

# **'A DAY IN THE LIFE': Exploring eating events involving two-year-old girls and their families in diverse communities**

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*This article reports on a specific aspect of a larger study of 'a day in the life' of five two-and-a-half-year-old girls in families in Canada, Italy, Peru, Thailand and the UK. The larger study involved filming each of the five children in their family contexts for one whole day and studying a number of emerging themes related to the child's development. The focus is on mealtimes and eating. Culture is regarded as a dynamic dimension of the child's socialisation through which family practices around eating (often neglected as a research focus) are explored. Using the concept of an 'eating event', by analogy with a 'literacy event', close examination of video sequences reveal the extent to which children and carers, with differing desires and intentions, negotiate and collaborate to achieve mutually satisfactory ends.*

## **'A day in the life' and eco-cultural frameworks: Towards the investigation of young children's eating practices**

Given the salience of practices around eating in the socialisation of young children, it is quite astonishing that this area has been greatly neglected in childhood studies. Calls for further research into aspects of children's lives and socialisation that takes a broader approach to that traditionally belonging to Western psychology are not, of course, new. However, as Nsamenang (1992) argues, it remains particularly true in the discipline of educational studies that some aspects of everyday life remain curiously occluded from academic attention, presumably owing to the dominance of attention on 'individual cognition' traditional in Western developmental psychology.

Why should practices around eating be of particular interest to those concerned with processes of socialisation and informal learning? Working from our interest in how children shape, and are shaped by, culture, we would identify three nested reasons. First, in an eco-cultural approach to studying childhood, it makes sense to consider the realities of daily life in their complexity and diversity (Miller, 1996; Rogoff, 2003). Second, as confirmed in the few studies of family eating practices and dialogues around them (e.g. Newson & Newson, 1968; Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001), this is an aspect of life of considerable emotional significance to caregivers and their children, an arena where dramas may be played out daily. Third, in thinking about eating as a practice, we would agree with Richards (1998) that theories of development should be 'epigenetic', that is take account of the complex interplay between elements of society and the individual at both the psychological and biological levels. He writes that epigenetic theories 'begin

with a notion of a system in which there are multiple interconnections and which is hierarchically organised into multiple levels from societies through individuals to cells and their chemical constituents. Mutual influence is to be found at all levels.' (Richards, 1998, p. 143).

In terms of our preferred theoretical and interpretive framework, this paper positions itself within the 'new social studies of childhood' (see James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 3). We regard children as social actors who, through their personal agency, actively shape as well as influence the family and cultural contexts in which they live.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this study is discussed in detail elsewhere (Gillen et al., forthcoming). Here we outline our methods relatively briefly. Working under the umbrella of a Canadian Research Development Initiative, the first author and her primary co-investigator (Cameron) initiated the project, working with researchers from developmental psychology, psychiatry and education in Thailand, Canada, Peru, Italy and the UK, as well as with Canadian research assistants. The local research partners found families with an apparently thriving two-and-a-half-year-old girl who were willing to engage in the project by inviting the researchers into their home for an entire day in their daughters' lives. We sought to redress the paucity of research that focuses on strength-based analysis of female resilience by choosing only girls. Although the families were middle income in their context, there was no other way demographic or other characteristics were 'sampled' in this study, other than that we worked with families with positive interest in the project, viewed as an exploration of what makes 'strong' children (see Gillen et al. for further discussion

of this notion in various cultural contexts). During early meetings interviews took place, the environment was informally 'mapped', and pilot filming done to help accustom participants to the filming process.

During the 'day in the life' two researchers videotaped the children's activities and interactions with their families and recorded field notes to enhance our understanding of the contexts of these exchanges. At this stage in the research it still had not occurred to us that a focus on eating might become a specific strand of investigation. However, we were planning an interpretive approach, ready to examine our data many times in dialogues with our research partners and participants. We drew upon Becker (1996, p. 67) who advocates an approach to analysis that is 'precise, in the sense of being close to the thing discussed and thus being ready to take account of matters not anticipated...'

