# Food, Family and Women: Constructing identity through food-related discourses

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# Abstract

This work focuses on the discursive practices that mothers employ when talking about different eating practices, themselves and family. Particular interest lies in the discourses regarding convenience foods. This research explores how mothers present convenience foods and draw from food-related discourses so as to construct and express a viable sense of personal and family identity. The linkage between the findings and the broader socio-cultural environment is discussed also.

The literature review represents some findings of previous research regarding identity construction, family identity, and relation between food, family and women. Additionally, the literature section covers the interplay between food and identity as well as findings concerning homemade meals and convenience food. To extend the knowledge regarding the multifaceted interplay between food (particularly convenience food), family, women and identity, a qualitative research was carried out by interviewing eight Finnish mothers on their family's eating practices.

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, three identity constructions that illustrate the main findings were formed. The identity formation of the family "*equal individuals looking for time together*" describe how women seem to strive for representing their families as collectivities in which gender equality prevails and traditional gender roles are forgotten. Also, it appears that food is used as a means to get the family to gather together. In fact, it seems that, in general, dinner time could be characterized as "family time" as opposed to "mealtime".

Mother's identity construction *"informed caretaker, not an imaginative chef"* refers to the representation of a knowledgeable and caring mother, who strives for serving "proper" foods to her children. The findings suggest that, nowadays, instead of the concrete work that goes into preparing a meal from scratch, mothers partly convey care, love and nurture through fairly excessive mental work (e.g. pondering about what kind of nourishment children need to stay healthy). So, women seem to craft an identity of a caring and nurturing mother partly by expressing engagement in different forms of mental work. The identity construction for convenience food *"unwanted products, which are regularly present"* demonstrates the negative tone in which the products were discussed. It appears that women feel they need to at least show reprehension towards the regular use of convenience foods in order to come across as a good, caring and well-informed mother.

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*Tell me what you eat, I'll tell you who you are.  ~Anthelme Brillat-Savarin*

*It isn't so much what's on the table that matters, as what's on the chairs.  ~W.S. Gilbert*


## 1. Introduction


This work focuses on the discursive practices that mothers employ when talking about different eating practices, themselves and family. The objective is to find out the ways these women talk about food, the activities related to it and how they present themselves in the context of family. Also, my aim is to investigate how family identity is constructed through food-related discourses. My particular interest lies in the discourses regarding convenience foods. This research examines how mothers use language and different discourses in creating meaning and building subject positions for themselves and for their families. In short, I am interested in the ways how mothers present convenience foods and draw from food-related discourses so as to construct and express a viable sense of personal and family identity. So, this study is about the interplay between identity construction and discourses that circulate around food and eating practices.


### 1.1 Background of the topic

In some parts of the world food related discussions, fights and battles can be about whether there is anything to eat and who gets to eat it, whereas in Finland the word "fat war" refers to the debates people are having about whether it is or is not unhealthy to eat hard fat (e.g. the fat from dairy products and red meat). It seems to me that we are continuously being bombarded with new guidelines and rules for eating. In addition to the aforementioned fat war, one cannot avoid hearing or reading about things like low-carb diet, food additives, superfood, organic food, daily calorie intake, local food, problems caused by high salt intake, monosodium glutamate, obesity problems, raw food, the Mediterranean diet, excessive meat consumption, lack of vitamin D, the Baltic diet…and the list goes on.

Also, most of us have heard the phrases "My mum prepares better food than your mum." and "food made by mothers" from television commercials promoting convenience foods. We don't solely have convenience foods "made by mums" but our supermarkets offer us also, for example, convenience foods that have been designed by a Finnish celebrity chef. Furthermore, convenience

foods suited to fit people on a low-carb diet have appeared to stores not too long ago. Nowadays, cooking and baking do not take place only in our kitchens. Food and cooking have taken over, for example, the television, and not just in the forms of commercials. Different television channels are broadcasting numerous programs related to food and cooking. In fact, in Finland free national television channels broadcast over 160 cooking programs in a week (Eeva Kolu, 2012). In addition, magazines are presenting different recipes both for weekdays and celebrations, offering dieting tips and writing about various food regimens page after page. So, people are faced with multiple sources, such as TV cooks, movies, cookery books and magazines, which communicate what food is currently, for instance, trendy. Also, the knowledge about fashionable and trendy food seems to be important especially to the urban middle-class women (Bugge and Almås, 2006).

In our society, the abundance of options, busy schedules and different existing ideals might sometimes make choices regarding food and eating difficult or unpleasant to make. When one's decisions do not merely concern him- or herself, things might get even trickier. People can be very opinionated and passionate when it comes to food and discussions about "proper" or "right" way of eating can lead to heated debates. For instance, there are articles in, for instance, tabloids and magazines where people are stating their opinion about whether regimes such as low-carb or veganism can disturb a child's development or not, and what kind of undesired effects food additives and preservatives might have on people. We have certainly come a long way from changing baking tips and bun recipes. Consequently, to me food and different practices related to it seemed to be an intriguing topic of study.

Furthermore, I wanted to include family identity to my research because the matter appears to be interesting and important in many respects. For instance, family's collective decisions are influenced by a range of possible identities (collective, relational and individual). Family is, in all of its various forms and life-cycle phases, the basic purchase and consumption unit and therefore it should be a constant object of interest for the marketers (Ahuja and Walker, 1994). In a similar manner, acknowledging that families use services, products and brands as resources for achieving relational and family identity goals, firms might in some cases succeed better in their positioning and targeting efforts (Epp and Price, 2008).

Ahuja and Walker (1994) have argued that the eating habits of an American household are not necessarily dependent on the configuration of the family; rather they are embedded in the culture. Furthermore, the findings of the research done by Soliah, Walter and Barnes (2003) indicate that the number of people that form the household, do not play a part in the food preparation practices

(convenience vs. food prepared from a recipe). Unlike the studies by Ahuja and Walker (1994) and Soliah et al. (2003), this research is not a quantitative one and the object is not to depict causal relations. However, I feel that the aforementioned studies bring out interesting remarks about the relevance of prevailing culture and society on eating practices. Furthermore, the findings of an interpretive research by Chitakunye and Maclaran (2008) suggest that the emerging eating practices, such as eating in front of a television even as a family may transcend class boundaries.

While acknowledging the large size of the family segment and the possible rationality in a more specific segmentation, Herbst and Stanton (2007) argue that families are united by their aspiration to eat together, one way or another. Accordingly, rather than trying to practice rigorous segmenting on an individual level, marketers might sometimes benefit from concentrating on the concept of the Finnish family. In addition, the changes and alterations in terms of family composition have kept the food industry "on its toes" and forced it to constantly transform and change (Herbst and Stanton, 2007). Thus, I feel it is justified to claim that family, family identity and eating practices are interesting topics of research.

## 1.2 Positioning of the topic and research question

One might say that traditionally food has been perceived as mundane and people who are not deprived of it often take it for granted. However, as the previous subchapter tried to show, food and different eating practices are in fact anything but banal, boring and free from deeper meanings. In addition, food and practices related to it are very social. Many researchers have pointed out that activities such as eating and preparing of food are deeply social, used in symbolic ways, and much more than a mere routine (e.g. Levy, 1981; Charles and Kerr, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Thompson, 1996; Warde, 1997). To quote DeVault (1991: 35) "The work of feeding others is also shaped by, and in turn expresses, beliefs and customs of the society at a particular time. More than just the provision of edibles, feeding work means staging the rather complex social events that we label meals."

Moisio, Arnould and Price (2004) have studied the role of homemade food in the construction of family identity and state that homemade food is utilized in strengthening certain idealized family meanings. The authors also point out that reproduction of family identities face qualitative changes due to changes in homemade food. In addition to the research conducted by Moisio et al. (2004), also several other studies (e.g. Charles and Kerr, 1988; Warde, 1997) note that cooking and

homemade foods can be seen to convey things like love and care, tradition and family togetherness. Warde (1999), for one, has studied the reasons for using convenience foods and argue that their consumption is a response to scheduling problems of everyday life and can be related to the want and need to "manipulate" time. Bugge and Almås (2006), in turn, have investigated contemporary practices and representations of the domestic dinner by interviewing Norwegian mothers. The researchers demonstrate the complex cultural and social processes that everyday provision of food entails and present three distinct dinner models for proper meals: the traditional, the trendy and the therapeutic.

Thompson (1996), for one, has explored what kind of meanings professional working mothers attach to consumption experiences and elaborate on the concept of caring consumption. The study also touches upon the matter of homemade food versus convenience food, although eating practices are not the main focus of the study. Based on different studies (e.g. Charles and Kerr, 1988; De Vault, 1991) food has a significant role in the (re)negotiation of gender relationships within the home and in the (re)production of family identities. Consequently, it seemed to be interesting to study the relation between food, women and family in the society of today, in which food and different guidelines regarding it seem to be visible everywhere, not just in the kitchens and grocery stores.

It seems to me that more research is needed to find out what type of things convenience foods might convey, how they are talked about and what their relation to identity construction is. Moreover, I feel that the interaction between eating practices, family, women and identity, specifically from the viewpoint of discourses and broader socio-cultural environment, should be studied further. Culture, typical foods and eating habits, as well as the array of available products vary from one country to another. Therefore, I feel that findings from studies made in other countries and cultures do not necessarily tell so much about the situation in Finland. Also, the available vocabulary for discussing a certain topic can differ notably between languages and so the starting points for talking about a particular issue are bound to vary, at least to some extent. Furthermore, as discussed earlier a lot has changed over the course of years with respect to food. Thus, I feel that in order to keep up with the times issues related to food should be (re)investigated continuously.

Consumption of edibles is something that people cannot do without, but what those edibles are and how they are consumed and discussed about can and will alter over time. Research must be carried out on a regular basis in order to understand these changes, the forces behind them and people's perceptions of them. Different studies might also help individuals to look at their own lives and

surrounding environment from different perspectives and make them question and ponder about things they have previously taken for granted. To extend the knowledge regarding the multifaceted interplay between food (particularly convenience food), family, women and identity, I carried out a qualitative research by interviewing eight Finnish mothers on their family's eating practices.

This study strives for presenting reflective insights and extending knowledge by addressing the following research question:

• *How do mothers talk about food and eating practices - what kind of identity constructions do the employed discourses craft?*

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, three identity constructions that illustrate the main findings were formed. The identity formation of the family "*equal individuals looking for time together*" describe how women seem to strive for representing their families as collectivities in which gender equality prevails and traditional gender roles are forgotten. However, the employed discourse practices seem to hint that cooking and caretaking are still very much associated precisely with women. The identity formation also illustrates the importance that was given to joint family meals and their role in within family communication and bonding. It appears that food is used as a means to get the family to gather together. Hence, food and eating practices can be perceived to play an important part in the construction and strengthening of family identity. In fact, it seems that, in general, dinner time could be characterized as "family time" as opposed to "mealtime".

Mother's identity construction (or its representation) *"informed caretaker, not an imaginative chef"* refers to the representation of a knowledgeable and caring mother, who strives for serving "proper" foods to her children. Mothers portray themselves as women who know what is important in terms of eating and children's well-being. Nevertheless, at the same time they use discourses that underrate the meals they serve or express discontent with their cooking capabilities. The findings suggest that, nowadays, instead of the concrete work that goes into preparing a meal from scratch, mothers partly convey care, love and nurture through fairly excessive mental work (e.g. pondering about what kind of nourishment children need to stay healthy). So, women seem to craft an identity of a caring and nurturing mother partly by expressing engagement in different forms of mental work.

The identity construction for convenience food *"unwanted products, which are regularly present"* demonstrates the negative tone in which the products were discussed. Nonetheless, it seems that convenience foods are still consumed but their use is often excused. Moreover, women appear to

link the consumption of convenience foods with, for instance, "moral hangover" or failure. At least mothers seem to think that that is expected of them.  In addition, convenience food seems to be a flexible concept and sometimes, through some alterations, convenience food can be transformed into a homemade meal. The women appear to have some sort of a rank order for manufactured food products that support their positive identity constructions, or at least do not disrupt them so easily. All in all, the women talked in a way that suggests that if you are regularly serving your children convenience food, you are partly falling short in your caretaking duties. It appears that women feel they need to at least show reprehension towards the regular use of convenience foods in order to come across as a good, caring and well-informed mother.

The thesis is constructed as follows: the next section takes a look at the Finnish food culture overall and is followed by a chapter that focuses on the previous literature and introduces a selection of relevant findings from other researchers. After that, the epistemological premises of the paper as well as the research methods are presented. From there the thesis moves on to the analysis and interpretation of the findings. Finally, the paper wraps up with discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Overview of Finnish food culture

According to social constructionism, our knowledge of the world is contingent and always up for negotiation (e.g. Philips and Jorgensen, 2002). The specific historical, political, cultural and social dimensions need to be taken into consideration when talking about knowledge and social reality. Hence, in order to better understand the phenomena under study and the role convenience food play in it, I feel it is useful to take a look at the Finnish food culture overall and the history of convenience foods in Finland. This section is largely based on the information gained from the reports by Kantén, Koivunen, Kähkönen, Mäkelä and Toikkanen (2009) and Kirveennummi, Saarimaa and Mäkelä (2008), as well as the author's own perceptions on the current state of affairs. When the text does not stem from those aforementioned reports and observations, the source is cited separately.

The foods that are eaten in Finland, as well as other customs of eating, solely do not tell something about each individual, nor can they be plainly compressed to figures and statistics. Instead, they also say something about Finnish history, nature, society, culture and identity. Everyone can be said to create (and to change or maintain) a food culture with his or hers daily choices.

Finland's location in the North and the place between East and West has had a great impact on our food culture over the course of history, although the influences of Sweden and Russia have mixed together over the years, at least to some extent. These days the Finnish food culture is affected by, for example, international food and diet trends and the experiences that people get when travelling abroad. For instance, traditional Finnish ways to prepare food are boiling and poaching in the oven but nowadays different cooking methods such as stir-frying have also reached Finnish kitchens. In addition, different ingredients, dishes and traditions that immigrants have brought with them to Finland have influenced today's food culture. For example, who would have guessed twenty years ago that Finnish workplace cafeterias would someday be serving different kebab dishes on a regular basis? Actually, you could say that different food cultures have formed or are forming in Finland due to, among other things, immigration and ethical values. Also, it is worthwhile to note that there is also a lot of regional diversity within Finland due to the long distance between Northern and Southern parts.

In Finland, the regulation of groceries lasted several years after the World II and so the 1950's became a turning point in terms of eating habits. But it was not until the 1960's that the last farmers began to use the grocery stores as the main source of food. So, after the regulation Finland shifted

from scarcity to abundance and stores began to play the leading role as the supplier of food items. Societal changes such as industrialization, urbanization and the risen standard of living have greatly affected the way we eat in Finland. In addition, when women took off their aprons and entered work life, eating habits were bound to change. All in all, Finns were (and are) no longer producers but consumers of food.

In Finland, first fresh convenience foods came about in the 1950's when women entered work life. The first convenience foods, liver casserole, meatballs, cabbage rolls and "whipped porridge"=vispipuuro, were introduced to the market in 1957, and they are still sold. First convenience pizzas (commercially manufactured pizzas sold in grocery stores) entered the market in 1981. Over the years the selection of convenience foods has multiplied tremendously and tens, if not hundreds, of new products are launched every year. However, the same traditional casseroles and pizzas are going strong year after year. (Ritva Mäenpää, 2005.)

So, in today's world we're not obligated to cook our own meal from scratch, or at all for that matter, when we want to eat. In Finland, during the past couple of decades purchases of convenience foods, which form a whole meal, have quadrupled. In general, more ready-to-use groceries are being bought, especially by younger age groups (e.g. fruits vs. fruit juices; cooking of porridge vs. "quick porridges" and muesli). Especially young people eat a lot of noodles and pasta with market-made sauces. The popularity of Italian food has increased consumption of canned tomato products and pasta. (Mäkelä, Varjonen and Viinisalo, 2008.)

