Happy meals at McDonald's: A qualitative field study of family dinner at McDonald's

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HAPPY MEALS AT MCDONALD’S

A Qualitative Field Study of
Family Dinner at McDonald’s

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of Communication
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by
Joy Sandersen-Smith

August, 1998
THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

[Signatures and names]

Chairperson

Date 7/28/98
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the family meal at McDonald's as a family dinner ritual and as an arena for socialization of children. A field study, including six McDonald's restaurants in Omaha, Nebraska, was conducted during the months of May and June. Approximately 25 hours of observations were recorded using the method of participant observation. The main sample consisted of 58 families (adults with children) and included single mothers, single fathers, two-parent families, as well as grandparents with children and other family constellations with children and adults. The most common family type at McDonald's was single mothers with children. The families in the main sample were predominantly white, but blacks, Latinos, and Asians were also represented. The family dinner ritual at McDonald's was characterized as a 'happy meal', although it is lacking in-depth conversation. Since McDonald's seemed to take care of most of the practicalities in the preparation phase and provided entertainment in the form of toys for the children, a play area, and TVs, the families were free to enjoy their meal. From their parents and the McDonald's environment, children are taught a number of lessons about public behavior, food, meals, gender roles, and environmental issues. It is hypothesized that the 'happy meal' experience offered at McDonald's is the key to McDonald's popularity among parents with young children and especially single parents. The overall socialization of children at McDonald's is discussed and the notion of 'happy meals' is critically evaluated.
This thesis is a product of combined efforts from a handful of people. During my work I relied on help and experience from my thesis committee members. I would like to thank Dr. Randall Rose and Dr. Lourdes Gouveia for their guidance and advice while serving on my thesis committee.

Dr. Hollis Glaser, chairperson of the committee, has been a mentor to me. She has given me insight to the broad world of qualitative research and she has guided me from the first vague idea of this project to the final draft. I offer her my sincere thanks.

Finally, a special thank you to my husband for his support and patience.
Dedicated to

Jason
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I am a fast food amateur. I grew up in Denmark during the 1970's and 1980's when fast food was still in its infancy. My experience with fast food restaurants is limited to six months employment at McDonald's in Denmark and occasional lunch visits since I moved to the United States. From my few encounters with fast food as a customer, I feel like an outsider. I take too long to study the menu, I do not know what is included and what to ask for, and I still do not understand why fast food is so popular. In my opinion, the food is not very tasty, filling, or gratifying, but I know that I belong to a small minority in the world of fast food.

I love food. I love to prepare food, I love to eat food, and most importantly I love to share food with other people. Dinnertime is an important part of the day for me. It probably stems from my childhood where dinnertime was a sacred time for my family and all other families I knew. It was a time where all family members would gather around the dining table and eat and talk. However, I now realize that the importance of dinnertime may be more cultural and personal than I thought.

In the last ten years I have traveled back and forth between Denmark and the United States and of all the cultural differences that I have encountered, one stands out and still amazes me – the family dinner patterns in the United States. Looking at people’s busy schedules and listening to people telling me that they never or rarely eat
dinner together with their family have left me wondering when families see and talk to each other. When I researched the American family dinner, I was astounded by the studies that have been conducted in this area. A number of studies have found dinnertime to provide important insight into the family and to be an arena for socialization of children (e.g. Baxter & Clark, 1996; Bossard & Boll, 1950; Haines, 1988). However, studies show a decline in families eating together (Camp, 1989) and dinner is the meal most often eaten away from home (National Restaurant Association, 1983). Even more surprising were the statistics of fast food dinners. Across different ethnic groups, households, ages 25-64, and all income groups people frequent fast food restaurants at least 14 times a month (Bradley, 1995). Every year, 96 percent of the American population visit McDonald’s, and McDonald’s captures 40 percent of all fast food visits of children under seven years old (Love, 1995).

The purpose of the present study is both ambitious and humble. On one hand, I will attempt to break new ground in the line of family dinner research by exploring dinner rituals in a fast food setting. On the other hand, I realize the limits of the study due to its exploratory status and limited scope. I am especially interested in socialization taking place at and around the dinner table. Young children will be the focus of the study since socialization is particularly important in the early years (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). The main question concerns what children are taught while dining at McDonald’s. Furthermore, the fast food restaurant context will be described in detail and incorporated in the discussion of family dinner and socialization of children. The findings will be discussed in relation to prior research in the field of family dinner.
Literature Review

Anthropologists have long recognized that the study of food and eating is important to the study of human relationships, but sociologists have come late to this field of study (Mennell, Murcott, & van Otterloo, 1992; Wood, 1995). The limited academic attention in the area of food can be explained by the commensality of eating and the lack of prestige in looking at what was believed to belong to the domestic sphere classified as women’s work (Mennell et al., 1992). In recent years, the study of food and eating has received more attention. A major journal in the study of food, *Food and Foodways*, is published on a quarterly basis (Watrous, 1998). Another attestation to the study of food and eating as an established field of research is the launching of the first doctoral program in food studies at New York University (Watrous, 1998).

The custom of family meals goes back two million years to the sharing of food between protohominid hunters and foragers and their fellows (Visser, 1991). The social event of eating together has been credited with a number of functions for the family and society as a whole. The family meal can be regarded as a family ritual, which among other things, serves to socialize children (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973; Grieshaber, 1997; Haines, 1988; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Children learn dinner specific behaviors such as eating etiquette and manners, as well as general roles and rules (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973). Gender roles, expression of feeling, and family membership roles are taught around the dinner table, and ideological values are reflected in the dinner experience (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973).
1. Social Functions of the Meal

The study of meals and meal patterns conveys important aspects of culture such as messages about social relations (Goody, 1982; McIntosh, 1995; Mintz, 1985). Sharing of food with another person symbolizes a special relationship in most cultures (Bennett, 1988). The act of sharing can ritually express “togetherness” and thereby signifies the dropping of hostilities (Mennell et al., 1992). Sharing is a main characteristic of people gathered around food. In some cultures or situations food may be shared by taking food from a plate in the middle of the table. Table talk is another way of sharing. Table talk is a largely western phenomenon which can be explained by the fact that westerners do not share the same plate and therefore share through verbal communication (Visser, 1991). Talking is also used to “rise above food” and emphasize the importance of the company and not the food (Visser, 1991).

A. Definitions of a Meal. A meal is a complicated phenomenon and various definitions of a meal highlight different aspects of the meal (Mäkelä, 1991). A food event is an occasion where food is eaten (Nicod, 1980). A meal can be defined as food eaten as part of a structured event, with the structured event being a social occasion which follows rules that prescribe time, place and sequence of actions (Nicod, 1980). A meal can also be defined in contrast to a snack, which is an unstructured food event. The lack of structure refers to the fact that there are no rules governing the sequence or pairing of food (Nicod, 1980).
Meals can also be defined in contrast to drinks (Douglas, 1975). Both meals and drinks are social events but meals are reserved for intimate relationships such as family, close friends, and honored guests, whereas drinks are for strangers and acquaintances. Eating together is usually reserved for family and friends since the act of sharing food is a symbol of liking and trust (McIntosh, 1995). According to Douglas (1975), the use of at least one mouth-entering utensil by each person is a requisite for a proper meal in the British culture. Drinks on the other hand, only require mouth touching. The meal frames the gathering by rules and necessary items such as a table and seating order (Douglas, 1975).

The notion of a ‘proper meal’ has also been addressed. Charles and Kerr (1988) interviewed two hundred women from the UK about food and food related activities. They found that women from all social classes in the sample regarded the ‘proper meal’ as a fundamental part of the family food system. Most women in the sample ate three meals a day of which one meal ideally was a ‘proper meal’, which the women described as the main meal of the day, the cooked dinner. The Sunday (roast) dinner is a prime example of a ‘proper meal’ with meat, potatoes, and vegetables. The women in the sample defined a ‘proper meal’ in contrast to ‘snack’ or ‘snack-type meal’ and cooking was a main defining element. Heating up food or boiling an egg was not considered cooking. A ‘proper meal’ is also characterized by being a social occasion that takes place in a specific social context, and it is defined not only by content but also by the way it is eaten, the behavior, and who is present (Charles & Kerr, 1988).

In a study of English working-class families, Nicod (1980) found relations
between the structure of food and the structure of family life. The family meal was defined as a meal where only family and intimate friends share food. The potato was found to be the basis of the family meal. Nicod (1980) distinguished between three different types of meals that together make up a meal system. A, is a major meal which is served around 6 PM on weekdays and early afternoon on weekends. B, is a minor meal which is consumed around 9 PM on weekdays and 5 PM on weekends. Finally, C, is the least significant meal, a ‘tertiary food event,’ which consists of a sweet biscuit and a hot drink. Breakfast did not register as a meal in the food system, but rather as a snack.

The meaning of a meal is found in its repetitive character (Douglas, 1975). Goode, Curtis, and Theophano (1984) talk about a meal cycle created by the patterning of food events over time. Across cultures, a meal can be divided into main course and side dishes (McIntosh, 1995).

This brief overview of some of the meal definitions in the field of eating provides insight into the different angles and dimensions of the meal. In her review, Mäkelä (1991) finds a commonality across the different definitions of a meal: the meal as a social phenomenon and a social sharing of food and meanings. With whom and under what conditions we eat is important (Mäkelä, 1991). People eating alone simulate a real meal because they share the same cultural concept of a meal in which sociability is a part. A meal helps mark closeness and distance, and a meal is an essential ritual for the unity of the family and it is an arena for socialization (Mäkelä, 1991). The meal structure (food items, number of courses, ways of cooking) is closely
connected to the *meal rhythm*, which is established by time and space. Meals are also culturally constructed and are inseparable from other aspects of life (Mäkelä, 1991).

2. Dinner as a Family Ritual

The family meal has been studied as a family ritual, which conveys information about families (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Douglas, 1968). Family rituals represent a subgroup of the numerous rituals that exist. Family rituals are found in some form in all families (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). It has been proposed by scholars that family rituals are significant to the psychological well-being of the family system (Baxter & Clark, 1996; Schuck & Bucy, 1997). Bonding among family members, family culture, and socializing of family members have been related to family rituals (Schuck & Bucy, 1997). Generally it is the family unit that is honored in the ritual's enactment (Baxter & Clark, 1996). Family rituals are characterized by a strong generational component which brings generations together through repetitive shared practices (Fiese, 1992). In addition, family rituals provide the individual family member with a sense of identity in relation to the family and the social world (Fiese, 1992).

A. Definitions and Assessment of Family Rituals. Bossard and Boll (1950) define family ritual as a prescribed procedure that involves a pattern of defined behavior directed toward a purpose. Family ritual is characterized by rigidity and a sense of “rightness” which is a result of the continuing history of the process. Wolin and Bennett (1984) define family ritual as a symbolic form of communication that holds
special meaning to family members and is repeated and acted out in a systematic fashion over time. Symbolic communication is the property that bestows ritual with meaning (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Symbols, such as clothes, table settings, and gifts are ways of communicating through significant objects. Behavior is another aspect of symbolic communication. Interactions between family members may symbolize power relationships or unsettled conflicts (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). In addition, the presence or absence of certain family members is a symbol of family life (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). According to Wolin and Bennett (1984), family rituals communicate shared assumptions about relationships and instill commonly understood rules for their conduct. Rituals can symbolize transition as well as status quo (Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

Schuck and Bucy (1997) look at four dimensions when assessing family rituals: structure, meaning, persistence, and adaptability. Structure refers to observable characteristics such as location and participants. Meaning or affective content pertains to the symbolic significance of the rituals. Persistence and adaptability concern the family’s ability to protect and maintain rituals over time. Information about these four dimensions of family rituals can help families adapt to a new situation.

B. Family Ritual Studies. In a landmark study in the research of family rituals, Bossard and Boll (1950) systematically examined rituals in 186 American families (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). One conclusion of the study was that family rituals are “the core of family culture” by transmitting the family’s values and attitudes, and are thus
the best starting point for the study of family culture. The data consisted of published autobiographies and written reports from college students. Bossard and Boll (1950) found that rituals regularize relations between family members and the family as a whole. The family meal was found to be highly ritualized (Bossard & Boll, 1950). Seating arrangements and serving follow rules of etiquette and patterns developed within the family. These findings have been supported and developed by Visser (1991) who states that ritualistic behavior is both expected and correct (e.g. use of utensils).

Meals and the spaces between them are controlled through rituals and society’s norms (e.g. the norm of not eating between meals as stated by Visser [1991]). Across different cultures handling of food is always tightly controlled by rules of etiquette (Visser, 1991). Rituals are closely linked to ‘manners’. Table manners are rituals because they represent the way in which it is commonly agreed that eating should be performed. The predictability of manners makes people interlock with each other and gives people a sense of belonging (Visser, 1991). Knowledge and use of table manners communicate information about a person.

