

1 Doing Family Meals

Eating, apparently a biological matter, is actually profoundly social. What we eat, where we get it, how it is prepared, when we eat and with whom, what it means to us—all these depend on social arrangements. Food sustains social and emotional life as well as physiological being, through the cultural rituals of serving and eating. The work required to feed a family is partly determined by the material situations of household groups: the organization of markets, supply and distribution of energy, and typical arrangement and accoutrements of dwellings. But the work of feeding others is also shaped by, and in turn expresses, beliefs and customs of the society at a particular time. More than just the provision of edibles, feeding work means staging the rather complex social events that we label meals.

In this chapter, I begin an analysis of the work of feeding that makes visible these essential, social aspects of food provision, by examining the production of family meals. But eating practices in contemporary households should be seen against a backdrop of larger economic and technological changes. Even a few generations ago, when more households were agricultural ones, and when work was usually closer to home, families were more likely to eat together, three times daily. They had little choice, because there were few other places to be fed. Cooking for an entire household was time-consuming and heavy work. Technological developments—new products and appliances—have made the material tasks of cooking much easier than in our grandmothers'

A portion of this chapter first appeared in *Families and Work*, edited by Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Engel Gross, pp. 178–191. © 1987 by Temple University. Reprinted by permission of Temple University Press.

time, and more and more of the arduous work of processing foods has been transferred from home to market. These very real changes have affected the way that most people think about housework, so that housework sometimes seems to have practically disappeared. Susan Strasser (1982) charts the history of technological development in terms of the activities that are no longer necessary—"By 1870, most people could buy soap and candles; by 1920, they could afford to purchase most of their clothes"—and claims that, "by 1970, they could stop cooking."

In fact, it is not clear that these technological changes have significantly reduced the amount of time people spend on housework. Rather, most analysts agree that social and technological developments have brought shifts in the types of housework required to support families rather than in the total work burden (Cowan 1983). Between the 1920s and the 1960s, for example, time spent on food preparation itself decreased somewhat, but additional time spent on shopping more than made up for the decline (Vanek 1974). And although the "convenience foods" introduced after World War II have been widely touted as time-savers for women, Joan Gussow (1987) argues that there is little evidence of any significant savings, and that advertisers have sold an illusion of time savings in order to promote new products.

While the total time spent on housework may not be very different, the form of feeding and eating has changed dramatically since the turn of the century. Now, family members who work for a wage often leave home early and work far away. They may do shift work that takes them from home at different times. Many children are at school or day care all day. In addition, cooking itself has become less and less necessary. Many technical skills have been marketized: new products incorporate much of the work of food processing formerly done at home, and the growth of the restaurant trade and tremendous expansion of fast-food franchising provide new options for purchasing meals. Food industry analysts claim that we now live in a "grazing society" (Advertising Age, cited in Strasser 1982:297), where individuals no longer come together for meals, but grab quick snacks here and there during the day. It is hard to say whether this claim accurately describes many family/households containing children.¹ But the kernel of truth be-

1. Despite much concern and public discussion, it is difficult to evaluate the significance of an expanding food service industry for family eating. While the share of food expenditures for "away-from-home eating" is increasing rapidly [e.g. from thirty percent in 1965 to forty-five percent in 1988], these are dollar figures that reflect

hind this popular image is the fact that most people in modern industrial societies are no longer compelled to return to a household to be fed. Family meals have become less necessary and more a volitional social form.

Typically, in contemporary households, work and school schedules cut into meal times so that very few families eat even two meals together each day. Breakfast and lunch, especially, barely survive. In the households I studied, men and women who work outside their homes eat breakfast quickly, often before the rest of the household awakens. Some purchase food on the way to work and eat on the job. Even when the entire family is awake, the pressure of various schedules makes an elaborate meal unlikely. In almost half of the households I studied, children are fed quickly in the morning while their parents are busy with other work. At lunchtime, almost a third of these households are empty; in several others, women are home alone. Even when women are home with children, and prepare lunch, the meal is an attenuated ritual. In some households, women sit down to eat with their children, but in an equal number, they feed the children alone and either skip lunch or eat later by themselves. Dinner is more consistently arranged as a well-defined meal, but can also be disrupted by the scheduling of outside activities. One man leaves the house for his night shift at 6:30, less than an hour after his wife returns from her secretarial job. Another, a professional worker, arrives home late in the evening, just as his children are going to bed. Evening activities—going to school or the gym, bowling or playing pool, working in church or community groups—may mean that men or women and their children miss dinner several times a week.

In the context of such changes, with more and more activities pulling individuals away from their households, bringing a family together for any kind of regular meal requires a new kind of effort. Still, the parents I interviewed were concerned about establishing

more precipitous increases in restaurant than in grocery prices (Blaylock, Elitzak, and Manchester 1989). Further, these figures do not indicate who eats away from home or how often. Average per-person weekly expenditures for food away from home are greatest in single-person households, somewhat less for two-person households, and still less for larger household groups (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1987b). This pattern suggests that family groups may be less influenced by the trend toward eating out than single persons and childless couples. Informants in this study did talk of eating away from home and purchasing take-out food items, but they discussed these practices as occasional treats or conveniences rather than as replacing family meals.

patterns of regular meals. They talked of strategizing about routines, and their comments revealed the importance of the concept "meal" as an organizer of family life. For example, the mother of an infant talked about pulling her daughter's high chair up to the table so that they can eat together "as a family," and a single working mother explained that she has continued to cook every evening for her teenaged daughter so as to provide "a dinner made by her mother." In addition, people arrange meals to mark the rhythms of family life, with regular dinners for extended family, or "special" Sunday dinners designed "to enrich our family life."

The work of feeding a family has changed, then, in ways that we are just beginning to understand. Most writers focus on the work that has disappeared. Strasser, for instance, concludes:

Hardly any modern families get together for all their meals, and restaurants and supermarkets provide options for buying food that somebody else has cooked. Cooking remains the central ritual of housekeeping, but like the rest of the housekeeping routine, that ritual endures only in truncated form. The work itself, performed with gas and electric stoves, devices that do the chopping and mixing, and utensils requiring little care, bears little relation to the time-consuming, hazardous, heavy work of the colonial hearth. (1982:48)

Strasser shows how the traditional skills of housework—the heavy work of cooking, for example—have been transferred from home to market. In this book, I will focus on a different aspect of this change, the nature of the work that remains. Though its character has changed profoundly, feeding remains a "central ritual," not only in housekeeping, as Strasser notes, but in the production of family life itself.

One thing that has not changed is that the work of feeding a family goes on and on; food must be provided again and again, every day. One woman I talked with complained of "just the everyday, what are we going to have, the drudgery of it, and the demands of it. You know, it's noon, and there are children that need to be fed." Indeed, many people think of cooking, especially everyday cooking for children, as rather tedious but straightforward, simple work. However, the repetitiveness of the work can be deceiving, so that even those who do the work barely recognize how much they do. Far from a purely mechanical task, producing meals requires

thoughtful coordination and interpersonal work as well as the concrete tasks of preparation.

The parents who spoke about the importance of family meals recognize that meals do more than provide sustenance; they are also social events that bring family members together. Such rituals provide a basis for establishing and maintaining family culture, and they create a mutual recognition of the family as a group (Bossard and Boll 1950; Charles and Kerr 1988). Indeed, a "family" is not a naturally occurring collection of individuals; its reality is constructed from day to day through activities like eating together. Thus, producing meals—at least in today's U.S. society—has increasingly become work aimed at maintaining the kind of group life we think of as constituting a family. The skills involved in feeding a family are skills of planning and coordination; the work, increasingly, is invisible work. In this chapter I will begin to examine the kinds of work involved in producing meals for a household group. I will make visible the work that women themselves often discount as trivial, and that they reveal only in their detailed accounts of everyday activities.

Planning a Meal

Some women talk of planning meals as "enjoyable," and experience planning as the creative part of their work; for others it is "a hassle." Whatever their feelings about it, planning is an essential part of the work that must be done. Jean's comment highlighted the effort involved:

My biggest peeve about cooking, preparing three meals a day, is trying to figure out what to put on the table. If somebody would just send me menus every week, and I could provide the mechanics, that would take a lot of the hassle away. Because I do—I'll spend time in the morning, thinking, about what in the heck I'm going to fix.

Not all women recognize that they "spend time" on meal planning; many claim that they "don't do much planning." But conceiving of a meal requires sensitivity to a variety of concerns, and as they described their cooking routines, all of the people I talked with revealed the thought involved in the work of feeding.

Family meals are prepared for particular people. While "cooking" is work that can be done alone, "feeding" implies a relatedness, a sense of connection with others. Producing meals is about

40 serving family members in a double sense: the food provided for a family cannot be just any food, but must be food that will satisfy them. Other researchers (Luxton 1980; Murcott 1983; Charles and Kerr 1988) have found that women's cooking is strongly influenced by their husband's preferences, and the people I talked with also emphasized foods their families liked. When I asked about typical meals, almost everyone began by drawing the boundaries between foods they would and would not serve, and these accounts were organized with reference to the special tastes of both husbands and children. For example, Donna, a married white woman, reported:

Like for meats, let's see—he likes so many. Well, he doesn't like pork chops . . . But we usually have meat. And he doesn't like potatoes too well, so I'll usually have stuffing. Or rice-a-roni. Or I'll make like corn fritters or potato pancakes. And you know, the vegetables.

Or, from a black single mother:

Let's see—well, beans are good. But my children aren't much on eating beans . . . They'll eat meat, but they won't eat a lot of beef—they'll eat like ground beef or something, but like steak is hard to chew. But I cook turkey parts. And lamb, they have these little lambs, I'll buy that and boil it up real nice where it just falls off the bone and they'll consume that. Veal. Liver. They will eat liver. And spinach, they love spinach. And I do push vegetables hard on them, because vegetables are very important. Carrots, and you know, they'll eat mixed vegetables, peas, broccoli and cauliflower, and spinach. But they won't eat greens very much.

Responding to these individual preferences is not a personal favor, but a requirement of the work. Family members may not eat if they don't like what is served, so women usually restrict their planning to items that have been successful in the past.

Mothers are often especially concerned that children eat the foods they need, and work at devising menus that are both appropriate and appealing. Some cook special foods for their children in addition to the family's regular meal, or invent techniques for encouraging children to eat, like Susan, who "disguises" her daughter's meat in mashed potatoes, and cuts cheese into amusing shapes. While not everyone does this kind of double work, the concern for children's tastes that it displays is not at all unusual. Everyone I talked with made some reference to the foods that children would and would not eat.

The ways that women respond to their husbands' tastes are more complicated. Donna, whose husband is "moody," and "a fussy eater," consults him every day before deciding what to have for dinner. He is quite vocal about his preferences, and she caters to his tastes in the same way that many women cater to their children: she will not cook anything he dislikes, and she always prepares foods in the special ways that he prefers. More typically, however, women respond to husbands' preferences out of a combination of duty and pride in their work. They spoke of meals appropriate for a man, and sometimes distinguished between meals they would serve to their children alone, and meals for the entire family. Sometimes these comments referred to men's work and to food as fuel. Susan explained:

He works hard, he has a physical job, in construction, and he's lean, and his metabolism is not at all like mine, he just burns it off. So I have to give him something with a lot of ballast.

Or, the same thought expressed by Sandra, a white woman married to a professional man:

I suppose a lot of it is influenced by his day. He is in a very demanding work situation. It's almost as though a decent meal is a reward for getting through a difficult day.

Many women feel that they have succeeded at their work when they have pleased the man in the house. One black working mother, Bertie, explained:

I like to cook things that make my family happy. I really do. I love to cook things that make my husband lean back in his seat and say, "That was a good dinner, lady." That's very important.