Today, our grocery stores, giant supermarkets and specialty shops offer a great variety of fresh ingredients both from Finland and abroad, as well as frozen and canned foods and meals, prepared vacuum packed dishes, and ready-to-eat fresh meals and so forth. The food industry is eager to respond to the consumers' changing wants and trends. For example, for some time now low-carb diets have been a hot topic and, consequently, two big actors introduced a few low-carb meals to the market in the beginning of 2012 and one smaller producer launched three low-carb meals in 2011. According to Markus Gotthardt, the marketing and product development manager of HK Ruokatalo, in addition to low-carb diet, products free from food additives and preservatives and overall naturalness are other trends in the convenience food market. (Riikka Kalmi, 2011.)

Not only has the number of meals eaten and the proportion of completely self-made meals decreased over the course of history but also there has also been a decline in the meals that families enjoy together. According to an international report, in Finland, people eat together as a family the least when compared to all other European countries. Only six out of ten fifteen-year-olds that go to

school eat their most important meal of the day with their parents several times per week (Unicef, 2006, see Juhani Saarinen, 2007). In the olden days families usually ate four proper meals per day during summer. The number first reduced to three when coffee consumption became more common and the warm meal enjoyed at breakfast time was replaced by coffee and sandwiches. Gradually afternoon coffee overrode the middle-meal. In the 1960's the custom of eating only two, not three, warm meals per day ossified. The reduction of physical work and the increase of desk work have, at least partly, led to the fact that nowadays many people only eat one "proper" meal per day. In Finnish schools the kids are served a free lunch and universities (and such) offer students different lunch options at a very reasonable price, as do most workplaces.

Even though the number of meals enjoyed per day has decreased, food, cooking and baking have become more and more visible in the media along the years. Food related topics, such as recipes and consumer education started to appear in the newspapers and magazines more often in the 1970's. In terms of television, food programs started to gain foothold starting from the 1960's and today there are countless of different food shows airing in television. Some examples of the television programs are different chefs with their own cooking shows introducing recipes, ordinary people or celebrities cooking for each other and then rating the dinners in order to win a prize (*Come dine with me* and *Neljän tähden illallinen*), professional or amateur cooks competing against each other over who is the top or master chef, and dieting shows like *You are what you eat* and *Cook yourself thin.* Naturally, numerous different cookbooks are published every year and the Internet is filled with food related blogs and discussion sites. So, even though the number of warm meals might have reduced, the number of available recipes, tips, ingredients and choices has gone up remarkably.

Eating in restaurants has been perceived differently over the decades. In the 1950's restaurants were considered prestigious, and in fact, going to restaurants was long seen as being depraved. In the 1970's pizzerias and hamburger restaurants found their way to Finland, which made eating out somewhat informal. Interestingly, pizzas are among Finns' favorite foods nowadays. In the 1980's and 1990's new types of restaurants that were specifically trying to reach women, families with children and laborers were opened. Today, the Helsinki metropolitan area is filled with Chinese, Nepalese and Japanese restaurants and kebab joints, among other places, as well as restaurants that highlight their use of top notch Finnish ingredients with an international twist and so forth.

According to DeVault (1991), over the course of years the way of eating has changed remarkably and numerous technical skills have been commercialized. Markets offer food products that are

already extensively processed, an aspect of meal-preparation that previously took place at home. In addition, the expansion of restaurants and fast-food chains during the past few decades has increased the possibilities to purchase ready-made meals. In sum, cooking itself is no longer indispensable but less and less necessary. Also, it is worthwhile to note that grocery stores and restaurants compete against each other for the families' food expenditures and one might say that the convenience of microwavable meals purchased from grocery stores are in direct competition with restaurants' take-out food (Ahuja and Walker, 1994). In short, times have changed and like companies also households are outsourcing some activities, i.e. food preparation tasks (Soliah et al., 2003).

The conversation regarding Finnish food culture is as versatile as the culture itself. Sometimes debates about what is the right way to eat and what is true Finnish food culture really like can get quite heated. Nowadays there is a vast range of healthy groceries in the marketplace and discourses of healthy eating are constantly present in the media. However, some people seem to think that the healthiness of food is being overemphasized, thus leading to a lack of attention in terms of taste or gastronomic experience. The concern for animals' well-being and climate change, for instance, are things that are also currently affecting some people's food choices and the overall food culture. Consequently, organic and local food, as well as vegetarian and vegan diets are becoming more popular.

Food and food choices do not simply boil down to facts about production, nutrition and health claims. Rather, symbolism is incorporated into food preparation service, consumption and manners (Levy, 1981). Eating and sharing of food are ways of interacting with other people and through different food choices one also defines his or her relation to his/her own culture and to other cultures as well. Common foods can, for instance, strengthen the cultural cohesiveness and carry the cultural heritage. In the same vein, certain foods, eating and cooking habits may play a central role in the formation, reinforcement and modification of a family's identity (e.g. Valentine, 1999; Moisio et al. 2004).

# 3. Literature review

This section presents a selection of relevant findings from previous research. The current study centers on matters that relate to identity, family, women and food and these issues are dealt here in that order. First, attention is given to the construction of identity and identity work. Secondly, institution of family, its identity and parents' influencing capabilities are discussed. Then, focus shifts to the relation between women and the provision of food in the family, after which the relation between food and identity is explored. This is followed by a discussion regarding homemade and convenience food. These topics are not completely separate from one another, however, and will thus be discussed in a somewhat integrated fashion in the chapters below.

## 3.1 Identity and identity work

Even though the papers discussed here deal with organizations and, for example, organizational control, one could assume that the presented ideas about identity and identity work can be made use of also in the context of this study. Matters regarding subjectivity, such as self and identity are extremely difficult to explain and interpret (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). In fact, here identity is viewed as somewhat more linguistic and social nature, and instead of focusing on depth-psychological issues the interest lies in the open, situational and discursive nature of human subjectivity (Svengisson and Alvesson, 2003). Identity construction can be viewed as a process in which the role of discourse in shaping the individual is in balance with other elements of life history (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Beech (2008) argues that, in terms of people's identities, meanings stem from contextual discourses and the remarks of others. He elaborates by stating that contextual discourses that flow in from the outside endow people with discursive resources that can be made use of and which also act on people. These discourses can be fairly generic (as in family versus work) or more precise (such as certain family's perception that eating together is vital). In addition, Beech (2008) notes that a more micro process exists in which utterances and remarks become assimilated into an individual's story of the self. He also points out that some constructions are deliberate, whereas some not so much.

Identity can be constructed and explored, for instance, through positive value, which relates to "social values". This means that aspired-for identity is ascribed a positive social meaning and so identity is invariably related to self-esteem (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Watson (2008) stresses

that, with respect to identities, one should not overlook the role of culture, discourses and social structures within which the individual is located. In a similar manner, Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) point out that larger historical and cultural formations shape our self-understandings and provide us with much of our identity vocabularies, pressures, norms and solutions. However, these formations do so in delicate and indirect ways. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), cultural raw material, such as language, sets of meanings and symbols are the "building blocks" of reflectively constructed self-identity. They also note that this raw material is drawn from exposure to different messages produced and distributed by, for instance, mass media and schools, from numerous interactions with others, as well as early life experiences and unconscious processes. Moreover, a person might perceive him/herself as a good parent or a great cook, but after being criticized or reproached, (s)he could alter his/hers perception towards being a bad parent or a cook (Beech, 2008). According to Beech (2008), there are different meaning-giving tensions (for instance good mother versus bad mother) that may be seen as a spectrum along which people can place themselves as well as be placed by others. Consequently, the meaning of the identity construction is the sum of a set of "meaning giving tensions". A richer discussion of the constitutive "ingredients" of identities is made possible by taking into account the effect of agents beyond individuals, such as societal discourses (Alvesson et al. 2008).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) remark that due to the accomplished and occasionally shaky nature of modern identity, major part of activities (if not all) entail active identity work. Here the term identity work refers to the constant formation, reparation, maintenance, reinforcement or reassessment of the constructions that produce a precarious sense of coherence and uniqueness (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Research on identity work, according to Alvesson et al. (2008), is usually about exploring how people build evolving understandings of themselves in social situations. The authors describe identity work as an ongoing mental activity conducted by individuals so as to craft an understanding of self that is distinct, coherent and positively valued. Managing stability against a changing discursive framework that is provided by socially established truths about what is normal and rational forms the core of identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

According to Beech (2008), identity work does not simply boil down to how individuals categorize themselves and are categorized by others. The author argues that identity work is also about the way in which images and representations (verbal, textual, symbolic, physical and behavioral) become embedded with meaning and are made a part of one's identity. Watson (2008), for one, makes a clear analytical separation between internal personal "self identities" and external discursive "social

identities". He perceives social-identities as a link that connects socially available discourses and self-identities. He also argues that self-identity is the individual's own perception of who (s)he is, whereas social-identities are cultural, discursive or institutional ideas of who or what any individual might be. Example of a social-identity given by Watson (2002) is that of "managerial identity" but in relation to this study a useful example could perhaps be that of "motherly identity".

Watson (2002) points out that even though existing and prevailing discourses and subjectivities provide the material that individuals have to work with, they are able to utilize the multiplicity of discourses and subjectivities. Thus, they may construct a self which is to some extent "their own". In sort of a similar manner, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) stress the role of discourse in processes related to identity construction, preservation and alteration. The authors remark that people identify themselves as distinct independent entities by both attending to and mobilizing discourses. They continue by saying that by participating in (other) discourses people mend or embellish their sense of identity as a coherent narrative. An individual may carry out efforts in order to craft the self variously as good worker, woman, mother, a person striving for being fit and so forth (Beech, 2008). In fact Collinson (2003) notes that people seldom (if ever) experience a singular or uniform sense of self. He continues by saying that some of the simultaneous identities may be mutually supporting, whereas others may be in tension or contradictory. This "multitude of selves" might be a source of insecurity and ambiguity.

However, it must be pointed out that infinite possibilities of using language to make differentiations and to construct social reality do not exist (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Rather, the possibilities are both enabled and restricted by cultural traditions, relations of power and material conditions. Then again, one should bear in mind that societies are socially constructed and by constructing diverse selves and forging relationships individuals notably shape the societies they live in and, thus, they are not merely passive units who are completely determined by external forces (Collinson, 2003).

Feelings, such as anxiety, shame or guilt may surface if a familiar feeling tone, connected to the sensation of "being myself" becomes unsettled (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). For instance, it could me assumed that if a mother feels she is not able to realize motherhood related activities in a way she perceives to be acceptable and desirable, it could cause feelings of shame and guilt. If a woman considers herself primarily as a mother, who takes good care of her children by cooking homemade food from fresh ingredients, reoccurring failure to act this way may lead to the aforementioned negative feelings, and perhaps to intensive identity work. In case of discontinuities,

the identity narrative is actively explored, defended or adapted either momentarily or with more permanent outcomes (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) mention that identity constructions can be largely affected by different norms and recognized ideas about the "normal" way of carrying out activities in certain contexts. Accordingly, the naturalization of particular standards and rules may lead to the adjustment of a certain self-understanding. The authors note that a shared sense of identity and purpose may be reinforced by learning and acting upon certain "rules" that offer guidance which, in turn, smoothes operations in the work context. It could be argued that the same logic might be applied to the context of family. Consequently, in the course of time, a family might develop particular patterns of and rules for behavior, which ease and smooth the carrying out of different activities within a household. Furthermore, the developed guidelines, rules and standards might be (and probably are) influenced by the common (culturally and temporally bound) ideas of how a "normal" family and its different members should function. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) point out, a sense of self-identity is shaped by the multitude of images and ideals of ways of being.

## 3.2 Family and identity

### 3.2.1 Family institution and identity are not solid

Family can be perceived as a significantly important entity that plays an essential role in numerous consumption activities and that faces many new challenges of contemporary society (Epp and Price, 2008). Some families might characterize themselves as being food connoisseurs who prepare multiple course dinners from top-notch ingredients and try out new restaurants on a regular basis, whereas the words "football lovers" might be used to describe some other families. Also, family can be seen as being partly a social product that is jointly mixed with historical, political, economic, and global forces (Langellier, 2002). In addition to the family's collective identity there can be multiple unique bundles of identities within each family, such as relational identities like the ones between siblings or parent and child and individual identities of each family member. Thus, diverse identity practices coexist and interplay in everyday experiences of family. In other words, when constructing identity, families are faced with competing (and perhaps even contradictory) interests and demands, increasingly elective interpersonal relations, as well as blended family forms that diverge from predominant ideals (Epp and Price, 2008).

Nowadays, a large range of different configurations that constitute family exists. In many cases family is something totally different than a married couple (a man and a woman) with two kids. Family can comprise of a single parent with children, childless households, one-career or dual career households, two or more "blended" families formed after divorces and new relationships, and even gay parents and so forth (e.g. Ahuja and Walker, 1994; Valentine, 1999; Oswald, 2003). In addition, Oswald (2003) points out that marketers have for some time now been segmenting families according to different wants, needs and lifestyles of the members and forming various target groups. She continues by stating that in consequence, the very notion of family has been altered and broken down into a multitude of meanings. Also, Epp and Price (2008) agree with Gergen (1996) that family identity is not a construct that resides in the minds of individuals but is co-constructed in action.

Kiter Edwards (2004), for one, has noted that family identity is being continuously constituted within the household, as well as managed in relation to others. According to her, family identity management is one kind of invisible labor done by women and it comprises of thinking work (evaluation of the environment and decision on how to act on those evaluations), emotional work (development and management of feelings about oneself and family members), as well as instrumental tasks (concrete actions in terms of managing one's family members in the perceived context). Kiter Edwards (2004) also states that the organization of material environments and the conduct of household's adults both indirectly and explicitly socialize the children into the particular family identity constructed.

Oswald (2003) writes that families of today have to find a way to negotiate and deal with the issues that arise from the mismatch between the traditional ideal and one's own family and also solve internal family conflicts. She continues by stating that despite the busy, frantic and technology-enabled life, people are continuously looking for ways to ground themselves in a fostering, stable space. Agate, Zabriskie, Agate and Poff (2009), in turn, discuss the vital role that family leisure plays in family life. Through family leisure family members have a chance to strengthen their relationships, bond with each other and solve problems. According to the authors, family leisure can be divided to core family leisure and balance family leisure. Core family leisure may consist of, for instance, preparing and eating a dinner together or playing games together. Core leisure usually enhances family identity, feelings of closeness and personal relatedness, and bonding. Balance family leisure, in turn, is typically something more special, like family vacations and trips. Its role is to provide families with opportunities to, for instance, develop adaptive skills, which are needed when dealing with the challenges that families are faced with in today's society.

### 3.2.2 Different components of family identity and the role of consumption

As families perform themselves, they imagine and reproduce identity (Langellier, 2002). Epp and Price (2008) offer one perspective as to how to examine family identity. Even though families can differ to great degree in the actions they use to define themselves, three particular components that are shared across families can be recognized: structure, the generational component and family character. First, the component of structure reflects who is included in the family and also the hierarchy and roles of family members (Epp and Price, 2008). In their study of consumption rituals of Thanksgiving Day, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) note that while the holiday was perceived as a day of family togetherness, consumption was used for negotiating who is to be included in the family circle and what the roles of each participant are. Also, they state that the holiday is an occasion that demands discourse and a decision on the relative roles (care givers/care receivers) of family members in the domestic cycle.