Douglas (1968) looked at the meal as a “microscopic portrait of interaction.” (p. 184). His study was based on the premise that interaction at dinnertime “may reflect attitudes and behavior which prevail throughout the family’s life” (p. 181). Since dinnertime is often the one time of the day where all family members get together, this time of the day is very important (Douglas, 1968). Paradoxically, this is also a time with potential for conflict either between the parents or between the parents and the children. Each parent brings his or her own ideas about what constitutes a ‘proper
meal' and good table manners. If the attitudes are compatible or can be synthesized, eating together can be pleasant and function to strengthen the family ties. Dinnertime interactions can, therefore, be viewed as a continuum ranging from the happy dinnertime to the “eat and run” families (Douglas, 1968). Happy dinnertime is a distinct event which family members look forward to. Douglas (1968) concludes that since dinner reflects general patterns of family behavior, focusing on this event has potential for helping overall family functioning.

Wolin and Bennett (1984) conducted another crucial study in family rituals. Interviews with families revealed three categories of family rituals: celebrations, traditions, and patterned interactions. Communication is regarded as a property of ritual in the form of affective and symbolic communication. Rituals provide an opportunity for the family to get rid of emotions and rituals encourage communication through the discharge of strong affect. Wolin and Bennett (1984) conclude that rituals are necessary elements of a healthy family but that families differ in their level of ritualization.

Haines (1988) conducted a study with 35 parents from single and two-parent families. The purpose of the research was to increase the understanding of the structure and meaning of two family rituals: dinnertime and Christmas. One part of the study consisted of a quantitative assessment of the relationship between family rituals and cohesion of the household. Significant correlations between these two variables were found. The second part of the study consisted of interviews that were intended to illuminate the structure, meaning and significance of dinnertime and Christmas. The
researcher found a similar ritual structure in the two events. Both dinnertime and Christmas were characterized by spatial and temporal boundaries. A series of secondary activities, including practicalities such as food preparation and cleanup, provide temporal boundaries to the core of the event. Symbolic markers such as saying grace and having children stay at the table until they are excused symbolically close off the time of dinner. Spatial boundaries include using the dining room for formal dinners. Other markings include regular seating patterns and special rules. Some rules may serve to protect the family from intrusion of outside events and people. Food and talk, as well as equal participation and decision making, characterize dinnertime. Dinnertime is regarded as the one time where the family can be together. Both Christmas and dinnertime carry meaning related to the joint participation of the family members. The researcher concluded that the American conception of rituals is ambiguous. What to some people is bounded, structured, and meaningful, is porous, amorphous, and meaningless to others (Haines, 1988).

3. Socialization of Children

Socialization can be defined as “the process by which one learns or is taught how to behave in any group or society” (Adams, 1980, p. 168). The initially asocial infant learns how to become a functional social being by developing social skills, a sense of self, and internalizing social norms (Nielsen, 1990). The process of learning the culture of a group involves socializing agents and the socialized. Socialization is a life long process although the early years of childhood are often stressed as a crucial
part of socialization (Adams, 1980; Nielsen, 1990). Parents are often mentioned as primary socializing agents because of their profound influence on the child during the child’s first years. In the socialization process the child learns to control his or her biological drives, and is taught what behavior is regarded acceptable and what is unacceptable.

Two variables of parental behavior have been identified in the literature of socialization of children: parental control attempts and parental support (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Supportive behavior can be defined as behavior which makes the child feel accepted and approved as a person by the parent and comfortable in the presence of the parent (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). The variable is operationalized by the sum of the frequencies of praising, approving, encouraging, helping, cooperating, expressing terms of endearment, and physical affection (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Control attempts are defined as behavior with the intent of directing a child’s behavior in a manner desirable to the parents (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Operationally the variable is the sum of the frequencies of a number of behaviors such as giving directions, instructions, commands, suggestions, punishments, threats of punishment, and imposing rules and restrictions (Rollins & Thomas, 1979).

One aspect of socialization involves sex-typing\(^1\) which refers to the process of learning and developing behavior, emotional responses, attitudes, and beliefs considered appropriate for the child’s gender (Nielsen, 1990). Sex-typed behavior can be explained by a number of factors. Two social learning processes can be applied to sex-typed

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\(^1\) The terms *sex* and *gender* are used interchangeably in the literature.
behavior. One is called *operant conditioning*, and refers to rewarding of gender-appropriate responses and punishment of sex-inappropriate behavior (Nielsen, 1990). The underlying hypothesis is that parents and others treat girls and boys differently. Another social learning process is called *modeling*. The hypothesis is that girls and boys imitate their same-sex parents' behavior. Girls choose mothers and other female figures to model and identify with whereas boys choose male models (Nielsen, 1990).

A. Meals and Socialization. In the early 1970's the study of socialization in natural settings was still in its infancy (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973). The evening meal is considered to be an important event when it comes to socialization of children (Grieshaber, 1997). At least a handful of studies have looked at the family dinner as a socializing event (Charles & Kerr, 1988, DeVault, 1991; Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973; Grieshaber, 1997). Dreyer and Dreyer (1973) described dinner rituals in 40 white, middle-class, nuclear families from Connecticut and concluded that dinner is a "highly socializing situation" (p. 300). Observation and interviewing were used to gather data. Parents were constantly monitoring the young child and "discipline" was found to be the second largest subject of conversation at the dinner table (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973).

Charles and Kerr (1988) reported on food preparation and consumption in York, an English town. Two hundred women were interviewed twice about feeding children, allocation of tasks such as grocery shopping, preparation, cooking, and decision making. DeVault (1991) studied the organization of feeding work in 30 ethnically and racially diverse American households in Chicago. Thirty women and three men were
interviewed. Grieshaber (1997) studied mealtime rules in four Australian families with young children and found that mealtime rules and rituals are used to discipline and normalize children. Each family was visited at least ten times and mealtime preparation, consumption and cleaning rituals were recorded using a video camera. In addition, the parents’ perceptions of self and children were gathered through reflection and unstructured interviews.

a. Meal Preparation. Socialization of children is differentiated along lines of gender when it comes to food (Charles & Kerr, 1988). Women and their daughters largely do the whole meal process starting from the planning of the meal and to the clearing of the table and kitchen after the meal. The Charles and Kerr (1988) study found mothers doing most of the grocery shopping, preparation of food, serving, and cleaning after eating. Gender seems to make a difference in whether or not parents encourage or discourage their children to help with meal preparation and other domestic tasks (Charles & Kerr, 1988). Very young girls and boys seem equally enthusiastic about helping with domestic tasks but they gradually learn which tasks are appropriate for their gender (Charles & Kerr, 1988). In the mealtime context, Grieshaber (1997) found mealtime rules to function as a regulatory mechanism for constituting boys and girls in different ways. Boys were called to the table right before the beginning of the dinner. In contrast, meal preparation was mandatory for all girls in the families that were studied (Grieshaber, 1997). With the exception of girl infants, all girls were also expected to help clean after meals, and in two families, the girls were required to help clean and care for their brothers. In contrast to the study by Charles and Kerr (1988),
the girls’ role in the domestic tasks surrounding dinner in the Grieshaber study (1997) was more than just the role as a helper. Grieshaber (1997) believes that the long-term effects of the different treatment of boys and girls are that girls learn to prepare, serve and clean up food for males.

b. Consumption. Mothers also expressed differences in the family members food needs. Men would receive larger portions of food and boys would also be expected to need more food than girls. The differences were attributed to men and boys being physically active outside the home whereas girls are thought to be quieter and less active inside the home (Charles & Kerr, 1988).

The Dreyer and Dreyer study (1973) found serving of food to children to be a shared task between the mother and the father. The oldest child, regardless of sex, was generally served first (62 percent), followed by the other children, the father, and last the mother (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973). It was usually the mother (85 percent) who helped kindergarten-age and younger children by cutting food on the plate and buttering bread. Boys were helped more often than girls. This corresponds with the findings in the Grieshaber study (1997) where mothers help prepare food for boys.

Table manners are considered an important part of the socialization process (Charles & Kerr, 1988). Parents express the importance of monitoring their children’s behavior as well as their own behavior to “set an example” (Devault, 1991). Various rules exist in different families (see Grieshaber, 1997) but resistance to implementation of parental rules was found in all of the families in the Grieshaber study (1997). Examples of boys’ resistance are found in the same study. One boy refuses to go by the
rules although his mother demands him to use required table manners. He positions himself through oppressive acts of domination and makes successful attacks on his mother by delaying his answers and making a sexist remark (Grieshaber, 1997).

Dinner is also a time to talk about the daily events. Telling about your day can be regarded as storytelling, which can be viewed as a basic human need (Blum-Kulka, 1993), much like food is. Storytelling at dinner brings about issues of participation rights and thereby power (Blum-Kulka, 1993).

4. Meals in the United States of America

People in poor countries may only eat one meal a day, whereas more affluent societies average three to four meals (McIntosh, 1995). Three meals a day are the norm in the United States, although about a quarter of the nation frequently skip breakfast or lunch (McIntosh, 1995). Dinner and supper are evening meals and the terms are used interchangeably. The average length of an American dinner is 30 minutes (Visser, 1991). The main course usually consists of meat, chicken or fish, potato or pasta, and a vegetable (McIntosh, 1995). Bread and desserts are frequently omitted from the American meal because of calorie consciousness (McIntosh, 1995). An emphasis on abundance has characterized American foodways since colonial times, as a result of the immigrants search for a secure food supply (McIntosh, 1995). A growing number of Americans eat two or more meals outside of the home, or food prepared by cooks outside of the home (Camp, 1989).

The American evening meal is not only characterized by a decline in home
cooking but also by a decline in families eating together (Camp, 1989). Studies also show that families may eat together but are often simultaneously watching TV. Up to 78 percent of Americans watch TV during dinner at least once or twice a week, and around 24 percent of these always have the TV on when eating (Visser, 1991).

A. Dining out. Within the study of food and eating, dining out has not received much attention (Wood, 1995), besides the work of Mennell (1985) and Finkelstein (1989). Several scholars have noted the growing rates of food consumption outside of the home (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Camp, 1989; Finkelstein, 1989). Changes in family structure and lifestyle have lead to more meals prepared outside of the home and eaten in restaurants or in the home (McIntosh, 1995). It has been proposed that the concept of dining out is misleading because a large percentage of meals are consumed on a takeaway basis and because public food consumption is increasingly becoming a secondary activity (Wood, 1995). The use of take-out and home delivery of foods is increasing and has helped the perception of the United States as a nation of snackers and grazers (McIntosh, 1995). The market for snack foods (soft drinks, chips, crackers, and cookies) has experienced annual growth rates of more than 10 percent (McIntosh, 1995). Changing times have made dining more of a routine activity as opposed to the special occasion (Wood, 1995).

Eating out can include hotel and catering, also called the hospitality industry (Wood, 1995). However, generally it is sufficient to divide eating out into occasions in other homes and those in restaurants (Goode et al., 1984). A restaurant can be defined
as an establishment which provides food and drink to people who are able to pay
(Finkelstein, 1989). According to this definition, restaurants have existed for centuries
(Finkelstein, 1989). The origins of the modern restaurant date back to the eighteenth
century and changing economic conditions which lead to new social and economic
classes and a public domain (Finkelstein, 1989).

Finkelstein (1989) developed a typology of seven kinds of restaurants within
three main classifications of dining out. The first category is named *fete speciale* and
contains restaurants that are in and of themselves attractions. The second category
consists of restaurants chosen for amusement and entertainment. The third category are
*convenience restaurants* which are “unpretentious establishments which serve
individuals who have neither the time nor inclination to prepare the foods themselves”
(p. 29). The fast food chain restaurants are part of the third category.

Dining out as a social activity has been criticized for commodifying human emotions (Finkelstein, 1989). According to Finkelstein (1989), restaurants encourage styles of interactions which produce an ‘uncivilized sociality’, where people “act in imitation of others, in response to fashions, out of habit, without need for thought and self-scrutiny” (p. 5). Thus dining out is a way of satisfying and shaping personal desires via “the prescribed forms of social conduct” (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 4).

5. Fast food and McDonald’s.

The United States is well known across the world for being the home of fast
food and to many foreigners American food is synonymous with fast food (Althen,
1988), although the French have had their own type of fast food at cafés (Mennell, 1985). The American fast food phenomenon started in the 1950’s and has since grown into a multibillion-dollar business. McDonald’s expansion across the world has contributed to its status as a symbol of American society and culture, bringing not just hamburgers but also an emphasis on speed, efficiency, and shiny cleanliness (Althen, 1988). The fast food industry reflects the ‘time is money’ principle which is a cultural value in the monochronic American society (Althen, 1988; Martin & Nakayama, 1997). Other than being quick, fast foods are convenient and usually less expensive than other prepared foods (McIntosh, 1995). Many Americans have grown so accustomed to fast foods that they prefer them to home cooking (McIntosh, 1995). The popularity of fast foods, however, has lead to national health concerns. The nutritional quality of fast food has been criticized for being high in calories, sodium, fat, and cholesterol content, and low in calcium, dietary fiber, and vitamin C (McIntosh, 1995). In recent years, the fast food industry has responded to criticism by offering items such as grilled chicken sandwiches, baked potatoes, and chili (McIntosh, 1995). There has also been a trend in reduced use of saturated fat in fast food preparation (McIntosh, 1995).