And Laurel, a white woman who described her husband as "incredibly easy to please," explained that, even so:

He would like it I think if I were more creative in the kitchen, and it was a real gourmet delight every night. So every once in a while I'll, you know, make a salad plate, instead of a big bowl. And I know that that's for him, I know that that's why I'm doing it.

Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr (1988:69) comment on the extent to which women take this aspect of the work for granted, noting

42

that some of their interviewees described themselves as "lucky" because their husbands "like everything."

In order to plan meals that are pleasing, women must know what it is that their husbands and children want, and such knowledge is not so easily gained as we might suppose. While family members can sometimes speak directly about their likes and dislikes, they do not always do so in ways that are helpful. In any case, the actual work of planning is rarely shared by those who only eat. Children will usually respond if given a choice of foods, and many women reported asking them what they want, especially for breakfasts and lunches. Husbands are typically more cryptic. Many women complained that they could not simply ask their husbands what they wanted to eat. For example, Sandra reported:

I'll call at the office and ask, "Is there anything special you'd like for dinner?" And his standard answer is, "Yes, something good."

And Susan explained:

He's a big eater, of something he enjoys. But he doesn't like a lot of choice. You can't ask him, what do you want? I just have to make that decision for him. And if he doesn't want it, he doesn't eat it.

Instead of through direct questioning, women learn what their husbands like "just living with somebody," through "trial and error." They notice what gets eaten and what is left, and which meals are special favorites. One woman reported:

Sometimes it's rather indirect. Like, it's still on your plate, what was wrong with it? You know, that kind of thing.

But the learning process has an active character, which can be seen in another woman's comments: Bertie explained that when she was first married, she had not known what to cook for her husband, so she "started looking for things that he liked better. Up until I saw him starting to get what he really wanted." Eventually, women learn what their husbands like, and take their knowledge for granted. Women who have been married for years experience meal planning as less difficult than those who are younger; they were more likely to report, "I don't get a lot of input, I know what they like."

Husbands' and children's tastes, of course, are often different. Thus, part of the work of planning involves weighing and balancing

43

the contradictory desires of family members. Again, some solve the problem by doing double cooking. Others consider the balance in their longer-range choices. For example, Laurel explained:

If we've had a particularly good meal one night, and everyone enjoyed it, and everyone ate heartily, and they've eaten well, the next day I might make something that I know everyone—other than Richard and I—they're just not going to give a lick about. And I will try to have something else on the table, that they're going to—not another entree—but a vegetable that they like, or cheese, or something that will fill them up.

Planning, then, means making sure that everyone gets "something that will fill them up."

Those who cook must consider their own tastes as well. However, in contrast to their responsiveness to the tastes of others, most women were scrupulously careful not to give their own preferences any special weight. For example:

I like spinach and they don't. So every once in a while I'll make spinach, just for me. But I don't make it frequently enough where he would feel that I was being prejudiced one way or the other.

Donna reported more bluntly, "One of us has to compromise, and it's going to end up being me." (The sources for this deferential reasoning will be discussed further in chapter 6.)

If pleasing the family is the first requirement, a meal must do even more; it must also conform to the pattern for a "proper" meal that household members have learned to expect. Within every culture, custom dictates that foods should be prepared and served in particular ways. Anthropologist Mary Douglas illustrates the force of these expectations with a story about her own dilemma as a family cook:

Sometimes at home, hoping to simplify the cooking, I ask, "Would you like to have just soup for supper tonight? I mean a good thick soup—instead of supper. It's late and you must be hungry. It won't take a minute to serve." Then an argument starts: "Let's have soup now, and supper when you are ready." "No no, to serve two meals would be more work. But if you like, why not start with the soup and fill up with pudding?" "Good heavens! What sort of a meal is that? A beginning and an end and no middle." "Oh, all right then,

have the soup as it's there, and I'll do a Welsh rarebit as well." When they have eaten soup, Welsh rarebit, pudding, and cheese: "What a lot of plates. Why do you make such elaborate suppers?" They proceed to argue that by taking thought I could satisfy the full requirements of a meal with a single, copious dish. Several rounds of this conversation have given me a practical interest in the categories and meanings of food. I needed to know what defines the category of a meal in our home. (1972:61-62)

Douglas proceeds to explore how food patterns are used as markers, expressing the structure of social relations both inside the household and also between household members and outsiders. In her household, for example, as in most, the categories "meals" and "drinks," and the people they are shared with, distinguish between those who are close friends and those who are merely acquaintances. In addition, meals themselves vary, with a differentiation between weekday and weekend meals, for instance, or everyday and special holiday meals, and this kind of variation marks the tempo of household life. Foods and food combinations carry messages about household life. They constitute a code with expressive significance.

For such a code to work, each meal, no matter how simple, must have the system's essential form so that it is recognizable as a part of the code. It must have the basic structure indicating that it is, in fact, a meal. This kind of patterning, of course, is imported from the wider culture into the everyday life of the household. Much of it is ethnically based, learned from shared cultural experience, and signalling membership in a cultural group beyond the household (see Douglas 1984). The forms of meals, then, become part of the social relations of eating: they provide instructions for choices about what to serve and they influence the responses and participation of family members. Most people, of course, are not conscious of food patterns as a coded system, and most cooks are not as introspective or analytical as Douglas about the patterning of their meals. However, it was clear from the way women talked about planning meals that they think about meals in the kind of formal, patterned way that Douglas shows us.

In a study of food practices among families in northern England, Charles and Kerr (1988) found tremendous concern with producing "proper meals." Their sample was relatively homogeneous ethnically, and they report that "proper meals" were understood—in

accordance with a "dominant food ideology"—as consisting of meat (or sometimes fish), potatoes, and a vegetable. Informants in the present study, drawn from several different ethnic groups, described different kinds of "adequate" or "proper" meals, but all thought in terms of some cultural standard. Some people talked about a single item that was an essential element in meals for their families (a meat entree, for example, or beans and tortillas). In addition, when asked to describe a typical dinner, most people talked in terms of the several categories of foods that make a meal. For example:

I try to have a salad and one or two vegetables, some kind of starch—potato or maybe some kind of bread—and then some entree—maybe meat or some sort of casserole.

They also spoke of rules for the kinds of combinations they can make:

We Mexicans usually have rice with pork. And if you have steak, we would have, like, any kind of soup, with broth.

The importance of such categories can be seen by the fact that people referred to them as a sort of standard even when they described meals that deviated from the form that was typical for them. For example, Laurel's description of a somewhat unusual dinner shows how she thinks of the meal as a set of "slots" to be filled:

Richard had been out for a business lunch, so I knew he wasn't going to be real hungry, and I'm on another diet, so I wasn't going to be eating the regular meal, so I didn't make, like, that slot that holds potatoes or noodles or something like that.

These cultural codes also extend beyond daily eating, with special meals to mark weekends, birthdays, and holidays. Charles and Kerr (1988) describe their informants' "festive" meals in some detail; I spoke with people about day-to-day cooking, but many of them also made reference to important "special" meals (and see Counihan 1988; Sered 1988).

Family members respond to meals in terms of such patterns, insisting on habits such as "meat and potatoes," rice with every meal, or special holiday menus. Some women reported that they were trying to change their families' ideas about meals, to encourage them to eat less meat, or more vegetables, for instance. But they could only succeed if they were sensitive to household mem-

bers' own ideas about what a meal should be. Susan reported that when she served a quiche, her husband told her, yes, it was very good, but he did not want "breakfast for dinner." Even though others respond to cultural patterns, those who are served are undoubtedly not as conscious of these codes as the women who actually work at designing meals. Ed, who had just begun to cook for his family, explained some of the requirements of planning meals, and his problem:

There has to be a vegetable. And not two starches. The trouble is, I don't know what a starch is, I can't remember what a starch is, so sometimes I end up with two starches, sometimes I don't.

He knows that the meal should be patterned, but he is still learning to construct the patterns himself.

The kind of responsiveness to family members I have described above implies that women who cook will select foods primarily from the set of things that have been successful in the past. The importance of food as a code implies that meals conform to particular patterns. However, these aspects of meal planning are combined with a third important concern—that meals should be varied—and the people I talked with also emphasized their efforts to make meals different and interesting.

Variety is more important in some households than in others, and it means different things in different households, but some notion of variation was fundamental to meal planning. At the simplest level, for example, a Puerto Rican woman reported:

When I go shopping, I buy different kinds of meat, something different for each day.

In addition, when they told how they make decisions about particular meals, the women I interviewed described a process in which they take account of a series of meals from previous days: "I wanted to fix a Chinese meal, I kind of felt like we hadn't had it for a while." Or: "Yesterday I decided it was time to have fish again." The same kind of consideration applies to the selection of side dishes:

I try to sort of get a variety . . . I sort of look in the freezer, and then just take out a vegetable that goes with it, that we haven't had yesterday or something.

People's concern with varied menus comes partly from contemporary U.S. health discourse, which links variety and nutrition. Food producers and nutritional scientists have promoted the idea that the safest and healthiest diet is a varied one. All of these informants reported that they were concerned about cooking nutritious meals, but their understandings of nutrition were often very general. (Those who followed media nutrition reports in more detail were predominantly informants in professional households, and will be discussed in chapter 8.) Many people summarized "good eating habits" with formulas like, "keep the variety up, and keep the sweets to a minimum." However, women also talked of variety as a part of their craft, important to producing meals that are not just adequate but interesting as well. Many expressed concern about "getting into a rut":

It's kind of boring to have the same thing over and over and over and over again.

Or:

You get to the place sometime where you think, now what am I going to cook, you know? And you've cooked everything, you've cooked around, and you want to think of something different, something I haven't cooked in a long time.

This woman's talk of having "cooked around" conveys the character of the process: she relies on a set of relatively standard food items, but she selects from among them to produce a series of interesting meals. Women search for new ideas, and many reported that they talk with friends about how to produce different meals:

It seems like when you're going through a rut so is your friend . . . [At these times they'll talk.] . . . Like, oh gosh, what am I going to do with the potato? There's only so many things you can do with it.

Such conversation has typically been regarded as trivial, as one of the unremarkable ways that women "pass time" when they get together. In fact, new ideas are important for each woman's work, and their talk provides one of the ways that they can learn about the essentially private household practices of their peers.

Planning a meal is rarely recognized as the kind of intellectual problem it actually is. The process is like solving a puzzle. There

The Work of "Feeding a Family"

48

are special requirements stemming from individuals' tastes and preferences, and relationships within the household, but variety is also important, so that the puzzle must be solved in relatively novel ways each day. The intersection of these different, sometimes contradictory concerns means that planning requires continual monitoring and adjustment. Planning is based on the overall form of each meal, and also the way it fits into a pattern of surrounding meals. By solving this puzzle each day, the person who cooks for a family is continually creating one part of the reality of household life. At the same time, she (or much more rarely, he) is constructing her own place within the family, as one who provides for the needs of others.

Meal planning is not a simple matter of decision making as conventionally understood. The intersection of several different kinds of requirements generates a holistic approach to the problem. Those who do the work are only partly aware of its principles. They can articulate some, but not all of their methods. They are like musicians and theater people, who choose to play particular notes because "it swings," or to do a scene in a particular way because "it works" (Becker 1982:199). The fact that the principles underlying this kind of knowledge are seldom articulated can make the work appear somewhat mysterious, or even mystical. For example, a man who has just begun to cook attributes his wife's superior planning abilities not only to experience, but also to "personality." And Bertie, who has been married and cooking for over twenty years, maintains that skills come automatically:

When you become a housewife, some of these things just—if one cares at all—they come almost automatic . . . Instinct, it's sort of like instinct.