Second, the generational orientation in turn relates to the ways the family is anchored in its past and how it is conserved in the future. Families might, for example, look at old family photographs and thus construct cohesiveness by reviewing their understanding of a shared past. The photographs might also be used in order to determine the legitimacy and extent of the group by anchoring it in the past (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991).  Lastly, the component of family character refers to the interactions that define the personality of the family. Families can differ in the emphasis given to possible character descriptors like common values (e.g. "We're all environmentally conscious"), common tastes (e.g. "We all love to read novels"), shared activities (e.g. "We're all keen on sports"), shared traits (e.g. "We all speak very loud"), or similar temperaments (e.g. "We all relent really quickly"). These three components also apply to the different relational identities within a family (Epp and Price, 2008).

In their article of family identity Epp and Price (2008) present a framework of family identity enactment highlighting individual, relational and collective identity interplays. They define enactments as communicative performances, i.e. rituals, narratives, social dramas, everyday practices, and intergenerational transfers, which families use in order to compose and manage identity.  Rituals can be seen as essential in constructing, modifying, strengthening and passing on family identity (Epp and Price, 2008). According to Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), the task of ritual is to overcome different disagreements and disharmony of social life so that the attaining of concord and harmony seems possible, if only temporarily.  Narratives and telling of family stories are used for teaching family values, connecting family members, providing amusement at family

get-togethers, representing family history and so forth. Family stories and narratives make certain praxes that reproduce family meanings more visible and "tangible" as well as establish family itself over time (Langellier, 2002).

Social dramas related to consumption are not rare and they can have an effect on the identity bundles that constitute the family. Consumption-based social dramas between generations within families might occur over, for instance, the amount of make-up, smoking or choice of clothes (Epp and Price, 2008). For instance, the family might have to reshape its identity if a member decides to be a vegetarian and refuses to eat meat (Valentine, 1999) or if a child no longer wants to participate in traditional family hiking trips, rather staying home playing video games. In the same vein, in their paper about Melbourne families and the role of children in family's eating practices, Dixon and Banwell (2004) noted that in the mission of maintaining family harmony, mothers try to answer to teenagers' changing tastes in terms of food. Everyday practices, for one, can be seen as something similar to the core family leisure discussed earlier and a few more examples of it will be presented in the next subchapter.

Home is not solely a consumption site for individuals, but importantly a place for collective (household or family) consumption. At home, the meanings and uses of various objects are negotiated, and even contested, between family members. Thus, understanding the ways goods become embedded into people's everyday lives can reveal the social context of consumption, as well as clarify how daily practices can construct individual and household identity (Valentine, 1999). In other words, everyday interactions within a family are intertwined with consumption objects and activities. Consequently, in order to gain an idea of how family identity is reinforced and, at times, modified through interaction, close attention should be paid to everyday practices and how consumption is incorporated in them (Epp and Price, 2008). These mundane interactions among family members could entail, for instance, eating dinner or watching television as a family, reading of bedtime stories, driving kids to soccer practice, clearing the table after eating, and so forth.

## 3.3 Family, socialization and intergenerational influences

Intergenerational influences point to transmission of information, beliefs and resources from one generation to the next that occurs the within family. Socialization helps individuals build their personal identities and assume the various roles expected of them in different stages of their life

cycles. In addition, socialization facilitates the functioning of a society by encouraging certain beliefs, traditions and values (Moore, Wilkie and Alder, 2001; Moore, Wilkie and Lutz, 2002). Ward (1974) defines consumer socialization as a process by which young people attain attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are relevant for functioning as a consumer in the marketplace. Even though emphasis is laid here on young people, Ward (1974) also points out that socialization is a lifelong process. On a similar note, according to Valentine (1999) the (re)production and (re)negotiation of gender identities, households, and food consumption activities occur throughout an individual's life. Family can be seen as a springboard from which people can "jump" into broader society and it offers a kind of a roadmap that facilitates mingling within the broad network that consists of various interpersonal and institutional relationships (Oswald, 2003).

Information about decision-making and consumption may be communicated to different family members in various ways. A family member may communicate particular norms and expectations to other members (consciously or unconsciously) by his/her own doings. In this case, learning usually results from observation or imitation of those actions. Behavior may also be affected by different positive and negative reinforcement mechanisms, such as praising or complaining. A member of a family may also influence the consumer behavior of others by using overt communication processes when certain values, attitudes and ways of conducting are often stated explicitly. (Moschis, 1985.)

So, the family plays a central role in socialization. Parents and other members of a family operate as channels of information and sources of social pressure, and also offer support for each other. Before children move away, they have countless opportunities to watch and observe their parents behavior, which leads to internalization of expressed values and preferences, and to the acceptance of these values as a natural norm. Hence, family can be said to be the first socialization agent and usually the most powerful one. In addition, it is the mother who tends to be the main influencing agent through both supervisory and nurturing actions (Moore et al. 2001; Moore et al. 2002). In their study on transfer of food learning, Ayadi and Bree (2009) have also discovered, however, that the adoption of new eating practices and food products does not solely flow from parents to children but also vice versa.

Although family plays a significant part in the consumer socialization and parental influence seems to exceed the basic elements of consumer decision making, "teaching" is not in many cases purposive consumer training, rather it is incidental (Moschis, 1985). Bugge and Almås (2006) note that family identities can be reproduced across generations and in this reproduction the adoption of

childhood dinner practices plays a significant role. Furthermore, they state that the childhood dinner practices had affected self-identities of the women. Nevertheless, they also point out that these women do not necessarily imitate their mothers in terms of dinner activities. The daughters partly want to reproduce the family's routines and rituals but, then again, they also want to come up with eating practices that fit both the modern life, and their self-understandings of contemporary women.

Accordingly, one should bear in mind that in addition to the influence of parents and childhood, the changes in society matter a great deal also. Many of the 32 couples interviewed by Mackereth and Milner (2007) said that the food regime and eating practices they now maintained differed from the ones they had been brought up to. For example, many of the respondents now feed their children foods that the children request, even though they themselves grew up in families where parents made the decisions concerning food and children were to eat what was put in front of them. Mackereth and Milner (2007) point out that this perceived change needs to be considered in the current context where, for instance, the availability and range of convenience food have increased. The researchers found that in the families where children got to choose what they eat, convenience and frozen foods were often used and family members frequently ate different meals. Also, the possible effects of, for instance, mass media on consumption habits should not be overlooked.

## 3.4 Food, family and women

The special relation between women and food is not a natural division of labor but a cultural construct; there is no natural or compulsory reason why women are commonly associated with household food activities (Van Esterik, 1999). Charles and Kerr (1988) have stated that cooking is perceived to be an essential part of a married woman's domestic responsibilities. According to their research, there exists a clear sexual division of labor in terms of family food provision, which many of the participating women viewed to be as essential to family life. Van Esterik (1999) notes that women often base their identities and sense of self on their capabilities to feed their families, as well as others. This is in tune with other research and literature. For instance, according to DeVault (1991) the activities that go into feeding family members are seen as "womanly" operations and, consequently, they contribute to the continuing production of gender in families.

Warde (1997), for one, points out that the decrease of full-time housewives is one of the most noteworthy and sustained social trends in the last century. Due to the fact that both spouses in any given household began working outside the home, meal practices have faced a significant change. Descriptive of the last quarter of the twentieth century was the increasing amount of people who

declared having difficulties to find time for cooking and meal preparation (Herbst and Stanton, 2007). Findings from previous research imply that even though women do not use as much time to cook and prepare food than before, the time spent on worrying about food has not reduced. Furthermore, although less time is spent on cooking and cleaning nowadays, the total time devoted to household chores has not significantly changed in the last century. For instance, it seems that today an increased amount of time is spent on shopping and storing food (Dixon and Banwell, 2004). In his book *A Theory of Shopping,* Miller (1998) argues that the selection of goods is designed to create harmony and avoid discord within the family. Also, the vast array of, for example, different low-fat yoghurts, curds and rich creamy desserts enables the shopper (often the mother) to compile her own particular way of handling the provision of food. The low-fat products may be served on a day-to-day basis in order to maintain a healthy diet, while the creamy desserts can work as treats and rewards. In this way the different goods can be used instrumentally to produce and maintain harmony within the collective life-world of the family.

Bugge and Almås (2006), who interviewed 25 young Norwegian mothers, found that even though the women generally felt somewhat uneasy admitting it, conventional gender roles still applied in the kitchen and the ideal of men and women sharing chores seldom actualized in reality. Furthermore, the study showed that not preparing a proper dinner is perceived as an unbecoming form of feminity. Even the younger and more "equal" generation of women felt that the shame of not realizing gender equality in the household would be less than the shame they would feel in case they would not be able to serve their family a decent dinner.  In their study regarding Melbourne families Dixon and Banwell (2004), in turn, noticed that most of the participating women (total of 33) seemed to accept the satisfying of other's needs and wants as an important part of their lives. In a similar manner, the findings of DeVault's (1991) research indicate that even though the participating women were responsive to the tastes and preferences of other family members, most of them conscientiously avoided placing any particular weight on their own preferences.

In his research on the juggling lifestyle of working mothers, Thompson (1996) found that the participants felt fundamentally responsible for the running of the household, despite the occasionally help received from their spouses and children. In addition, the women acknowledged that their spouses did not have to start carrying more responsibility permanently partly because, when things got tough, the participants were ultimately always there to complete the task. This is in line with Warde (1997) who mentions that the minimal willingness of men to agree to do a considerably greater share of domestic work and carry more responsibility, has forced women to resolve the increased time pressures on their own and to juggle with different roles. It seems worth

mentioning that, at least in Finland, the difference between the amount of time women and men use in domestic labor has become narrower during the 21$^{st}$ century. Nevertheless, women still take care of the majority of household tasks while men are more in charge of maintenance work. For instance, between 2009 and 2010 girls or women aged above ten years used approximately 47 minutes per day in food preparation, whereas for the boys or men the corresponding figure was twenty minutes. In terms of shopping and running errands, the figures were around 42 minutes for women and 34 minutes for men (Tilastokeskus: Ajankäyttötutkimus 2009).

According to previous studies, women are seen as being responsible for arranging family meals, where the family members sit round a table together and converse while enjoying the food (Charles and Kerr, 1988). Also, Charles and Kerr (1988) interestingly found in their study that the whole family (mother, father and children) had to be present in order for a proper meal to be served. For instance, the absence of the father frequently also meant the absence of a proper meal. Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), in turn, remark in their paper about Thanksgiving Day that for that one festive day womens' domestic efforts are praised while otherwise they are usually taken for granted.

Charles and Kerr (1988) point out that food does not solely play a part in the relationship between man and women, but it has a significant role in the relation between women and children. In those affiliations, women are the ones with the power. They feel obligated to teach their kids to eat "properly", which suggests eating a proper meal in a manner that is socially acceptable. Then again, the study made by Valentine (1999) showed that, at least in some occasions, children as young as eight might have the power to make their own independent decisions regarding their identities and eating habits. In Valentine's case study an eight-year-old girl decided to be become a vegetarian, which led to the negotiation and modification of the whole household's consumption practices. However, I doubt that the family would have agreed on a child's request to, for example, start eating merely candy, chocolate or chips, or to other demands that would be viewed socially as totally unacceptable eating habits and anything but proper nutrition.

DeVault (1991), for one, writes that some of the women participating in her study made an real effort in pleasing their children's tastes while serving them meals that are also appropriate. In addition to the family's regular meals, some of the women even prepared separate foods for their children. So, at least for those women the preparation of a meal that is both appropriate and tempting was a factor of concern. This is in line with research by, for instance, Dixon and Banwell (2004) who noticed in their research that nowadays children influence family's decisions regarding food, while women still worry about the nutritional healthiness of family members. According to

Dixon and Banwell (2004) children seem to play as significant role as husbands when it comes to setting boundaries concerning the selection of foods.

## 3.5 Food and identity

### 3.5.1 Looking beyond the functional aspect

Food is a necessity, a part of our everyday lives, and often taken for granted. Food is something that we cannot do without, we all have to eat. No matter how banal the statement about food having a functional use value in sustaining bodily health might be, it is undeniable (Warde, 1997). However, food is used for much more than keeping us alive and kicking. Furthermore, it seems to be anything but irrelevant as to what, where, how and with whom we eat. Preparation and provision of meals and eating can be perceived as metaphors for things like nurturance, pleasure, caring and interdependence (Van Esterik, 1999). Through the cultural rituals of serving and eating, food maintains both emotional and social life and, thus, eating is profoundly social (DeVault, 1991). In their study on the role of homemade food in the construction of family identity, Moisio et al. (2004) noticed that the participants' stories carried moral suggestions that narrated, for instance, what a family should be like. Moreover, for the participants homemade conveyed things like family unity, sharing and reciprocal connectedness. Moisio et al. (2004) also note that homemade food permeate continuity in self-understandings of the family and state that homemade is still perceived as an essential symbol of the family.

At home, material products (foods) are transformed into cultural products (meals) to sustain both body and soul (Van Esterik, 1999). Preparing a meal is not simply just routine housework; rather it is more like a ritual (Bugge and Almås, 2006). Meals reproduce and sustain social order (e.g. age and gender divisions) within a family and symbolize the family's social power relations and subordination (Charles and Kerr, 1988). In the same vein, food is an important part of the production and negotiation of family and family member identities, as well as the gender relationships within the home (Moisio et al., 2004; Valentine, 1999). Chitakunye and Maclaran (2008) note that food consumption is implicated in the constitution of taste and national communities, and food may be viewed as a medium that expresses a system of social relationships within a family.

Nowadays, Miller (1998) argues, though stores offer a vast array of different groceries and brands, it does not mean that family relations would have become somehow more complex or nuanced.

Rather, as a result of the broad range of different commodities, ever more precise and diverse objectifications of the same relations are made possible. Miller (1998) goes on to say that the subject (e.g. a family member) is constituted in relation to the shopper through the intermediate of various commodities. Different goods are a means to (re)construct the relationship by transcending the separate identity of both parties. Accordingly, shopping may be perceived as a ritual mechanism through which family relations are (re)produced. Even though Miller (1998) is talking about shopping, the same logic could most probably be applied here to the provision of meals and choice of food items. However, especially in terms of the individual, it is a crass oversimplification to say that satisfaction and self-identity are directly acquired from astute shopping. Instead, part of the meanings that commodities convey are a result of the way in which they processed, arranged and presented (Warde, 1997). This is in line with the findings of Wallendorf's and Arnould's (1991) Thanksgiving Day paper, as well as the findings of Thompson's (1996) research on juggling mothers. In both cases the work done and/or additions made to manufactured food products played an important role in communicating the meanings related to those products and to their provision.

### 3.5.2 Freedom to choose and restrictions of choice

Bugge and Almås (2006) remark that, for instance, for the urban middle-class women preparing meals and cooking aren't solely ways to (re)produce home and family but they are also ways to indicate belonging to a certain social class. For example, the different food ingredients can be seen as social narratives that say a lot about things like social mobility and class hierarchy. Symbolic and material food practices can be perceived as placing people within certain plotted stories or narratives of identity that are not of their own making. Also, individuals can make use of food in producing stories about themselves in the context of numerous plots of family, work, peers, institution, culture and so forth. However, this does not mean that food is the only form of consumption by which individuals can constitute identities (Valentine, 1999). In fact, Warde (1997) writes that in terms of food, the majority of people find it hard to interpret signs of distinction, and without a collective understanding of the symbolic significance of certain product features ones efforts at self-presentation will fall short. He continues by stating that food's ability to express personal identity is limited. Then again one might argue that keeping in mind, for example, the increased food product variety and "food talk", things have changed from the 1990's and that the aforementioned limit has somewhat stretched.

