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# FAMILY TABLE TALK—AN AREA FOR SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY\*

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Family table talk is an essential part of the process whereby the family inducts the child into the life of society. Three aspects of this process are emphasized. (1) The family meal is the family at its ease, holding its members together and repeating many features of its life. (2) Family table talk is a form of family interaction, important in the development of personality traits. (3) The culture-transmitting function of the family operates with effectiveness during the family meal.

HOW THE child is inducted into the family, and how, in turn, the family inducts the child into the larger group, are two basic social processes whose general importance is conceded universally, but whose mechanism remains as yet largely unexplored. This paper is a preliminary study of what it is believed is an essential part of those processes: namely, the role and nature of family table talk.

The history of the application of the scientific method is replete with long-delayed recognition of "acres of diamonds" at the front door step, and the failure of students of family processes to perceive the scientific possibilities in the study of the family meal is but another illustration in point. Various non-scientific groups have been less tardy. Religion has long recognized the intimate importance of the family meal. Christianity immortalizes it in the ceremonial of the Last Supper, and renews this recognition endlessly in the continuance of the communion rite. Dramatists stage it with frequent effectiveness. To the novelist, it is a constant device for character delineation or plot facilitation. Even the essayists, like Dr. Holmes, clothe their sage observations around the framework of the breakfast table. Only psychiatrists, sociologists, and students of child development, concerned with the minutiae of family life, seem to have overlooked it.

Students of family and child problems may regard family table talk from two main points of view. One is as a form of family interaction. Here the concern is with the

relationships between the personalities in the family group, with particular reference to the functioning and formation of personal traits. Also, so far as the children are concerned, there is a good deal of emphasis upon habit formation, such as habits of eating, sitting, speaking and the like. A second approach sees the family meal as a vehicle for the transmission of the family culture to its younger members. Here the chief point of interest is on the role and techniques of family table talk in this continuing process. Before proceeding to the two main points of view just identified, certain general considerations concerning the social nature of the family meal should be noted. Accordingly, the main body of this paper is presented in three parts: the first dealing then with the social nature of the family meal; second, its analysis as a form of family interaction; and third, its role in the transmission of the family culture to its younger members.

## I. THE SOCIAL NATURE OF THE FAMILY MEAL: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The family meal is a distinct aspect of the family's life. Warner and Lunt have called attention<sup>1</sup> recently to the fact that the two rooms in which the family spends most time as a group are the living and the dining

\* Author's Note: This is an inductive study, based on a collection of documents which reproduce verbatim family conversations at mealtime.

<sup>1</sup> Warner, W. Lloyd, and Lunt, Paul, *The Social Life of a Modern Community*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1941, p. 105.

rooms. Of the two, the dining room and the family meal are confined, except on definitely recognized occasions, to the intimate participation of the family group. In upper class families, large and attractive living rooms, combined with more leisure, tend to emphasize the greater importance of the living room; in lower class families, the opposite of these facts makes the dining room often the more important, or the only social center of the household.

2. It is at the dining table, and particularly at dinner time, that the family is apt to be at its greatest ease, both physically and psychologically. The times when the family is at its best are perhaps most often on the occasion of its more leisured dining, just as the family, entertaining at the dining table is the family on exhibition, putting its best foot forward. One is reminded here of the comment of Dr. Holmes that a dinner party of proper intellectual elements "is the last triumph of civilization over barbarism. Nature and art combine to charm the senses; the equatorial zone of the system is soothed by well-studied artifices; the faculties are off duty, and fall into their natural attitudes; you see wisdom in slippers and science in a short jacket."<sup>2</sup>

This more felicitous generalization about the family meal does not mean to overlook the fact, however, that the family meal also represents at times the family in haste, operating with direct bluntness, or the family at war, disturbing the emotions of its members and upsetting the gastric process. The family meal, in short, represents the family in action, focussed upon a common interest and a task so absorbing as to leave it operate offguard in other important respects.