The activities of feeding a family are of course not really instinctual; they are socially organized and their logic is learned. However, comments like these emerge from actual practice. They point to real characteristics of the work of feeding: its invisibility, its improvisational character, and its basis in a tacit, rather than fully articulated kind of knowledge.

The Meal as Event

The details of everyday meals—the times and places that families typically eat, the formal and informal rules that govern their behavior, and the kinds of interaction that are part of the meal—vary

from one household to another. But most people's thoughts about meals reflect idealized versions of family life. Laurel described her family's typical hurried breakfast and explained apologetically, "It's not a Walton family breakfast, by any means." Even though actual events fall short of the ideals suggested by television families such as the Waltons, people work at making their meals particular kinds of events. Those I interviewed reported that they tried to make meal time "a calm time," "a very social thing," or "an important getting together time." Such goals can only be accomplished through attention to the meal, and efforts to orchestrate the event.

Talk is considered an important part of most families' meals, and is something that people reported working at. For example, an Asian-American woman, married to a white professional man, reported:

At dinner we usually talk about the kind of day that Mark and I had. You know, you try to relate what cute thing, cute and wonderful thing the child did, and things of that nature. We try to talk during dinner.

Sometimes, these norms are even more explicit:

My son will sometimes be very grumpy and grouchy, because "The whole day went wrong," and he's told that that's simply not an excuse for not talking.

One affluent mother with five children, worried that they might not all have enough of a chance to participate in the dinner talk, had tried to get each child to read a news item each day and report on it at the table. The system did not work, she reported, but the story does reveal this mother's concern for her family's mealtime conversation. Such concern with organizing talk at the meal seemed to be somewhat class-specific. Though informants in all class groups talked about meals as events of coming together, middle-class and especially professional women were more explicit about the effort they put into organizing talk. In a few working-class households, talk at the dinner table was an item of contention between taciturn husbands and their wives, who were striving to construct the meal as a particular kind of social occasion. One of these women argued with her husband over his dinner-table behavior, while another simply gave in on the issue; she explained, "If I sit and start talking, he'll say, 'What the heck, can't you ever shut up!'" These comments suggest that at least some

49

working-class women, but fewer working-class men, share the more middle-class expectation that meals should be times for family interaction.

In all households, children's behavior at the table must be monitored and controlled. Sometimes this is relatively simple:

Now they're getting older they aggravate each other at the table. You know, "She did this," "She's doing that." So I have to sit there and kind of watch.

In more difficult situations, when children are problem eaters, managing the meal can become a "project." Laurel explained:

There's a lot of nights when it's, you know, "Either sit up and eat or leave the table." And you know, then the whole meal is ruined, it's just an aggravating situation. So the two of us are working on just not letting that happen. We give her real small portions, and just try to encourage her, and praise her when she is cleaning her plate. It's a project for Richard and I to get going on.

Most parents monitor their own behavior at the table, since their children learn from them; mealtime is time for "setting an example." One woman talked about how her daughter was learning to use a cup by mimicking the others at the table. Another, highlighting her own active role in this kind of imitative learning, explained:

I really have changed my way of eating. Like I will always take the vegetable, even though I'm not much of a vegetable eater. I don't make a big deal about it, but so that they at least see that that sort of thing is eaten.

This kind of interpersonal work may be directed toward the needs of adults as well as children. For example, a South American woman whose elderly parents live in the household explained how the whole family has helped her father adjust to health-related dietary restrictions:

We love coffee because we come from a country that's very rich in coffee. But we aren't drinking it so much now, mainly because of my father. It's not fair, if we are drinking and drinking coffee every time, and he's just watching us, it's terrible. Now we are very familiar with these herbal teas.

Her comment highlights the fact that the social experience of eating something together may be more important than the food itself. And both examples show how social interactions, and even one's own eating, become part of the work that contributes to the production of a family meal.

Most people do not think of themselves as working when they sit down to eat with family. Often (though not always), they are enjoying eating themselves, and enjoying the companionship of the others in their households. They engage in habitual behaviors that seem natural, that they often described as simply "what everybody does." But the difficulties that may arise, especially for parents who have other work as well, provide occasions when the effort required at mealtimes becomes visible. With the family so seldom together during the day, the meal becomes critically important. Laurel again, who was running a small business at home, explained:

It's a real hard situation. By the end of the day, I'm tired, Richard's tired, the kids are either wound up or tired. And it's a real volatile situation. It can either be just great, a real pleasant experience, or it can be a real bummer.

She does not talk about the problem in terms of work that must be done, but her comment suggests it. She and her husband are often too tired; they have trouble making the effort required to control a "volatile" situation.

In an observation of one family's dinner, I was able to see how Ed, the black professional man who organized it, thought of this work of interaction as the essential activity defining the meal as event. After the family finished eating, the older son was to load the dishwasher; Ed remained at the table, supervising him in this task. A younger son brought his book to the table, and they looked through it, discussing each picture. When they had finished, when Ed had sent his older son off to do homework and was finally left alone in the kitchen, he turned to me and announced, "Well, that's dinner at our house." There was clearly more work to do—food left out on counters and stove—and he went on to do it, but when the children left the room he felt the closure that marked the end of "dinner" as an interpersonal event.

The time and effort required to orchestrate family meals comes into focus even more clearly when we examine the households in which family members have difficulties coming together for regu-

lar family meals. All of the women who reported that they rarely sat down to dinner as a group were women working outside their homes (although some working women did manage to organize regular family meals). Conversely, of the women who are at home rather than working for pay, only two reported that they sometimes did not eat as a family group. Bertie, who works full-time as well as going to school, whose husband has two jobs, and whose teenaged children are involved in their own activities, commented that sitting down to dinner every day is "just one of those luxuries that we have to give up." Thus, part of the reason for eliminating the dinner as a regular family event is the difficulty of coordinating multiple work schedules instead of just one. However, it is also clear that arranging for family meals is work that takes time and energy, and that it is most easily accomplished when there is someone at home with time and energy to devote to the task.

Rick and Robin, a young white couple who both worked full-time (he as a delivery truck driver and she as a clerical worker), talked eloquently about this problem. Their two children were seven years and seven months old at the time of the interview. Both had been working full-time throughout their marriage, though their jobs had changed frequently because of cutbacks and layoffs. Robin was going to school at night, and they hoped that soon she could earn enough that Rick could stay home as a househusband. For the present, though, they described their routine as a "helter skelter" one, with no "set patterns." She is usually late because of school or overtime work, so they often eat at different times. In any case, supper is in the living room, in front of the TV. She talked of how different their life seems from the way she grew up, and of her regrets:

My mom was home. And it really makes a world of difference. She always had good meals on the table . . . It was more of a family thing. You know, my dad got home at a certain time, and we always ate dinner after he got home. And then we'd watch TV. On Saturday nights it was like a regular routine. We'd always have hamburgers and watch Science Fiction Theater. I mean, it was great.

Now it's like a helter skelter routine. If we're all home fine, if we're not then we just work around it. I don't think Kate would know what it's like to sit down and have a formal meal with the family. It's such a rare occurrence. The only time we really do that is the holidays.

There are a lot of times when I really regret it. I regret not having a family routine. It feels like, you know, your kids are being shuffled around, and you're being shuffled around.

And there are times when I get this real craving to stay home, stay home and play housewife. But then you know that there's no way in hell that you could afford it. It's a matter of economics. You have to do it, in order to survive.

It is a real problem for her, the one thing she would like to change about their eating habits, and something that she says they talk about "all the time." Rick seemed more resigned to the situation, though he talked about their routine in much the same way:

We don't have any set patterns like I was raised up with. It's just, you know, the food's here, there it is, eat. It's not, you know, the table's going to be cleared off, and there's going to be four place settings around the table, and the whole schmear like I was raised up with.

When I asked him why they didn't have "set patterns," his answer was ambiguous, but ultimately reflected the time and effort involved in arranging for meals:

It doesn't make any difference. Well, it does. But you're so damn tired. It's not the time, because you could do it if you wanted to. It just gets to where you're so tired, and fed up with the way the money situation is, and you just say, the hell with it.

Many working parents feel frustrated and defeated when they cannot arrange family meals of the sort they remember. Their comments often reveal the complexity of meanings they attach to family meals, and provide clues to the reasons that they feel so bad when they do not conduct them successfully. Jean, a married woman who works as a legal secretary, reported real distress because of her inability to arrange the kind of meals she wants, and discussed the reasons for her concern:

If you have a real discussion at the dinner table, like we used to when I was a kid, you can give a person a chance to let you in on their life. What they were doing all day when they weren't with you. You can find out more about that person. That doesn't happen in our house at all . . . [It's time when you can show that you really care about that person in more than just a caretaking role.] I mean, I'm their mother, so I

attend to certain needs for them. But that doesn't mean I really know them.

Providing food is a way of "attending to needs." But Jean's comment makes clear how the work of relating to others is an even more essential part of producing a "family meal" than the provision of food.

In professional households, parents were more often able to arrange regular family meals, even if both were employed. However, in these households, almost all of the women who worked outside the home worked part-time instead of full-time, and they usually had jobs with flexible schedules, so that they had considerable control over their own activities. They had fewer obstacles to overcome in arranging a regular mealtime routine, and more time to devote to this work.

Single mothers in this sample were somewhat less likely than married women to eat with their children (though other researchers have found no such differences [Wynn and Bowering 1987]). Some of these women reported that they arranged and supervised regular meals for their children, but they themselves ate alone, at another time. For example, a mother with six children, who is home all day, explained, "I'd rather wait until it's quiet." And a single woman who works all day as a receptionist said:

We usually sit down and eat. Or I have them in here and I'll—because, you know, I've been working all day, and I might go in and sit in the living room so I'll be by myself for a while.

In such situations, there is only one person to do all of the family work, and no one to provide any relief, or even help in sustaining a conversation. Like the working couples described above, these women need some respite. They find that it is simply too much to keep working during their own mealtimes.

The "breaks" that these single mothers allow themselves highlight the continuous nature of the interpersonal work that organizes a family meal. The meal is part of the ongoing process that constitutes the life of the household. Whatever its particular features, a "family" has a problematic existence: it is a socially constructed group, continually brought into being through the activities of individuals. Repeated activities—and especially routines and rituals like those of family mealtimes—sustain the reality of a family. Thus, when people talk about the work of feeding a family, we sometimes hear hints of an interweaving of the rather

mundane business of the food itself with more fundamental aspects of group life. One woman explained:

The initial drudgery is what you dislike. Actually going shopping, doing all the planning, chopping, cutting, what have you. And of course cleaning up. But you do it for the good parts, you know, you get enough of the good part to keep doing it. And of course, you have to survive.

"Doing" a meal, then, can be a complex and tiring project, but also one that holds promise for the rewards of good family times. It is a matter of survival, but also a matter of the "good parts," beyond survival, which are harder to label and discuss.

Invisible Work

Most everyone would count "meal preparation" as an important kind of household work, but we seldom stop to think about the activity that produces a meal. Most would assume that "meal preparation" refers to the discrete tasks of cooking. Meals, however, depend on more than food alone. They come into being as socially organized events, with recognizable form and tempo. "Doing a meal," then, requires more than just cooking; it takes thoughtful foresight, simultaneous attention to several different aspects of the project, and a continuing openness to ongoing events and interaction. These kinds of effort must be considered part of the work of feeding a family, but they are seldom identified as work: they remain invisible even as they are done.