In 1995, fast food restaurants accounted for 47 percent of all eating places in the United States, 52 percent of chain restaurant locations, and 87.5 percent of all new restaurants (Spiselman, 1996). McDonald’s is without doubt the number one fast food chain. The market share of McDonald’s (7.8 percent in 1995) is more than twice the size of the number two fast food restaurant, Burger King (3.4 percent Pollack [1996]). McDonald's hosts 14 percent of all restaurant visits and in the fast food market alone
McDonald’s controls 18.2 percent (Love, 1995). McDonald’s is America’s fourth largest retailer and 96 percent of the American consumers eat at McDonald’s every year (Love, 1995). McDonald’s is the largest job training organization in the United States and has the power to influence American eating habits\(^2\) (Love, 1995).

The fast food industry accounts for 40 percent of the money Americans spend on meals away from home (McIntosh, 1995), and take-outs account for 60.3 percent of all meal occasions and more than half of all restaurant meals (Bradley, 1995). Bradley (1995) quotes a survey that states that 41 percent of all Americans eat fast food monthly and 40 percent eat fast food on weekends. However, there are regional differences in fast food consumption. Forty-seven percent of the population in the Northeast frequent fast food restaurants at least 14 times a month, in the Midwest the number is 33 percent, the South 28 percent, and the West only 17 percent (Bradley, 1995).

A. **Fast food consumers.** The portrait of fast food consumers is a diverse picture. According to one survey, people ages 18-24 and people living by themselves are two groups that stand out as frequent fast food consumers (Bradley, 1995). Thirty-nine percent of people ages 18-24, and 47 percent of household sizes with one person patronize fast food restaurants at least 14 times a month (Bradley, 1995). However, the general picture of a fast food consumer appears to cross socioeconomic lines. Different groups based on gender, age, race, household size, and income show similar

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\(^2\) McDonald’s helped popularize English muffins after the introduction of the Egg McMuffin in the early 1970’s and a similar popularization took place in 1982 when the Chicken McNuggets were featured on the menu (Love, 1995).
percentages of people who eat fast food at least 14 times a month (Bradley, 1995). Approximately one third of blacks, whites, other races, household sizes ranging from two to five, ages 25-64, and all income groups fit into this picture. Ages 65 and over show the lowest percentage of 21. Another survey found fast food patrons to include families with children, working women, two earner households, people under 35 years old, and four or more person households (National Restaurant Association, 1983). When looking at average monthly number of visits to fast food restaurants, 18-24 year olds are the most frequent users of fast food restaurants followed by singles, upper income individuals, and men (National Restaurant Association, 1983). About 50 percent of the men, singles, 18-34 year olds, one person households, upper income households, and households with a working wife or mother reported to be heavy or very heavy users\(^3\) of fast food restaurants (National Restaurant Association, 1983).

The picture of fast food consumers does not correspond with other food and eating research where class has been found to be an important differentiator in food consumption (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Mennell et al., 1992; Wood, 1995). Class affects access, taste, and availability, as well as the structures of dining (Wood, 1995). Groups on the higher end of the socioeconomic scale are generally reported to have more range and variety in their food consumption and to be more in accord with recommended nutritional advice (Mennell et al., 1992). European studies show that lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to consume high amounts of animal fat, whereas

\(^3\) Five to ten visits to fast food restaurants per month is classified as heavy user. Eleven or more times is classified as a very heavy user. Of all the fast food patrons in the survey, 27.4 percent were heavy users and 14.7 percent were very heavy users (National Restaurant Association, 1983).
higher socioeconomic groups eat more fruit (Mennell et al., 1992).

A consumer attitude and behavior study (National Restaurant Association, 1983) surveyed consumer attitudes and expectations in regard to dining out. One part of the study focused on fast food patrons and the results from this study show that the primary reasons for eating at a fast food restaurant are lack of time and convenience. Fast food patrons want and expect quick food delivery, and tasty food served at the appropriate temperature with a pleasing appearance. They also expect to be greeted with a smile and they have high expectations in regard to the cleanliness of the fast food restaurant. The expectations vary in different types of fast food patrons. Lunch patrons and frequent customers found quick food delivery more important than did dinner patrons and occasional and infrequent patrons. Frequent customers were also found to have significantly lower expectations in regard to the food and the service. Very frequent customers strongly believed that fast food should be consistent from one visit to the next. Women and infrequent fast food customers had higher than average expectations concerning the food, service and atmosphere.

A distinguishing characteristic of McDonald’s is McDonald’s hegemony in the children’s market (Love, 1995). Other fast food chains miscalculated the importance of the children’s segment and when they realized their mistake, McDonald’s had already built the loyalty of children. Ronald McDonald, the clown spokesperson, is the only commercial character with a recognition factor among children equal to that of Santa Claus (Love, 1995). Children are offered a free meal on their birthday and dispensers are placed in the customer area so children can get their own napkins and straws
(Fishwick, 1983). The appeal to children is reflected in the numbers. Forty percent of
the fast food visits of children under seven years old are to a McDonald's (Love, 1995).

In light of the previous research findings and the lack of similar research in fast
food restaurants, dinnertime in fast food restaurants deserves more attention. The
popularity of fast food does not appear to be declining. General trends for the future
include an even greater demand for convenience foods (McIntosh, 1995).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the present study was twofold. The objective was to first
explore and describe the family dinner ritual at McDonald's restaurants, and to then
examine the socialization of children that takes place in the McDonald's restaurant.

The research shows that the meal is a social event (Mäkelä, 1991). Numerous
definitions of a meal incorporate the social dimension of the meal (e.g. Douglas, 1975;
Nicod, 1980). The family meal has been studied in the home where it unites the family
through sharing of food and meanings. It has been stated that dinnertime is the one
time of the day where the whole family gets together (Douglas, 1968). The mundane event
of eating together has been credited with a number of functions, socialization of
children being one (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973; Grieshaber, 1997).

The meal is surrounded by a series of activities and practicalities in preparation
of the meal and cleaning up afterwards. Studies have found the meal related tasks to
primarily be women’s work and responsibility. It is estimated that a traditional
housewife spends eight out of sixteen waking hours doing food related activities when
grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning up are included (Curry & Jiobu, 1980). In
collection, men spend four hours. Viewing these numbers it may not be surprising that
the restaurant industry, and particularly the fast food industry is prospering. Lack of
time and convenience are the primary reasons for eating at a fast food restaurant
(National Restaurant Association, 1983).

The number one fast food chain in the United States and the world is
McDonald’s. McDonald’s is chosen by 96 percent of the American population every
year (Love, 1995). The scope of McDonald’s is enormous and the influence on the
American society profound. The restaurant chain caters to the family and has the
largest segment of the market when it comes to young children (Love, 1995). The
number one fast food chain has been the focus of numerous studies but, to the best of
my knowledge, the family meal has not been studied as a social event in the
McDonald’s setting.

Data was collected using participant observation. Dreyer and Dreyer (1973)
stressed the importance of naturalistic observation as the best way to collect data about
important variables such as gender roles in the family. If the family dinner takes place
outside of the home, the natural environment could be a fast food restaurant. Family
interaction at dinnertime in fast food restaurants was described and discussed in relation
to the reviewed literature.

In 1973, Dreyer and Dreyer stated that dinnertime is “ripe for plucking” (p.
by social scientists, since dinner is a time for socialization and the structure of dinner reflects ideological values. Two research questions was addressed to examine the family meal at McDonald’s as a family dinner ritual and as an arena for socialization of children.

1. How is the family dinner ritual carried out in McDonald’s restaurants?
   1.a. What type of behaviors and activities can be identified?
   1.b. How are adults/parents and children interacting?

2. Is socialization of children evident and if so how is it taking place?
   2.a. What types of socialization behaviors are present?
   2.b. Who socializes the children?

I looked for patterns and differences across different ethnic groups, different family constellations, different locations and physical surrounding in regard to the research questions. Furthermore, the fast food restaurant context was described in detail and incorporated in the discussion of family dinner and socialization of children. The findings were compared to prior research in the field of families and the dinner ritual. Finally, the findings were combined in a discussion of the overall socialization of children at McDonald’s and its consequences.
CHAPTER 2

Methodology

1. Procedures and Data Collection

I first sought IRB approval. Then I proceeded to conduct preliminary observations at four different McDonald’s restaurants located in the city of Omaha, Nebraska that served as practice for the actual study. One of the preliminary observation locations was chosen for the study. The other three were not part of the study for various reasons including layout of restaurant and location. The sites of the observations for the study included six McDonald’s restaurants located in the city of Omaha, Nebraska. The restaurants were chosen according to their geographical location in ethnic and socioeconomic areas. One restaurant is located in north Omaha in a predominantly African American neighborhood. Another restaurant is located in a new, affluent housing and store development in west Omaha. One restaurant is located in Northwest Omaha and three restaurants are in south Omaha. Initially, only one restaurant located in an area with Mexican stores and signs in Spanish was chosen to represent the south Omaha area. The Latino neighborhood is composed primarily of Mexicans but there are also people from other Latin countries. A second south Omaha location was added when there was a lack of customers at the first location. The third location was included when I found out that it had a play area and could then be used as a comparison to my observations at the play area in the west location. The additional
south Omaha locations are both close to the interstate.

The study took place over a period of two and a half weeks in the months of May and June. Observations were conducted on weekdays between five p.m. and eight p.m. and on Sundays between 11 and two p.m. The goal was to observe 50 families with adults and children equally distributed on each of the four geographic areas. The amount of time spent in each location was not to exceed two hours. One evening I was so engulfted in my observations that I exceeded my two hours by 15 minutes but most of my visits lasted between one and two hours. Visits to the different locations were alternated so each restaurant was not frequented on consecutive days. The number of visits to each restaurant varied between two and four times. Some days two restaurants were visited.

My approach was simple. I would enter the restaurants, buy food or dessert and sit down pretending to be a “regular” diner. I aimed at being as unobtrusive as possible. My choice of seat would be determined by the layout of the restaurant and the people already eating. I chose seats with a maximum view of the tables in the restaurant as well as the counter most of the time. Other times I would let close proximity to the subjects take precedence. During my first observations I kept a notebook on the table and continuously wrote down my observations with a book in front of me. I was pretending to be reading and studying or casually looking around in the restaurant. With a little experience and practice I later found it easier to keep the notebook in my bag and occasionally take it out to write or to keep the notebook in my lap. I brought a book or a magazine with me at all times and I usually would flip through the pages
while listening to conversation. The ‘Chicken McNuggets’, little fried chicken pieces, proved to be a good choice of food for this type of activity. Contrary to sandwiches which I found hard to eat slowly (I had to eat the sandwiches fast to avoid everything from falling out and having to pick up the sauce smothered contents with my fingers), the chicken pieces were much easier to savor. The value meal where you get fries and a soft drink with the sandwich or chicken nuggets was my menu choice in most cases since I felt that a full meal justified my relatively long stay. A dessert or coffee purchase was made in most cases to keep my status as a dining customer and it also offered opportunity to relocate to a new seat. My covert researcher status and common decency prevented me from staring directly at the people I was observing for long periods of time and also from moving closer to them if I was already sitting down. In some cases, I would relocate after buying dessert but even then I found it difficult to sit down right next to people eating if there were plenty of empty tables. It felt like a violation of a social norm of privacy and distance similar to the seating on a bus where it is not common to sit down on the same seat next to a stranger if there are plenty of empty seats. My apprehensions also kept me from sitting in the ‘PlayPlace’ eating area which seemed to be a place for parents with children. At the west location the seating was limited and I would have taken up a seat needed by a parent or other adult watching a child. At the south location it did not seem natural for me to sit in the area where adults watching children were sitting.

I had planned on focusing on one group of adults and children at a time, but during my observations, the opportunity to observe more than one group presented itself
on several occasions. Ideally, the adults and children were to be observed from their point of entry to the point where they left the restaurant. This was, however, not always feasible. At times my location in the restaurants limited my view of certain parts of the restaurant. My opportunities to decrease the distance between the people I was observing and myself were also limited. When possible, I followed the adults and children through the food ordering process and paid attention to what took place before the consumption phase. I documented the amount of time each family spent in the restaurant, how the time was spent, seating arrangements, family constellations, and who did what. Most of the observations also include detailed descriptions of the family members’ clothing and physical appearance. When conversation was audible I would write down what was said as I heard it. Observations also included other restaurant guests, McDonald’s employees, and everything else that was taking place at the time of observation.

The handwritten notes from my observations were typed and refined as soon as possible after the time of observation.