Filming was done for most of the child's day, other than sleeping and bathroom episodes. It had been emphasised to the caregivers that they could halt filming at any time, and researchers were ready to cease at any sign of a child's discomfort; however, this latter did not occur. In each site at least six hours of film was obtained.

The primary investigators independently viewed the videotapes and together edited a half-hour compilation of about six short episodes that illustrated a range of the child's activities and interests. The next, iterative phase of the research involved showing the composite of the selected video clips to the families [see Hsueh & Tobin (2003); Tobin, Wu & Davidson (1989) for development of a method of 'multi-vocal ethnography' utilising videotape]. We had questions prepared to stimulate discussion, with regard to eliciting observations, opinions that might further illuminate values, and caregivers' memories of their own childhoods. However, these questions were hardly needed as discussions flowed. This phase was also videotaped and analysed; where necessary (for these authors) translations were made into English and interpreted by individuals indigenous to the context. It was during the analysis of the iterative phase of the research that eating began to emerge for the authors of this paper as a potentially fertile aspect for further consideration (Hancock & Gillen, 2004; Gillen & Hancock, 2005). Other combinations of research partners are investigating other topics, for example resiliency (Cameron, Tapanya & Gillen, 2006) and musicality (Young, Didkowsky & Gillen, 2004; Young, Gillen & Cameron, 2005).

### **Towards a notion of an 'eating event'**

Detailed perusal of the video and other qualitative data in this project rapidly brought eating as an activity firmly

in the purview of 'cultural practices'. We use Bourdieu's (1990) notion of 'habitus'—the socially acquired, embodied predispositions in relation to the family. Bourdieu emphasised agency in his conceptualisation of practices. The family habitus provides many opportunities for a set of potential ways of acting, but it is for the child and family to take these up, to improvise anew (Tomanovic, 2004). As we shall seek to describe, we found much complexity in the subtle interactions and negotiations around eating practices and indeed in the literal embodiment of these.

Searching for a way to delineate the occasions we were studying, we developed the notion of 'eating event' by direct analogy to the more familiar concept of 'literacy event'. In her landmark study, *Ways with words*, Heath (1983, p. 386) defines a literacy event as 'any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role'. Such a conception became necessary in the field of literacy studies when it was recognised that the narrow conceptualisation of 'reading' as 'decoding the text of a book' missed a great proportion of authentic literacy learning engagements. For example, studies of emergent literacy have found that engagements with environmental print such as street signs often constitute a salient element of early literacy experiences (Hall, 1987).

Defining an eating event as 'any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the offering and/or consumption of food plays a role' is useful in making a move towards detaching ourselves from preconceptions around the consumption of food anchored in our own culture. Additionally, in adopting the notion of an 'event' involving food, it is important, as with literacy (see, for instance, Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic, 1993), not to forget the extent to which eating in families is immersed in social contexts that provide meaning.

To prefigure one selected engagement below, it might be useful to mention a discussion of Canadian Candice's engagement with a Popsicle with a colleague. Rejecting this segment of data as irrelevant to any consideration of 'eating'—as it was 'clearly not part of a mealtime'—the colleague evidently shared the judgment of Newson and Newson (1968) in their longitudinal study of children in an urban English community. In line with the values of the studied community, the researchers equated 'eating' precisely with 'mealtimes' and did not consider it in any other context. Yet it has also been argued that such judgements may occlude cultural significance; and that examining everyday eating, in whatever contexts it may occur, may be of value, even if it is not always easy to access. As Cheung (2005, p. 259) introduces his study of the 'low'

cuisine of Hong Kong:

*Food and eating practices, currently as in the past, function as important markers of cultural identity ... yet it is often difficult to trace the channels through which these entities perform meaning as they are so much a part of the mundane material 'stuff' of everyday life...*

One final reason for making use of the New Literacy Studies concept of literacy event is in the links discovered with play (Barton, 1994; Hall, 1987). We note a similar embeddedness of eating events within play and vice versa, or at least playful dispositions and spontaneous interests, as our analysis will reveal. Our data suggests that the imperative to explore and play while eating is ever-present for all five studied children. Children, it seemed, were reluctant to suspend their 'way of being' (see Thomson & Philo, 2004) when adults were making demands upon them with regard to eating.