Researchers who study household work often rely on commonsense assumptions about the content of the work, asking interviewees to report on tasks such as "cleaning," "cooking," and "ironing" (Oakley 1974) or to estimate the time they spend on "home chores" or "taking care of children" (Pleck 1985). In another approach, respondents log their household activities in time diaries, and researchers assign these activities to categories such as "after-meal clean-up" and "marketing" (Walker and Woods 1976). These studies are useful: they call attention to the amount of time devoted to housework, the greater share of housework done by women, and the work "overload" (Pleck 1985) and consequent "leisure gap" (Hochschild 1989) experienced by women who work for pay as well as at home. But the expanded view of feeding work put forward here suggests that time studies, or those based on commonsense understandings, capture only a fraction of women's

household effort. While such studies document the performance of physical tasks, they miss most of the planning and coordination involved in household work, as well as the constant juggling and strategizing behind the physical tasks.

We find clues to the invisible work of feeding in people's accounts, as they refer to their planning toward family meals. Though preparation time is bounded, the strategizing that supports preparation extends throughout the day. As Bertie explained, "The antennas are always out." Those who will cook later spend time considering their plans, strategizing about how to make the meal better, or prepare it more quickly. This thought work is often squeezed into the interstices of other activities. Barbara, the busy mother of two-year-old twins, explained:

As soon as I get up in the morning or before I go to bed, I'm thinking of what we're going to eat tomorrow. Even though I know, but do I have this, and is this ready, and this ready?

And another woman, though not so pressured, reported:

I turn the alarm off and I have about ten minutes of kind of free time while I'm lying there in bed. And during that time, I usually try to think of what I'm going to put in Brad's lunch. So that when I get up, I don't have to stand there and say, "Whoa, what am I going to make for him?" I have it in my head already.

At their paid jobs, or in odd moments, people think about what to have for dinner, what they need from the store, or how to fit all of the activities of food preparation into the time available.

This work of planning, and the kind of interpersonal work I have described in this chapter, are essential parts of the work of feeding a family, but they are invisible activities. Most analysts of women's "invisible work" have meant work that women are not given credit for, like volunteer work, work on a husband's career, or behind-the-scenes work in organizations (e.g. Kahn-Hut, Daniels, and Colvard 1982:137–143; Daniels 1987). The kinds of work I have been discussing can be thought of as unacknowledged work in this sense; however, they are also literally invisible: much of the time, they cannot be seen. Planning is largely mental work, spread over time and mixed in with other activities. In addition, these tasks can look like other activities: managing a meal looks like simply enjoying the companionship of one's family—and of course, is partly so—and learning about food prices can look like reading the news-

paper. The work is noticeable when it is not completed (when the milk is all gone, for example, or when the meal is not ready on time), but cannot be seen when it is done well.

The invisibility of this thought work, along with the way it combines with physical tasks, can hide this part of housework even from those who do it. There are few words for this kind of effort, and a pervasive trivialization of the work of managing meals. Thus, many of the women who talked in detail about the kinds of activities I have described here also told me that they did not do any "planning." They dismissed the thinking involved in what they did with words like these:

It's just routine to me. It's just all up there, you know. Just what comes natural. It's just a part of—just like, my work.

In fact, this woman's sense of the "natural" character of her activity reveals the extent to which thought work is at the heart of what she does. It is "just all up there," "just routine." But keeping track of the routine, keeping it "all up there," is in fact the heart of her work.

2 Provisioning

The family meals discussed in the last chapter are made from grocery items obtained outside the home, and part of the work of feeding a family involves keeping the household supplied with products used in the day-to-day routine. Much of this work is included in the activity usually called shopping, although some people also garden, or trade food items with relatives and friends. I refer to the work as provisioning rather than shopping because I intend to provide an expanded view of the work: to indicate that there is more to it than we can see inside a store, and to emphasize its embeddedness in a socially organized household practice.

In the past, farm families grew much of their own food, and some, though many fewer, still do today. Most households now, especially in urban areas, depend on food that is produced elsewhere and purchased for home use. This shift to mass production and distribution of food developed as part of a turn-of-the-century reorganization of the economy that produced today's largely urban, industrial society. Increasingly, part of the work of feeding—production and distribution—has been done, collectively, by large corporations for large numbers of people. Preparing and serving food are also more widely offered as market services than in the past, but these activities are still more often conducted as “housework”—in private homes for household groups. Much of the older work of feeding a family, then, is now done socially, through the market. This change has given new importance to a gap between market and household which must be bridged: supplies must be funneled from relatively few large organizations with standardized products to a great many small and particular private homes. As mass production and national-scale retailing

have developed, consumption has become an increasingly important part of the economy.

Some writers have noted that these shifts produce an expanded sphere of work for women as shopping becomes more extensive and more necessary. Nona Glazer (1987), for example, shows how retail organizations draw women into doing the work of shopping and benefit from their unpaid labor (see also Willis 1972; Weinbaum and Bridges 1976). Like these analysts, I am concerned with shopping as work activity. However, rather than considering the work as a piece of the economy, I begin in the home, with the everyday activity of shopping and its significance for individuals living their lives in family households. From this perspective, shopping for food can be seen as a complex, artful activity that supports the production of meaningful patterns of household life by negotiating connections between household and market. The activity is shaped in many ways by the economic context in which it is done (and shopping can be a cruel task, fraught with anxiety and frustration, especially for those with inadequate resources), but the market is also a terrain in which many shoppers learn to maneuver in their own interests quite skillfully. They use the market to obtain the products they need if they are to continue to “do family.”

There are many different ways to do the physical work of provisioning. Some people shop for food once a month while others shop almost daily. Some go to a single store while others alternate, or make the rounds of several shops in a single day. Some of these differences arise from the strongly class-related constraints of neighborhoods and resources (the availability of stores, transportation, and home storage space, for example); others are based on individual preferences and inclinations. Differences in specific situations meant that some of the women I talked with had more autonomy than others in planning these routines. Poor and working-class women worried often about prices and “making ends meet,” while more affluent shoppers felt freer to make choices on the basis of preference or convenience. In addition, the physical work of provisioning was generally easier for those with more resources. These differences will be discussed in chapter 7. Here, I will examine common features of the process through which people develop and carry out strategies for provisioning their households. As in the previous chapter, I will display the character of the work required, and point to the skills of coordination and adjustment developed by those who do it. In addition, I will begin to display the significance of household work in constructing a distinction between

"public" and "private." The work of provisioning involves social relations that are both public and private, as we typically understand these terms. The work connects "public" and "private" realms, but since it is largely invisible, the connections go unnoticed. Instead, people do shopping, and use their purchases, to produce "personal life" and thus, actually to construct the boundary between home and market.

The Household as Context

Shopping for groceries is more than a simple matter of buying a few things that one needs, because "needs" grow out of an everyday routine that takes shape over time. Teresa, a Chicana woman married to a white-collar worker, laughed when she remembered going shopping when newly married:

I remember when I first got married telling my husband, "Well, we have to go out grocery shopping, because the pantry's empty." And I thought to myself, "Oh, no, grocery shopping! What do I get?"

Not everyone is so bewildered when they start the work of feeding a family. However, everyone develops a plan for provisioning over time, in part consciously and in part as a result of routine and habit. The plan comes to be expressed in choices about the stock of foods to be kept on hand. Replenishing the stock of foods periodically makes it possible to carry on the everyday routine.

When the people I talked with explained how they did their shopping, they referred to the organizing power of a conceptualized standard stock of foods, though they did not explicitly label it as such. For example:

I just buy things that I know we're going to use . . . And I know—I usually buy the same cuts, even though I don't make the same thing out of it.

Since the set of items to be purchased remains fairly constant, preparing for shopping is relatively simple:

I go around and I check, in the refrigerator, and I check the cupboards and I check the bathroom to see what I might have missed. And I make the list.

The question is not so much what to get as how often, and how much:

You buy the same things every week, you know, you really do, every two weeks, whenever you go. It's just do you have enough of it.

From such comments, provisioning appears to be highly routinized. However, the story is more complex. While shoppers describe their activity as "routine," they do not actually do the same things each time they go shopping. Instead, shoppers make different specific purchases within repeated categories that provide instructions for deciding on individual items. For example, a grocery list might include the instruction to buy "treats" for children, without specifying a particular treat. The shopper describes herself as buying the same thing each time (some kind of treat), but she actually chooses a specific item at the last moment in the store (Lave, Murtaugh, and de la Rocha 1984). This observation suggests a modification of the commonsense view of "routine" activity as mechanically repetitive. The routine character of shopping does not come from the sameness of every trip to the supermarket, but from the way that shopping fits with a parallel "routine" in the household, the way that habitual purchases become the constituents of "standard" family meals.

Shoppers must consider the economic resources of their households, attempting to balance taste and economy as they decide how much to spend. The people I talked with had varying incomes: some were quite wealthy, while others received public aid and food stamps to supplement minimal income. Surprisingly, however, none emphasized money when they reported on their shopping. All could estimate what they spent for food, and though some had quite limited resources, all reported that they "managed" to get what they needed. Shopping practices were often influenced by the way that money flowed into the household: many people planned shopping trips to coincide with paydays, especially in working-class households. But how much to spend seemed an old decision, and one that was taken for granted. Since so many decisions were based on habitual practice, staying within a budget did not seem to require special effort:

We just have an idea of the categories of things we ought to have, and what we can afford.

This is not to say that shoppers are unconcerned about money. Many reported worrying about the price of food, and almost all shoppers try to economize in various ways. (Their reports will be discussed in chapter 7.) But when people described their shopping

strategies, none except the poorest informants organized their accounts around issues of budget; most referred to cash resources only indirectly, as taken-for-granted background for their strategizing.

Decisions about stocking up on supplies are related to the kinds of meals that people want to produce. For example:

A few of the things we buy might be for the immediate week. Other things are kind of general categories. Like if you've got pot roast around you can make beef stew, or beef teriyaki. Chicken, whatever, you can do something with chicken. Hamburger, you can make some kind of spaghetti.

Sometimes, family members assert their preferences, and complain about foods they do not like. Jean reported:

There are all different kinds of rice-a-roni, I mean brands that you can buy. But my family only likes one kind, so it doesn't make any sense for me to buy something that they aren't going to like and eat.

The one who does the shopping must discover which of the many products on the market are acceptable. Mostly, the process is one of trial and error. However, Janice explained why she makes a point of encouraging her teenaged children to go shopping with her occasionally:

Then they get what they want, and not what I want. And I also get their idea of what they like. Would you rather this brand or that brand? Or they don't like particular kinds of cheese . . . That kind of thing, where you've got to sort of get to know your kids, and the people you're working with.

Her account shows her need for such information, though, like many shoppers, she probably learns less from such questioning than from her occasional mistakes, when her son "gets hysterical" about foods he considers unhealthy.

Keeping the household stocked with food supplies has become especially important given the growing tendency of family members to eat separately, on their own schedules. Although some family members prepare their own meals (especially breakfasts and lunches), they can only do so if the ingredients they need are available. Sandra explained her role in providing for her husband's breakfast as follows:

He fixes his own breakfast—a standard fried egg and toast. And he's got it timed so that he puts down the fork,

grabs the briefcase, and is out the door and just makes the 7:48 train. So I make sure that there's breakfast stuff on hand for him.

"Breakfast stuff" is one of the categories that organize this woman's shopping; by making sure the "stuff" is "on hand," she provides for her husband to carry out his own routine for getting off to work.

An extended example, from a somewhat unusual household, will show clearly how a household routine can structure shopping practices, and conversely, how shopping in a particular way can facilitate a routine. Janice shops for her husband and two adult children who live in the household. She works as a nurse, a position she achieved a few years before our interview, after working in a lower-level position and attending college while her children were growing up. During that busy time, she was often away from home and her children learned to take care of themselves:

If anybody wanted to eat, you had to feed yourself. You had to find a way to do it. And they were—not taught, but I told them how to cook.