3. The family meal, especially the main one of the day, holds the members of the family together over an extended period of time. The length of time, and the details of the occasion, naturally vary from one family to another, but, in general, a meal is an extended session of the family personnel, with a relatively high rate of attendance.

Meal time is the family council time, particularly today when under stress of the differing interests of its various members, it is apt not to get together at any other time. Family prayer time and family councils both are found to a lessening extent in contemporary society.

4. It is significant, in any attempt to appraise the social significance of the family meal, to recall that its role is one of continuing repetition. Many families meet around the table three times a day, most families do so at least once a day. Over a period of years, the simple arithmetic of the situation is enough to emphasize its quantitative effectiveness.

5. Finally, it is obvious that the social significance of the family meal, and the role of table talk, varies from one social class to another. Referring again to Warner and Lunt, who concerned themselves so largely with class and status systems, we are reminded that:

. . . meals in the home have different values which depend upon the social status of the family. The upper-class family, for instance, spends more time over its breakfast and endows this meal with more group significance than do families in other classes.

In upper-class families there are generally servants to perform a large part of the secular household ritual through their daily rounds of tasks and duties which keep the house in order. The mistress of the house ordinarily superintends the activities of her servants, but she does not herself do any of the actual work. However, she and other members of the family perform definite ritual acts which top off the work of their paid employees; arranging flowers; carving at table; lighting the fire; and pouring at tea. Maids serve at the table according to a strictly formalized routine, while the food is prepared by a cook hired especially for that work. Maids are outfitted in uniforms of different types according to the time of day and the specific duties in which they are engaged, their dress symbolizing their subordination to and separation from the family whom they serve. The leisure time accruing to the family that can maintain servants allows more frequent performance of social activities which bring them conspicuously to the attention of the remainder of the community, and the men indulging in a

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, Oliver Wendell, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, James Osgood and Company, Boston, 1878, p. 71.

variety of sports, intellectual interests and hobbies, and community activities by means of which they express and constantly reaffirm their social position.

All of the activities which surround the preparation of the table and the serving and eating of the meal are demonstrations of ritual relations between members of the family, the servants, and objects which have esthetic and traditional value in the house. They are also expressions of the meal as a family communion. Non-members of the immediate family—such as collateral kin and clique members—who are invited in to eat at the family table may be said to participate in the "private communion" of the family and household, a secular but highly organized ritual. These ritual elements surrounding the daily life within a household tend to increase in number and intensity of function with the height of the stratification of the family.<sup>3</sup>

## II. TABLE TALK AS A FORM OF FAMILY INTERACTION

The role of the group in the determination of personality is a recognized sociological dictum. The primary character of the family as a group, and its fundamental importance in the development of personal traits, particularly of children, is equally well established. From what has been said concerning the social nature of family table talk, it is obvious that much of the family's interactive process takes place during the family meal. Certain aspects of this process call for special comment.

1. The individual's role in the family group comes to be clearly defined around the family table. Since the entire family is together, relationships between individual members are brought out into the open. Feuding members are seated at opposite sides of the table, for example. Covenants secretly arrived at become manifest. Group choices are made—in seating arrangements, in the serving of food, in the assignment of left-overs, in priorities in conversation.

2. The family is an audience for individual performance, chiefly conversational. Through these performances, family members reveal, and try out, their abilities on each other.

One is reminded here again of Dr. Holmes' observation that "there are little-minded people whose thoughts move in such small circles that five minutes of conversation gives you an arc long enough to determine their whole curve." Even silences in table talk are an important part of its art. Again Holmes reminds us that "talking is like playing on the harp, there is as much in laying the hand on the strings to stop their vibration, as in the twanging them to bring out the music."

3. This table audience, both in responses which it gives and which it withholds, to its individual members, carries the greatest weight in the moulding of personal traits. Its intimate nature and repetitive force make it often the family's best corrective disciplinarian. Children especially are frank, often quite brutally so, in their reactions to one another, and perhaps nowhere are they so with as much self-assurance as under the protective custody of the family meal.