An aspect of caregivers' habitus within the cultures we studied was a self-conscious responsibility for the child's nutrition. Eating as a nurturing activity has been proposed as a universal aspect of caregiving across time and place (Newson & Newson, 1968) although, at times of social upheaval, war and deprivation, such a pattern must be disrupted to some extent. However, this aspect of caregiving is not shared entirely by the child. The child is unlikely to have the 'long view' in terms of health and growth, and is a relatively short-term thinker in her approach to food. She may not be 'hungry' as such, or perhaps 'hunger' is in itself part of the family habitus, something that has to be learned as a cultural practice. After all, adults often project plans for action in a rhythmic timeframe to include breaks for sustenance and rest (Scollon, 2005). For a child absorbed in play, a degree of hunger may not be something that requires immediate attention or a projected 'break'. It may be objected that there must be something 'natural' in hunger—but reflection on the claims of epigenetic theories can cause one to remember cultural practices around even the tiniest of infants (e.g. feeding 'every four hours') so that even 'hunger' can be entwined with change at the social level (Richards, 1998). From a very early period in our lives, there may be inextricable links between 'being comforted' and eating, setting up patterns of feedback and reinforcement. So, with co-occurring intentions, interests and purposes, eating events are cultural practices, sites for the exercise of agency in negotiation with others.

Following, to give a sense of the range of eating events in our wider study, we will describe five selected episodes, from each of our families, presenting some interpretation of what appear to be salient features of the activities. We utilise as data the short section of video referred to, our

contextual knowledge of the entire 'day' and its range of eating events, field notes, later translations when appropriate, and material from the interviews and iterative stage discussions with the five families. The selection of the clip concerned is not motivated as being either highly exceptional or 'typical' of the eating events available, partly because in practice for us neither of these aspects have emerged as potential characterisations.

## Peru

Figure 1.



Lina's aunt feeds her spaghetti and *papa huancaína* while her cousin brings her a hat.

Lina's family lives in a mountain village in Peru. Child Lina engaged in eating events in a number of locations within the compound that was her extended family home and place of economic activity. She first enjoyed a prolonged breakfast while on her bed and also ate various small items in the shop with her mother. These were not so much bounded events reminiscent of a 'mealtime', rather extended involvements which were interwoven with play and family life. The eating event we have selected is clearly bounded and takes place when her aunt feeds her from a plate of spaghetti and *papa huancaína* (potatoes with sweet cheese sauce), followed by a drink. Interacting with Lina as she eats are her aunt, six-year-old cousin, and her grandfather. This eating event lasted about nine minutes, shortly after midday.

During these minutes Lina eats a considerable amount, occasionally pausing and pointing at her still-full mouth to regulate the next spoonful. However, there is not a rushed feel to the event, for Lina's diversions are tolerated and even expanded upon. For example, she calls for a nearby hat; her cousin fetches it for her to put on her head; and her aunt repeats the word several times, possibly gently correcting her pronunciation. Indeed there is a 'scaffolding' (Bruner, 1975) feel to the language interactions; as the aunt expands upon Lina's utterances and links them to feeding her. During the field interview the family had emphasised the importance of nutrition in this cold, mountainous area to which some degree of prosperity had come only

recently. Infant mortality was a spectre that still haunted. So, as Lina notices a bird, the aunt incorporates interest in her observation with pursuit of her nurturing purposes: 'What? Birdie? Let's see eat for the little bird—for tweetie, tweetie. Ok, chew more, chew, chew. Eat.' When Lina feels she has eaten enough, a face-saving solution is negotiated; Lina takes the remainder of the food to her grandfather, who is apparently going to continue feeding her; he wields the spoon energetically but never actually feeds Lina.