Now, family members are quite independent. Though Janice's husband does not cook, the three children, in their early twenties, contribute financially to the household and also share housework responsibilities. Janice herself participates in evening sports and the children are often involved in their own activities; they rarely plan for meals, and sometimes eat dinner—singly or in twos and threes—at a neighborhood restaurant. Still, meals are often family events, prepared and eaten at home together. Janice or the children decide on the spur of the moment whether or not to cook, and "whoever is home sits down and eats it." Janice's shopping is what makes this kind of independence possible:

What I do is provide enough food in the house for anybody who wants to eat. And then whoever is home, makes that meal, if they want it.

Janice's son is a vegetarian, and a daughter and her boyfriend prefer not to eat red meat, so menus are limited in complex ways. Again, Janice has a principle that guides her efforts: she expects the children to do their own special cooking, but she takes responsibility for providing the special ingredients they might need. She explained that her son might make himself a quiche for dinner, and described the process in terms of the division of labor they have negotiated:

He wants it, so he builds it himself. I mean, I provide the milk, I provide the cheese, I provide the eggs, the pie shell. He builds it.

Janice is pleased with the household routine. She talks with pride about how the children take care of themselves and she thinks of their system as a cooperative one:

It's like anybody in society. You try to make things mesh together. It doesn't always work. This happens to work.

Still, it is very clear that this routine does not just "happen" to work: Janice herself spends considerable time and effort to make this system work. She explains that she can ask the others to do shopping, "if I say that I just don't have time." But she also reports, matter-of-factly:

You need to get food in the house, you spend Saturday morning doing grocery shopping. And when I don't, we end up somewhere around Sunday night saying, why isn't there any bread for breakfast tomorrow, or for lunches tomorrow.

Her transition from the most general of observations, applicable to anyone ("You need to get food . . ."), to a very different statement of the real consequences when *she* doesn't shop, reveals the extent to which supplying the household remains her job. (Of course, the comment also hints at how her weekend time—leisure time for other family members—is taken up with attending to household needs.)

Janice, like other shoppers, pays attention to her family's preferences, noticing what gets used and what does not. For example:

I have two or three things of jello in there, and they've been there for ten years. And nobody's going to make them, unless I do. If I put pudding in there—regular chocolate pudding—it might be gone tomorrow.

The comment refers to the fact that, in this household, there are several cooks, whose different demands make shopping a more complex endeavor. Janice's method of preparing for shopping involves other family members more than is typical in other households:

OK, what I do is I take out an envelope. Whatever came in Wednesday or Thursday's mail, and is still sitting around. I take an envelope. I will write down whatever I get from the

newspaper [i.e. sale items], and then I'll yell, what do you want? What do we need? Because I'm not in the kitchen, you know, all the time. I mean, I don't go through, and I'm not doing all the cooking. So I say, what do we need? And somebody'll tell me that we need baking soda, or that we need something, we're out of coffee, or we're out of bread, or I didn't have something for breakfast this morning that I wanted. And I'll put that on the list.

For Janice, the point is to find a division of labor that is both reasonable and effective. She sets limits on what she herself can do:

I cannot run an eight-room house by myself. I cannot take care of five people's needs, by myself . . . If there's something that needs to be done, you have to tell me about it. If we're out of shampoo, or we're out of laundry detergent, you have to tell me.

Still, Janice does attend to five people's needs, and her language associates the routine chores of grocery shopping with care and sensitivity:

I'm aware of other people around me, and their needs, and I know that it'll have to be purchased.

In spite of the considerable effort that Janice spends on provisioning, her routine does provide flexibility and allows her to give up the preparation of an inexorable series of dinners which her grown-up children may not even be home to eat. But Janice continues to shop for family members, in spite of their considerable independence, and in doing so, continues to care for them in ways they have come to depend on. Janice's routine is somewhat unusual because the household is unusual—it is organized to promote independence while maintaining some sociability. However, its atypicality makes it an especially effective illustration of the strategizing that ties provisioning to the particular needs of a specific household group.

The Market as Context

Shopping as everyday activity is done for a particular household; it is experienced by those who do it as a search for the items that will be used by a group of individuals with idiosyncratic needs and preferences. The items needed must be found in one or more of the many kinds of food stores available in any city, from small mom-

and-pop groceries and ethnic or gourmet specialty stores to huge self-service supermarkets. Within each of these stores, the products offered for sale are those that the retailer has procured from distributors, and the products available from distributors are those produced by the complex network of food producers and processors, increasingly multinational, mega-corporations. The "market" provides a context for provisioning, then, in two senses. In an immediate and concrete way, specific stores are the places to which people go to buy foods, the settings for their shopping activities. More generally, the features of these specific stores are produced by much larger economic processes.

The activity of grocery shopping is carried on in a dialectical interaction with the specific store as a setting for activity. That is, shoppers enter a structured environment and respond to it, but they do so in ways that aim at carrying out their own intentions: they use the store in ways that will allow them to get the things needed in their own households. In the same way that the household stock of supplies provides the basis for a routine for food preparation, the store as setting becomes part of a regular shopping routine. People learn what is available in a favorite store and where frequently purchased items are stocked, so that the store becomes a setting with particular meanings for individual shoppers. Those who have no need for certain items (pet food, for instance) can bypass whole sections of the store, so that "some aisles in the supermarket do not exist for a given shopper" (Lave, Murtaugh, and de la Rocha 1984:71), while other areas may be filled with items that are relevant because they are often selected.

I will treat shopping as one part of an extended course of action that also includes learning about the options available and making decisions about when and where to shop, and how often. The market context for the activity, conceived in this way, includes all the stores available to shoppers, and the various organizational features of these stores.

There are, obviously, many food stores in urban areas like the one where my informants live. Most of them, however, did their shopping regularly in a few favorite stores. The choice of a store is a primary decision, so that when I asked about shopping, many people began by telling me where they typically go, and why. The convenience of stores near home is often a decisive consideration, and when people reported that they went farther than the nearest store, they usually explained why. When shoppers own cars, they can make choices that balance cost, convenience, and the features of

particular stores. One woman rejected the store closest to her house because she did not like the layout of its parking lot, and Barbara, with her two-year-old twins, chose to shop at the store whose employees would help her carry groceries and children to her car. Women without transportation must work harder at getting to stores, and find it more difficult to strategize about the best, and especially the cheapest, places to shop. When I asked about shopping, a poor single mother, living in a neighborhood with few stores or services, responded by talking first about transportation:

Now that's the big job. It's not really—you know, it wouldn't be such a big job, it's just such a big job because there's one single parent . . . I can't do shopping with all my children. I've even tried shopping with just the twins, and it's very, very chaotic . . . Usually I'll call my sister to watch the children, maybe take them over on a weekend . . . [When she has the opportunity], I try to go to the most difficult place, the most distant place that I can't get around to fast. And a lot of places they do have delivery service and stuff. So it's really a matter of me struggling to get on over there . . . I may not get there when I want to. You know, it depends on when I can get my sister. Sometimes I'll say, "Can you take me here?" "Well, I can't do it this week, I can do it next week." You know. And then it's if I feel like spending the extra money to go out and get a delivery service or something to bring the food here.

This kind of problem is compounded by the fact that, historically, stores in poor neighborhoods have taken advantage of their captive clientele to charge more than stores elsewhere (Caplovitz 1967).

Most people use several stores for different purposes. Some make regular trips to two or more stores, to take advantage of sale prices. But even when people get most of their groceries at a single favorite supermarket, there are usually small nearby stores where they stop for an item forgotten on a previous trip, or special stores where they purchase items that cannot be bought elsewhere:

If I run out of stuff during the middle of the week, which I hate to do, but you know, sometimes you do, everybody does—there's a store on the way home that I'll stop at.

Some people use supermarkets for canned goods and pet food, and get meats or produce at small markets they think have better food, and most of the Mexican and Puerto Rican women I talked with

shop regularly at small stores in their neighborhoods for tortillas or vegetables that are unavailable in the larger stores. The stores people know constitute a kind of repertoire for variations on the shopping routine—the places one might go or not. Decisions to shop or not, at particular places and times, are part of a larger strategy for managing to fit necessary shopping chores—that is, those that support a household routine—in among the other activities of everyday life.

Within the store, shoppers encounter a distinctive setting. The most common form of retail food store now is the self-service supermarket, a store in which shoppers select their purchases from an array of thousands of different products. These are packaged and displayed amidst a wealth of printed information designed to do the "selling." The products available, and the print that tells about them, are tied to processes of production, marketing, advertising, and state regulation of these activities. Most of the items for sale are brand-name products, known nationally because of their mass-media advertising. Indeed, much of the information that surrounds the shopper in the supermarket consists of ads and displays provided by large food companies or the central offices of supermarket chains.

Shoppers must decide which of these thousands of products they need. Some fraction of the information available in the store is relevant to their concerns, and the rest, as people are well aware, is designed to encourage them to buy more and spend more. Shoppers, interested in getting what they need as quickly as possible, try to routinize their decisions, choosing mainly familiar items that they've already identified as "good buys." But there is always the possibility that new or unfamiliar products may be better or cheaper, and this possibility encourages attention to product labels and displays. The context requires that shoppers constantly sort through the information available, screening what is irrelevant, taking and using just what they need.

The "context" for shopping, in this sense, extends beyond a particular store, and so does the activity. As they read the newspaper or watch television, shoppers notice prices, new products, stores and their offerings. They learn, in a general way, what to expect in a store, how to recognize a bargain, which kinds of products to look for. Some rely heavily on traditional practices and what they have learned directly from familiar people, while others notice advertising, study product labels, and pay attention to specific features of the items they want. For example:

I always wait to see what somebody else has to say about things and then I'll try it.

But, to illustrate the latter strategy:

We read labels. What comes first. Is there more sugar than anything else, is there more starch than anything else, are there a lot of additives? Things like making sure that you're not getting a drink, that you're getting 100% juice.

One can see in this comment the way that merchandising and advertising set a context for this kind of learning. Reading labels is a special skill: when this woman explains that she looks to see what comes first, she assumes that we share her knowledge that ingredients are listed in order, indicating their proportionate share in a product's composition. And when she speaks of making sure she does not buy a "drink," she has adopted legal, advertising terminology that distinguishes pure juices from those that are diluted.

These two comments also illustrate a general concern with selecting food that is healthful, and the rather different ways that general concern is expressed. Virtually all those I talked with emphasized that they chose foods they believed were nutritionally beneficial for their families, and most made some reference to widely disseminated nutritional principles emphasizing the importance of a varied, low-fat diet. But some put these principles into practice in a vague and general manner—talking about nutrition simply in terms of "getting the basics," for example—while others, like the second shopper quoted above, selected products on the basis of very specific nutrition-related criteria and the kind of specialized knowledge this woman displays. I argue in chapter 8 that such differences arise from the tendency for individuals in different class situations to draw from a health and nutrition discourse in different ways. In this chapter, these different approaches can sometimes be seen, as here, in the particular ways people describe their shopping practices.