The data was collected during 25 hours and 7 minutes of observation. An additional 40 minutes was spent at Burger King in north Omaha. The data consist of field notes of my observations. During my observations the opportunity presented itself to talk with a number of employees and restaurant guests. These conversations are also part of the field notes.

Data was collected using the participant observation method primarily as it is described and defined by Jorgensen (1989). Jorgensen (1989) describes participant
observation as a method that is appropriate for a wide range of studies dealing with human existence. According to Jorgensen (1989), the methodology of participant observation seeks to unveil the meanings used to understand daily lives, and the methodology is unique in that it puts the meaning of everyday life first. Location in the here and now of everyday life situations and settings as the foundation of inquiry and method is a basic feature of participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989). Jorgensen (1989) also points out that participant observation is especially suited for explorative studies, as well as descriptive studies. Furthermore, the method is unprecedented for studying processes, human relationships and events, and “immediate sociocultural contexts in which human existence unfolds” (p. 12), which also supports the objectives of the present study (Jorgensen, 1989). Although the use of multiple methods of data collection is stressed, Jorgensen (1989) still points to direct observation and experience as the primary forms of data collection.

Definitions of participant observation vary. Junker (1960) views participant observation as a continuum consisting of complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer. In the present study I posed as a mix between a participant as observer and a complete observer. My participation was covert in the sense that subjects were not informed that they were part of a study and that I was observing them. At the same time, my presence was not hidden. I was part of the restaurant context but, with a few exceptions, I was not a direct participant in the interaction between the subjects. Only observed public behavior of the families and other guests along with my personal experiences were recorded.
A problem emerged at the north Omaha McDonald’s restaurant. During four visits I only saw three different groups of adults with children eating in the restaurant. The first two visits revealed a constant flow of people buying at the counter and carrying out or going through the drive-through. The last two visits were different in that there were few customers. The only other restaurant where I saw black customers was the northwest location. As a result, the black population is represented in a small sample. The absence of people eating in this restaurant and particularly the absence of blacks with children eating in puzzles me. I decided to investigate the problem by paying a visit to the Burger King restaurant across the street from the north location.

Here I only found two older black males eating in and the rest of the customers carrying out. Conversations with employees, managers and guests at the Burger King and the McDonald’s in north Omaha only contributed a little to a better understanding of the lack of customers eating in. I asked if the restaurants were always “this empty” and the reason for that but I had trouble getting the questions across. The general response from the fast food employees was a look of perplexity and a matter of fact answer. When I asked a manager from McDonald’s why people would choose the drive-through or carry out option instead of eating in, he answered in an assuming manner, “maybe because they are on their way home from work or they have kids at home.” An employee from McDonald’s gave me insight by telling me that the restaurant is usually not busy unless they have promotions and it occurred to me that the first time I visited the restaurant was during the “Teenie Beanie Baby” promotion. The responses from customers confirmed my observations of few people eating in at dinnertime, but the responses did
not help me to understand why.

Another problem became apparent at the south locations. I encountered language barriers with most of the Latino subjects since I do not speak or understand Spanish. I compensated for this limitation by noting detailed descriptions of tone of voice and other nonverbal behaviors (eye contact, gestures, haptics, and facial expressions). Spanish was the only language, other than English, that I heard during my observations.

Audibility was a problem in all locations. In some cases I would be too far away from the subjects to hear their conversation and in other cases noise from the restaurant in the form of TV, radio, or other people made it difficult to hear what the subjects were saying.

2. Subjects

A total of 178 families and people eating alone or without children were observed. The main sample consists of 58 families. Each family consists of a minimum of one adult and one child gathered around food in a McDonald’s restaurant. For the purposes of this study, a child is defined as a person who looks 13 years old or younger. The main sample includes 77 adults and 105 children. Of these 101 are female, 77 are male, and four are not gender specified (infants). Fifty-eight girls, four infants, and 43 boys were observed with 43 women and 34 men. In the main sample 43 (74%) families are classified as white, seven (12%) as Hispanic or Latino, two (3%) as Black or African American, and six (10%) as families which included more than one
ethnic group\textsuperscript{4}. Adults accompanied by younger children were the focus of the present study. Younger children were chosen because of the socialization research question. Age and ethnicity were based on physical characteristics such as color of skin and hair and facial features according to my judgement.

In addition to the main sample, observations of 120 other groups of guests were observed. The additional groups included adults with children, children without adults, adults without children, and people eating by themselves. Ethnicity of the additional sample included 76 (63\%) white, 34 (28\%) black, 4 (3\%) Latino, one (less than 1\%) Asian, one (less than 1\%) Mediterranean, and four (3\%) that included more than one ethnicity.

3. Data Analysis.

Since the objective of the present study was an explorative one, I was not anticipating a particular outcome. The data were analyzed with an open mind. The field notes were coded, labeled, sorted and organized in a dialectical manner, which Jorgensen (1989) calls the “analytic cycle.” I looked for patterns as well as for the unique. To analyze the data I did the following to respond to the research questions. First, the families were divided into different categories and labeled accordingly. The main sample consisted of three family constellation categories: adult male with one or more children, adult female with one or more children, and two or more adults with one or more children. The additional sample included adults without children and children

\textsuperscript{4} All calculated percentages are rounded up if above .5 and down if below .5.
or teenagers eating without adults. Children were placed in categories according to approximated age\(^5\): *infant* (18 months or younger), *toddler* (18 months-3 years), *preschooler* (3-5 years), *early school years* (5-8 years), and *preadolescent* (8-13 years). In addition, subjects between 14 and 19 were labeled *adolescent* and the remaining subjects as *adults*. Adolescents eating with adults and younger children were labeled as children. In addition, children were divided into two major groups: younger children (infants, toddlers, preschoolers) and older children (early school years and preadolescents).

The families were placed in categories according to ethnicity: white, black, Latino, Asian, Mediterranean and units with more than one ethnicity. As mentioned above, these categories were purely based on my judgement.

The meal was divided into three phases: *preparation, consumption, and clean up*. *Preparation* included choosing food, ordering food, paying, carrying food to table, picking up napkins, straws, ketchup and other items from the dispenser area, choosing a table, distributing food, and other meal preparation activities such as cleaning and calling family members to the table. *Consumption* was the core event and involved eating, talking, and everything that took place during the meal. *Clean up* consisted of behaviors and verbal statements pertaining to the clearing of containers and wrappers along with napkins, trays, leftovers, and other trash. The phases sometimes overlapped. Each phase was analyzed by identifying behaviors and activities and noting who did

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\(^5\) The categories were formed using The World Book Encyclopedia's (1995) definition of stages in childhood and adding infancy, adolescence, and adulthood.
Interaction between adults and children was defined as conversation between adults and children and other verbal or nonverbal behaviors that involved both a parent and a child. Interaction among children and among adults was also looked at but the focus was on the interaction across generations. The units of analysis were divided into three groups according to the level of involvement: high, medium, and low involvement. Conversation throughout most of the meal including most of the family members across generations was labeled high involvement. Moderate amounts of conversation during or after the meal along with one-sided involvement (initiation of conversation was not reciprocated or only met with one-word responses such as "really"), were labeled medium involvement. Low involvement was characterized by a focus on the consumption of the meal rather than interacting with other family members. In the cases where conversation was audible, table talk topics were identified.

Socialization was operationalized as non-parental influence and parental influence in the form of parental support and control attempts as defined by Rollins and Thomas (1979) along with other parental behaviors that did not fit these categories (cleaning, division of labor, and other behaviors that were not directly aimed at the children). In review, support behaviors make the child feel comfortable around the parent and accepted by the parent (i.e. praising, encouraging, helping, and expressing terms of endearment). In contrast, control attempts are behaviors that make the child comply with the parent (i.e. commands, punishment, and imposing rules and
restrictions). Reinforcement and reminders of table manners were classified as control attempts since these are behaviors that seek to direct the child’s behavior in a manner desirable to the parent and/or society. The type and number of socialization behaviors were identified and counted for each unit of analysis. A close examination of the types of socialization behaviors was performed and linked with the different types of parents. Observations of McDonald’s employees, the McDonald’s restaurant setting, and other influences were included in an overall discussion of the socialization that takes place at McDonald’s.

The findings were compared across different dimensions, such as geographical location and ethnicity and discussed in relation to the literature review. Finally, a broad discussion of the socialization of children in McDonald’s restaurants and the implications hereof are presented along with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 3

Findings

1. The McDonald’s Experience.

The golden arches (McDonald’s logo) were good landmarks to look for when trying to find the different locations. A “welcome” sign would greet me as I pulled into
the parking lot along with a “drive thru” sign with an arrow pointing in the direction of a menu board. Parking was always easy and conveniently close to one of the two entrances. The parking lot was either wrapped around the restaurant building in single rows or simply one large parking lot. At some of the entrances, close to the door handle, a small sign would inform the guest about to enter that “for everyone’s comfort this McDonald’s is smoke-free.” In other cases, signs inside the restaurant made guests aware that it was a non-smoking facility.

After entering the door you find yourself in an entryway with another door leading into the restaurant. The tile floor is either light gray or imitation wood. An entryway free of tables or other obstacles leads to the counter where you get in line to place your order. A large, lighted menu board above the counter displays a selection of various sandwiches, desserts, and drinks. Some of the menu items have names starting with “Mc,” e.g. “McChicken, McNuggets, McBacon.” Other items have names that I have never seen at other restaurants, such as “Big Mac” and “Filet-o-fish.” Value meals are listed where beef or chicken sandwiches can be purchased with a drink and fries. The list of beverages contains different types of sodas, along with juice, milk, coffee, tea and hot cocoa. No alcoholic drinks appear on the list. The prices are the same at most of the locations I visited. Only the west location has slightly higher prices on some of the items and one of the south locations has special senior prices on coffee and soft drinks.

Standing in front of the counter you can see a window to the far left serving the drive through customers. To the left is also a french fry station where the potatoes are
deep fried and emptied onto a lighted steel area and placed in small bags or boxes with a special tool that makes the fries sit vertically in the box. Moving down the left wall is the open kitchen area where employees are busy cooking and wrapping food. The shape and size of the kitchen varies from location to location. The wrapped food is placed in an open metal bin where employees at the registers can grab it quickly and place it on trays or in paper bags. To the right of the food bin are ice cube machines and soft drink machines where a one-touch button fills the paper cups with soda and lids are placed on the cup. Coffee maker, ice cream machine, milk shake machine, apple pie dispenser, dispenser with toppings for the new dessert “McFlurry” are among other things that are visible from the customer side of the counter. At one location a dispenser with hand sanitizer is hanging on the wall behind the counter. At some locations a wooden placard with engraved brass plates shows the customer the names of the store manager and the shift manager. Framed diplomas from competitions and pictures of the storeowner and Ronald McDonald are also displayed in and around the counter area along with leaflets containing nutritional information about the food at McDonald’s.

Most of the McDonald’s employees are dressed in black pants, purple polo shirts with a McDonald’s logo, and sometimes a black cap or visor with a McDonald’s logo. Some people are wearing clothes that are different from the other workers such as a different color polo shirt, a button down shirt with a tie or scarf (men wear ties, women wear scarves). Judging from their behaviors and interaction with other workers, it is apparent that these people are higher rank, probably managers.
The person at the counter hands you a tray with a paper cover sheet and the food and drinks. On the counter or to the right of the counter is a self-serve area with napkins, straws, and packages of salt, sugar and cream. At some locations the self-serve items are on the counter and at other places they are on a separate shelf or counter at a higher level than the front counter. At most locations there are large dispensers with ketchup and small paper cups to fill. At other places little packages of ketchup are handed out with the food upon request.

The eating area is L-shaped with some tables in front of the counter and additional seating to the right of the counter extending toward the back. The tables vary in appearance from place to place but they are always square. The chairs also vary and are either bolted to the table or are regular moveable chairs. At some places the chairs have cushions which make them more comfortable than the other hard and cold chairs and benches. Soft pop music is playing or TVs may be on. The restrooms are located at the back of the restaurant at the same place in all locations. While eating you will see McDonald’s employees wiping off tables, cleaning the floor, emptying trashcan and straightening chairs. Everything, except the tray, is disposable. Trashcans enclosed in wooden covers with a lid saying “thank you” are located at different places in the restaurants. On top of the enclosed trashcan is a place where you leave your tray after you have emptied it. On the way out of the parking lot a “thank you” sign is placed by the exit.