The occasion has a feeling of an established eating arrangement. Eating—the process of gaining nutrition—is clearly central to this specific event, emphasised by the aunt with the young cousin also 'in attendance'. At the same time, Lina effectively orchestrates additional interests to enrich this 'mealtime' event.

## Canada

Figure 2.



Candice dances along to a toy snake while holding a Popsicle. Her mother looks on with a drink.

Candice's family lives in a farmhouse in Nova Scotia. The selected sequence is approximately eight minutes. It's mid-morning (9.44am); Candice and her one-year-old sister are snacking, interacting with their mother and playing. Previously Candice had eaten part of a muffin, but went into the kitchen saying, to her mother, 'Oh, my tummy hurts. I don't want that.' Mother then offered her a frozen yoghurt Popsicle, which she took. The sequence begins where mother, Candice and baby sister return to the living/play room.

Candice has evolved a bouncing game on the child's couch while eating—a favourite place to be and an enjoyed physical activity which, on this occasion, is integrated with eating. Rasmussen (2004) makes the distinction between 'places for children' (designed by adults for children) and 'children's places' (a place rendered significant by children). The child's couch seems to be the former, but it's become a place that enables physical activity and play. It's thus a place to which Candice attributes personal meaning, although it is not actually designed for her bouncing movements. Mother's stillness, when sitting in a chair drinking, is in contrast to Candice's playing; it serves to contrast the

worlds of adult and child even though they are together in the same room. Candice's need for spontaneous movement is accepted and encouraged by mother, but sucking the Popsicle requires some concentration and there are pauses to savour its taste. In terms of Candice's development and learning, there seems to be a great deal happening: there's exploration, movement, music, imaginary play, social interaction and word-play through a song. At one point this prolonged eating for Candice spontaneously becomes a kind of family 'mealtime': mother is sitting in the chair, helping and encouraging Candice, and also has access to a drink herself.

## Thailand

Figure 3.



Nong (right) is eating her noodles while her sister, at intervals, takes some of Nong's food and drink for herself.

Nong's family lives on the periphery of a city in Thailand. The selected six-minute eating event occurring around midday revolves around a bowl of noodles provided by Nong's mother, consumed on the balcony of her aunt's house. Nong sits in surroundings much more luxurious than her immediate family's quarters. She is accompanied by her six-year-old sister who shares a considerable amount of the food, although the mother has left to purchase a portion for the older girl at a nearby street stall. Nong's aunt is inside, within earshot and, potentially, sightline.

The interaction is characterised by two sets of counterbalancing features: two senses in which contradictory processes seem to be taking place at the same time. One is the coexistence of eating and play in the girls' game of spinning bottle tops down the length of the table (requiring frequent movement and thus not immediately commensurate with the relative stillness required to eat a bowl of noodles). The second is the almost constant swinging between support and rivalry by the two sisters. Nong initially appears to try to elicit help in separating noodles with the spoon, but when her sister moves in on the food she is warded off through non-verbal vocalisations and gestures. Indeed the older sister, when adult surveillance is absent (the non-interfering



researchers do not count for this purpose), succeeds in taking some of the noodles and drink. Nong also picks up on her sister's modelling of two different ways of engaging with the noodles, by hand and with a spoon. Both sisters operate with fine movements. This is shown by the length of time and number of 'mouthfuls' they take from a fairly small bowl, which was evidently only partly filled at the beginning.

Nong's expressions of emotion seem to fluctuate between objection and appeal to her sister in the matter of food. She nonetheless shows a more constantly positive attitude towards the game that is taking place. Family eating practices can evidently provide the locus for complex affective exchanges that have certainly been noticed as characteristic of family mealtimes (Hérot, 2002).