As shoppers try to find the items needed to provision their families, they must deal with the fact that the range and character of products on the market are determined by corporate decisions, which are only partly based on any notion of household needs. Defenders of capitalism point to demand, and claim that the "consumer is king," and ultimately gets what "he" wants (in strangely inaccurate language for retailers who are keenly aware that most shoppers are women). But critics argue, more convincingly, that needs are learned, and that retailers force consumers to buy what is

available while providing the illusion of choice through minute and mostly insignificant differences among the products on the market. Charles and Kerr (1988) point out that the decisions that most influence quality of diet are made at the levels of public policy and corporate strategy, rather than by consumers simply choosing healthy foods. And Batya Weinbaum and Amy Bridges (1976) have shown how it is the shopper's responsibility, through "consumption work," to reconcile private production of commodities like food with socially determined household needs. When the products available do not fit with everyday needs, consumption can be difficult and frustrating, as shoppers struggle to translate the material goods they can afford into "nurturance." The shoppers I talked with were certainly aware of the economic forces shaping the market. They strategized about which products were worth buying for their households, and what the alternatives might be, and they developed methods for dealing with products they did not want as well as those they did:

My kids want this cereal, or Choco-this, or Froot Loops, and I just tell them flatly, "No, I will not buy it." I just give them such an emphatic no that they know what to expect now.

Such comments hint at the ways that stores are inadequate, but few people think much about these problems. They have mostly found "good enough" strategies, and their own work accomplishes the reconciliation that is necessary: by doing provisioning, they minimize any lack of fit between their needs and the market. In the "unusual" situation—recession, poverty, an illness that calls for a special diet—shoppers become more aware of the market as an adversary and sometimes become more militant. But typically, shoppers are absorbed in the everyday work of *making* the market suffice.

In fact, when shoppers engage the market as context, they do enter a kind of struggle. They must deal with a superfluity of products and information about them, and with essentially antagonistic marketing techniques designed to disrupt their routines and induce them to buy new products. In this context, the screening and sorting that shoppers do is a specific kind of skilled practice, but one that goes relatively unnoticed. It is essential to the operation of a market economy, but it is experienced—if noticed at all—as activity conducted privately, for the family. Shoppers enter stores with their own plans foremost in their minds, use the market in

the way they have decided is best for their purposes, and then go home to their families.

Monitoring and Improvisation

Routines for provisioning evolve gradually out of decisions that are linked to the resources and characteristics of particular households and to features of the market. The routine is made to work through monitoring activities that fit the regularly occurring categories of routine to specific events from one day to another. Monitoring also provides a continual testing of typical practices. This testing occurs as shoppers keep track of changes on both sides of the relation: household needs and the products available.

Monitoring on the household side means watching for the needs and preferences of household members and keeping track of supplies. People learn to notice supplies and sometimes make notes about which items they will need. They describe the process as simple, but their comments also belie this simplicity with an awareness that they do not always get it right:

Even though it's the same thing, I still make a list. Because I'll forget what we have and what we don't have. Like we may have enough juice one week, the next week we don't, and I have to write it down, otherwise I'll think we have enough juice, you know, and we don't.

In addition to keeping track of supplies, monitoring means paying attention to new or evolving needs. Sometimes provisioning becomes a topic of conversation. Gloria explained:

Sometimes he'll come home with something I don't like, and I'll mention it to him and we'll talk about it. Or sometimes it'll come from him.

This kind of negotiation seems to occur most often in households where both adults participate in the shopping, perhaps because it is only in these situations that both are aware of the options available and the choices that are being made through provisioning. When one person does all of the keeping track, this kind of monitoring may simply mean noticing that conditions or requirements are changing.

Monitoring is especially critical when the household routine is a difficult one and mistakes can be costly. Barbara, for example, a former school teacher, now spends her days taking care of her two-

year-old twins who have been diagnosed as slightly hyperactive. It is very demanding work (as I discovered while we talked), and her household routine is built around managing the children. She plans carefully for her weekly shopping trip—deciding on a menu for each dinner and writing down "everything we're going to eat for seven meals"—since a trip to the store for something forgotten is no simple matter. Still, she has to go out every few days for milk, and she is constantly aware of what they will be needing:

I always have to be thinking ahead, like how many gallons do I have at home. Or if I do sneak out, am I running low on this, or am I running low on that, or will I make it between Thursday and Friday of next week. So as soon as I get up in the morning or before I go to bed, I'm thinking of what we're going to eat tomorrow. Even though I know, but do I have this, and is this ready and this ready? And then it's like, three, four o'clock, can I get them down in their chairs so I can get dinner going, if I don't, we're really behind schedule. And having these guys hungry—Thinking, you know, do we have bananas in the house, for fresh fruit for them.

It is interesting to note the "shorthand" she uses to talk about her monitoring. Gallons, of course, are of milk, and Thursday or Friday is her regular shopping time, and she speaks of them in our interview in the familiar way she is used to. She does not think of explaining these details, because, typically, she is the only one who needs to understand.

In addition to monitoring the household, shoppers must monitor the market, so that they know what is available and where to get it. Much of this learning, too, is accomplished through trial and error, but there are many more formal sources of information about products as well. As they sort through terminology, products, and prices, shoppers work hard at devising routines to reduce the amount of decision making they have to do. Most people reported that at times, they have studied prices carefully, but that once they have decided on "best buys," they tend not to re-examine their decisions.

Routines, however, are always subject to revision. Various changes—a move to a new neighborhood, the closing of a favorite store, advice from a friend about products or places to shop—may be occasions for revising these choices. People pay attention to new products and consider whether they will be better than old

standbys. Often, time spent in the supermarket is partly time for learning what is available. Teresa explained:

I read labels sometimes, just if it catches my eye, and I think, "Gee, I haven't tried this." Then I'll read what it is, what's in it, how to prepare it. It's just curiosity more than anything.

This kind of casual study seems like curiosity to her because it does not solve an immediate problem; however, it is one of the activities that provide the general information about the market she needs in order to continue to do provisioning for her household.

Routinization makes the work manageable; it means that choices do not have to be newly made with each trip to the store. However, the benefits of routinization are balanced by the need to attend to shifting circumstances; consequently shopping, like the design and management of meals, has an active and improvisational character. One aspect of this dimension of shopping is the way that purchasing becomes part of the process of planning meals. The items that are chosen, and the variation within an established pattern, are thought of as part of an overall design. Sometimes the planning involved is relatively routine:

Most of the time, I kind of plan when I'm at the store, you know? Like OK, we have chicken Monday, pork chops Tuesday—I be kind of, you know, figuring out in my mind, as I shop, what's what.

For others, this planning involves a more contingent kind of thinking:

I saw a spaghetti squash at the grocery store the other day and it was cheap and I thought—well, I automatically organized things in my mind because I knew I had to cook the spaghetti squash fairly soon and I'd be eating it for several days, so, you know, that took care of that.

In both cases, part of the work of shopping is an active organization of the possibilities of using the things that are purchased. Even when they did not explicitly describe such a process, the comments of some women provided hints of this rather subtle mental dimension of shopping. For example, Donna explained why she would prefer that her husband not accompany her to the store:

My husband likes to just get in and out, and then that's it. Whereas me, I like to look around, and just think, you know?

She has no clear vocabulary for the organizing that she does mentally while in the store, but she has noticed its consequences. She knows that it takes time to consider what she needs.

In addition to this kind of planning at the supermarket, shopping includes an improvisational element that involves changing the routine to adapt to particular circumstances, or take advantage of especially appealing items:

I'll probably get two or three things that aren't on the list, that will just catch my eye, and I'll say, hmm, that's an idea, I could make that instead of this, depending on whether it's on sale, or whatever.

For those with less money to spend, improvisation is usually a response to price variation; in higher-income households it may also mean taking advantage of the availability of special items that cannot always be found or items of particularly good quality. In both cases, however, it requires an on-the-spot rearrangement of plans, an ability to shift from the regular routine to a variation of it and to make adjustments for the unusual purchase. This kind of constantly shifting routine is at the heart of the work of provisioning, which must be based on multiple criteria for choices, a mental inventory of supplies at home, and a long-range but flexible plan for using them. The holistic nature of the process explains this woman's comments about using a shopping list:

I find a prepared list almost dulls my memory rather than sharpens it. If I have time enough—it's not even time—if I'm concentrating enough, since I do it so often, I can go to the store and walk down the aisle and be inspired by, oh yes, we're missing that. And pick it up.

Many shoppers do use lists; however, like this woman, they keep much of the information relevant to provisioning in their heads, so that they can adapt and adjust to changing circumstances.

"Public" and "Private"

Shoppers go to the supermarket looking for the materials they need in order to put plans (though they are often barely articulated as plans) into practice. They must use the stores and services they

find in their neighborhoods, with whatever advantages and limitations they have, to fulfill the needs of their own households as well as possible. Products are standardized, designed for a mass market. Thus, part of the work of provisioning is a kind of strategizing directed toward using the market to suit particular needs. Choices about provisioning, like those involved in planning and managing meals, are based on strategies about household life. They are guided not only by the contingencies of decisions about price and quality, but also by the tacit, improvisational skills of feeding a family in the broader sense: the skills that exploit the possibilities of material objects in order to produce family life within a specific household.

Like planning and managing meals, the work of provisioning is partly invisible. An observer can see someone going to the store, gathering up purchases, paying for them, taking them home and putting them away. But the ongoing strategic parts of the work—the planning, monitoring, remembering—cannot be seen. Family members who do not share the provisioning work often do not understand it. Janice explained:

They're sort of amazed when I walk in with something. And they look at me and say, "How'd you know I needed that?" But I did know they were going to need it. I mean, if not instinctively, at least I had taken a look to see whether it was gone or not.

Since monitoring is only partly conscious, and choices are made improvisationally, the work is taken for granted even by those who do it. For Janice, knowing what is needed seems almost "instinctive"—though she realizes as she speaks that actually she had "taken a look."

As more and more options for purchasing prepared foods have become available, the technical work of cooking has become less necessary. Now, the coordinative work of supplying family members as they "flow" through the household is at the heart of feeding work. The work of provisioning links the household with the distributive network outside, and thus serves a family group within a market society. Those who do provisioning are involved in social relations both within the household and also outside. They match the needs of a particular household group with the standardized products on the market.

The activities of provisioning knit together the ragged edges of household life and the larger society. This knitting together con-

sists of a continual process of adapting and adjusting. On one side, there is the market in the broadest sense: not just stores and services, but also institutions like schools, the media, and state and legal arrangements. These are organizations that operate on the basis of abstract, conceptual categories designed to be applicable in a broad range of situations. On the other side are a multiplicity of households, each a local and particular setting inhabited by a unique combination of specific individuals. In this context, making any single household work properly takes a particular kind of knowledge and effort. It means knowing both the local and abstracted settings, searching the market, making selections from among the alternatives available, and delivering the "goods"—again, broadly defined—to the home. These processes are at the heart of provisioning, and of other aspects of the work of feeding the family as well. The one who does this work is located precisely at the point of connection between home and the world, and is pulled in two directions, responding and adjusting both to internal family dynamics and also to the world outside.

3 Constructing the Family

The form of family found in modern Western societies has developed over time. As productive work moved out of the home, the family began to be thought of as a bounded unit, "associated with property, self-sufficiency, with affect and a sphere 'inside' the home" (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1982:32). As this kind of family developed, its day-to-day construction came to be part of the work to be done within a household, and as the physical tasks of maintenance have become less arduous, the work of constructing a particular type of household life has received increasing emphasis. Leonore Davidoff, in an analysis of middle- and upper-class households in nineteenth-century England, points out that we can see this activity emerging clearly in those households where servants did the routine work of maintenance and wives could devote themselves to supervising the construction of a special sort of place:

The ultimate nineteenth-century ideal became the creation of a perfectly orderly setting of punctually served and elaborate meals, clean and tidy and warmed rooms, clean pressed and aired clothes and bed linen . . . there was to be a complete absence of all disturbing or threatening interruptions to orderly existence which could be caused either by the intractability, and ultimate disintegration, of things or by the emotional disturbance of people. (1976:130)

Obviously, such standards could be met in only a very few households. Still, they served to define a model which was becoming the basis for a developing form of family life. Davidoff's analysis led her to define housework as a project of "boundary maintenance":

Housework is concerned with creating and maintaining order in the immediate environment, making meaningful patterns of activities, people and materials. (1976:124)

The ideals have changed—hardly any contemporary wives or mothers even aim for "perfect order"—but housework is still a project of "making meaningful patterns." Feeding the family is work that makes use of food to organize people and activities. It is work that negotiates a balance between the sociability of group life and the concern for individuality that we have come to associate with modern family life.