According to the literature (Ritzer, 1996), the McDonald’s environment is supposed to be standardized and streamlined but that was not always the case during my
observations. I saw employees wearing jeans and one wearing a sporty short and tank top outfit without a McDonald’s logo and a female employee with rings in various places on her face. Orders were not always taken while looking at the customer and food was not always handed to the customer with a smile. I saw dirty windows, fries and dirt on the floor, dirty restrooms, employees openly yelling at each other, and ketchup on the lid of the trash can. At the west location there was a handwritten sign on the door of a stall in the restroom. It said “out of oder.” The “o” in out had a smiley face drawn inside the letter and the last word was missing an “r” to say “order.” I also witnessed problems when the standardization was challenged. At one location, I changed an order after being notified that a broken machine was now working. I had already paid for my alternative choice but wanted to change the order to my initial choice. The worker looked confused and asked me if I wanted to add my initial choice to my order. I am guessing that she was not able to change the order on the register. I told her that I only wanted my initial choice and that I would pay the difference. A look of bewilderment filled her face and she was speechless until she made a decision and mumbled that she was going to give the dessert to me. She then went to the machine, let the machine mix the ice cream and topping, and handed me the dessert without charging the difference.

A. Interior and specifics about each location. The interior of the restaurants is similar and yet different. Each restaurant location has its own unique characteristics.

   a. South. The oldest looking restaurant was the south location in the Latino
neighborhood. Faux wood tile covered the floor and the walls were covered with a light colored wood paneling and off-white, lightly structured wall paper. The booths were off-white plastic with vinyl cushions against the back with dark red lining. The tables had the same red color around the edges. The tables and chairs were bolted to the floor. Part of the eating area was fenced off by side walls and looked like an outside gazebo with leafy, green plants hanging from planters. The ceiling tile had brown water stains on them. Big posters on the windows advertised the Mcflurry.

This restaurant was not very busy. There was a handful of single men eating by themselves, and of these the older men stayed for longer periods of time than most customers. The restaurant appeared to be a place where the men could pass time and relax. The Latino population was the predominant ethnic group at this location. Two younger Latino children, a boy and a girl, were eating by themselves and running around playing. I later discovered that their mother was working behind the counter. The girl helped one of the female employees clean the eating area. She was the only child I saw cleaning. The layout of the restaurant made it hard to observe and the temperature was very cold at this location.

The second south location by the interstate looked like a smaller version of the north location. Two corners had TVs showing the news and “Star Trek.” There were gray tile floor, gray tables with dark tan chairs (movable), and a couple of booths with worn cushions (everything else looked new). The framed posters on the wall were all Monet motives from ‘The museum of fine arts, Boston’ and ‘Yale University Art Gallery’. It was located near the interstate and did not have people staying for long
periods of time as the first south location.

The third south location had a PlayPlace and a modern and colorful interior and was also located near the interstate. Signs in the parking lot by each parking space stated that parking was only for McDonald's customers. The walls were white with red, blue, green, and yellow paint splashes. The moveable chairs were black with colorful padded seats in the same color scheme. The tabletops were different colors, some green, some blue etc. The framed pictures at this location were 50's style with motifs of the golden arches and cars. One picture was a replica of Mona Lisa with a box of McDonald's fries in one hand and fries in the other hand. Children's drawings were posted in the windows. A sign by the drawings stated, "An Art Sampling from Mrs. Christiansen's Kindergarten." Two TVs were showing different local news programs, one TV had subtitles. The PlayPlace had a large eating area. Only one window by one of the entrances had a big yellow 'M'. Outside there was a large, fenced in eating area with black iron rod furniture. This location was by far the busiest of the three south locations. There were a lot of adults with children, most of them white but some Latino families.

b. Northwest. The northwest location had a traditional home-style interior similar to that of the old-fashioned south location. The same faux wood tile was on the floor. The wall coverings were also similar to that of the south location, except for a dash of light pink color. Brown, metal swivel chairs with orange seats were bolted to the table. The windows were decorated with the big 'yellow arches' and flowered, ruffled window shams covered the top of the windows. On the walls at the back of the
restaurant close to the restrooms were framed nature pictures and an owl made of yarn sitting on a stick in a frame. A fig tree and small palm tree looked real. Plants in planters along one eating area looked like they were fake. There was an outside eating area with picnic tables on a patio and picnic tables in the grass along the parking lot.

This restaurant was one of the busiest locations and also one of the cleanest locations. During the dinner hours a part of the restaurant would be closed off so that employees could clean the area thoroughly (mop floor with water). The parked cars were a mix between family vans, sedans, and trucks. The majority of the guests were white but this was also the only location, other than the north location, where black customers were observed. The northwest location was a rather comfortable restaurant. The service was a bit slow since drive-through customers seemed to take priority but the employees were friendly and older than the average employee at other locations.

c. North. The north location was unique in having big yellow gates by the entrances to the parking lot. The gates with big signs were open. The writing on the signs said “parking lot closed. No trespassing”. Inside the restaurant were two TVs each hanging from the ceiling in a corner. The volume of the TVs was high and at my different visits “Rosanne,” “Mad About You,” “Ricki Lake,” “Star Trek”, and a movie were showing on the TVs. This restaurant was one of the larger restaurants with a neutral and simple interior. The floor was light gray tile and the walls had gray paneling and off-white, structured wallpaper. The chairs were black with cushions and there were both bolted and removable chairs. The booths were not the same color as the rest of the interior. They stood out with their bright pink and green cushions and tables.
A breakfast bar area was unique to this location. Large framed prints of flowers and abstract scenes covered the walls. The 'golden arches' only covered a small area of the front window. A big banner covering part of one window read, “McDonald’s and Skinner Magnet Center, Adopt-a-school, partners in education.” The north location was the only restaurant with a smoking section (I did not see any smokers there).

The restaurant was nice but also one of the dirtiest locations. There were big chunks of dirt and food on the floor. The ‘wet floor’ sign was standing on the floor during two of my visits but it looked like it had been a while since the floors had been cleaned. Even when the employees were not busy they did not clean the restaurant.

One evening, a manager asked a young female and a young male employee to clean the restaurant. They quickly straightened the chairs and moved a high chair to the self-serve area but they did not wipe off the tables or clean the floor despite their dirty condition.

The interaction between customers and employees was friendly and this was the only location where people approached me with conversation. Two sets of children were eating by themselves during different visits. A Latina girl and a Latino boy were eating and playing during one visit. The girl started talking with me and I found out that her brother and sister worked behind the counter. The boy was her sister’s son. At another visit I saw one of the black, female employees helping two black girls eating alone. They were talking and joking while she set up the food, then she returned to work behind the counter.

This location was characterized by a steady flow of people going to the counter
and carrying food out to their car or walking away with it. The majority of these people were black. The patterns were similar. A car would drive into the parking lot and one person would get out and go to the counter while the driver and other passengers waited in the car. Most of the cars were old looking sedans. When a shiny Lexus drove up, it caught my attention because it was remarkably different from the other cars. There was also a steady flow of people coming into the restaurant, going to the restrooms and leaving without purchasing anything.

d. West. The west location was the most sophisticated of the restaurants I visited. The moveable chairs were brown metal (very cold to sit on in shorts) and the tables had a marble pattern. The counter had a similar marble look on the sides and the counter was unique in having a window underneath the counter top displaying ‘Happy Meal’ toys. The window attracted a lot of attention from younger children. Toward the end of the restaurant by the restrooms were framed prints with men and women in golf clothes (the restaurant is located close to a golf course). At the front of the restaurant there was an enclosed ‘PlayPlace’ with a smaller eating area than the one at the south location. I noticed that the high chairs for young children were gray in color and made of plastic at this location. At all other locations the high chairs were constructed of light colored wood.

The west location was the cleanest of all the restaurants I observed and I also noticed employees vigorously cleaning while I was eating there. Even when the drive-through and the counter were busy there would be employees in the dining area cleaning. The cleaning was not limited to sweeping the floor and emptying the
trashcans, but also included cleaning the entry way doors and the door to the ‘PlayPlace’.

During the ‘Teenie Beanie Baby’ promotion the restaurants had signs advertising the promotion and stating the rules and limitations of how to purchase the popular toys. At later visits, handwritten signs by the doors stated, “we are out of Beanie Babies” or computer written signs by the menu board gave a similar message. At the south location in the Mexican neighborhood a typed sign says “Sorry, we are sold out of Teenie Beanie Babies. Thanks for the response to our record-setting promotion.”

2. Family Constellations and Ethnic Groups.

The average length of stay at the McDonald’s restaurants was 27.13 minutes for the families in the main sample. The seven families observed in the PlayPlace eating area where the length of stay was documented stayed for an average of 42.57 minutes in comparison to an average of 24.88 among the 40 families observed in the main eating area.

Of the 58 families, 22 (38%) were single women, 18 (31%) were single men, and 18 (31%) were families with more than one adult. Of the single women there were

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6 The average was calculated from 47 of the 58 units of analysis. Eleven units were not included since the length of time was uncertain in these cases.
7 Six of the 40 families eating in the main eating area got up and went to the PlayPlace. In some cases the children had not finished eating and the parents would pack up the leftovers and take them to the PlayPlace. I did not keep track of how long they stayed in the PlayPlace area.
8 The main sample does not reflect the predominance of single mothers. I deliberately selected families with single fathers over single mothers to have enough families for a comparison.
17 white women with white children (one grandmother with granddaughters), one Latina woman with a Latino child, one white woman (appeared to be a grandmother) with two Latino children, one Asian woman with both Asian and white children, one white woman with a Latino child, and one white woman with Asian children. The group of single men consisted of two black men with children, one Latino man with a child, 14 white men with children, and one white man with an Asian child. In a few cases, quick comments about the other parent suggested that the parent was not a full-time single parent, e.g. a little girl asking “where is mommy?” and the father answering “she is at work”. In other cases, gold rings, which looked like wedding bands, on the father’s left hand indicated that he might be married.

The group of multiple adults consisted of nine white families with two parents of opposite sex, mother and father, and five Latino families with the same constellation. In addition there were a white family with a mother and a grandmother, a white family with a dad and two grandparents, and three white women (possibly mother, aunt and grandmother) eating with a boy. The only multi-ethnic family in the group of multiple adults was a family that was hard to categorize. It was a white woman with what looked like two mixed black-white adolescents, and two younger mixed black-white children. The adolescent girl referred to herself as “mom” when talking to the youngest child. Because of her parent status I decided to count her as an adult although she looked younger to me.

The distribution of family constellations, ethnic groups, and level of involvement at the different McDonald’s locations is depicted in Table 1 (see Appendix
A). The black population was only represented in two of the 58 families (3%). Both were men with girls eating in the north location. Their average length of stay was 13.5 minutes. One man was sharing a ‘Happy Meal’ with a preschool age girl. In the other case a man was eating with two early-school-age girls. The children were not eating.

The Latino population was represented in nine of the 58 families (16%). Seven families were Latino adults with Latino children, and two families were white women with Latino children. Eight of the families were observed at south locations and one of the white women with a Latina girl was at the northwest location. Five of the Latino families were children eating with both a man and a woman, three were single women eating with children, and one man observed with a girl. The average length of stay was 32 minutes for four of the Latino families and 28 minutes when incorporating the multi-ethnic families.

The six multi-ethnic families consisted of five white adults with children of different ethnicity and one Asian woman with Asian and white children. Four families were single women eating with children, one was a single man with a girl, and one was a white woman with a mixed black-white adolescent girl and mixed black-white children. A single man and Asian daughter and a single woman with two Asian children were both observed at the west location. The west location was the only location where Asian people were observed. The two single white women with Latino children were observed at the northwest location and a south location. The average length of stay for the multi-ethnic families was 31.33 minutes.

The 43 families categorized as white constituted the largest group of families
(74%). Seventeen of the white families were single women with children, 14 were single men with children, and 12 were families with more than one adult. The average length of stay for the white families was 27 minutes.

Across different ethnic groups single women with children had the longest average length of stay, 42.67 minutes. Families with more than one adult were second with 32.54 minutes and single men with children had the shortest average length of stay, 21.43.

The average length of stay varied at each location. At the north and northwest locations without any ‘PlayPlace’ the average stay lasted 17 minutes and 30.14 minutes respectively. At the south location with ‘PlayPlace’ the average length of stay was 39.4 minutes and at the locations without ‘PlayPlace’ the same average was 25.4 minutes. Taken together the average length of stay at the south locations was 30.07 minutes. At the west location the people eating in the ‘PlayPlace’ eating area stayed for an average of 50.5 minutes whereas people eating in the main dining area averaged 19.83 minutes. The overall length of stay at the west location was 24.21 minutes.

3. The Family Dinner Ritual at McDonald’s. (Research Question 1)

A. Preparation. In the preparation phase, activities and behaviors were aimed at the main objective, consumption. Upon entrance the families would go to the counter and

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9 Four of the families eating in the main dining area went to the PlayPlace after finishing their meal. I did not keep track of their length of stay in the PlayPlace area.
get in line. Most adults did not spend much time studying the menu but seemed to know what they wanted to eat. Younger children were often given a choice between the different ‘Happy Meal’ menu choices and sometimes also a beverage choice. It appeared implied in most cases that they were having a ‘Happy Meal’, a meal designed for children consisting of a small drink, small fries, and either a hamburger, cheeseburger or four ‘Chicken McNuggets’ served in a paper bag along with a toy. While the parents were waiting or ordering food, children (especially younger children) oftentimes wandered around and sat down at a table. In a few cases, the families went to the Play Place before ordering food. Parents paid and carried the food on a tray to the self-serve area to pick up straws, napkins, ketchup, and sometimes salt and pepper. In the families where there were two parents, either one of the parents handled ordering and paying for the food. Children often accompanied the parents at the self-serve area and helped pick up items if they were tall enough to reach the dispensers, or the parents handed items for the children to carry to the table.