## Italy

**Figure 4.**



Beatrice eats a meal of focaccia bread and meat sauce at the kitchen table while her parents encourage and participate.

Beatrice and her mother and father live in a city in Italy, in a small apartment with a balcony. The eating event studied here is 10 minutes long, during Beatrice's midday meal. Her mother has already cooked pasta for her, but it was 'too hot' so she didn't eat very much. The sequence begins with Beatrice eating bread at the kitchen table; later sauce is added to the bowl. Both mother and father are involved in her meal. They provide food and sometimes feed her, although often she feeds herself. She also chooses to give them tastes. There is much conversation about food, as there is indeed at other times in the kitchen. The qualities and origins of food are a point of discussion; the parents show great concern for Beatrice's likes and dislikes. Such encouragement for articulation of values has been noticed in a large-scale study of families in urban Italy, where the researchers noted the active role the children played in their own socialisation (Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001).

To some extent this mealtime eating event has some qualities that make it particularly formal—with a beginning and end, and two people in careful attendance around the eater. In essence, Beatrice is eating alone, although she does actively draw her parents into the event through feeding

them. They are available despite not actually sitting at the table for the meal. Beatrice's engagement with the food is maintained by the surrounding life supporting her eating.

**Figure 5.**



Beatrice puts a bib on her doll (assisted by her mother) and pretends to feed it.

However, looking at this extract in context, we found very strong links to play. Soon afterwards Beatrice 'carries over' her personal experience of a formal eating event (and being fed) to a play situation when she does the same thing to her doll, situated on the apartment's balcony. This event is supported by her parents, who engage in the sociodramatic play, for example helping Beatrice to put a bib on her doll. Beatrice pretends to feed the doll with 'small spoonfuls'—it is as if she is re-enacting an eating event around herself at a slightly earlier age, one she still remembers and understands. Pontecorvo, Fasulo and Sterponi (2001) propose a concept of 'mutual apprentices': as the child is being socialised into the ways of the family, so the family is socialised into the ways of children. The way this 'pretend' eating event is played out seems to us very supportive of this notion.

When making the compilation tape to view with the family during the iterative stage, the two researchers did not include this 'pretend' eating event. This was commented on with surprise by the parents, who considered this 'mealtime' to be one of central importance to the family; this comment stimulated us to pursue this strand of investigation.

## UK

**Figure 6.**



Jessica (foreground) having lunch with her brother, supported by her mother (offering a sandwich) and grandmother (background).

Jessica's family lives in a large house in an English town. Jessica and her twin brother Matthew are having lunch at the kitchen table, supported by their mother and grandmother (who will lunch later during the children's 'nap'). The selected sequence is approximately four minutes. Initially, before the sequence begins, the children have been eating prepared plates of food (crisps, sausages, ham, apple, tomato and buttered bread) that their mother has brought.

Mother is sitting next to Jessica, who is playing with and eating a piece of ham. Close by is Matthew, with grandmother sitting next to him. Jessica moves across to her mother's lap and reaches for 'Thomas the Tank Engine' while her mother reaches for the plate of food. Then she makes a bridge with her fingers and says 'under the bridge'. Jessica and her brother are both coupling train carriages to their engines. Mother and grandmother are involved in this play but maintain the flow of the children's eating by periodically offering them items of food. Generally, the children accept this feeding arrangement.

The children take responsibility for leading their play; the adults lead the eating. The engines are also involved in eating. For instance, at one point mother offers Jessica a sausage, which Jessica offers to 'Thomas' then places back on the plate. Shortly afterwards, a sliced sausage offered to Jessica is offered to 'Thomas', after which Jessica eats it. A little later she decides to take a crisp from her plate without her mother's prompting, although this decision is noted by the response, 'You're going to eat your crisp?' Matthew then feeds his mother a crisp, and later Jessica does the same.