This is the place to refer to the habit of family squabbling at meal time, so characteristic of many families. There are families in which few meals are completed without a quarrel or without some member leaving the table in tears, anger, or disgrace. There are families where the family meal is a tribunal or disciplinary workshop rather than a ceremonial. Children are called on the carpet for misdeeds, lectured in regard to policies of behavior, or nagged constantly about table manners.

It is pertinent to question the physiological effect of this upon the digestive processes and through them upon the entire chemistry of the body. Recent analyses of such processes by students of physiological chemistry point to the overwhelming importance of emotional upsets at mealtime. How your stomach "flops" when upset around mealtime is an experience which many persons may be able to recall. Consider also the family in which there is a good deal of tension between adult members. The family meal may come to be a duel of silence with marked physiological as well as psychiatric effects.

4. One of the distinctive services of family interaction at mealtime is the development

<sup>3</sup> Warner and Lunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

of the symbols of expression, particularly again those of the children. All members of the family participate in family table talk—from the youngest to the oldest and most erudite. Through this process, the family members enlarge one another's vocabulary. Children particularly gain symbols to use in learning and in speaking. Much of the learning of the precise meaning of words comes as a by-product to participation in family conversation. In other words, the family meal is a class in oral expression. In a family of any size, meals come to be gab-fests. Two or three persons may be talking at the same time. Facility and quickness in expression constitute the price for admittance to the conversation.

5. The family meal represents the family's interaction in its most democratic mood. Now, more than other times, the younger members get a chance to blossom verbally. Well-fed elders accept with impunity remarks from juveniles which otherwise would not be tolerated. Side conferences prevail also while the main program continues.

6. The family meal is a kind of personality clinic, with both students and clients in attendance. Particularly is this true if the family is of any considerable size. Each member comes to be analyzed, dissected, catalogued, and processed by the other members. This procedure is all the more devastating because it goes on before the entire group. Undesirable traits and personal weakness may be particularly identified and castigated.

7. Table talk serves a definite purpose in aiding children to learn the relative role of the parents and adults in the family. Aunt Minnie jabbars away, does three-fourths of the talking, says little and tends to be disregarded in family decisions. Mother defers to Daddy as a rule, but takes an emphatic stand at times. Daddy talks very little at the table. Even when Mother and Aunt Minnie correct the children, they turn to him for support. Repeatedly they suggest to him that he take disciplinary measures. Deference to him is constant and repeated. But father is silent, his face is immobile. His few words to the children at the table, or even

a look, suffice. The stereotype of the strong, silent father has been created. Under no circumstances could the full length process of this creation be so effectively imprinted upon the child's mind as at meal time. A family meal, in other words, is like the scene from a drama in which the personalities identify themselves to each other.

### III. FAMILY TABLE TALK AND THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE

Sociologists agree that the family is the chief culture-transmitting agency in our society. The family not only introduces the child to its own particular culture, but also to that of the larger society. In this latter capacity, it not only interprets this larger culture, but creates also attitudes toward it. Much of this happens as a by-product of family table talk. In this process the following aspects may be identified.

1. The family meal, particularly the dinner one, is the clearing house for most of the family's information, news and experiences. Jack tells about the substitute teacher; Jane about the neighboring girl's new coat; Daddy refers to the fact that Mr. Davis is complaining about the number of government questionnaires, and threatens to go out of business; Mother thinks that Bill is going down with the grippe. The family dining table is like a crossroads, through which flows the news of the world as the respective members of the family see it and experience it. Much of this traffic of information and ideas flows swiftly and unobtrusively past, noticed more in its absence than in its presence, but it is there for all to see, hear, and assimilate.

2. The family meal is constantly serving as a forum for the discussion of matters of interest and concern to the family members. Questions are asked, answered, or evaded in turn. The range of topics covered may be wide and varied, or monotonous in the recurrence of a few items of interest. Significant for all are the topics meticulously avoided as well as those assiduously discussed. The selection of topics for the family forum is in itself a cultural choice.