The choice of table was often an issue. In some cases the parents sat down at the table chosen by the children while they were waiting for the food or the parents lead the way to a table. Children were sometimes asked where they want to sit, other times the parents clearly told the children where to sit. At times the choice of table was an issue of conflict between parents and children. The children wanted to sit at one table and the parents at another. The conflict never escalated to more than statements of preference and was resolved with the parents making the decision. An example of this type of conflict was seen in the following field note excerpt from the west location. A
white father and two early-school-age children had completed the process of ordering and paying and the father was holding the tray with food.

The girl is standing by the PlayPlace. She looks at her father and says, “can we sit over here and eat?” The father looks at his daughter and says “let’s sit over here” and he starts to walk to the back of the restaurant away from ‘PlayPlace’. On the way to the back the boy stops at a table and claps his hand on the table top while saying “I want this one.” The father does not say anything as he continues to move to the back of the restaurant. The children follow their father and nothing further is said about the incident.

In some of the families the parents cleaned the meal area before eating. At a south location a Latina woman wiped off a chair before a preschool-age girl sat down. At the northwest location a white man with a preschool-age boy and girl was very particular about the cleaning ritual.

The man says “don’t sit down yet, not till I get a rag.” The children wait by the table while he gets napkins from the self-help area. He comes back and wipes off the table.

Seating around the table varied depending on the number of family members and the type of seating area. A single parent with one child generally ate sitting across from each other with the table between them. Two parent families usually sat so the parents were facing each other on each side of the table. Booths were usually only chosen by families with more than two family members. Some of the younger children sat on brown, plastic seats placed on the chair or bench or in high chairs. The restaurants provided the seats and high chairs.
In some cases, the children carried their ‘Happy Meal’ bags to the table but usually the food was distributed after it was brought to the table. In families with two parents the mother most often distributed the food. Food was often placed on wrappers or in boxes from sandwiches and napkins and trays serve to keep food from touching the table. In one family, a white mother carefully unfolded napkins one by one and placed them on the table as a tablecloth. In some cases the parents broke the sandwiches into smaller pieces for young children and in one case, a McDonald’s employee brought a bib to the table for a small girl.

B. Consumption. In the consumption phase the main activity was consuming the purchased food. The phase started as soon as the preparation was done or sometimes before. The main rule seemed to be that you could start eating as soon as the food is in front of you. With few exceptions, each family member had his or her own food placed on the table in front of where they were sitting. At the north and south locations I observed families sharing food, but generally, each person had a sandwich or chicken nuggets, fries, and a drink. The food was eaten using one or two hands depending on the type of food. Fries and chicken nuggets were eaten using one hand whereas larger sandwiches usually required the use of two hands. The only use of utensils was three older adults eating salads with forks and the use of spoons for desserts.

The consumption phase was divided into three different types of families according to level of involvement. 40 families were placed in categories of low,
medium, or high level of involvement\textsuperscript{10}. The group of families showing high levels of involvement consisted of 21 families (53\%). 12 (30\%) families made up the group of medium levels of involvement families and seven (18\%) families showed low level of involvement. Table 2 (see Appendix B) shows the different families within each group of involvement.

Two of the three categorized Latino families were placed in the group of high levels of involvement. Both families were two-parent families dining in south locations. The families showed very high levels of involvement and were some of the few families that appeared to have remarkably harmonious and tightly bonded family dinners although I could not understand what was said. The parents’ attention was focused on the children without distraction from entertainment devices, and the children appeared more interested in what was taking place at the table than their surroundings. Both parents and children smiled and laughed a lot throughout the meal and displayed more physical affection (hugging, tickling, teasing, and caressing) than other families. Two other two-parent Latino families also showed the same harmony and togetherness at the time I observed them,\textsuperscript{11} and if they are counted as high levels of involvement as well, more than half of the seven Latino families displayed high levels of involvement.

The only literature I found on Latino meals suggested that the Latino meal is more than simply consumption (Esteva, 1994). Unlike English, Spanish has a verbal

\textsuperscript{10} 16 families were not categorized. These families were families eating in the PlayPlace eating area and families where I did not have sufficient information to place them in either one of the categories.

\textsuperscript{11} These two families were not categorized according to levels of involvement since I did not observe them throughout their stay.
distinction between food and meals (Esteva, 1994). “Alimento” is food and refers to the contents of food. “Comida” is the social interaction and performance of the dinner ritual. Esteva (1994) points out that the English word “meal” only seems to refer to the time and condition of taking nourishment whereas the social aspects of eating are embedded in “comida.” He then proceeds to talk about lack of “comida.” Esteva (1994) calls it lack of comida when Americans go to McDonald’s in other countries and when Americans eat ethnic foods in the United States that they would not eat in the corresponding country. The illusion of abundance and diversity when eating standardized food blocks out the feeling of lack of “comida” (Esteva, 1994). In relation to my study, the Latino families appear to bring the cultural and social “comida” with them to McDonald’s, and in comparison to the Latino families, the white families could be characterized as lack of “comida.”

a. Table Talk. Conversation involving parents and children was characterized by short discussions (usually only two sentences involving a question or initiation and a reply), pauses while eating, and jumping from one topic to another. Only one man and boy had a long conversation about sports. The most frequent table talk topic was the parents’ disciplining the children by teaching them manners, telling them to eat, and laying down the rule of “eat first then play.” In 11 families the toy in the ‘Happy Meal’ was not an issue, and in 21 families there was either no ‘Happy Meals’ or no recorded information about any type of discussion. In four families the toy from the ‘Happy Meal’ was an issue of conflict. Toddlers, a preschooler, and early school children were told that they had to eat before they could get their toy. In two families eating in the
main dining area, a toddler and a preschooler were told that they have to eat before they could go play in the ‘PlayPlace’. In these families the toy and ‘PlayPlace’ were clearly used as negotiation devices and as an incentive for the children to eat. Some examples of this in different families were as follows.

“Take two more bites then we’ll go play”  
(a father to his son)

“You eat otherwise you’re not gonna get that toy!”  
(a father to his son)

Boy says, “I wanna look at my Beanie Baby.” His mother tells him that he has to wait till he is done eating.

“A couple more bites then we can go play.”  
(a father to his daughter)

Daughter asks, “can I have my toy?”  
Mother says, “you gotta eat first.”

The negotiation strategy was used more often with boys than with girls, and fathers more often used it than mothers did. Boys seemed to challenge the parents more when it came to toys and play. In one two-parent family, the boy asked for permission to go play. The mom said that he was not done eating but he went to the ‘PlayPlace’ anyway. In some families where the toy or play was not an issue of conflict, the toy was handed to the child after the meal as a reward. The children in these families must have known and accepted the rule of “eat first then play.” Even though all parents did not use the reward or negotiation strategy, there was clearly a struggle to get younger children to eat. The younger children were often more interested in what was taking place around them than in eating. Parents and older children often finished their food
before the younger children and then waited for the younger children to finish and sometimes urged the younger children to finish. The only exception to this was the adults eating salads. Men usually finished before women in two-parent families. Older children generally ate their food without any interference from their parents. In some families the older children went to the counter by him or herself and purchased a dessert. A parent later purchased desserts for the younger children.

The most frequent table talk topic involving both parents and children was the toys in the ‘Happy Meal’. The ‘Teenie Beanie Babies’ created a lot of talk and so did the McDonald’s tape. A two-parent family with an early school age boy was eating and the boy could not get the toy to work.

A McDonald’s employee walks by the table with a bucket and a mob. The mother asks him “how does this work?” and holds out the Happy Meal toy. He tells her “it’s kind of like a harmonica.” She says, “thank you” and gives the toy to her son. The boy tries to play. He turns to his father and says “try that.” The father says something like “it’s OK” and does not take the toy. The boy then hands the toy to his mother “come on mommy, try that.” She gives it a quick try and hands it back to the boy. The parents are talking. The boy tries to get their attention. He says, “mama, mama, mommy, mommy....”

In another family with two children, a mother, and a grandmother, the “Teenie Beanie Babies” were the center of attention throughout the meal. After they sat down the grandmother turned to me and said “I wanted the Beanie Babies too, the guy said I didn’t look like a kid.” She had a ‘Happy Meal’ bag in front of her. The mother asked the daughter what kind of ‘Beanie Baby’ she got. When the mother told the boy that he could not have his toy until he was done eating, the grandmother told him that it was
better that way. The mother told the grandmother that she is not going to McDonald’s every week to get the ‘Beanie Babies’. She was probably referring to the fact that there are different types of Beanie Babies.

Other table talk topics included talking about the day and what the child did along with talking about the food. Toddlers and preschool age girls were eager to talk about the people and cars they could see outside of the restaurant through the windows. Talking about what to do after eating was a topic the parents initiated.

The ‘Happy Meal’ was often a part of the consumption phase in a number of ways. The toy was a topic of conversation and sometimes the children played with the toy during the meal. The toy was also an issue of conflict, a negotiation strategy used by the parents, and an award given to the children after eating. Parents and older children studied the special ‘Happy Meal’ bags with pictures and text. A paper table tent informed that “A parent’s guide to sage and sane road trips” could be found on the ‘Happy Meal’ bags.

Discussions of toy or play were not recorded for the families observed in the ‘PlayPlace’ eating area. I did, however, observe seven families where the children ate before they played and four families where the children played before they ate. The involvement level in these families was determined by the parents’ activities while the children were playing. Most parents closely watched their children playing. One father almost could not sit still and he jumped out of his seat a couple of times and chased his son inside the structure. A mother climbed up in the structure and helped her young daughter get to a higher level in the structure. The interaction between parents
and children while the children were playing was limited to waving hello, quick visits at the table to get a sip of the drink, and the parents signaling or telling the children that it was time to go. I saw parents holding up their hands and it looked liked they said five more minutes. In some cases the parents would get up and go to the structure to get the children to come down. Other parents were less involved. Two women talked while their sons are playing and look up occasionally. A woman with four older children (two look like friends of her children) looked like she was balancing her check book and only signaled for the two boys to come down after the girls had bought ice cream cones. She held up a cone and pointed at it. A woman with two younger children looked like she was solving a crossword puzzle.

C. Clean Up. The clean up phase was the fastest of the three phases. This phase sometimes overlapped with the consumption phase when parents or children disposed of their trash while some family members were still eating. All the people I observed took their trash to the designated garbage cans, pushed the lids in, dumped the trash and placed the tray on top of the enclosed trash can. Some unused napkins were left on the table, but most families took everything to the trash. In two-parent families, the father most often carried the tray to the trash. Mothers sometimes packed left over food in the ‘Happy Meal’ bag, wrapped napkins around cups and carried the food and drinks to the ‘PlayPlace’ area or to the car. Younger children often carried their toy and sometimes also the ‘Happy Meal’ bag with left over food to the car. Cups with unfinished desserts were often taken to the car and some adults and older children got refills of their
beverage before they left. Children were still being monitored throughout this phase. A mother told her son "stop, look, go" in the parking lot. Another mother told her son who was eating a dessert "get that in dad's car and dad will have a royal fit and a half."

4. Socialization at McDonald's. (Research Question 2)

Two types of socialization were apparent from my observations: one by the parents and another one by the McDonald's environment. The parental socialization involved control attempts and supportive behavior along with other behaviors. In 39 of the 58 families (67%) the parents showed some type of supportive behavior in the form of smiling, conversation, asking for the child's opinion, hugging and other types of affection, and explaining what was taking place. The frequency of each supportive behavior was hard to determine because of their nature (e.g. I did not note every smile). Asking for the child's opinion was, however, countable and in comparison with the control attempts this was the most frequent socialization behavior found in single men. Men in two parent families also exceeded the women in asking for the child's opinion. The frequency of this type of behavior in women was medium.

In 32 families (55%), parental control attempts were identified. In comparison to the supportive behaviors these behaviors were countable. The control attempts were divided into enforcing manners, telling the child to eat, telling the child to hurry, rule of eating first then play ('PlayPlace' and/or 'Happy Meal' toy), asking the child to help, and restrictive behaviors. Enforcement of manners included telling the child that it is not proper to eat while standing, telling the child to wipe his or her face, telling the
child to wash his or her hands, and shushing. The restrictive behaviors\textsuperscript{12} included shaking their head, pointing their finger, and other verbal and nonverbal behaviors that restrict the child's activities.

Single parent women accounted for the largest amount of control attempts, more than twice as many as the ones displayed by single men and two parent families. Overall, woman displayed more than twice as many control attempts than men did. Telling the child to eat, enforcing manners, and restricting behaviors were the most frequent types of control attempts found in women. Single women also had a high frequency of asking the child if he or she is done eating.