The food act is partly inherent and partly acquired. We share a certain biological heritage: in one way people are omnivore, and hence eat a broad range of foods. Then again, people also develop tastes and preferences, which vary across different cultures, through learning processes. Accordingly, taste is affected by numerous factors that relate to, for instance, culture, social sphere, historical period, and the product and the individual him-/herself (Ayadi and Bree, 2009). Warde (1997) argues that tastes are still largely commonly shared since consumers' food choices stem from numerous shared sources of guidance, such as commercial advertisement, official propaganda, expert advice, social contacts, and one's personal child-and adulthood experiences. For instance, women's magazines can be seen as influential vehicles of popular culture that both reflect and reproduce current categories of judgment. Warde (1997) also states that the oppositions of novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, as well as care and convenience are used as criteria in order to make justifiable choices between different foods.

Even though it is often argued that nowadays individuals are using food as a means to build and enhance self-images and certain lifestyles, in reality there are clear limitations restricting the choices regarding food. Factors like age, gender and class, as well as quite strict moral, social and cultural logic are still guiding eating habits to a great extent. Despite the multitude of available dinner recipes and ingredients, the choice is usually narrowed down to a few options depending on time and place (Bugge and Almås, 2006). Soliah et al. (2003) note that meal planning and choice of food result from intricate relations between financial, demographic, environmental, and psychosocial aspects. Furthermore, commodities, such as certain food products, might be seen as the objectification of family tradition, stability and history, and thus lead to the recurrent purchase of particular foods or brands (Miller, 1998).

### 3.5.3 New forms of family dinner

In her paper about the American family, Oswald (2003) states that nowadays, in their efforts to save time and have more of family time, families (at least in the States) are eating out or taking out food more than ever before. A few years after Oswald (2003), Herbst and Stanton (2007) remarked that current trend suggests that people tend to be eating more at home. They continue by saying that in order to ensure the ritual of eating together, despite the lack of time, families are multi-tasking and, for instance, doing homework or watching television while eating. So, eating together as family might have taken new forms in addition to the gathering around a dinner table mentioned by

Charles and Kerr (1988). Though, Herbst and Stanton (2007) do point out that the findings of their small sample of telephone interviews should not be taken as a final statement.

Chitakunye and Maclaran (2008) also acknowledge the role of the television in family eating practices. They studied people aged between 13 and 17 and found that nowadays television influences families' eating habits and the maintenance of family identity a great deal. In fact, the television itself has won a place in the family's dinner table. The researchers found that for some mothers eating in front of the television with their children and discussing different programs was a means to foster family identity and maintain connectedness and love in the family. While parents are at work children may very well be home alone on a regular basis and look for things, such as interaction and socialization from the media. Consequently, parents may, in a way, be forced to include the television in their eating patterns so to communicate with their offspring (Chitakunye and Maclaran, 2008).

## 3.6 Homemade food versus convenience food

### 3.6.1 Ambiguity of terms and the triangle of care, convenience and schedule

It is not easy to come up with definitions of convenience and homemade food that everyone would agree upon. It seems to me that the terms are used quite loosely and their meaning may alter depending on the situation. For some people food might be homemade if you mix canned pasta sauce with minced meat that you browned yourself and serve it with boiled spaghetti. For others the sauce would have to be made "from scratch" in order for the food to be considered homemade. Also, some might make a distinction between fast or takeout food and convenience food, whereas other people might consider anything that is not entirely self-made as convenience food. The word "convenience" might also be used both when talking about frozen pizza and frozen vegetables. Clearly the list of similar examples could be continued for several pages.

It is interesting and fruitful to think about the relation between homemade and convenience food and the meanings attached to them. So, rather than trying to make strict definitions of the two terms I feel that, for the purpose of this study, it is more useful to present some of the ideas and findings that previous research has come up with overall. For instance, Moisio et al. (2004) remark that homemade appears to be a malleable and culturally constructed concept that consumers feel comfortable with. I feel it's justified to say that the same may very well apply to convenience food.

Also, I think that it will be more fruitful to let the participants talk about food, whether convenience or homemade, in their own words and define the terms themselves.

In terms of food, the conceptual opposition between convenience and care has been one major theme in the later twentieth (and now early twenty-first) century (Warde, 1997). In his analysis of recipe columns in women's magazines Warde (1997) found that, between 1968 and 1992, the recommendations addressing convenience increased, whereas the ones drawing from the expressions of care reduced. However, the magazines seemed to "beat around the bush" and use words like ease of preparation and speed instead of the actual term convenience. The idea and concept of convenience food often has a negative connotation and can be somewhat disapproved. Usually it is the love and labor that are put into meals that sacralize them and give them the symbolic family-sustaining role. Therefore people who are relying on convenience foods may be seen as "degenerated" and falling short in their chores (Warde, 1999).

For instance, Charles and Kerr (1988) found that major part of their sample of 200 women perceived homemade food to be better than processed food. Also, for most of the participating women "a proper meal" was a dish formed by meat (occasionally fish), potatoes and vegetables. In order for the meal to be considered as proper, it had to be cooked and, what is more, simply heating food up or, for instance, boiling an egg did not equate with cooking.  Bugge and Almås (2006), in turn, noticed that frozen pizza, for example, failed to meet the requirements of a dinner and when the studied women ended up serving that type of food, the choice had to be justified and explained.

In a similar manner, Thompson (1996) noticed that the working mothers, who participated in his study, had feelings of guilt because of reliance on precooked and preprocessed foods due to lack of time. In fact, the participants told that they often served the convenience and fast foods with green vegetables, or the like. Thompson (1996) states that by enriching, for example, the precooked meal with vegetables the women did not try to disguise the use of convenience food but they symbolically balanced the meal and thus felt more at ease with serving commercially processed food instead of traditional home-cooked meal. At least some manufacturers and marketers seem to be aware of the emotional aspect and guilt involved in the serving of market-made meals and have tried to find ways to help consumers beat it. Ritva Mäenpää (2005), the marketing manager of Saarioinen (a Finnish food producer) has noted that their message "food made by moms" seemed to turn convenience foods (valmisruuat) into something more acceptable and also brought Saarioinen new customers. She also mentioned that the women used in the commercials were real workers from one of Saarioinen's food factory.

In turn, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) found that the women made an effort to transform the commercially manufactured products into "homemade" ones by removing the revealing packages and by adding some special ingredients (e.g. butter or margarine) to the branded products. Furthermore, the modification of the commercially manufactured products sanctified the commodities and converted them into a family tradition of some sort. Wallendorf and Arnould (1991: 28) continued by pointing out that by altering the processed foods into a ritual meal "the food preparer proves familial values can triumph over the powerful homogenizing influences of consumer culture." In a similar spirit, in the battle against the mass production, the discourse of homemade food functions as a symbolic safeguard protecting the domestic life from the intrusion of market (Moisio et al. , 2004).

It could be argued that the demand for convenience is, at least partly, resulting from the appeal to a novel way of reifying the use and management of time. For instance, frozen chopped root vegetables or manufactured pasta sauce make it possible to reduce the number of weekly shopping trips. Accordingly, people of today's society often feel that they are short on time and hence, they try to fit in more activities into the day's 24 hours by organizing or reorganizing their order (Warde, 1999). In today's hurried world the foods purchased may not be what the individuals truly desire for a meal, but if the items make up a quick meal that is easy to throw together or just need to be heated, it can be qualified as a dinner (Herbst and Stanton, 2007). Warde (1999) argues that the increased consumption of convenience food is not a matter of people actually liking or wanting it, rather their use is a response to the problematic temporal organization of daily life. Warde (1999) also points out that it is not just the cook who has difficulties in being in the kitchen long enough to prepare a meal but also other members of the household are juggling their schedules. Thus, it might be difficult to arrange joint family meals, not to mention family meals that are totally homemade.

### 3.6.2 Differences between generations

Like mentioned earlier, there is no easy way to define convenience food and make an unambiguous distinction between homemade and convenience food. At least some research findings suggest that different generations have different perceptions of what is homemade and what is not. In their study Moisio et al. (2004) found that the younger generation (participants under 36 years) seemed to define homemade in opposition to mass production. Moreover, homemade was not equivalent with the notion of "made from scratch", but it appeared to be enough that the consumer's labor is somehow involved in the preparation. The younger generation also connected the preparation of

homemade food to personal achievement and creativeness and, what is more, the reproduction of tradition and cooking homemade did not really seem to be a major concern for them. In turn, the middle-aged participants (between 36 and 59 years) of Moisio's et al. (2004) study linked homemade food with nostalgic family identities. They negotiated the meaning of "made from scratch" from situation to situation in order to feel more at ease with their cooking practices and their divergence of some ideals. The senior generation (participants over 60 years) conceived homemade as something made from fresh and authentic ingredients according to traditional script and that involved a "respectful" amount of personal labor and effort. For them homemade was not about using "boxes" or "mixes". The senior generation of the study perceived homemade as always being superior to market-made.

The findings of Moisio et al. (2004) could suggest that the younger generation (at least part of it) is more in peace with using processed and manufactured foods than the middle-aged and senior generations, and that they also use them in order to produce "homemade". In a similar manner and in terms of this research, it could be assumed that the participants might not be so strict in their definition of and their attitude towards convenience food.

### 3.6.3 Clashing discourses

As mentioned many times before, food, eating and provision of meals can be much more than a mere routine, which only purpose is to fulfill the physical needs. Also, different and even opposite discourses about a certain matter can exist simultaneously and the knowledge of the issue can be under negotiation. For instance, there seems to be differing claims concerning the healthiness and environmental friendliness of convenience food and market-made meals. Some people are very concerned about the use of food additives and preservatives and therefore (at least partly) try to avoid the use of processed food. However, Marina Heinonen, who is a professor in the food- and environment sciences faculty of Helsinki University, has stated that the consumers' fear of food additives is totally groundless and she would not "ostracize" market-made meals. According to Heinonen the food industry might even succeed better in modifying meals to healthier ones than home cooks. It might be easier for the food factory to reduce the amount of sugar and fat than it is for ordinary people, who might be set in their ways. (Helsingin Sanomat 12.2.2012.)

As noted earlier, convenience and processed foods and market made-meals often have a negative connotation. However, in addition to the food producers and marketers, also other "advocates" of

convenience foods can be found. For example, consumption researcher Annukka Berg (2011) from University of Helsinki has written that when solely examining the eco effectiveness, convenience food might do pretty well compared to homemade meals. This is because according to some studies, people rarely throw away convenience meals and canned food, while heaps of fresh vegetables and homemade food end up in the bin. Food's lifespan and usage possibilities can be enhanced with good food preservatives and preservation methods. Thus, food should not be labeled as bad, at least in terms of environment, just because food additives have been added to it. Berg also writes that David Evans, a researcher from University of Manchester, suggests that people should use more well preserving ingredients and make use of semi-finished products when cooking. The suggestions were given in order to reduce the tremendous amount of food waste.

In their paper about meal planning in the 21st century, Soliah et al. (2003) state that if people desert home food preparation, cultural heritage and families' food traditions may disappear and be forgotten. On the other hand, at least some manufacturers argue that certain traditional Finnish dishes would not be eaten so widely and often (if at all) today, in case they were not sold prepared in grocery stores. They doubt that nowadays people would prepare some of the traditional dishes by themselves. According to the manufacturers, particular convenience foods help to maintain Finnish food culture and ensure the existence of some traditional Finnish dishes, such as liver casserole, blood crepes/pancakes and mämmi, which is typically eaten at Easter (Mäenpää, 2005; Ruokatieto Yhdistys ry). Then again, one might argue that if those dishes were not available premade people would still prepare them by themselves.

## 3.7 Summary of the review

I feel it is important to emphasize that the objective of this work is not to investigate and determine whether convenience foods should be used or not, or whether market-made meals should be seen as inferior nourishment or choice overall when compared to food cooked at home. Neither am I concerned with which eating practices would be the best choice in terms of family's well-being or family togetherness and so forth. The purpose of this research is to investigate how different eating practices and especially how convenience food are talked about and what are their roles in the construction and presentation of self- and family identity. Studies on identity discussed in this literature review bring out the role of culture, discourses and social situations in the identity construction process. Interactions, cultural discourses, norms and so forth can be viewed as

providing "material" for identity constructions and identity work. One aspect of identity work is the building of a self-understanding that is positively valued (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Based on the previous research, it appears that the family institution and its togetherness are still highly valued. Nevertheless, due to the haste and busy schedules, families seem to be struggling to find time for connecting with family members. Eating together as a family is one occasion when family members can communicate and bond with each other, and it may strengthen plus (re)produce the family identity. Organizing these family dinners, as well as the provision of food, seems to rest on the shoulders of mothers, even when they are working outside the home. Hence, traditional gender roles still seem to apply and are reinforced by cooking and eating practices. As the research on intergenerational influences show, examples set by women's own parents, both intentionally and unintentionally, can work as reference points and influence women's current food related practices.

Even though women do not spend as much time preparing food as they did in the earlier decades, a great amount of time is spend on worrying about it. Women are stressing over providing meals that will contribute to their family members' wellbeing, as well as please their tastes. Even though women are busy with work and grocery stores have offered different kinds of frozen and other convenience foods for quite some time now, it seems that they are not served light-heartedly and their use needs to be excused. Homemade meals, on the other hand, are perceived as signs of love, care and devotion, and are deemed superior overall. Then again, like mentioned earlier, based on the findings of the research by Moisio et al. (2004), it could be expected that younger generations might be more at ease with using at least partly processed foods. Also, the term "homemade" can be used somewhat loosely and defined in various ways. One could assume that the same applies for convenience foods. In addition to fostering relationships, maintaining harmony and bonding, different food choices and eating practices can be used in demonstrating and negotiating both family and self-identity, at least to some extent.

# 4. Epistemology and methodology

This section covers the epistemological premises as well as the methodology of this study. The study revolves around different discourses and meanings given to food products and consumption practices through language and, thus, it seems justified to have an overview of those matters. In the same manner, keeping in mind that the objective of this research is not to come up with universally binding facts, it is considered necessary to discuss how knowledge is actually perceived in respect of this study. The methodology part covers issues such as data collection, analytical focus and the logic behind interpretation of data.

## 4.1 Epistemology

### 4.1.1 The nature of knowledge

This thesis draws from social constructionism. Hence, the take on knowledge of the world is that there are no objectives truths that apply always and forever. From the viewpoint of social constructionism, knowledge is not a reflection of reality but rather a discursive construction that is negotiated through the interplay of different regimes of truth (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002). Conventions concerning "what counts as what" are intrinsically equivocal, always evolving, and can be given new meanings by those who use them (Gergen, 1985).

Knowledge is always context-bound and therefore up for negotiation. Knowledge is contingent upon the historical, political, cultural and social aspects. Also, the social construction of knowledge has social consequences. Gergen (1985: 268) states that "[…] descriptions and explanations form integral parts of various social patterns. They thus serve to sustain and support certain patterns to the exclusion of others. To alter description and explanation is thus to threaten certain actions and invite others." Within a particular worldview and context certain behavior and actions are seen as natural or normal while others can be unthinkable or, for example, deeply frowned upon.

### 4.1.2 The role of language, discourses and context, and their relation to reality

Keeping to constructionism is not to proclaim that physical articles and actions do not exist, rather it is to say that they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse. Discursive approaches that adhere to social constructionism (at least to some extent) are generally

based on the assumption that language is not a mirror reflecting reality nor, in other words, does it function as picture of an independent world. Rather, language works constitutively and constructs reality; meanings are produced within language. (e.g. Gergen, 1997; Hall, 1997.) Like noted in the previous paragraph, available discourses both enable and restrict us in the meaning construction process, which takes place in social interactions (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). In short, meaning is not embedded *in* things but it is constructed. The meaning results from signifying practice, which produces meaning and which *makes things mean* (Hall, 1997).