Sociability

Meals are social events. They can provide occasions when household members come together as a group, but they do not do this "naturally" or automatically. If household members are to come together for dinner, someone must organize the meal so that it becomes a part of several different sequences of events. Family members are involved in various individual activities throughout the day, mostly outside the household. Their paths do not necessarily cross, and points of intersection must be planned. Since routines are often customary, they seem natural, like "what everybody does." But those who organize meals work at developing these patterns, and understand that they have significance for family relations; they talk about their choices as pieces of a consciously crafted structure of family life. The times of coming together that result are thought of—though not entirely consciously—as making a family.

The intentional quality in the plans that produce these activities, apparently so simple and natural, can be seen in women's accounts of the details of their everyday routines. Susan, a white woman whose husband is a construction worker, quit her job as a nurse when her two-year-old daughter was born; now she works at taking care of her child and house. Though she has been married for five years, her daughter's relatively recent arrival signalled the beginning of a new kind of family. When I asked how the mealtime routines had changed, she explained:

Our mealtimes are at a certain time. And I have an idea of what I'm going to have. Whereas before, it was, whatever, it was very casual. We didn't have the responsibility.

The responsibility she speaks of is not merely responsibility for providing food. As she elaborates, we can see that she organizes the

mealtime routine so that the three individuals in her household will come together "as a family." She said:

I'll pull her high chair up so that she can be part of the family . . . I think she was six months old when she started eating as part of the family—breakfast, lunch and dinner. We adjusted our schedule a little bit to her schedule. And it worked out really well. Now, everything is as a family.

Part of the intention behind producing the meal is to produce "home" and "family." In a study of mealtimes in Welsh working-class families, Anne Murcott (1983) found that women thought of the evening meal as a kind of marker for their husbands, signifying the end of work and return to the family. They talked of a "cooked dinner" in terms of associations with home and well-being. But the significance of the meal is not just that it represents, or is associated with the idea of family; indeed, the meal comes to be thought of in this way because it involves household members in the actual day-to-day activities that constitute family relations over time. Furthermore, the linkage between food and family depends on women's work. Susan spoke of how she produces a homecoming for her husband:

If it's real ugly outside and I know that my husband's going to want a hot meal—which is all the time—and I want the house to warm up and smell good, I'll make stew. Or I'll bake a cake.

As she thinks ahead toward the evening meal, she plans to produce an experience: the return to a warm and pleasant house.

Susan's comments also show how activities like baking can be fit into a larger scheme for producing a particular kind of everyday life. When she spoke of baking a cake, she added:

I usually end up freezing half of it, because we don't usually eat that much of it. It's just something to do. Or now that my daughter's helpful, we bake a cake. And we make cookies. That's an all-day affair.

Cooking is a way that she and her daughter can spend time together, and a way that her two-year-old learns, through participation, the special work of producing home and family, anticipating a dinner together.

Scheduling a meal requires attention to the various schedules of individuals in the family, and a process of adjustment that recon-

ciles family events with their separate needs and projects. For Susan, this process is relatively simple: her husband's work schedule is fixed, and she must adapt to it; and she has developed a schedule for her daughter; but her own activities are quite flexible. She uses this flexibility to preserve the routines of others. For example, she explained:

Routine is really good for kids. They know what's expected of them . . . I don't like to stray too much from my routine. Because then she's going to get confused.

But dinner time, though, I can probably stretch, if my husband's going to be home late, or whatever. I can stretch within an hour. But if it looks like too much, I'll feed her, first. But she likes to be part of the family supper.

Susan is the one who keeps track of the activities of other family members. When her husband takes more time than usual coming home, she must consider the consequences of this change for her daughter, and for the "family supper." Part of her work is to monitor schedules, and eventually, to make a judgment as to whether it will be possible to have a meal together. In order to make it possible, she changes her own activities, "stretching" the dinner hour as far as she can.

Susan adapts to her daughter's schedule throughout the day as well. She explained that she can easily complete her household chores by noon, and added, "Then I have the rest of the day to spend with her." She has observed that her daughter is especially cranky while she is preparing dinner, and she organizes her work routine to minimize this time:

Usually what I try to do, if I know what I'm going to prepare, and it's going to take time away from her—a lot of time, like chopping vegetables or whatever—I'll do it while she's sleeping, her nap. And I'll have everything ready. If it's something like breaded pork chops, I'll bread them before, put them in a pan, and put them in the refrigerator. So all I have to do is put them in the oven. Or even like a salad, I'll put everything in but the tomatoes. And I'll do it when she's not around, so she doesn't feel rejected.

Again, Susan considers the consequences of different ways of organizing her work. She plans her work activities to produce a particular kind of everyday household life for her child.

Susan likes the way she does things, and seems to do them easi-

ly. She explained that she is a very disciplined person, and that she thinks about organizing her household work as part of an overall strategy for managing her home. She is "big on rules," and explained that, "It's just a lot easier if you're organized. If you know where to put things, you know where to find them." The work of adaptation and reconciliation that produces Susan's family is relatively easy; she has fewer material constraints and competing demands than most women. The family is small, and Susan's daughter is too young to be involved in independent activities. Though Susan enjoyed working as a nurse before her daughter was born, she has decided since then that she is "more needed at home." She does not need to work outside the home because her husband's wage is adequate for the family's support. She has plenty of time to devote to the work of constructing a family life.

For other women, the work of scheduling is much more complicated and difficult. But the process is similar: the task is one of adjustment and reconciliation in order to create points of intersection among diverse sets of activities. Jean, for example, is a white woman who works as a legal secretary, whose husband works at night as a security officer. Her two children are in elementary school. She must plan meals to fit with several different schedules outside the home, and she has little time to plan and prepare meals. Like Susan, though, she works at combining different schedules, and using the resources she has, to produce points of intersection among diverging paths. The process can be seen in her detailed account as she thinks out loud about how she will manage one evening meal, which she must prepare and serve in the time between her own arrival home and her husband's departure for work an hour later. She explained:

Tonight has to be a real rushed dinner, because the kids are going ice-skating and they're getting picked up at 6:00, so there's a package of smoky links in the refrigerator and they're going to have that. And David will probably either have that, or—well, we had friends over last night, actually I did, because he was gone—and it was a potluck dinner, but I was lucky because since it was at my house I got all the leftovers. So tonight—this isn't a good night to ask about, but—so the kids will—it'll be three different things. The kids'll probably have the smoky links, and David will probably have—well, see there's still a little hunk of ham left, and there's still—what's the other thing? We have

something else left over, plus we have the things from last night.

I asked what the children would have with their smoky links:

They'll have—if I have time, I'll make macaroni and cheese to go with it, because that's one of their favorite dinners. They'll have that. And if I can get them to, they'll probably have an apple, for dessert, or I think I'll get them to eat a tomato, I don't know. It won't be real balanced.

And her husband?

Given the choice, given the fact that—I don't know what he'll have. I tend to think he'll have the very last bit of that ham that's left. I could be wrong, he might have smoky links. I don't think he'll have what we had for dinner last night because I think it's something he doesn't like.

If he has the smoky links he'll probably just have it in a sandwich, because he doesn't like macaroni and cheese—see he's not big on pasta, he doesn't like spaghetti either. He would probably just have a sandwich. I might be able to get him to eat some sliced tomatoes too, but that would probably be it.

If he has the ham, he'll probably slice it up, and I would imagine that it'll be fried with some eggs, or I'll make an omelette for him, something like that.

And if I have the leftovers, I'll have the leftovers and probably a sliced tomato. That'll be it. There are some brownies left, I'm sure I'll have a brownie [laughing].

The meal that Jean imagines will be produced at the intersection of several sequences of events. She has to keep interrupting herself in order to explain to me why she has various things on hand, and as she thinks prospectively toward the meal, she can see that much depends on her husband's choice among the several options she will offer him, so that she must think of several alternative plans. The previous days' meals, the children's plans for the evening, and the preferences and choices of family members (which I will say more about later)—all these are part of the reasoning behind the choices she makes. With all of these things in mind, in the time that is available, Jean will provide a meal that fits into her husband's and children's lives. When she thinks of having a brownie at the end of it all, one cannot help feeling that she will certainly deserve it.

Jean must organize her family's eating in the context of a very difficult set of schedules. She works all day, she has only the evening with her children, and only an hour or so before her husband must leave for work. Still, like Susan, when she organizes her time and work, she aims at producing the kind of household life she wants for her family. She explained:

So much of the way I manage my time is affected by my children . . . Really that whole chunk of time, from 5:30 or 6 at night until bedtime, is theirs.

During that chunk of time of course I do make dinner. And sometimes do the dishes. Usually I wait and do the dishes—I mean I really have this worked out into some sort of weird system of my own. I watch the news, you know, at 10:00. And when the sports comes on, I really could care less about sports, I go back to the kitchen and I do my dishes. And then depending on what I have left to do . . . It's all just sandwiched in.

Jean gets everyone in her family fed, but she is not usually able to produce the kind of regular family dinners that Susan talked about. Jean worries that her family rarely sits down together and talks, because she believes that such encounters constitute "quality family time":

If you have a real discussion at the dinner table, like we used to have when I was a kid, you can give a person a chance to let you in on their life. What they were doing all day when they weren't with you. You can find out more about that person.

When she was a child, she explained:

We'd sit down and everybody would tell what they had done that day. And my father, when the main meal was over, you know, like if there was dessert or something, that was time for Daddy to give us quizzes on world capitals or something like that.

Jean works at creating such family times, seizing the few opportunities available in her busy weeks. For some time, she made a special effort to get the family together for Saturday night dinner. On those evenings, she explained:

There were some rules for that. I mean, there were self-imposed rules. That it be a good meal, not—not hamburger,

not hot dogs, but something decent. You know, a really nice meal that I really took some time to create and prepare. The kids would set the table. Yeah, there would be rules about what would be served and how it would be served and it would be a more formal thing.

These attempts were frustrating, though, partly because she did not get the help she needed from her husband, who doesn't share her ideas about "family time." She reported:

Lately what's been happening—we hardly ever all eat together—but lately David gets up and leaves before the rest of us, and that really makes me angry. Because I think that's a rotten example he's setting.

Part of Jean's work, then, is to struggle with her husband (she called it "hammering away") about the activities that constitute family life. He seems not to share her understanding of how specific activities contribute to the construction of a group life. His reluctance makes her efforts to produce "family times" stand out in sharp relief.

He said, "What do you want me to do?" And I said, "You've got to give us at least two Saturdays a month, that are just ours."

So this Saturday, we'll see, we're supposed to go bowling. And while we're bowling, I'm supposed to have something cooking so that when we're done we can come home and eat it together.

This kind of event is conceived as a time for being together, when family members can share a pleasurable activity. But there is work involved in producing such an event. Jean, like most women, is the worker behind the scenes, as well as a guest at the party. Somehow, while they are bowling, she is to "have something cooking." It is her work that brings their time together into being.

Both Susan and Jean are doing more than just cooking. In addition to producing meals, they organize their cooking so as to produce a group life for their families. They adjust to work and school schedules, and as they make decisions about managing their work, they weave together the paths of household members. Their efforts are directed toward creating patterns of joint activity out of the otherwise separate lives of family members.