Men in two-parent families showed the least amount of socialization behaviors, and their single most frequent control attempt was laying down the rule of first eat and then play. Another characteristic in men in two parent families was the absence of any type of manner enforcement that also was nearly absent in single men families. The most frequent type of control attempts by men in single parent families was asking the child to help, and although the number was low it exceeded the same type of control attempt in women overall.

One group of single men was remarkably different from the rest of the single men. The single, black men (only represented in two families) displayed few countable socialization behaviors and only a couple of control attempts were seen. Both families seemed comfortable and happy but the conversation was sparse and the length of stays

\textsuperscript{12} Manners and restrictive behaviors were sometimes hard to distinguish from one another and sometimes coincided. In the cases of doubt the behavior was only counted in one category.
less than 15 minutes. One man was sharing a Happy Meal with a preschool age girl. During the meal she was talking and playing with the Happy Meal toy and he occasionally replied while facing the TV showing a situation comedy. In the other family a man was eating with two early-school-age girls. The girls were not eating. He ate fast while watching the girls and glancing at the TV. The girls ran around playing, chasing, and teasing each other (the wildest behavior I witnessed in any restaurant).

"The girls are still full of energy. (..) They yell 'shut up' to each other followed by different names. The young girl says "who's a pig raise their hand" and both girls raise their hands. Then they start pushing each other and the man mumbles something with his mouth full. He tells the older girl "go wash your hands, wash em' real good." She runs to the restroom followed by the younger girl."

When the girls returned and complained to him about what the other girl did he did not say anything. The girls then argued back and forth until they started playing again. The next time the father responded to the girls was when he chuckled after one of the girls burped.

Other socialization behaviors in the meal ritual included parental behaviors that were not directly aimed at the children but nevertheless were part of the entire dinner ritual experience. These behaviors included cleaning, whether or not the parents encouraged conversation, the parent’s way of eating, and the division of tasks between two parents. In two-parent families eating in a restaurant with a 'PlayPlace,' the father usually got up first and went to the ‘PlayPlace’ with the children while the mother cleared the table, packed the left-over food, and brought the drinks to the ‘PlayPlace’.
In families with both a parent and a grandparent, the parents took care of socialization

Another part of the dinner ritual experience was the influence of other people in the dining environment (other guests and McDonald's employees), and the physical surroundings. In the 'PlayPlace' there were big signs with a list of rules and a sign on the door stated that the department of health regulations require socks to be worn at all times, and that socks can be purchased at the counter. Another sign said that you have to be below a certain height to play but some of the kids who played were a lot taller than that. A sign showed a list of rules stating that you have to be between 3-12 years to play, children must be supervised at all times, and climbing on the structure is not allowed. Another sign listed 'Ronald's way to play.' He tells you to be a friend when playing, to leave food, toys and other stuff at the table, to play safe, to leave your shoes at the entrance to Play Place, that kids between 3-13 can play, and that parents can play too.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

1. The McDonald's Family Dinner Ritual (Research Question 1)

The findings paint a diverse picture of McDonald's restaurants where families come to satisfy their biological need for food. McDonald’s offers ‘happy meals’ in a
nice package complete with food and entertainment. When you go to McDonald's you can expect to be served a relatively quick and inexpensive meal (compared to other types of restaurants) of your choice from a selection posted above the counter. Without grocery shopping or cooking you can sit down with a (more or less) warm meal. McDonald's provides entertainment and diversions in the form of newspapers, TVs, PlayPlace, toys, and artwork by children and Monet. When done eating you can easily dispose of the remains on a plastic tray in a nearby trashcan. The McDonald's experience may vary slightly from one restaurant to another, but the experience is generally the same.

The 'happy meal' experience may be the key to McDonald’s popularity among families with younger children. The informal meal experience at McDonald’s has a certain family appeal in its predictability and familiarity, and most importantly the kids seem to like McDonald's. The parents are relaxed and free of many of the tasks of putting together a family meal. By letting McDonald’s do the work, the parents can enjoy their food and concentrate their efforts on making sure the children eat.

A. The Customers.

An interesting finding was the types of families and people who were observed in the restaurants. Adults with children was the most frequent type of customer observed, followed by men eating alone, couples without children, and very few teenagers. Thus, compared to the picture of the typical fast food patron (see Bradley, 1995 and National Restaurant Association, 1983) the evening meal seemed to attract a
certain type of customer to eat in the restaurant as opposed to carrying out or going through the drive-through. It is interesting to note that I did not see any women eating by themselves but single women with children was the most often observed family constellation. The observation that single mothers not only came in larger numbers than other families but also stayed longer than other customers suggests that McDonald’s is particularly suitable for single parents with children. It is possible that the fun, easy, and conflict-free atmosphere makes McDonald’s a comfortable place for single parents. After all, single parents face the challenge of controlling, monitoring, and socializing their children all by themselves and while eating, so it may not be surprising that they take advantage of all the help that they can get. McDonald’s lends the parents a helping hand by providing food, labor, and entertainment for a small price: The parents can accomplish their goal of satisfying a biological need for food and the process is eased by the cooperation of the children. The children love the food and entertainment at McDonald’s and therefore do not complain or object to the food.

Ronald McDonald tells us that families are welcome at McDonald’s. Senior citizens can get discounted prices on coffee and soft drinks and children have their special ‘Happy Meal.’ Only teenagers do not seem welcome inside the restaurant during dinnertime, except for behind the counter. The sign in the PlayPlace clearly discriminates against this group of the population. Ronald McDonald says that children between the ages of 3 and 12 are allowed to play in the structure and he invites parents to play as well. During my observations I only saw a few teenagers eating at
McDonald’s. The two surveys I have referred to in describing fast food consumers (Bradley, 1995; National Restaurant Association, 1983) do not include teenagers separately. It is likely that teenagers are included in the household statistics but not as individual consumers. As for McDonald’s and teenage appeal, the literature does not have much to say. In a McDonald’s biography, Love (1995) traces the success of the developing McDonald empire back to the 1930’s and the McDonald brothers who started the business as a carhop drive-in. The carhops attracted teenagers on weekend nights but a larger segment, families, was discovered through product and procedure inventions (Love, 1995). The discovery led to a new marketing strategy which attracted adults by appealing to children (Love, 1995). From my observations it looks like the family appeal is still a McDonald’s trademark.

Ronald does not seem to discriminate against ethnicity and social status. The McDonald’s employees who help him serve ‘happy meals’ are black, white, and Latino men and women ages 40 and younger. The customers also reflect an ethnic variety. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ronald is a clown. He is not affiliated with a specific ethnic group. His face is painted white but nobody knows what is underneath the makeup. He wears a constant smile and claims to be a friend to all the children.

A survey of fast food patrons (National Restaurant Association, 1983) found convenience to be a major reason for choosing a fast food place. The concentration of

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13 I saw four teenagers eating with their parents and younger siblings, two groups of teenagers with desserts and beverages, and a high school football team with their parents and coaches.
14 See page 21 in the literature review section for results of these two surveys.
blacks and Latinos in certain restaurants located in areas where these groups are predominant may suggest that people choose a McDonald’s close to home.

The customers are well trained; they know exactly what to do. From the white single mother patiently waiting in line for 10 minutes with her son, to the Latino father of four making two trips to the trashcan after the Sunday dinner while the mother took care of the youngest child. The basic procedure at McDonald’s is the same for the family in the shiny Ford Explorer and the family in the rusty Datsun. At McDonald’s everyone is equal. The families come to McDonald’s to eat, not to flaunt social status. However, I did observe management differences in the McDonald’s locations. The north and the west location were noticeably different in the cleanliness and cleanliness priorities which resulted in a different eating environment within each McDonald’s restaurant.

Throughout the stay at the restaurant the families follow social norms of common courtesy and at no times did I see conflicts between families in the restaurant. An example is the line of customers in front of the counter. People line up behind those who came before and are served in the order in which they entered. Even when the wait is long (at times up to 10 minutes); most people patiently wait until it is their turn. I was the only person not to master this activity since I was cut in front of twice by other people who walked straight to the counter after they entered the restaurant. I am not sure what I did wrong or what the reason was for this seemingly rare behavior. Maybe both times were coincidences, or maybe I kept too long of a courtesy distance to the customer in front of me. Maybe I did not look like I fit in and was subject to discrimination. The first incident was at the North location where a young, black couple cut in front of me. The second time was a south location where a white woman with two black children did the same.

Overall, the dinner ritual at McDonald’s lasts less than the 30 minutes average
for the dinner meal at home (Visser, 1991). My findings suggest that there may be ethnic and gender differences in the average length of stay. I only observed two black families, both single men, and they had the shortest average stay, but it is hard to make a general claim based on such a small sample. However, overall men stayed for shorter periods of time than women. The Latino families had the longest average stay. Two two-parent families at the south location in the Mexican neighborhood largely contributed to this number. The differences in length of stay among different ethnic groups may suggest ethnic mealtime differences. The finding that the average meal lasts slightly less than the meal eaten at home, may be an indication of the emphasis on efficiency at McDonald’s. McDonald’s literally serves fast food. The texture of the food is soft and encourages fast consumption.

B. How Families Make Themselves at Home

The families dining at McDonald’s create their own space where family members are in close proximity to each other. The table is the focal point of the meal and also serves as a ‘home base’ where family members meet and return to after picking up food and food related items, playing, or going to the restroom. In addition, parents attempt to maintain boundaries to the surrounding environment by enforcing rules that restrict the amount of interaction between the family and its surroundings. The rule of staying seated while eating is an example hereof.

The customer cleaning behaviors are interesting. Fast food patrons have been reported to have high cleanliness expectations (National Restaurant Association, 1983).
Although McDonald's places cleanliness as a priority (Love, 1995), the observations reveal a picture where the restaurants are far from being spotless. The customers, women in particular, are aware of this flaw and take matters in their own hands in the preparation phase. Wiping off the table and seats is the most frequent type of cleaning behavior. The observation that no one lets the food touch the table may also be related to cleanliness. One of the most interesting and unique preparation behaviors was the mother who laid out napkins on the table as a tablecloth. Here is an attempt to individualize the McDonald's environment. She may have been concerned about food touching the table or she could have wanted a more formal meal. She was eating with her son and the son's father on a Sunday and they were all dressed in what looked like their Sunday best (suit and tie, dress and high heels).

C. Parents and Children. (Research Question 1 and 2)

I observed gender differences in the parents' interaction with children. In families with both a father and a mother, the mothers had more interactions with children at the table through food distribution, helping, disciplining, and conversation. The finding suggests that although the mother is relieved of the task of preparing a meal, she takes on the main responsibility of the children.

The fathers' (both single and two-parent) interaction with their children seemed to encourage independence from the children. The fathers often inquired about the children's opinion and desires. Fathers, more than mothers, asked their children about food preferences and about what the children wanted to do next. However, this
behavior could also be reflective of how well the fathers' know their children, which suggests that fathers know less about their children than the mothers do. On the other hand, the fathers displayed more playing behaviors and playing interaction with their children (tickling, chasing kid in the play structure). In two-parent families, fathers were first to get up and take the children to 'PlayPlace'.

One group of families is particularly interesting, when looking at socialization behaviors, the single mothers eating with children. The group of single mothers is characteristic of a high amount of control attempts. Overall, mothers rank high in enforcement of manners and restrictive behaviors. In addition to these behaviors, the single mothers display a high frequency of telling the child to eat. This may be the female way to tell the child to hurry without sounding like they rush the child or it may reflect a motherly concern for the child’s health that involves eating.

Also interesting is the finding that the parents' control attempts do not seem to have an effect on the children’s enthusiasm. Most children look happy and content and they chatter throughout most of the meal. Even in families where repeated control attempts take place, the child’s behavior does not seem to change.

2. Children at McDonald's. (Research Question 2)

The ‘Happy Meal’ is designed for children and it also reflects the overall meal experience. McDonald's is a place for children. It is quick, easy, worry-free, task free, conflict free, and in many ways designed for a child. Any day of the week can be a
McDonald’s day. Parents and grandparents take children to McDonald’s and sometimes friends can go too.

The food items have fun names and they are easy to eat. McDonald’s serves finger food and the drinks have straws. McDonald’s has a special meal for children called a ‘Happy Meal’ and it never has broccoli or other things in it children do not like. Children can play at McDonald’s and they get a toy when they order at ‘Happy Meal’. The toys are fun. Children recognize the toys from Disney movies and other fads such as the Beanie Babies.

Even the furniture at McDonald’s is fun. Some of the chairs spin around and children can stand on the chairs and benches with their shoes on. Children do not have to worry about spilling at McDonald’s because everything can be wiped off and if there is a spill, a McDonald’s employee cleans up after you.