Considered as a forum, the family meal may take several different forms. First, it

may be quite formal. Questions are obviously posed, and discussion patently stimulated. One well-known member of the judiciary, known to the author, followed for years the practice of stating a proposition at the beginning of each dinner meal which his six children were asked to analyze and debate between soup and demitasse. Second, the meal time forum may be informal and spontaneous. This is much more frequently the case. Questions arise in the course of the family conversation, and the discussion proceeds out of the fulness of the heart rather than from the prodding of the parent. Topics tend to succeed each other in kaleidoscopic fashion, and the argumentation most often is both brief and direct. Finally the family forum is often entirely incidental, scarcely recognized as such, in which views are expressed in a word, a silence or facial expression. Each family tends to have its own words, phrases, idioms, grimaces, signs, gestures and the like, eloquent with meaning to all the family members even if somewhat unintelligible to outsiders.

3. The family meal serves constantly as an evaluating conference, especially on the experiences, needs and interests of the family members. There is group discussion. Individual views are expressed, modified and reconciled often as a family judgment, choice, decision or attitude emerges. Arrived at experimentally in democratic conference, or imposed by an autocratic parent, these evaluations are absorbed on the basis of their emotional relations to the family, so that the line between the two may often be quite indistinct.

So far as the induction of the child into the culture of the family is concerned, this evaluating process in family table talk serves two purposes which Dr. Holmes long ago suggested in his "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" as the requirements for satisfactory conversation. One of these is agreement upon the ultimata of belief; the other upon the secondary questions depending upon these ultimate beliefs. In other words, table talk not only inducts the child into the fundamental idea-patterns and values of the family culture, but also, because of the concrete

nature of this process, clarifies the concrete applications which arise therefrom.

4. The family meal serves often as a substitute for class-room instruction. This happens in several ways. First, there are the well known staged conversations—as a rule for the benefit of the younger children. Says Mother: "I heard today about a little boy who ran across the railroad tracks"; to which Father replies quite seriously: "I am glad that my children don't do things like that." Or Mother refers to a visit from Mrs. Terry and her daughter, who was very polite. "Oh, yes," says Father, "You can tell that she is going to be quite an attractive young lady."

Again "lessons" for class instruction may be raised by one of the children. Helen, aged twelve, tells of a neighbor's child, that proverbial and perennial scapegoat. Father, who is envious of the neighboring father's business success, expresses himself freely concerning the conduct of his daughter. Mother, who dislikes the neighboring mother, is equally heated. Helen, without understanding the motives involved, is quite impressed. The neighboring girl's conduct *was* reprehensible.

Finally, many of the lessons of the family meal school are unplanned and spontaneous. "Katie kissed John," pipes up the well-known little brother, and in the wake of this disclosure may follow either an eloquent silence, or a colorful discussion concerning kissing, John's intentions, John's job, Katie's prospects, and mother's attitude toward early marriages. These are perhaps the most common grist in the family round-the-table mill, as it grinds, now slowly, now rapidly, but always exceedingly fine.

5. Akin to these pedagogic functions are the stimulation and direction of the child's interests. If a child has literary, or artistic, or mechanical interests, family table talk does much to stimulate or dampen the development of such interests. One is reminded again of Dr. Holmes: "Writing or printing is like shooting with a rifle; you may hit your reader's mind, or miss it—but talking is like playing at a mark with the pipe of an engine; if it is within reach, and you have time enough, you can't help hitting it."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

In many respects, family table talk may be likened to a university seminar on family culture, continuing over a number of semesters. Both are similar in that there are designated reports (at times unscheduled), criticisms which vary with the prestige of the reporter, exchange of viewpoints, and the boredom of the more sophisticated members of the group. There is teaching too, and inculcation of viewpoint, but these grow more out of the give and take of informal discussion than out of formal admonition. As is the case in most seminars, the discussion often rambles; assigned topics are disregarded; the procedure departs from the program which the seminar master (instructor or parent as the case may be) has devised; and seminar members leave the table before the discussion is concluded. Finally, too, the ultimate effects are, for the most part, subtly devious and intangible.