Individuality

Feeding the individuals who live in a household makes them a group, as shown above, by reconciling their different activities in order to produce a common life; but feeding is also done so as to produce a particular kind of group, one that is intimate and personal. The work involves special attention to the individuality of each household member. To some extent, this kind of attention to preference is necessary: children, especially, may not eat at all if they dislike what is served, and in many households, individuals have health problems that require special diets. However, the personal attention that is part of feeding work has a family character that goes beyond necessity. The family is a place where people expect to be treated in a unique, personally specific way instead of anonymously, as they are often treated outside. Part of the work of feeding is to give this kind of individual attention, and doing so constitutes a particular household group as the kind of place we expect a "family" to be.

All of the women I talked with reported planning meals around the tastes of family members. They select and serve foods that will be eaten enthusiastically. But the personal service I refer to here is more meaningful than this feature of planning suggests. It involves attention to the specific, often idiosyncratic tastes of individuals within the family group, and decisions about which of these desires will be satisfied and which not. Often, it involves making distinctions among individuals in the family, and personalizing their meals. Distinctions can be quite simple or rather elaborate. For example, a Puerto Rican woman whose second husband is from Guatemala does extra cooking almost every night in order to satisfy his different tastes. Her mother cooks a standard meal for the rest of the family, and she adapts it for her husband. She gave some examples:

If I know that she's making, say, rice and black beans and steak in a sauce with lots of onions and green pepper, then I know that for that day what I'll do is I'll take the black beans and I'll mash them in a special little machine that I have and then I'll refry them, because that's what he likes, the refried beans. So that the rest of us will eat the beans whole and he'll eat them refried.

For the next day, if there's steak left over then what I do is I chop it up real fine, and I'll buy the large Mexican green peppers that are hot, and I stuff them with this and then I

beat eggs and I fry those peppers for him. And I'll use some canned stewed tomatoes for a sauce over it. So that this way I'm kind of satisfying both tastes.

In other cases, adjustments are much simpler. For example, I watched while Ed served his family a dinner that was standard for the household: beans and rice. But I saw that each of the two children had a unique way of eating this standard meal. As he served one son, Ed asked him, "Now do you want your beans right next to your rice?" And as he served the other only rice, "You're going to have your beans later, right?" Each boy had established his own routine. Their father had learned to take these preferences into account, as a small but important part of the negotiation required to insure that each child would eat his meal.

This kind of personal attention is unique to feeding at home. When we eat with friends, we usually take what is offered (though friends often care for special guests by serving favorite foods). When we eat in restaurants, we can choose what to eat, but only from a standard set of foods (though the most expensive restaurants may offer customized service, and some wives continue to attend to husbands by helping them order their meals). In most settings outside the home, then, we learn not to expect meals tailored to our individual tastes; we select from the items that are offered. Consider, for example, a family's dinner in a fast-food restaurant: I watched a father ask his son what he wanted, and heard the boy answer, "Double cheese, large fry, large coke." A pause, and then, "No—medium coke." Clearly, this child knew the categories, and could use them. At home, however, there is no standard set of categories, and family members can be quite picky.

The women I talked with take many individual preferences into account as they work at feeding their families, but they do not think of themselves as controlled by individuals' whims. Rather, they understand that preferences are part of what constitutes individuality. They pay attention to preferences and they consider how best to satisfy divergent tastes. As they do so, they evaluate the boundaries of legitimate preference, and make decisions that simultaneously define both arenas for the self-assertion of family members and also the women's own roles as caretakers.

Most analysts of housework point out that women's decisions are often influenced by husbands' preferences (Oakley 1974; Murcott 1983; Charles and Kerr 1988). Studies consistently demonstrate that husbands' needs dominate, and that women's own

needs generally come last. Meg Luxton (1980:50), while noting this pattern, also suggests that women are not "powerless," and that a woman will often "get him to do things her way." These writers sometimes imply that the issue is a rather straightforward one of autonomy versus constraint. I would argue that the phenomenon is somewhat more complex. Certainly, the behavior of many women suggests a trained unwillingness to be forthright about their own needs. But my informants' accounts show that personal attention is only partially the result of pressure from others; it also makes sense to these women. It is part of the logic organizing their work, a way of caring for others well that is central to the social contribution they make through their work.

The women I talked with did not think of themselves as "catering" to family members. They distinguished themselves from others who they think do "unreasonable" amounts of work. Still, they insist that some attention to personal taste—quite a lot in some cases—is "reasonable," and, in a quite straightforward way, part of the craft of feeding. Janice, for example, told about her complex shopping routine: she buys special foods for her adult children, who are vegetarians, and particular cuts of meat and brands of canned foods for her husband. Then she added:

It's not a hassle. I mean, I don't think it's outrageous. It's not—there's nothing eccentric about it. I mean, you know, everybody has food preferences.

She is aware that some would criticize her care with the shopping as unnecessarily burdensome, and she responds to the possible criticism in my questions about the influence of individuals' tastes. She begins by asserting that what she does is no "hassle"; then, apparently not quite comfortable with that statement, she starts again and explains what she means: attending to preference is a normal part of the work, and she expects to do it.

"Everybody has food preferences": the statement provides an understanding of human nature that sets conditions for the work of feeding. Part of the work is to understand the character of taste, and how it operates for the individuals in a particular household. When women talk about taking account of special requests, they rely on rudimentary theories about eating, which they develop partly from the knowledge of their own food preferences. For example:

I'm sure—I remember quite clearly as a child, and even to a certain extent now—texture of food is very important as to

how you like it. And I would assume she doesn't like the texture of rice, because she likes noodles, and they slide down.

Again, her understanding makes this preference a "reasonable" pickiness.

The issue, then, is not whether, but which special tastes should be allowed. Laurel, whose children are young, reported that she does not do much catering to their preferences, but then added:

I'm sure there'll be a time when that'll be necessary. Just because of legitimate taste differences.

Ultimately, women must decide which of their family's requests are "legitimate." As they make these decisions about what they will and will not do, they operationalize unspoken conceptions of the family, and the extent to which individuality will be accepted as legitimate within it. Some foods, for example, are defined as beyond the bounds of family life. Susan reported:

He really likes lobster. But he'll never see it here. We go out for stuff like that. I mean, certain things I don't make, because I know I can't compete with the restaurant. He can take me out for it if he wants it.

In the same way, family members must be made to understand that they cannot always have what they particularly want. Annie explained that she sometimes mixes corn with rice; her boyfriend likes the combination, but her son does not:

He'll eat it, though. Because I tell him, if he doesn't eat that, he's not eating anything. But sometimes he'll ask, if I'll leave the corn out. And sometimes I do. But I tell him, if I do it that way just for him, he'll think he's in a restaurant.

Her account not only shows that she is in charge of deciding how often to satisfy the tastes of each family member; in addition, her own language draws on the contrast between family eating and the abstracted provision of service in a restaurant setting. Family members cannot be independent, as they would be outside the home, but must adjust their demands to allow for the needs of others.

Women's comments about whose needs they would attend to also reveal strong connections between feeding and family life, and can often be understood as indicators of the boundaries of their concepts of family. People were ambivalent, for example, about

pets. Janice, who does quite a lot of special shopping for her family, explained that she refuses to do that kind of shopping for the dog, which belongs to her husband and son:

Sometimes I'll buy a couple of cans of food to tide them over, but I'm not going to go about the business of hauling home a bag of food, I'm not going to spend a lot of time and energy buying dog food.

Another woman finished her account of special tastes by reporting wryly, "We don't do a lot of special shopping for the dog." And then added, "But when we were overseas, that did figure into the shopping, we had to get horse meat for the dog and make dog food."

The connection between special cooking and the boundaries of family life can be seen even more clearly in households that do not conform to their members' ideas of what a family should be. For example, Phyllis, a white single mother, cooks only to please her daughter, and not for her male friend who lives with them. She explained:

I usually cook a real dinner. But only for Marilyn. Because when Marilyn isn't home, if I know it ahead of time, I won't cook at all . . . I only make it for her, really, so anything she doesn't like I wouldn't make.

When I asked if she considered her friend's tastes, she laughed and answered, "He's lucky to get what he gets."

Margaret, another white single mother, was living with her children in her parents' household when I interviewed her. She was recently separated, as was her sister, also living in the house, and their parents were considering a separation as well. Margaret's job was to cook for the young children; she would also do special cooking for her father, and she would cook for her brother and sisters as well, but only if they got to dinner on time:

If they're here, they're here. If they eat, they eat, if they don't eat, they don't eat. I'm not cooking later on. Except I'll cook for my dad when he gets home, around 11:00.

Margaret defined her stay in her parents' home as a temporary one. She explained that, because of the disruptions in all of their lives, things were "on edge," and that "nobody really does for each other as they should." The members of this household did not make up what she thought of as a proper family. When I asked if people's preferences had much influence on her cooking, she replied:

With my father, I more or less know that he won't eat tomatoey stuff and spicy stuff, because he's got an ulcer, it disagrees. And that's what it does to me, so I kind of remember that way. Then with my brother, the only vegetable he likes is corn, so that's easy to remember. And you know, stuff like, if I was to make chicken soup, I'd know he wouldn't eat it, because he's fourteen years old, he's more into hot dogs and corn and stuff like that. But I don't really get into it so much because I won't be here that long. So except for cereal, I stick with—I don't really go deep into it.

She has decided on a minimal level of attention to individuality in this transitory situation; she doesn't "go deep into it" as she might in a family she defined as more legitimate.

The family, then, is a setting in which wives and mothers learn to attend to quite particular needs, and others learn to expect such attention. Women contribute to this expectation when they organize their work to provide personal attention. However, there are boundaries to the kinds of attention considered appropriate. As women do the work of feeding, they make decisions about what they will and will not do, and these decisions are based on a conception of "family" defined in terms of a balance between group life and individuality. As they act in accord with such a conception, these women constitute particular household groups as personal "family" spaces for household members.

Feeding Produces "Family"

An analysis of family work from the standpoint of those who do it shows that the work joins material and interpersonal tasks: the organization of maintenance work emerges from a conception of family life, and the ongoing accomplishment of the work, day by day, produces interpersonal relations through specific activities. Feeding work, for example, reconciles the diverse schedules and projects of individuals so as to produce points of intersection when they come together for group events. Within the group that this kind of scheduling creates, attention to individual needs and preferences establishes the family as a social space that is personalized.

These household activities are organized through shared understandings of family life, communicated in a variety of ways. As women talk about their work, they refer to the practices of mothers. They also reason about the needs of family members, and how to manage the work with the time and resources available. They

talk with friends about how to feed their families better, or more easily. This strategizing has an ideological component: women, mothers, friends, and family members have all learned about feeding and family life partly from literature and the media, from advertising, and from professionals in social services and health care. As they do the work of feeding, these women draw from a discourse with a history, which both reflects and organizes concepts of "family." They apologize, like Laurel in chapter 1, for not producing a "Walton family breakfast." But they integrate such media images with more idiosyncratic, largely unarticulated ideas that develop from their own experience. From a variety of sources, then, these women develop routines appropriate for particular household groups. Through day-to-day activities, each produces a version of "family" in a particular local setting: adjusting, filling in, and repairing social relations to produce—quite literally—this form of household life. The households they live in rarely fit the pattern of some ideal "family." Instead, households are quite varied, homes for motley groups of actual individuals with their particular quirks and idiosyncracies. Both inclination and necessity produce variation in daily activities within and among households. But the work of "feeding the family" tends to collect these unruly individuals and tame their centrifugal moves, cajoling them into some version of the activity that constitutes family. Because this work of social construction is largely invisible, such efforts simultaneously produce the illusion that this form of life is a "natural" one.