We note here the integration of imaginative play with a focused eating event. Adults are drawn in to support and stimulate play ideas and cooperative feeding. To a considerable extent there seems to be harmonisation of adult nutritional interests and child play interests. The adults, however, appear to be taking the long view in terms of eating and not play being the real purpose of the occasion. Play is supported in the interests of eating.

Our iterative data is revealing of the adults' perspectives on and concerns about eating events in this family. The grandfather, who with the grandmother was at that time staying over Monday to Friday for alternate weeks, speculated that 'some people might think it's a bit odd that we let them draw or play with things at mealtimes'. But he explained the trade-off behind this practice: 'I think we've always let them do this providing the eating continues.' The grandmother supported this position as she felt the children 'ate better when they had something else to do'.

Three months after the filming, the mother expressed her concern that the existing arrangement was no longer

working well 'because they draw and fiddle and don't eat'. There had been collective agreement for a need to be a 'little stricter' about things, given how Jessica was now of an age when she could better manage her own eating.

## Discussion and conclusion

What can be said about this range of eating events, all of which show important differences in terms of food, contexts, surrounding family habitus, social structure and cultural milieu?

First, we would draw attention to the agendas of the respective participants. Given that the five children in our study were all eating much of the food on offer, there does seem to be tacit understandings and shared eating agendas between children and carers. On those occasions which are most clearly 'mealtimes' (Peru, Italy, England) there is carer expectation that children will attend to eating. Nevertheless, despite strong carer signals about the importance of nutritional intake, these carers are still willing to enter into subtle bargaining with their children in order to maintain the flow of eating.

A related consideration concerns the pace of young children's eating. In Italy, Peru and the UK, the focused nature of the eating events signalled adult expectations about the time the meal should take and therefore the rate of eating. However, we cannot know how clearly the children sensed these expectations. Time passing is an adult preoccupation. Many adults would confirm that children seem to get lost in time, and this presents a potential difficulty for carers because, conceivably, a meal could be endless and undefined if adults totally accommodated children's interests. The sequences from Canada and Thailand offer a different view. In these eating events the children have control. Pace is not a consideration and both children integrate much physical movement and play into their eating.

Third, we note the readiness of all five children to play. Indeed, much of our video footage can be seen as five children at play. Mealtimes require more focus on the 'business' of eating and therefore could be seen as interruptions into the children's preferred way of being. Lim (2004, p. 483) draws attention to Dewey's emphasis on the aesthetic purpose of children 'enjoying the moment'. Eating events could make this difficult for children unless carers are willing to support their spontaneous mealtime explorations and 'distractions'. However, the children used mealtimes to pursue their interests, supported in this by their carers and siblings.

Fourth, to what extent is our notion of an eating event an actual event for the children? It seems from our observations that, although carers might implicitly denote eating

occasions as 'mealtimes', these seemed to be regarded by the children as happenings that still afforded opportunities for exploration and play—business as usual. Children might carry over previous interests into the eating event (trains in England; the bottle top game in Thailand). They might also carry over their personal experience of eating to stimulate further play (Beatrice in Italy feeding her doll).

This small-scale, in-depth study of five children from specific world locations suggests that children and their carers are approaching eating events from different perspectives. Adults have a distinctive focus on nutrition, whereas children want to integrate play into their eating. Children as 'strategic actors' (James & Prout, 1996, p. 47) are seen to be successfully intermingling their personal interests and, at the same time, meeting the expectations of their carers to eat food. The carers in our study, for their part, also appear adept at maintaining this harmony of interests. Our glimpses into the children's worlds seem to support a generally bi-directional view of socialisation (Hérot, 2002) as children and adults learn to co-construct their worlds. Close examination of (relatively) naturalistic data has assisted the analysis of this element of the eco-cultural framework within which these children and adults are learning how to develop their diverse needs and intentions in cooperation.

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