#### IV. COMMON ILLUSTRATIONS OF CULTURE TRANSMISSION THROUGH FAMILY TABLE TALK

1. Much of the family's sense of economic values, and the child's training in them, are indicated in the following sentences appearing repeatedly in the case material upon which this article is based.

"Go easy on the butter, it's fifty cents a pound."

"Eggs are sixty cents a dozen now."

"Bill's shoes have to be soled."

"What, again? Why I just paid two dollars for soles three weeks ago."

"I think you ought to be ashamed to waste bread when thousands of Chinese children are starving."

"Mother, Mary soiled her new dress."

"Well, she had better take care of it. We can't buy another until after Christmas."

It is the absorption of values of this kind, so constant in normal family life, which constitutes such a big gap in the training of the child reared in an institution.

2. Political attitudes crystallize early in children's minds as a by-product of table conversations such as the following one.

Bill: "Mother, Jack made \$1.05 playing the machine down at Louey's store."

Mother: "Jack had better get a job after school instead of playing the machines."

Father: "Well, Jack comes by that honestly. His old man is a gambler if there ever was one."

Older Sister: "There must be money in it. I saw Mrs. Haggerty (Jackie's mother) and she had one of those new fur coats on."

Mother: "Why don't they raid Louey's place. I saw in the paper about some judge saying they (the machines) were illegal."

Father: "Guess the police are fixed."

Bill looks at his father, apparently not wholly clear on what was implied.

Mother: "Bill, that shirt has got to go into the wash."

Father: "Hank O'Brien was telling me yesterday that the police 'take' on these machines ran into thousands of dollars a week. He said the lieutenant drove a Cadillac Coupe to work, but parked it two blocks away from the station house."

Light seemed to dawn on Bill as he finished his dessert. The boy next door entered the house and Bill rushed from the table.

3. Multiple implications for the child of what may seem to the parents but a routine conversation appears from the following:

Father: "Well, I'm sorry, but I forgot to bring home some whiskey for the cocktails tomorrow night."

Mother: "It's all right, I don't think we better serve cocktails."

Father: "How come?"

Mother: "Well, the Pearsons are coming, and you know him."

Son: "Is Dr. Pearson coming, mother, is he? Is he, mother?"

Mother: "Yes he is, and Mrs. Pearson is coming too."

Daughter: "Why don't we serve cocktails when Dr. Pearson comes?"

Mother: "Well, Dr. Pearson is a doctor, and he thinks cocktails aren't good for people. He says too many people have the cocktail habit."

Son: "I like Dr. Pearson."

Father: "Well, I like him, too. But this means a stupid party." (This to wife.)

Mother: "I think I'll serve tomato juice. Do you think that will be all right? The red

glasses will look nice on that black tray."

Father: "If Pearson doesn't want to drink, that's O.K. with me, but I don't see why that should spoil the party for the rest of us."

Mother: "Well, I do think out of deference to his views, we should have a dry dinner."

Son: "I like Dr. Pearson. Is he a good doctor, mother?"

This conversation carries these implications for the children: (a) A doctor whom I like does not approve of the social use of alcohol; (b) Father thinks a dry party is dull; (c) Mother sees her obligation as a hostess; (d) A difference of opinion is re-

solved with deference to a guest, regardless of the wishes of the host and hostess. There is no preaching, no moralizing. All the ideas are transmitted in a matter of fact way, incidental to a table conversation, chiefly between the parents, concerning a small dinner party.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This paper purports to be a tentative report on an initial study. It seeks to stake out an area for sociological investigation, and to set up temporarily a frame of reference for future study. Its thesis is that the area and the process involved are of primary importance.