According to De Saussure (1983) the value of any one element is dependent on the coexistence of all the other elements in particular a system, i.e. language. The difference between certain elements constitutes meaning and value of the elements. In the final analysis, the substance of a word is not ascertained by what it contains but, rather, it is determined by what exists outside it (De Saussure, 1983). For example, in terms of food there is a chain of different eating occasions throughout the day, week and year. Breakfast is typically different from lunch, snack or dinner and eaten before them. Also, for many families the dinner eaten on Sundays might be more abundant and more appreciated than the supper eaten on Tuesdays. "Everyday meals" are usually very different from meals eaten on, for instance, Christmas Eve and they are also perceived differently. The chain linking these various meals together presents each of the elements some of their meaning (Douglas, 1975).

For instance, "brunch" is seen as kind of a combination of breakfast and lunch (and not just the words) or something that falls between them, so it is the relation between these elements that gives the code brunch its meaning (or at least some of it). A proper dinner has a meaning because also words and terms for what should be perceived a poor, bad, unsuitable or wrong type of dinner exist (Bugge and Almås, 2006). Also, it is the difference that people perceive between homemade and convenience food that give the two some of their meaning. According to Douglas (1975: 44) "the meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image."

Moisander and Valtonen (2006) point out aptly that in the investigation of cultural meanings it is essential not to overlook the whole representational system with its underlying rules, values and logics. They continue by stating that cultural meanings are not static but continuously negotiated and contested in practices of social interaction and representation. Hirschman, Scott and Wells (1998), in turn, mention that neither products as material articles nor images of products as material

articles carry meaning per se, they acquire their meaning through transformation into signifiers of a culturally recognized practice or category. According to the authors, it is both the historic and present use of the product, as well as the texts, such as commercials that cover the physical object with symbolic content.

Due to the emphasis put on contingency, social constructionism has faced criticism stating that if all knowledge and social identities are viewed as being dependent on the context then, consequently, everything is in flux and there are no constraints and rules guiding social life. However, that is not how the advocates of social constructionism perceive it. Rather, despite the fact that knowledge and identities are always contingent *in principle*, they tend to be fairly inflexible in specific circumstances (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002). Available discourses do not merely make it possible to meaningfully discuss a certain phenomenon or topic but they also pose constraints and determine acceptable ways of conduct (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

In sum, discourses constitute, construct, reproduce and change the (social) reality. Also, different discourses construct and reproduce different social realities. In addition, there can simultaneously exist different discourses in a specific context that strive for hegemony, i.e. they compete against each other over which discourse becomes the prevailing one. Accordingly, some researchers argue that no singular hegemonic discourse ever dominates individuals. Rather, social life is structured by the relative relationships among discourses of power (e.g. traditional vs. alternative medicine; women's right to work vs. women's place at home). When intersecting discourses clash it creates points of conflict, where localized forms of resistance may occur. That, in turn, composes pressure points where social and institutional shifts take place. (Thompson, 2004.)

Since language does not solely mirror reality but produces it, it can seldom (if ever) be thought of as value-free. Rather, it is considered as the key repository of cultural values and meanings (Hall, 1997). According to Hirschman et al. (1998), the consumption of any product is tightly intertwined with the symbolism of practices, rituals, and texts surrounding it. The authors also point out that in order to understand the exchange value of a certain product in the marketplace, one must understand the meanings associated with the product.

## 4.2 Methodology

### 4.2.1 Data collection

The data for this study was gathered through eight loosely structured personal interviews that lasted approximately an hour. In the beginning of each interview, the respondent was asked to tell about her family, to describe their typical day and to tell how eating is incorporated in it. After this, all of the interviews proceeded in somewhat different ways based on the things the respondent had told. However, during each interview the participants were asked questions about their family's eating and dinner practices. The interviews included questions such as what factors affect food choices, what the family had for dinner the previous day and why, who is in charge of the cooking, are convenience foods used, and how (if at all) have children affected the respondent's eating habits. In order to make the interview situation comfortable and to get the interviewees to relax the interviews were conducted in the informants' native language, i.e. Finnish. The interviews took place either at the respondent's workplace or home. The location and time were decided on the basis of what would be the most convenient arrangement for the participant. The in-depth interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The participants were mothers between the age of 26 and 43.

I chose to interview women because according to many studies women are still generally responsible for the provision of meals in families (e.g. DeVault, 1991; Charles and Kerr, 1998; Thompson, 1996; Bugge and Almås, 2006). Also, feeding children sounds easier than it might actually be. In fact, it is a job that is not free from anxiety and tension. If children do not eat properly but they eat the wrong foods, or too much or too little, it is usually the mother, who gets the blame. The flood of advertisements and experts' guidelines, which do not necessarily go hand in hand, make matters even more difficult for women. (Dixon and Banwell, 2004.) Thus, I wanted to study how mothers talked about food and what kind of meanings did different eating practices attain in their talk. What seemed to be the role of food, and convenience food in particular, in the construction of self- and family identity?

I chose to interview women who are under forty-five because I felt it would be interesting to see how these women would perceive and define convenience foods and market-made meals since their parents already had the possibility to use them when the participants were growing up. At that time women had already entered the work life a while back so the interviewees grew up in a society where it was (and still is) normal that women had (have) both work and children. In addition, market-made meals had already been on the grocery stores' shelves for about couple of decades.

Nowadays, the concept of family includes a broad range of different configurations (e.g. Valentine; 1999; Oswald, 2003). For instance, Oswald (2003) points out that contemporary households might be formed by two or more blended families as a result of divorces and such, unmarried couples and so forth. Therefore, I wanted to interview women whose family compositions differ from one another in terms of the number of children and otherwise. The table below presents a few demographics from each participant.

**TABLE 1**

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

| Informant 1 | 33 years old | Bachelor of Business Administration | Two daughters (3 and 5 years) | Married to the father of the children. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Informant 2 | 43 years old | Master of Social Sciences | One son (7 years) | Married to the father of the child. |
| Informant 3 | 36 years old | Master of Science (Agriculture and Forestry) | Three sons (4, 8 and 9 years) | Married to the father of the children. |
| Informant 4 | 33 years old | Vocational Qualification in Business and Administration | Three sons (2, 5 and 16 years) | Married to the (Indian) father of the small children. |
| Informant 5 | 29 years old | Master of Economic Sciences | One daughter (10 years) | Living together with a boyfriend (not the child's father). |
| Informant 6 | 36 years old | Master of Science (Agriculture and Forestry) | Two daughters (5 and 6 years) | Married to the father of the children. |
| Informant 7 | 30 years old | Bachelor of Business Administration | One daughter (7 years) | Single, currently back to living with her parents (+daughter). |
| Informant 8 | 26 years ol | Bachelor of Business Administration | One son (3 years) | Living together with the child's (Congolese ) father. |

However, I feel it is necessary to stress that by interviewing solely mothers I am only getting the mother's viewpoint on the family's eating practices and family identity. Family members' accounts concerning the collective identity of the family and how (if at all) that collective identity is intertwined with consumption symbols and activities may differ from one another. Still, the collective enactments of a family are bound to shape individual members' articulations and descriptions about the collectivity, at least to some extent (Epp and Price, 2008).

### 4.2.2 The nature of interpretation and the researcher's interpretative lenses

According to social constructionism neither objective nor universally binding truths nor knowledge about the "reality" exist. Thus, no clear cut rules or facts regarding human behavior can be stated. Context is the key. In consequence of the epistemological premises of social constructionism, my

objective is to offer one alternative point of view and plausible interpretation of this specific phenomenon, not to state universal facts or truths about the world and consumer behavior. Like Levy (1981) states, the participants' responses are not to be treated as scientific observations that can be tabulated as measures; in addition, products are presumed to carry symbolic meaning and so the talking about them and their consumption is a means to symbolize the life and nature of the family.

Different meanings are not embedded in the objects, things or people themselves, nor can the meaning be found *in* the word itself. It is the people who determine and fix meanings in a certain firm manner and, thus, after some time the meanings are perceived as natural and inevitable. The correlations between our conceptual and language systems are established by codes, which constitute and fix meanings through the system of representation. The code informs us that, for example, in the "language of traffic lights" green stands for go and red for stop. In a similar manner, every time we think of, for instance, a fork, the code tells us to use the (in this case English) word FORK. Additionally, the code lets us know that the concept "fork" is represented by the letters F,O,R,K that are placed in a particular order. So, codes are needed in order for different signs to communicate meanings; codes allow us to transform concepts into language, and vice versa. (Hall, 1997.)

Codes do not exist in nature nor are they "within us" when we are born. Rather, they result from social conventions practices and play a crucial part in each culture. Therefore, by becoming members of a certain culture, people learn to use and unconsciously internalize particular codes. (Hall, 1997.) Codes offer a range of possibilities for communicating certain messages. Douglas (1975) mentions that with respect to food, the messages reflect, for instance, various degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, and boundaries. According to her, the messages food encode can be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed.

Since I am a part of the culture that I am studying, revealing taken-for-granted assumptions and looking at phenomenon with new eyes is everything but easy. Hirschman et al. (1998) point out that researchers are also consumers. Consequently, in their everyday, nonanalytical states, researchers watch and interpret, for instance, television commercials and advertisements and listen to various discussions by drawing on the discursive knowledge that they have absorbed since childhood. Accordingly, all consumers (including researchers) share a culturally common *interpretive lens*. The authors also note that by familiarizing ourselves with different studies, theories, literature and

so forth we are led into a process of secondary socialization. This, in turn, offers us as researchers an additional set(s) of interpretive lenses that we can employ to the object of study.

### 4.2.3 The analytical focus and hermeneutical logic

Arnold and Fischer (1994) note that according to hermeneutic philosophy texts take on a life of their own after being written or recorded. Therefore they might engender insights that the author did not even realize. In other words, the texts can be seen reflecting something more or different than what the author meant. Accordingly, I am not trying to "get inside people's heads" or reveal their true thoughts or feelings. Hence, the approach that I am taking in my thesis differs from, for instance, phenomenology in terms of the analytical focus. Instead of trying to "drill" into people's minds, I am going to study how these women represent their families, themselves and food consumption by using language as a means to produce and construct meaning (Hall, 1997). What kind of discourse practices can be detected and what it all means in a broader sense? How are convenience foods represented and self- and family identities (re)produced?

Much like novels, fairy tales, myths and psychological test responses, depth interviews can be viewed as a form of story-telling, which imaginative statements can be qualitatively interpreted for their functional and symbolic substance (Levy, 1981). Thus, the "true" feelings etc. and "tapping into people's minds" do not belong to my research scope. The analytical focus is not on the individuals themselves but on the discursive practices and rhetoric techniques they use (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). For the purpose of this research it was not important to discover whether or not it was true that the participant "only ate market-made meals on a rare occasion", but rather to investigate how these women talked about food, their eating practices and their families (Bugge and Almås, 2006). In other words, the objective of the analysis and interpretation was not to provide evidence about what people actually eat or cook, but to offer insights about the way in which food, eating, family and the women themselves are represented (Warde, 1997).

This study follows a hermeneutical logic in the analysis and interpretation of the data. Thus, the handling of the data encompasses an iterative process of reading, documenting, and systematizing the interview transcripts. In order to obtain a sense of the whole, each transcript is closely read and already during this initial reading the interpreter starts the process of noting key phrases, metaphors, and patterns of meaning. (Thompson, 1996.) Through each iteration the interpretation is developed further and the goal is to find some common themes and ways of meaning-making and points of differences. Also, the goal is to grasp their relation to the socio-cultural environment.

In other words, to use the hermeneutic circle (or iterative spiral of understanding) means going back and forth between the data and incorporating a specific-general-specific movement in the interpretation (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). In sum, the logic of hermeneutical circle bases on the idea that in order to understand the part, the researcher must grasp the whole. In this iterative process earlier readings of a text inform later readings and vice versa. Gradually an even-more integrated and comprehensive account of the specific elements (single words, concepts, categories and rhetoric devices) as well as of the whole (e.g. socio-cultural form of life) develops (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

To achieve an understanding of the topic, I read and re-read each interview after transcribing it. As more interviews were conducted, I returned to the previously transcribed ones to identify reoccurring themes, similarities as well as distinctions. I aimed at starting the reading process with a clean slate, so to speak, and not to expect or look for anything particular. In other words, I tried to let the data to "speak to me". As the process continued I tried to link the things that emerged from the data to the broader historical, socio-cultural context. When I was handling the data I strove for identifying connections between the remarks of individuals and this particular society we live in. Why did the participants say what they said? Why were certain phrases uttered? So, the transcripts were not thought of as some distinct entities that could be scrutinized as something completely separate from the "outside world". Rather, the objective was to see the forest behind the trees and figure out how it all comes together. As I was carrying out the analysis and interpretation, I tried to bear in mind that things do not end in the remarks that were voiced out, they are just the starting point.

Even though I am not set out to come up with universally binding facts or to reveal the "most inner selves" of the participants, the process of hermeneutic interpretation does result in some sort of generalizations. However, here the word generalization does not refer neither to factlike declarations nor causal explanations of human behavior; instead they can be described as reflective insights about a collective human community (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

Relying on the remarks by Arnould and Fischer (1994) I would like to stress that there can be (and are) more than one possible interpretation of this matter, my aim is to offer one of them. The phenomenon is bound to look different from different perspectives and therefore there can be more than one plausible interpretation. The culturally, temporally and socially specific (pre)understandings of the researcher that are drawn both from experiences as a consumer and experiences as a researcher, work as a starting point for the interpretation. Different theoretical and

analytical frameworks and readings of particular literature provide different tools for looking at and analyzing the data and so they can and will produce different accounts of it. Accordingly, my approach in relation to the interviews, as well as my understanding of the topic and data are affected by both my own personal experiences and the literature I have familiarized myself with.

# 5. Findings

All of the interviews had their own peculiarities and each woman told a unique story. However, some themes and issues were present in all of the interviews and the informants' talk had many similarities, in addition to the differences. In general, a lot of weight was given to joint family meals and the central role they play with respect to within family communication. Additionally, the importance of versatility in relation to food as well as the consideration for the children's health came across strongly throughout the interviews. These aspects were made use of in the identity construction of a caring mother. Based on the literature review and scrutiny of the data, overall identity constructions for the family, mother and convenience foods were developed.

The descriptive names, which were given to these identity formations, aim at capturing the main points that shone through the interviews. Analysis of the data led to describing family identity, or rather how it was portrayed, as "*equal individuals looking for time together*". This construction depicts the themes of portrayed gender equality in terms of provision of food and the importance of joint family meals. Mother's identity (or its representation), in turn, was named "*informed caretaker, not an imaginative chef*". This creation illustrates the theme of mental work and its different aspects, as well as the mothers' tendency to put care and the "collective good" before themselves. As one of the objectives of this study was to pay particular attention to how convenience foods were talked about, an "identity" was constructed also for convenience foods. The identity crafted for convenience foods was named "*unwanted products, which are regularly present*". This formation demonstrates the negativity (e.g. bad conscience) related to convenience foods and the given representation that they cannot be totally avoided, even though they are fairly detested. The findings that led to these three formations are discussed next. However, since the matters are connected and intertwined, the findings regarding the three formations as well as their justification overlap to some extent.

## 5.1 Family identity: Equal individuals looking for time together

### 5.1.1 Equal individuals?: Man's place can be in the kitchen, but...

The collected data seemed to imply that nowadays it is not necessarily the mother who is in charge of the cooking and the provision of food. The women appeared to want to portray their families as contemporary entities in which gender equality prevails and this way attached positive values to its

representation. In some of the cases the interviewed women informed that their spouses are the ones who mainly do the cooking. However, there are some interesting remarks to be made about this. It turned out that even though the women first said their spouses are in charge of cooking, the women's expressions suggested that they also prepare meals from time to time and sometimes help the man in the kitchen. Even more striking was that in most of the cases where the men were said to be responsible for preparing dinners, the reason for this arrangement was the man's own willingness and desire to cook.

