, 2003).

Our first contribution stresses the importance of time in the study of family practices. Hot spots are generated in the effort of coordinating different schedules and family needs (Southerton, 2003). By looking at breakfast, we show the implications of hot spots in doing family, as hot spots ease the ‘sense of obligation’ implied in creating quality time for others (Southerton and Tomlinson, 2005). In the hot spot individual needs, such as sleeping a bit longer or getting ready for the day ahead, can be prioritised without compromising family meanings, and expectations around synchronicity and presence around the table are negotiated without questioning togetherness. Moreover, we showed how boundary practices, which contribute to the feeling of belonging (Morgan, 2019), are present in the hot spot too, such as remembering by heart what other family members eat even if breakfast is not consumed together.

The prioritisation of individual needs taking place in the hot spot has particular implications for the distribution of gendered work within families. The division of labour is very important in understanding gendered temporal practices. Research has shown how the organisation of children’s lives is impacting most on the temporal rhythms of mothers, who tend to be the ones in charge of synchronising multiple dimensions of time (Morehead, 2001; Southerton, 2006). Our data showed how the lack of moral judgement over convenience food and the frequent de-synchronisation makes breakfast the meal in which women have the least obligation to tend to their family members. This role of breakfast should be seen in relation to other meals (Douglas, 1972) where the expectations over eating together are higher and women do not enjoy the same flexibility.

Our second contribution is that participants do not experience guilt or anxiety for using time-saving strategies in the hot spot. This contradicts the original argument about hot spots: ‘the forms of convenience necessary to negotiate hot spots also generated anxiety about “taking short cuts” and not “doing a job well” (all narratives of personal integrity)’ (Southerton, 2003: 21). Yet participants in this study did not feel particularly

anxious about taking shortcuts in relation to breakfast (such as simply opening a packet of pre-prepared biscuits) and did not express tensions between care and convenience (Jackson, 2018; Meah and Jackson, 2017; Warde, 1997). Hence, we contend that in the 'hot spot' participants did not express a sense of guilt or loss of their personal integrity for using shortcuts motivated by time management. Interestingly convenience food does not stop being consumed once there is more time for breakfast, for example during the weekend, showing how the exceptionality of this meal is not only related to time scarcity. This perhaps connects with Morgan's (2011: 88) observation that family practices are not simply defined by the time in which they take place, but that 'it is also that a sense of time and space is created or recreated by these practices and the relationships involved'.

Our third contribution is the observation that care can be enacted also in the hotspot. This contradicts the argument that hot and cold spots reproduce the tension between care and convenience (Southerton, 2003). In our sample, care was enacted through attentiveness rather than commensality. Examples of care in the hot spot include the accommodation of individual needs within collective schedules, memorising each other's morning rhythm, or the labour involved with feeding children even when parents were not having breakfast themselves. Convenience is not antithetical to care, as care is made possible through convenience food. Breakfast products are not simply seen as an acceptable convenience (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006) but part of enacting care (Meah and Jackson, 2017). Thanks to such products, individual preferences can be accommodated, and parental care is maintained also during a hot spot. Valentine (1999) observed how individual preferences can be satisfied only at the expense of family food. Breakfast, instead, emerges as the only meal in which the expression of individual and indulgent preferences does not call into question whether the family is eating 'properly'.

We want to conclude by making some suggestions for future research. The findings in this article suggested that there could be merit in further investigating the dichotomy between hot and cold spots, raising the question of whether this is a straightforward binary, and whether family members might have a different experience of this temporal rhythm. Our data indicated that hot and cold spots might not be so rigidly divided, since breakfast showed a combination of both. There is also the question of whether all family members experience temporality in the same way. While this article does not explore the discrepancy between individual perceptions of time pressure, it acknowledges that 'one person's interpretation of rush may be another's experience of leisure' (Southerton, 2006: 443). As hot and cold spots and care and convenience are not always in opposition as previously theorised, further research could illuminate how these dichotomies apply to family life.

Conclusion

This study contributes to understandings of how family practices are inserted in the family time economy (Maher et al., 2008). Inspired by Morgan's (2011) view that family practices are conducted with the use of time, this study has shown that time in the morning is a scarce resource in family life. As such, the allocation of time to certain tasks rather than others reveals priorities and commitments of individuals and their families. In looking at the specific case of breakfast in Italy, this study has shown how this meal is

inserted in a flux of competing activities and thus it needs to be understood in relation to temporal priorities. Acknowledging such flux implies recognising that family practices might compete for time and that certain tasks might be squeezed among others that take priority. In studying the complexity of balancing and allocating time in family life, the investigation of what is eaten, how, how often and with whom becomes a matter of temporality and care.

In investigating people's accounts of their experiences of breakfast, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of their daily schedules and enactments of care through food. The theoretical dichotomy between care and convenience and the related anxiety around eating and sharing convenience food were not confirmed in our research. A broader view of care was provided by participants, which departed from a simple nutritional understanding of food as good/caring versus bad/convenient. Providing convenience food for the self and others was not seen as morally problematic nor as neglecting 'normative social standards of expressive care' (Southerton, 2003: 22). It was seen as a pragmatic compromise between paid work and family life and between parental duties and individual schedules. Such standards might also be framed in relation to other family meals, in which, it seems, different standards of care and different temporal arrangements were applied.


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