McDonald’s has a play area and TVs so children never have to be bored. The play area is colorful and fun. There are tubes in different colors where children can climb through and look out of little windows. Children know McDonald’s. They go there often enough that they recognize the place and know their way around. Ronald McDonald, the fun clown, guides their play and makes sure that they have a ‘happy’ meal.

So what are children learning from the meal experience at McDonald’s? The socialization that takes place through the child’s immersion in the McDonald’s environment is far more complex than the parental socialization. In addition to the
parental socialization there is the socialization from the eating environment involving the physical surroundings, the McDonald's employees, and the other restaurant guests.

Children are taught a number of lessons in the McDonald's environment. They are taught lessons about public behavior, food, meals, gender roles, and environmental issues.

Public behavior is taught by the parents and reinforced by the environment. The children watch what their parents do and see other people doing the same. Throughout the stay at the restaurant the families follow social norms of common courtesy and at no times are there conflicts between families in the restaurant. Queuing is one example. Public distance and territoriality are other examples of public conduct, which are taught through the private space that the family creates around the dinner table and protects through rules. Once a family has chosen a table, other guests do not attempt to sit at the same table. During my observations there were always available tables in the main dining area but the west location 'PlayPlace' eating area was fully occupied during some of my visits. After a glance through the window to the 'PlayPlace', parents would tell their children that they could not sit in the 'PlayPlace' because there were no tables available. The tables do not lend themselves to being shared either. At some locations there are a lot of small tables for two so families with more than two people sit at different tables located side by side. Also, moving tables and chairs is impossible at the locations where tables and chairs are bolted to the floor. The lack of interaction between different families teaches children to keep a distance and to respect other
people’s privacy. Mothers shushing their children is an example of teaching children respect for other people.

Children also learn important lessons about food. They learn that food is readily available in abundance. The food is prepared by strangers, often young men and women, and it is served in wrappers and boxes. Food can be obtained quickly and it is easy to eat. Children learn that food looks and tastes the same from one visit to the next. The food is processed into unrecognizable forms. The ‘Chicken McNuggets’ do not look like any part of a chicken and the square, fried fish in the ‘Filet-O-Fish’ sandwich bears little resemblance to a real fish. Even the all-American apple pie has taken a new form at McDonald’s. It is a handy, rectangular shaped pie which can be consumed without the use of utensils. In addition to what the children see are also the things that children do not see. They do not see how the food is prepared and the work that is a part of the food preparation.

The food at McDonald’s is sweet and salty. Spencer (1983) says that McDonald’s food is “unctuous” (p. 88) and that is has “seductive qualities ... that appeal to our gastronomic moral weaknesses” (p.88). Continuous visits to McDonald’s may also have an impact on children’s future food habits. It has been stated that fast food customers can grow so accustomed to fast food that they prefer it to home cooked food (McIntosh, 1995).

Children learn that a meal means sitting down around a table and eating. The parents teach their children that it is important and good to eat. They learn if they do what their parents tell them to do, they will be rewarded with praise, toys, and playtime.
The underlying value seems capitalistic, in the sense that you do not get something for nothing. McDonald's helps the parents by providing the rewards for the children. Children also learn that dinner at McDonald's means having a 'happy meal' in more ways than one. Dinner is not only fun, it is also a time where children get a lot of attention from their parents. The disciplining and monitoring of the children’s behavior do not seem to have a negative effect on the children. The parents’ objective of consumption and the children’s objective of playing are compatible at McDonald’s.

From the interaction with white parents,16 children are taught the rules of negotiation from their fathers, and table manners from their mothers. Conversation is shifty and centered around eating and playing. A meal at McDonald’s is not a time for conflict or in-depth conversation.

Children learn important lessons concerning aesthetics and environmental issues. The McDonald’s meal experience is in many ways an artificial experience. The interior is artificial with imitation wood and marble, artificial plants, and reproduced prints from artwork. The McDonald’s environment teaches children that it is perfectly natural and convenient to eat from disposable dishes.

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16 The Latino population is not included because of my language limitations and the black parents did not display these types of behaviors.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

When I started this study, I was interested in the family meal at McDonald’s as a family dinner ritual and the socialization of children that takes place at McDonald’s restaurants. The findings show that the family meal at McDonald’s can be described as a ‘happy meal’ where parents and children enjoy their dinner with the help of McDonald’s.

The family dinner ritual at McDonald’s has many similarities to the dinner at home. Although there is no set place to eat, the families create their own spatial boundaries around the dinner table. The ritual consists of the same three distinct phases: preparation, consumption, and clean up. Contrary to the dinner at home, McDonald’s is present in all three phases. McDonald’s prepares the meal, provides entertainment, and takes care of most of the clean up (cleaning after cooking, wiping off the tables, and cleaning the eating environment). In accordance with the literature on family dinners (e.g. Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973; Grieshaber, 1997), family interaction and socialization of children are also taking place at dinnertime at McDonald’s. Contrary to the literature (Douglas, 1968), dinnertime at McDonald’s is not a time for conflict.

On the bright side, dinnertime at McDonald’s appears to be a fun and happy event where children and parents get to spend time together. The families do not have
to worry about the practicalities of the meal and can concentrate on eating. On the other hand, there are certain elements of the family dinner from my readings that are not taking place at McDonald's, but there are also additional circumstances specific to the McDonald's environment. The family dinner at McDonald's is lacking in-depth conversation and sharing of personal experiences between parents and children. It is ironic that the family time at McDonald's is spent talking about the Happy Meal toy and less about family members (e.g. the how was your day ritual). The family members do not share intimate personal feelings or broaden their knowledge of each other as individuals. The reason for this, could arguably be the McDonald's environment. The family time at McDonald's appears to be heavily influenced by McDonald's. Children are obviously distracted by the entertainment devices and the people in the eating environment. They watch other children play in the 'PlayPlace,' play with the 'Happy Meal' toy or want to play with the toy, and watch people around them. Parents also look at the TVs, read the newspapers provided by McDonald's, and read and talk about the 'Happy Meal' toy. Along with the distraction is also the awareness of being in a public place. Despite the private space that is created and the similarities with the family dinner at home, it is still obviously not like a meal at home where you can say and do anything.

At this point I would like to question how 'happy' the meals at McDonald's really are. It has been proposed that a look at the family meal is a "microscopic portrait" (Douglas, 1968, p. 184) of the family. If this is true for the families at McDonald's, I am concerned about the values that children are taught in the
McDonald’s environment. I am not referring to the families who pay an occasional visit to McDonald’s but rather the families to whom the McDonald’s visit is a routine activity. The ‘dishes’ or lack thereof are an issue all their own. The waste that is generated at McDonald’s must be enormous. It may seem convenient at the time to simply clean up by throwing away but what about the environmental concerns in the long run?

Despite my experience that McDonald’s restaurants were not always standardized, in that the employees did not always wear the uniforms with the McDonald’s logo, the restaurants varied in cleanliness, and the ordering process was not always quick and streamlined, standardization was apparent. The customers basically receive the same service and product regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and social status. The positive outcome to of this type of standardization is (arguably) equality. However, the interaction with the McDonald’s employees is also mechanical and impersonal. Ritzer (1996) has coined the term McDonaldization to describe the rationalization that takes place at McDonald’s and other businesses. Efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control are the characteristics of McDonaldization which arguably take their toll on the customers. Using the terminology of Deetz (1992), a ‘colonization’ of the family meal seems to take place at McDonald’s with McDonald’s as the colonizer. The family meal has taken on a new form outside of the home which reminds me of a classical discussion of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.

Briefly explained, Gemeinschaft is the notion of the close and meaningful relationships

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17 See Tönnies (1957) for a presentation and discussion of the two concepts.
between people and their community in the pre-industrial society. Gesellschaft, on the other hand, is the loss of community as a result of the rise of urban industrialism. Relative to this study, the family dinner at home represents Gemeinschaft with its close social relationships, and the family dinner at McDonald’s represents Gesellschaft with its loss of ‘community’. There are signs at McDonald’s that emphasize their role in the outside community through sponsorship of sports and school programs. However, inside McDonald’s there is little interaction between the guests, and the guests and the employees. The children in the ‘PlayPlace’ do not appear to be playing with each other unless they know each other. Parents do not talk to other parents and guests rarely talk to other guests. It is possible that the styles of interactions at McDonald’s suggest an “uncivilized sociality,” as argued by Finkelstein (1989). The customers at McDonald’s are not explicitly unpleasant to each other but they are not antagonistic either. They follow norms of social conduct but they are not friendly to one another.

Embedded in the Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft is a sense of nostalgia which characterizes my view of the family dinner and some of the literature on the family dinner. The notion of a family meal may be an idealized one. Who is to know if the families at McDonald’s have more meaningful interaction than at home where they perhaps watch TV and argue about chores? Still, I hope that the McDonaldization does not find its way to Denmark as it has here in the United States of America. I am yet to see people eating off of paper or plastic plates on a TV tray in their home. Personally, I wish to remain a fast food amateur.
Limitations

The study is limited by the geographic locations of the selected McDonald’s restaurants, the relatively small number of families in the analysis, the unequal representation of different ethnic groups in the data and in the literature review, and the method and timing of data gathering.

The McDonald’s restaurants in this study are all located in Omaha, Nebraska. The findings of this study may be limited to this Midwestern city. Remarkably different American cities and populations, such as New York or Los Angeles, could show different ethnic representations and different meal patterns. It is also possible that a different selection of McDonald’s restaurants within the city of Omaha would have yielded a different result.

Another limitation of the study is the sample size of the families that were part of the analysis. A total of 178 units were observed and of these 58 families were part of the main analysis. Within the 58 families in the main sample, detailed information about all parts of the meal was not obtained in all cases. In some cases, lengths of stay or conversation were not recorded because of lack of visibility or audibility. In other cases I was not able to record conversations because I do not understand Spanish. Therefore the sample size was smaller for some parts of the analysis.

Ethnic groups are not equally represented in the study. Seven families represent the Latino families and only two families represent the black population. The Asian-American population is even less visible. A single woman with a girl is the only Asian
family and it is not part of the main study. An another single woman with two Asian
children and two white children is the only other Asian adult with Asian children.
Otherwise, the Asian population is only represented in families with white parents and
Asian children. As a result, the comparisons between and within ethnic groups and the
conclusions drawn from these comparisons are based on small samples. The literature
review also lacks research of ethnic groups. During my research I mostly encountered
literature on nutritional differences between ethnic groups. This study will hopefully
contribute to the limited literature on meal differences between ethnic groups.

The participant observation method of data gathering presents a number of
limitations to the study. Problems of audibility, visibility, and language during the data
gathering process have already been mentioned. Using the researcher as the main
instrument of data collection presents another problem. A major limitation of the study
is its ethical legitimacy. There are ethical issues to be considered, since my presence in
the restaurants as a researcher was not made known to the subjects or to the
McDonald’s employees. The advantages and disadvantages of open and covert research
are a classic dilemma for the field researcher. I deliberately decided to be unknown
because I wanted to see the ‘undisturbed’ behavior and my study was primarily
descriptive. However, had I chosen to disclose my researcher status I could have
incorporated other methods of data gathering such as interviewing.

The last limitation is related to the timing of the study. The study was
conducted in the Spring and early Summer. It is possible that a study conducted in the
Winter months would have found different patterns and results.
Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research. Future research might compare observations from other McDonald’s restaurants or other fast food restaurants to the findings of this study.

I strongly recommend that future research use triangulation, particularly interviewing. Interviews with McDonald’s managers might be useful to obtain information about how the restaurant caters to the families with children, as the literature suggests, and about the individual restaurant’s customer service philosophy.

It could be interesting to explore the differences and similarities in the family dinner ritual between ethnic groups. A larger sample of different ethnic groups with each group equally represented could form the foundation for comparison.

The differences between socialization behaviors in men and women found in this study deserve more attention. First of all, it would be interesting to see if a replication of this study would show a similar pattern. Second, it is possible that the socialization behavior categories could be broken into subcategories that could provide more insight to the different behaviors.

An understanding of the family dinner ritual at McDonald’s and how the family members experience it could be obtained by interviews with restaurant guests or a different sample of people. Finally, interviews with children could be interesting. Children could tell what they actually experience at McDonald’s and how eating at McDonald’s is different from eating at home.
References


Ronald Revisited – the world of Ronald McDonald (pp. 85-93). Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press.


Appendices
### Appendix A.

Table 1. Family types at different McDonald’s locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>High W/B/L/M</th>
<th>Medium W/B/L/M</th>
<th>Low W/B/L/M</th>
<th>Uncategorized W/B/L/M</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

(W=White/B=Black/L=Latino/M=Multi-ethnic)
Appendix B.
Table 2.
Distribution of ethnic and family constellations across the levels of involvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOW INVOLVEMENT</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Multi-Ethnic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Men</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Women</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Parent Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEDIUM INVOLVEMENT</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Multi-Ethnic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Men</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Women</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Parent Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGH INVOLVEMENT</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Multi-Ethnic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Men</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Women</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Parent Family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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