One respondent, in turn, said that her partner had done more of the cooking lately since he is *"so brisk"* Nr.5 29, years, and she had recently been held up at work. So, it seems that when the man is handling the provision of food, it is because of some special trait or situation. Also, the respondent currently living with her parents told that her father does perhaps most of the cooking and the reason given for this was related to the father's own taste preferences (*"He is used to much heavier food than us [...] if he has bought pork steak it's no tenderloin but the steak has the fat, the blubber layer with it. [...] He likes cooking as well but I think it's mainly because he likes to prepare those greasier foods and use salt rather much, he has these sort of tendencies."* Nr. 7, 30 years). In one case, where the woman did the cooking, it was not necessarily because the woman enjoyed it but because the man was not interested in it and, thus, the respondent saw no reason in bothering the man with dinner preparations. Consequently, it appears that the provision of food is still fundamentally the woman's responsibility and men do it if they happen to be interested in and enthusiastic about it. For example:

*I have outsourced it (laughs), he* (the husband) *likes to cook. You could say that he is responsible for out foods. [...] It just came naturally* (the division)*, he was interested in cooking. Sure if he hadn't been I would have probably taken the role. Of course, it's not that I don't do it too but he does much more, he's the one responsible for it (cooking).* Nr. 1, 33 years

The use of the phrase *"I have outsourced it"* gives an impression that the cooking is something that would normally belong to the woman but the respondent had found someone who prefers do it. The whole quote implies that if the man had not been especially interested in cooking, the task would have fallen on the shoulders of the respondent, as if that would have been the "normal" way to handle it. Below are two quotes from other respondents. The first one also reflects the facts that even though the man is said to be responsible for the cooking, the women do it also and that the man is responsible for it because he likes to do it. The second quote is an example showing that (at least in some families) if a man is not interested in cooking, he does not have to do it.

*Who is responsible for the preparing of food?*

*My husband is. Luckily he is in charge of the cooking in our family. […] He took care of it even before the kids. I have certain salads that I do well […] he never does them; they are always on my responsibility. But in general, if he is home he prepares the food because he likes to do it.* Nr. 5, 36 years

*It is a question of personality, my husband isn't interested in cooking at all […] it isn't his natural area so why bug him with it when I'm capable of doing it […].* Nr. 2, 43 years

The data might give the impression that the boundaries of traditional gender roles are blurring and women do not necessarily have to be the cooks in the family. However, the ways in which the respondents talked about the division of labor in terms of cooking and so forth seemed to hint that women still tend to play the role of nurturing caretaker, and that the provision of food is perceived as being "normally" the mother's duty (see e.g. DeVault, 1991; Van Esterik, 1999). Nevertheless, this was not voiced directly and the traditional gender role (i.e. it is a woman's job to handle the provision of meals) was not given as a reason for taking care of the cooking. Then again, even though she told being mainly in charge of the cooking, the youngest respondent did mention that *"I don't want him* (her son) *to think that women's place is in the kitchen."* Nr. 8, 26 years. Accordingly, she also viewed it to be important to accustom the son to the cooking activities. So, perhaps the traditional gender roles are fading slowly but surely, at least to some extent.

### 5.1.2 Equal individuals?: Inspiration and want versus nurture and duty

Based on the interviews it seems that cooking and the provision of food mean different things for men and women. In their research Moisio et al. (2004) found that the young generation (informants below 36 years) related experiences of personal accomplishment and creativeness to preparing of homemade dinners. The findings of this study, in turn, seem to hint that it is the men for whom the cooking homemade dinner is about creativity and self-fulfillment. This can be seen, for instance, in the following quotes from two respondents: *"I don't think he* (the husband) *will let go of his task* (of cooking) *since he likes it so much […]"* Nr. 1, 33 years, and *"for my husband it* (the process of cooking) *is the thing and he wants to try out new stuff and new foods […] the bad side about him cooking is that he makes a big mess and doesn't clean after himself […]so it's not like some dream that I would (laughs) read a magazine and he would cook and everything got taken care of […] he*

*uses imagination, goes to the store open minded"* Nr. 5, 36 years (the latter phrase referred to the lobsters that the man had cooked).

The women, on the other hand, seemed to relate things like care and nurture (or the lack of them), as well as duty and responsibility to the overall provision of food. Similar tendencies have been reported also in some previous research by, for instance, Charles and Kerr (1988), DeVault (1991) and Thompson (1996). The following extracts from different informants aim at demonstrating these statements.

*What does food mean to you (note: this question only relates to the first quote)?*

*Being together and that kids would get healthy homemade food [...]* Nr. 4, 33 years

*[...] you have gotten the kids as to feed them well and with quality so it* (cooking homemade food) *is part of the motherhood, that's how I experience it.* Nr. 4, 33 years

*I feel that it* (cooking) *is also a way to show affection and to take care; I know everyone's favorite foods and I know that one wants a bit more of this and the other one wants a bit more of that and the third one doesn't want the mushrooms in this [...].* Nr.3, 36 years

However, in addition to referring to the child's well-being, the youngest interviewee also stated that *"If I had a choice between cooking the meal myself and simply heating it* (convenience food)*, I would rather do it myself, it's somehow <u>therapeutic</u> and nice."* Nr. 8, 26 years. After the interview was over and a few words were exchanged she also mentioned how, nowadays, cooking and trying out new foods seem to have become like a hobby for many people. So, maybe there is some sort of a shift occurring and younger mothers are finding new reasons for cooking and attaching new meanings to it besides the nurture and care. With respect to employed discourses, the possible shift from "care to creativity" would also lead to other, possibly multifaceted constructions of identity. Perhaps this movement could, at last partly, stem from all the food related television shows and other media coverage discussed in the earlier sections of this work.

### 5.1.3 Looking for time together: The more the merrier

The data strongly suggests that family leisure plays a significant role in family life *("It's nice to eat together at least once a day [...] it's a good place to go through the events of the day and ask things and catch up."* Nr.1, 33 years*)*. Based on the data especially the core family leisure of eating together seemed to be highly valued, not solely by the mothers but also by other members of the

family *("It's something that we all like a lot and especially my daughter demands that we are all together."* Nr. 5, 29 years and *"His family didn't have the routine of eating together but I notice that he likes it a lot, I actually think that he is more strict with it* (eating together) *than me [...]"* Nr. 6, 36 years *)*. Eating together offers a natural way of spending time together as a family and communicating with other family members. The quotes below are couple of examples that demonstrate this claim.

*[...] going out together* (e.g. skiing in the winter) *would also be something to do jointly and while we could converse...but it* (eating together) *is just so easy, you chat and spend time together, if we would just hold on to it that everyone eats together at least in certain days [...].* Nr. 4, 33 years

*We don't spend so much time together otherwise and that's why I think that the moment of eating is so nice. We don't really do other stuff mutually [...] maybe that's why the eating together is so important, this way there is a least some point when we stop for awhile...* Nr. 3, 36 years

*It's interesting how this one little social moment of the day can bind people since otherwise you don't necessarily talk to each other that much while doing other things [...]* Nr. 7, 30 years

Amidst their busy and frantic lives the families appeared to yearn for taking a breather, stopping for a minute and grounding the family in a caring place for a while *("Food has quite a big role in everyday life since otherwise the days are so hectic. We come home and then it's time for the depressing task of shopping and then everyone has homework or some other stuff to do, so it's this nice moment when you can just be and you don't do anything else...then after dinner you're in a hurry to go to bed so you can get up in the morning, so I guess it* (eating together) *is this nice moment..."* Nr. 5, 29 years.*)*. Moreover, all of the women said that getting take-out food or eating out only happened in rare occasions, rather the tendency and aim was to eat (preferably) homemade food at home jointly as a family. Consequently, home seems to be a vital place for collective (and individual) consumption.

The way the informants talked gave the impression that the families are busy with, for instance, work, different domestic chores and children's hobbies. So, the family dinner is an opportunity and a smooth way to get together, bond and reinforce family cohesiveness *("It* (eating together) *creates certain shared moments and that way you know that everyone is ok since they just ate, and then everyone head off to different directions."* Nr. 8, 26 years*)*. Additionally, some of the women clearly stated that according to some external sources eating together is something you are supposed to do. One of the informants told that they eat jointly because it is a custom of theirs, it is nice and

that way they spend some time together. However, she also said that nowadays you can rationalize it by saying that you have read in many places that those moments when everyone sits down together, at least for a brief moment, are important. As if the fact that she thinks it is a nice habit and that their family is used to it would not be a good enough reason as it is.

One mother, whose family did not eat together, except sometimes in the weekend, remarked that "*I have sometimes felt a sting in my heart about not providing this family model where you eat collectively as a family around a table [...] perhaps it's this view inherited somewhere else that eating together as a family has some sort of an intrinsic value.*" Nr. 2, 43 years. This statement was particularly interesting since the respondent also told that they do a lot of things together as a family, such as go outdoors in the weekends and watch sports from the television. This hints that family dinners would not be their only chance to do something collectively. Thus, it appears that even though most of the women seemed to feel that eating jointly as a family is a nice habit especially because it is a good and natural way to communicate and bond, some prevailing ideals have not gone completely unnoticed either.

The value and importance that were given to eating together were also reflected, for instance, in the answers a couple of the women gave when asked about what good food is. With the exception of one respondent, none of the informants started describing, for instance, their absolute favorite foods, but mentioned things like *"diverse basic home food=kotiruoka"* and the collective capability of the dish, so to speak. The next two citations illustrate the want to get the household together, as well as some other aspects of the previously mentioned mental work that women engage in.

*Good food is something that gets the family to gather together [...] e.g he* (son) *doesn't eat any soups so I don't think soup is good food because then he would just be like blaah and leave and maybe eat some bread..so, good food is of course healthy and it makes the family come together, and it's quick to make (laugh).* Nr. 4, 33 years

*Tortillas are good food because most of the time they suit everyone in this household, and it's a good compromise food since there's also salad in it but in a way it's also some sort of a treat.* Nr. 5, 29 years

Thus, it appears that the provision of food can be much more than a simple routine task to be completed mechanically without really thinking about it. It is not merely about providing and getting nourishment but it is also about communicating with other family members, fostering family relations, ensuring the wellbeing of offspring, and sustaining harmony within the family.

In some situations the mother turned to convenience foods in order to get something to the table fast since that way the family had the possibility to eat together.

*[…] let's eat fast now, fast whatever it is, so I just quickly prepare the rice and (frozen) nuggets and cold sour cream –sauce, that's one "basic guickpig" (perus pikasika) that we sometimes do. This way, when the food comes just now, I can get the teenager to stay. But if I started to bake bread or prepare something that takes a long time he would just say "bye, put it in the fridge, I'll eat later".*
Nr. 4, 33 years

*We ate barley that was boiled yesterday and then market made frozen vegetableballs. We came to this because the boys had soccer practice and they had to leave really quickly, so I didn't have time to prepare anything that would have taken more time.* Nr. 3, 36 years

Hence, it seems that occasionally convenience foods are used as a means to serve the greater good of eating jointly. It seems that in some cases more weight is placed on getting the household to eat together than cooking something from scratch. This, as well as the notions made of good food, imply that reinforcing family cohesiveness and within family communication are perceived very important. For instance, in these examples the mothers did not decide to first give something quick for the ones that were leaving and then prepare totally self-made dinner for the rest. Furthermore, at times convenience foods *had to* be used in order to eat dinner at somewhat reasonable hour after coming home so late. There can be find some similarities between the remarks made here and the statements made by Warde (1999). He pointed out that all family members juggle with their schedules, which makes organizing collective family dinners difficult, at least if the meal is to be served without the use of convenience foods.

Many of the informants also hoped that the collective family meals and the time spent together would be something that their own children would remember, think of fondly in the future and carry with them when growing up. For instance:

*I would like it* (the habit of eating together) *to root also to her* (daughter)*, so that at least that one moment of the day is dedicated to others than yourself and you spend that moment together.* Nr. 7, 30 years

*At least I would want him* (son) *to remember our kitchen bustles when we prepare food together and especially that we've spent time together and eaten together…* Nr. 8, 26 years

*What do you wish your children would remember from their childhood?*

*Well maybe our weekend breakfasts, those long morning moments when we have "hotel breakfast" and also our joint dinners [...]* Nr. 6, 36 years

Like discussed previously, the respondents seemed to perceive joint family dinners as nice, calm moments in the middle of their families' hurried and restless lives, as well as occasions for fostering and strengthening family relations. It could be said that everyday interactions within family are intertwined with consumption objects and activities and that the family identity is composed, reinforced and managed through these everyday interactions (Epp and Price, 2008). Many of the women also felt that they could be quite flexible about the food eaten but they would not be willing to give up the eating together part. The data gave the impression that the dinner might be characterized as family time, as opposed to mealtime.

## 5.2 Self-identity: Informed caretaker, not an imaginative chef

### 5.2.1 An informed mother: On-going mental work

Like mentioned in the literature review, for instance, Dixon and Banwell (2004) found that even though women do not put so much time in cooking as they did before, the time spent on worrying about food has not diminished. Indeed, the women in this research gave the impression that they have a tendency to stress over food issues while the meals might not be made from scratch. It appeared that all the information that the women can get their hands on, as well as information that they cannot help but to hear, see and sink in have taken their toll. So, the provision of food is not simply a mechanic routine but entails deeper meanings. It appears that women might not be always cooking completely homemade dinners but they are doing a lot of "thinking work", i.e. mental work. Sometimes it is this mental work that conveys things like nurture, the want to protect your children and consideration for family members' well-being – things that in previous decades were communicated perhaps through meals made basically from scratch. And even when the meals are homemade the mental work and anxieties caused by food can still be present.

*Food means awfully lot and I feel that it has gotten too many meanings. Previously it was merely about filling up (tankkaamista) or relishing (herkuttelua) but now, because of the kids, you think a lot about whether the nutritional content is sufficient. Also, the green causes and protection of the environment are close to me and my husband's heart [...] It's not just about eating or relishing anymore but you feel like you should save the world and keep the kids healthy at the same time [...]*

*nowadays there is so much information and options available that it feels like you have a huge responsibility…* Nr. 3, 36 years

*I think I tended to use quite a lot of those marinated meats but now I have totally stopped using them, I haven't bought them in couple of years..I think it's due to all these writings about them having a lot of sodium (natrium?) and also other additives […].* Nr.2, 43 years

*[…] it's stressing to try to come up with different foods that would make do for everyone and that would be healthy, at least somewhat so…* Nr. 5, 29 years

When talking about what makes a decent meal and so forth, the informants often mentioned versatility and vegetables and in some cases not eating enough of greens was a cause of distress. Interestingly many of the respondents said that vegetables were not such a big deal in their childhood and their parents did not necessarily use them that much. When asked about why they feel it is important to serve vegetables or salad, the informants mentioned, for example, *"Well I guess it's this common knowledge that you should eat vegetables, and probably it's basically about serving your child something sensible and teaching her that kind of a food culture where you need to eat vegetables […]."* Nr. 5, 29 years. The reference to "common knowledge" could be linked to the premise of knowledge being contingent and always up for negotiation. People might start taking things for granted and stop questioning them once they have been "on the surface" and talked about long enough. When the informants were growing up, vegetables and salad might not have found their way to the dinner table that often, nor were they talked about so much. And yet, now the women mentioned the importance of vegetables and the worry about not eating those enough in numerous occasions. So, even though we might not always realize it, we are being affected by the changes in the discourses that prevail in the society.

### 5.2.2 A caretaker: Cooking and consideration for others, not self

Like mentioned earlier, the mothers appeared to represent themselves as knowledgeable mothers who pay attention to the family's eating habits and try to ensure the provision of healthy food. So, they seemed to strive for constructing an identity of a caring mother, who knows what is best for children. The inspection of the data suggested that the mothers seemed to view cooking homemade and avoiding convenience foods as a part of the caretaker identity. For instance:

*Well it* (serving market made spinach pancakes or chicken nuggets etc.) *does lead to a moral hangover, it doesn't depress me for the whole week but it does give a certain sense of a failure…* Nr. 5, 29 years

*I'm a bad mother in the sense that I don't really separately start cooking during week nights, we rely on market-made meals quite a lot…well for our son I cook in the way that I might make a greater amount of food during weekend and then put in the freezer."* Nr.2, 43 years

The above extract is interesting in the sense that the respondent implies that for her son she, at least in general, serves homemade food but the same habit does not seem to apply to her. So, the role of care and consideration appeared to be specifically related to the eating habits of children and could be somewhat overlooked when it was a question of the woman as an individual. This was reflected also, for instance, in the statements that the respondents made about probably relying on sandwiches, yoghurt or other snacks instead of eating supper, provided that they did not have the kids who need an actual evening meal. The women gave the impression that they would not "fuss" about food that much and would settle for less, if they did not have to think about their children's well-being. Even though she was not usually in charge of the cooking, the respondent living with her parents remarked that *"I would be so out there/bad off (hunningolla?) if it wasn't for my daughter. I wouldn't necessarily eat unhealthier but probably less and not so diversely. Because of her, you try to make sure that everything needed for growth is gotten from the food and no pill jars have to be used."* Nr.7, 30 years

In addition, the women tended to be less strict about convenience food (that form a complete meal) on an individual level *("I think it's a good idea for single households if you need to get something fast."* Nr. 7, 30 years, and "[…] *if I was living alone I would probably cave in (sortua) to those […]."* Nr. 6, 36 years*)*. Moreover, some of them told that they eat or had eaten those meals, at least occasionally, at work or at home. Still, they said that they wanted to ensure that their children do not eat convenience foods.

The value given to preparing dishes at home came through also when the women talked about the choice of convenience foods. Some of the informants mentioned that the choice depends on the degree of difficulty of the preparation. The respondents seemed to favor those manufactured food products that they felt they (or their husband) could not make themselves. For instance, one of the women said *"I do consider them (market-made spinach pancakes) as convenience food but I wouldn't know how to make them myself. I couldn't buy e.g. macaroni casserole from the supermarket since I know how to prepare it myself, and I do make it. So, I wouldn't buy foods that I*

*can make myself.”* Nr. 6, 36 years. It could be that in some cases the "moral hangover" can be toned down a bit or somehow managed, if the convenience food served is something that the mother perceives to be out of the range of her own cooking skills. Maybe the use of manufactured macaroni casserole or spaghetti bolognese would too greatly highlight the fact that the mother chose not to cook and wound up serving commercially produced meal, which she could have prepared herself. It might be argued that in those examples the effect is even further reinforced since the dishes do not require, for example, the boiling of potatoes or rice.

The inspection of the data led to the perception that microwave and the single-packaged convenience foods that form a whole meal play the part of the bad guy *(“I don't like anything that goes into the microwave.”* Nr. 5, 29 years, and *“I somehow tend to think that frozen foods are better […] I don't know why, maybe factors related to shelf life (säilyvyys) come to my mind…but you always get the feeling that the frozen food is better than the one in the shelf.”* Nr. 7, 30 years). When the respondents were asked to tell what products belong to the convenience food category (valmisruoka="ready food") the microwaveable foods that form a complete meal were often the first thing they had in mind. Furthermore, also other points in the interviews gave the impression that, in general, it is precisely the microwaveable foods that form a whole dish that are deeply frowned upon *(e.g. “I have sometimes wondered who buys those market-made pasta casseroles. It would never even cross my mind to buy some market-made spaghetti Bolognese dish […]”* Nr. 3, 36 years, and *“In terms of convenience foods, those boxes where you have the whole food ensemble completely ready, those are at the bottom of the barrel.”* Nr. 4, 33 years). The following extract from one interview (Nr. 6, 36 years) exemplifies the notions made above well.

*How would you define convenience food?*

*Well, as something little tasteless and watery and pale…*

*Are all convenience foods, such as spinach pancakes, french fries and those complete meals the same..?*

*Well no, I was perhaps thinking about some complete meals just now…I wasn't thinking about…I didn't think of fish fingers or french fries or spinach pancakes or the like so…*

*But you consider them as convenience foods or are they semi-manufactured products or…?*

*I do think they're convenience food but but…maybe it's those totally complete meals that somehow bewilder me, the ones where you have the rice and the sauce…Then again, if I was living alone I would probably cave in (sortua) to those […].*

Some of the women had hard time picturing their family using microwaveable complete meals because the products tend to contain only one portion and the respondents found it a bit weird and ridiculous to heat every member's meal separately. According to the women, the families usually eat together so heating up meals one by one would not be so convenient. The bags of, for instance, frozen nuggets or vegetable rissoles, on the other hand, provide food for the whole family and they can be prepared in one go *("There's also the thing of the microwave dishes being single meals but when you take something from the freezer it's usually a bag which includes three portions. So, when you smash it to the pan, there's enough for everyone. It would feel so weird to heat the meals one by one." Nr. 5, 29 years).*

However, it might also partly be a matter of kind of distracting oneself, consciously or unconsciously, from the use of convenience foods. Could it be that the microwave and the separate meals in their little boxes make the use of market-made foods too apparent and, thus, worsen the feelings of disappointment and moral hangover? Is it so that when heating up frozen foods, the use of oven or stove make the food feel at least slightly more home cooked, and therefore make those products a bit more appealing and acceptable than microwaveable dishes? Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) argued in their Thanksgiving Day paper that "Through elaborate preparations using manufactured food products, families make a claim about the immanent productive potential of the household […] The more food dishes prepared, the more tableware to be washed, and the more manufactured products transformed, the more evocative and powerful this message.". These two contexts are different but the same logic could possibly apply here even though the women did not spell it out loud.

The foods that do not form a complete dish offer more possibilities to prepare part of the meal (e.g. boil potatoes or rice) yourself. This, in turn, might mitigate the anxiety related to serving convenience foods. In his research, Thompson (1996) found that the interviewed women often offered vegetables with the convenience food in order to symbolically balance the meal and alleviate the feelings of guilt. Indeed, when talking about serving convenience food one respondent of this study remarked *"Oh yes then you definitely have to have something mitigating=loiventavaa? with it, something like fresh salad, or when we're having, for example, market-made meatballs we boil whole potatoes […]"* Nr. 4, 33 years. It could be argued that no matter whether using

convenience foods or preparing dinner from scratch, the women are representing themselves as informed caretakers or, in other words, as protective mothers that are concerned with their children's well-being. The following extract illustrates this well: "*I put more effort in eating now, you become* (after getting a child) *more conscious and want that the child eats healthy, grows properly and that the bones and everything are ok.*" Nr. 8, 26 years.

By talking, for instance, about the healthiness of the food and by showing concern for the use of convenience foods the informants appear to build an identity of knowledgeable and caring mothers who strive for, but not always succeed in, providing food that enhances the well-being of their offspring.  They do not, for example, simply state that they serve market-made meals because it is so much easier and faster and so it is possible for them to have more "me-time". Instead of representing themselves as first and foremost as individuals, they voice a concern for others.

### 5.2.3 Not an imaginative chef: Same old, same old

Many of the mothers did not solely stress over the time needed to prepare the meal, healthiness of the food or over the use of convenience foods but they also tended to find the decision on what to serve very difficult. So, coming up with different dishes is yet another element of the mental work and a cause for pains *([...] really it's such a vexatious task, going grocery shopping and figuring out what to eat..thinking about what to have for dinner is so stressful, probably the most stressful thing of the day (laughs)"* Nr. 5, 29 years*).*  Furthermore, they tended to kind of downplay the foods that they prepare, as well as their innovative capabilities *("He has imagination so the dishes are much more versatile, not always the same foods that I make [..] I too like cooking but I hate that I don't have enough imagination while doing it."* Nr. 6, 36 years*).* It appeared that many of the women were somewhat frustrated about always serving the same, boring dishes:

*I don't know whether a mother who wouldn't stress over 'what should we eat today' exists…It does feel like I'm making chicken again or again I'm preparing minced meat…you're supposed to try to come up with several different dishes from the same ingredients so it wouldn't feel that you're always serving the same things [...]*. Nr. 2, 43 years

*The fact that always the same boring fish soup, macaroni casserole, and minced meat soup and potatoes are served derives from my childhood - basic Finnish foods, never anything exciting or new…* Nr. 4, 33 years

Overall, the women seemed to view the diversity of the foods both in terms of the meals (i.e. not always serving e.g. spaghetti bolognese) and the components used in formation of the dish (e.g. the meal should include also vegetables) very important. Accordingly, words *versatility* and *variability* were uttered many times. Nonetheless, many of the participants felt that they were sometimes falling short in reaching the objective of diversity and stressed over it ("*I'm worried that I'm not that good and skilled as a mother that I would be able to serve that kind of broad selection of different (dishes) [...]*" Nr. 5, 33 years). Some of the informants' anxiety over always eating the same boring dishes and the desire for versatility could also be seen in terms of the future. The below quotations from different women illustrate these remarks.

*I'm stressed out because I can't cook vegetarian dishes and I don't...I would want to teach my kids, like broaden their horizons from this meat/chicken/broiler rissole –world [...] I would like to offer more versatility and less meat, I'm worried that that they'll learn this kind of habit and then continue that same meat policy with their own children.* Nr. 4, 33 years

*Well actually (laughs) I'm afraid that he we'll precisely remember that he always got chicken or minced meat, always those same old dishes and that good food was served at school [...]* Nr. 2, 43 years

The adjectives such as *superdrab, easy, boring, familiar and safe* that many of the interviewed women used in their talk seemed to represent the dishes they served, as well as maybe themselves, as unimaginative and dull or at least as "very basic", nothing out of the ordinary or fancy. The verbs that they chose to employ also suggested the same and underrated their efforts in terms of cooking. This can be seen for example in the following quotations:

"*I quickly rig/put together (väsätä) mincedmeatsoup [...]*" Nr. 5, 33 years

"*[...] I basically just dash (iskeä) cream on top and then dash some peppers there [...]* " Nr. 6, 36 years

"*[...] it doesn't really require anything else except you just slap/slam (lätkästä) spices on top [...]*" Nr. 2, 43 years.

These notions raise a question whether the general air and culture somehow makes, at least mothers or women, either consciously or unconsciously downplay their skills and efforts - or at least prevent them to blow their own horn, so to speak.  Is it not acceptable to say that you are doing a good job and capable of cooking nice meals unless you come up with something new, complicated or exotic

everyday and spend hours in the kitchen? Or would it be considered as boasting? For instance, one of the mothers said *"[…] first I just peel and chop some root vegetables, throw them into the stew, put it in the oven and then it just stays there. So it's not like I do something to it constantly, I don't do anything demanding like soufflés and Sacher Tortes that I would have to guard continually and stir but…"* Nr. 3, 36 years. This was mouthed by a respondent who is in charge of the cooking and, based on what she said, does not use processed foods often and prepares, for example, pea soup from scratch.  So, it appears that the women had a tendency to underrate their own efforts, at least in some respects.

## 5.3 Convenience food: Unwanted products, which are regularly present

### 5.3.1 Convenience food or homemade food?

Before taking a closer look at the findings related to the aspects of *"unwanted products, which are regularly present"*, the relation between homemade and convenience food is elaborated on. Grocery stores are filled with food products that reduce the time and effort needed in preparation of a meal and even prepared complete meals. However, like discussed earlier, homemade food appears to be viewed superior to convenience foods. So, what constitutes as homemade meal and where is the line between homemade food and market-made food? In general it seems that dodging the microwave trap and getting a kettle dirty from boiling rice does not turn a meal into a homemade one *("For me the market-made minced meat steak  isn't homemade food even if you have boiled the potatoes yourself. […] some semi-manufactured products like frozen vegetables can be used* (in homemade food)*. I don't know why I think that they are so ok.."* Nr.1, 33 years *)*. It appears that in order to be called homemade, the meal has to involve a certain degree of personal effort in terms of the main part of the meal. The following citations from two informants illustrate this notion.

*[…] since there were also cucumber, carrot, bell pepper and barley, in addition to the (convenience) vegetable rissoles, quantity wise they did eat more of the self chopped and boiled stuff than the rissoles, but I still consider the meal as convenience.* Nr.3, 36 years

*In my opinion using, for example, frozen root vegetables doesn't make the meal convenience food but maybe it's that the main ingredient, meat or whatever, is fresh.  Maybe that's the thing. And then the preparation method, that you use some time making it and don't simply heat it in the microwave, but that it involves some preparation process.* Nr. 2, 43 years

So, the status of homemade does not require making *everything* from scratch, but it appears that simply boiling potatoes does not quite make the cut either. However, as discussed earlier, the boiling of rice or such can mitigate the "pain" of serving convenience food. Even though the above quotations were about the determining role of the main ingredient, the matter is not so unambiguous. In few of the interviews it came through that, at least for some mothers, the main ingredient of the main part (e.g. sausages in sausage sauce) can be made by the food manufacturers without turning the dish into convenience food. For instance:

*I do perceive that wiener sauce that I prepared as homemade food but then again, in the end, those sausages are terrible...scheisse (laughs). They are really processed food but I would still consider it as homemade [...] maybe it's because I've put some effort into the preparation.* Nr. 5, 29 years

So, it could be that because the sausages were not served "bare" but were part of the sauce that the mother had made herself from different ingredients, the meal could be viewed as homemade. Another respondent said that the food can be called homemade if you boil the potatoes and fry the market-made wieners, add some butter and so forth. The following quotation also illustrates how the meal can transform from convenience food to homemade if some part of the dish is prepared at home.

*In my opinion a meal that is half convenience food can in principle be homemade, as long as you've put some effort into it. For example, if you mix the bought meatballs with mashed potatoes that you've made yourself...that way it's somehow prepared..* Nr. 7, 30 years

In the passage above the use of the word *mix* is interesting because it implies that the meatballs will not be a clear separate part on the plate, but are in a way hidden or embedded in the mashed potatoes prepared at home. Consequently, it seems to be that it is the effort put in to the preparation of the complete dish and the "visibility" of the convenience product that are relevant factors in determining whether the meal is considered as homemade or convenience food on the whole.

### 5.3.2 Unwanted products: Do no good and need to be excused

The words used by the informants presented convenience foods in a very unfavorable light. For example, the verbs *crumble* or *cave in* were mentioned quite many times when talking about buying or eating processed foods. In addition, in one case when talking about soups, which her teenage son will not eat, the respondent said that *"[…]in those cases he* (teenager) *will just nibble something like market made pizza, so he's sort of neglected since you don't have the energy to prepare two*

*different meals."* Nr. 4, 33 years. First of all, the verb *nibble* has that kind of a ring to it that consuming processed pizzas do not even constitute as "proper" eating, as if it cannot really be compared to the consumption of other kind of meals. Secondly, by stating that the son gets neglected the respondent, in a way, presents herself as a bad mother for not making sure that her son eats a meal prepared by her. In the course of the different interviews also terms like *failure, moral hangover, bad tasting, bleak, tasteless, "rubber slice"* (=kumilätty*), highly processed* and *unhealthy* came up. The following phrase voiced by one respondent encapsulated the general conception of convenience food quite well:

*What comes to my mind is just that it's vacuous (tyhjää)…that it lacks those ingredients that a body should get. It's tasteless and dry.* Nr. 8, 26 years

Like mentioned previously, convenience foods have habitually been disapproved and had a negative connotation (Warde, 1999). Like the passages above illustrate, this still seems to be the case, at least in some occasions. Accordingly, the respondents of this research viewed homemade meals better to market-made dishes. In general, the informants tended to perceive home cooking as a better option not just in terms of the taste but also with regards to healthiness.

Overall, the thing that appeared to worry the informants a great deal was the uncertainty involved in convenience foods *("I just think that all those additives and all the things that are put in to them, you just don't know […] Somehow it just feels like, well not all e-codes are even bad for you, but somehow it feels like children shouldn't…no generation that would have eaten some supermarket's convenience pap has grown up to adults...it's like…you don't really know."* Nr. 6, 36 years*).* In numerous occasions they voiced a concern over what the products really consist of *(*e.g. *"Often it feels like all the leftover stuff gets mashed in to them* (convenience foods)*…you know like chicken's nails or something […]"* Nr. 5, 33 years, and *"but then again what really is in the bag..."* Nr. 1, 33 years*).* Moisio et al. (2004) also discovered that the informants were doubtful of the true origins of the market-made food products and worried about what ingredients have potentially been used in them. In somewhat similar tune, the respondents of this study represented convenience food as something that is uncertain and questionable.

Different market-made foods and meals have been in the Finnish grocery stores for decades now and first convenience foods appeared to the stores over ten years before the oldest informant was born. Nevertheless, it appears that they are not yet perceived as something totally normal or acceptable. Convenience foods are not something to be consumed daily (or at least not with a completely clear conscience), rather they can be used as makeshift by force of circumstances.

Bugge and Almås (2006) found that if the women served, for instance, frozen pizza to the family the choice had to be somehow excused. The respondents of this study mentioned hurry, laziness and lack of energy as reasons for using convenience foods. This way they kind of presented convenience foods as being far from ideal and linked their use to situations with negative features, such as hurry and tiredness. Hence, it appears that negative feelings and images are still attached to convenience foods and a mother cannot simply say "We eat frozen chicken nuggets on a regular basis." but their consumption has to come with an explanation. The explanations also help to maintain the identity of a caretaker: by justifying and explaining the use of convenience foods, the mother expresses a general tendency towards homemade food. By excusing the use of convenience food, it can be maintained that the mother usually ensures that family (especially children) eats meals made at home and simultaneously plays the part of a nurturing caretaker. Consequently, convenience foods are perceived as inferior to home-made meals and when they are used some aspect of "being a great mom" seems to be lost.

The need to have an explanation for the use of branded food products came also through when the talk turned to weekends. The informants said that convenience foods are not consumed during weekends since then you have time to cook and, in addition, then you want to really enjoy the food, as opposed to just eating in order to get nourishment *("[…] on weekends we eat better, then I cook a proper meal […] on the weekend you want to eat well […]"* Nr. 2, 43 years*)*. Like the passage from another respondent demonstrates, on weekends manufactured food products can solely play a supporting role during mealtimes.

*[…] we might cook, for example, whole shrimps and marinate them with oil and garlic and then we serve them with French fries, which are convenience food…and the aioli is made to market-made mayonnaise, so we can make use of them also on Saturdays but I wouldn't see us…[…] No way could convenience foods form the whole meal. I couldn't imagine us eating something like market-made pizza on a Saturday night, it would be so dreary…It is the weekend after all and we do enjoy good food…You can't get anything out of some market-made foods, there's no pleasure in it.* Nr. 6, 36 years

It appears that convenience foods are (or have to be) disapproved to some extent, and that their use comes (or should come) with some kind of a moral hangover. One respondent actually said that *"[…] I feel that quite a lot has been talked about it and parents are in a way blamed for giving their children convenience foods. So, everytime I heat those spinach pancakes, maybe once a month, I*

*kind of feel like 'well just eat these fast now' […] what's more, they like them cold so you easily get a moral hangover from serving the girls cold spinach pancakes as a snack.".* Nr. 6, 36 years

### 5.3.3 Regularly present: No one needs to know

The respondents remarked that sometimes want and need to get the food on the table fast lead to the use of convenience foods, such as spinach pancakes or chicken nuggets, which in turn often cause feelings like self-disappointment, worry and bad conscience *("[…] sometimes I have actually thought that 'hey, don't eat that! Stop, everything to the bin! Mom makes something else.' So sometimes you get these waves of horror […]"* Nr. 4, 33 years*).* The following quote also demonstrates these negative feelings well *"If I buy spinach pancakes for the girls, I do feel bad about it. I do buy them but I get kind of...like damn this is so unhealthy, the girls shouldn't get to eat these […]."* Nr. 5, 36 years. Notions regarding feelings of disappointment and shame of some sort were also discussed by Thompson (1996). However, couple of the respondents did say that they do not feel so bad or guilty when serving convenience foods because they know that it only happens rarely and that the family usually eats healthily.

Interestingly, some of the informants were somewhat contradictory in the things they said. For instance, when asked questions about the family's typical day and factors that influence what is eaten, one respondent first talked about preparing the food *("[…] what's been prepared or what's left from previous day […] I aim at not always having the minced meat-soup, which is easy and quick to do […] I'm in charge of the cooking […]"* Nr. 4, 33 years*).* Later she mentioned that they use convenience foods *"unfortunately often"* and as the interview continued she made remarks about trying to avoid convenience foods. Also other respondents tended to emphasize cooking homemade and yet during the course of the interviews the use of different market-made foods became apparent. The passages below express the aforementioned ambivalence fairly well. All of the quotations are from the same respondent (Nr. 5, 29 years) but from different parts of the interview.

*I feel that we little too often wind up eating something like french-fries and nuggets […] but, I don't know, we do try to avoid it (market-made food) and we really do cook every, almost every evening.*

*How often, on an average week, the food that is served is some frozen or other convenience food, spinach pancakes or the like?*

*...I don't know, now more than usually because I haven't really been at home, so maybe even a bit more often...but hopefully not...perhaps once a week, well that might have been a slight understatement.*

*But in general about once a week?*

*Yeah...might be that I embellished it a bit...well I don't know.*

Even though most of the women remarked that they attempt to avoid convenience foods and that in principal the family eats homemade food, during the interview everyone named several different processed foods that are eaten in the household. Additionally, based on what the informants said they did have different market made foods (e.g. spinach pancakes, frozen soup, french fries, fish fingers) in their fridge and/or freezer at the time of the interview. Moreover, it was mentioned that some of the foods could always be found in the house. Hence, it appears that convenience foods are probably used quite a bit but for some reason the informants do not feel comfortable with stating it so clearly and first talk about eating homemade dinners. They seem to want to paint a picture, whether true or false, of a family that mainly eats homemade meals. In short, it could be argued that families apparently do use convenience foods on a regular basis but one is not supposed to say it or at least you are not "allowed" to be totally ok with it.

Only one of the interviewed women (Nr. 2, 43 years) confessed right up front that during weekdays she relies heavily on those market-made meals when it comes to her and her husband. However, she did express *"feeling a sting in her heart"* for not serving her husband self-made food during the week but mainly making him eat market-made foods. In this case the figure of speech of *feeling a sting in one's heart* and the use of verbs *serve* (someone something) and *make* (someone to do something) are attention-grabbing in couple of respects. First of all, they imply that the use of convenience food is somewhat problematic and "wrong". Secondly, they hint it is the woman who has to do the cooking, and by not doing it she is forcing her husband to turn to market-made meals, as if the husband would not be capable of preparing a self-made meal himself. Moreover, the respondent noted in the same context that she tries to ensure that her son usually gets a homemade meal and does not have to eat market-made foods so often.

Interestingly, importance of healthiness came across strongly in the women's speech throughout the interviews and yet the convenience foods they announced to use tended to be spinach pancakes, chicken nuggets, french fries, battered fish fingers and wieners – foods that might not be considered the healthiest options of all. So, like discussed earlier the women appeared to represent themselves

as health conscious and as caring mothers, who take their children's wellbeing into careful consideration and avoid those unhealthy market-made meals, or feel disappointment in the case of *"caving in"*. At the same time, though, they informed using those kinds of commercially produced foods that might be perceived as a quite unhealthy dish on the whole. Furthermore, they seemed to think themselves that, for example, chicken nuggets can be quite "iffy" but still from the wide range of today's convenience foods the nuggets and the like were the ones consumed. Thus, in a similar manner with the issue of consumption frequency the women appeared to be somewhat ambiguous in their remarks.

So, it seems that convenience foods are a contradicting matter by and large. Then again, the respondents also mentioned having, for instance, wieners, nuggets or spinach pancakes since the children like them. Consequently, it could be that some of the convenience foods are used in order to please the child and because they might help in sustaining harmony within the family. This would support the notions made about the family and self-identity constructions. First of all, eating together was viewed as important family time so it is likely that families have great motivation to keep those occasions harmonious and free from, for instance, food related tantrums. Second of all, the women appeared to put others before themselves and thus they might want to choose convenience foods that please others.

# 6. Discussion and conclusions

## 6.1 Discussion

As remarked in the methodology section, the purpose of this research was not to come up with universally binding facts or declarations. Instead, the objective was to offer some insights of the collective human community. The aim of this section is to elaborate on some previously presented findings. First, reflections with respect to gender roles within family and the importance of eating together are briefly discussed. Secondly, different aspects of the mother's identity construction and their linkages to the overall socio-cultural environment are talked about. Especially the relation between concrete and mental work with respect to provision of food is elaborated on. Before presenting some of the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research, the relation between convenience foods and identity constructions is addressed.

### 6.1.1 Family and food: gender roles and collectiveness

The women appeared to construct an identity that promotes gender equality. They seemed to carry out identity work so as to perceive and present themselves as free from traditional gender roles, "women of the new age", so to speak. At the same time some of the men were portrayed as capable and willing. Overall, the identities constructed for families could be characterized as collective entities with equal individuals, not units ruled by patriarchs. It could be argued that the women wanted to represent themselves and their families as equal and not stuck on the gender roles of previous decades. However, scrutiny of the data hinted that, much like old habits, old gender roles die hard and provision of food was perceived to be fundamentally woman's task. When the women talked about their partners the emphasis was on individuality and on the men's personal interests and wants. The men were presented as individuals whose reasons for cooking stemmed from personal attributes. For themselves the respondents tended to construct a caretaker identity and the employed discourses circled around nurture and duty. Accordingly, when it came to women more emphasis was put on things of a more collective nature.

On one hand, the participants represented families as bunch of individuals that are off to their own activities and go their own ways. On the other hand, families were portrayed as significant and tight units whose members want to come together. Consequently, families are faced with the challenge of balancing between the aforementioned characteristics and eating together is posed as a solution for

combining the two contradicting elements. Thus, eating practices go beyond aspects of nourishment and play an important role in building and maintaining family identity. On the whole, the mothers crafted a multifaceted identity for the family. Overall, it could be argued that family as a whole is a significant consumption actor, and the importance given to its togetherness should not be overlooked. In fact, when planning their targeting efforts firms should remember to take into account the possible benefits of appealing to the identity and collectiveness of the family.

### 6.1.2 Mothers and food: mental work versus concrete work

The scrutiny of the data led to the perception that, for themselves, the mothers crafted an identity of a knowledgeable caretaker. They talked as to portray themselves as mothers who carry out different types of mental work. The women represented themselves as individuals who have knowledge of the "proper" eating habits and who strive for serving their children food that fit those requirements. However, convenience foods did not seem to go hand in hand with the "proper" way of eating and, thus, their use leads to negative feelings, such as self-disappointment and bad conscience. Or at least the women felt it was necessary to build an image of a person who is not totally ok with serving convenience foods. It seems that in our society processed foods are, in general, somewhat frowned upon and numerous contemporary regimens and tendencies advice to avoid processed foods and favor "pure and natural" ingredients. So, maybe women perceive it to be necessary to express negative feelings around discourses regarding convenience foods in order to portray oneself as a good mother and to construct an identity with positive value.

Even though the participating women seemingly constructed a positive identity of a well-informed and caring mother, they also brought out aspects with somewhat more negative tone. In general, the words and descriptions employed by the participants gave the impression that they perceive themselves as anything but amateur chefs or innovative explorers in the world of cooking. As covered in the earlier sections, food has taken over the media and, for instance, countless of cooking or food related programs are aired in television and magazines are filled with different recipes. This raises a question whether all the media coverage has somehow had a negative effect on women's perceptions of their own cooking abilities and efforts. It might be that all the attention media has given to food and cooking has made women, perhaps unconsciously, further raise their standards in respect of dishes prepared. Is it that if you are not preparing novel, elaborate and exotic dinners, you are not entitled to truly show appreciation towards the outcomes of your cooking? Is preparing traditional or simple dishes not enough anymore? Then again, the youngest participant noted she

likes trying out new foods, ingredients and recipes. According to her, figuring out what to cook is not usually an unpleasant or a stressing task. Hence, perhaps the prevailing "food mania" may also work in an inspiring and encouraging manner. Also, it could be argued that by employing discourses that downplay the dishes they prepare, the women are representing themselves as modest individuals who cannot be charged for boasting.

All in all, it appeared that the women were balancing between identity constructions that were not coexisting in perfect harmony. Consequently, the respondents seemed to be in a slight predicament. On one hand, they appeared to construct an identity of a well-informed and nurturing mother whose family (in principle) consumes homemade food, an identity laden with positive value. On the other hand, the way some of the respondents talked tended to represent them as women who are unable to provide versatile or complex dishes, and who occasionally fall short in serving homemade meals. These latter aspects, in turn, were said to cause anxiety and stress and they led to a somewhat unfavorable self-representation. It could be argued that these contradictions lead women to engage in identity work in order to maintain a positive identity. But how to maintain an identity of a knowledgeable and caring mother when one is unable to execute the provision of food according to standards she perceives to exist? It seems that for some mothers one means to sustain the positive identity construction is to adopt a malleable perception of homemade meal. In addition, it could be argued that it is precisely the mental work that women carry out (e.g. worrying over diversity of foods and acknowledging the importance of nourishment) that conveys, for example, nurture and partly reinforces the identity of a caring and capable mother.

It might be that the society's shift from scarcity to abundance, which has occurred over the years, has altered the proportion between mental and concrete work with respect to food and nourishment. In the earlier decades mothers had to perhaps worry about whether there was enough food to go around and stressing over, for instance, variability of the dishes was not even an option. As the range of available ingredients was probably a lot narrower than today, so was the range of meal options. Also, the alternatives for preparing food yourself were significantly fewer than today. Against this background, it feels justified to say that the mother's tangible work related to provision of food was a very natural and inevitable way to convey care and nurture. Nowadays, the multitude of recommendations, ingredients, recipes, manufactured food products and so forth has placed contemporary women in a very different situation from their predecessors. There are so many options to choose from and so many decisions to make that weighing different alternatives and carrying out extensive mental work could be perceived as important parts of nurture, love and care.

By representing oneself as someone who ponders about food related matters one may construct and support a positive caretaker identity, in spite of not necessarily executing all of the concrete work.

### 6.1.3 Convenience food and identity

With respect to convenience foods, the women appeared to have a rank order that support their other identity construction efforts. By choosing products that require some personal effort their perception of informed caretaker and responsible parent can be somewhat supported. Also, it could be argued that some of the mothers expressed avoiding single-packaged meals and dishes, which they can prepare themselves, in order to make the use of convenience foods less obvious. This, in turn, might tone down the bad conscience they seemed to relate to convenience foods. Moreover, this way the identity of knowledgeable and nurturing mother does not get disrupted so easily.

The importance of family togetherness and perception of dinner as "family time" shone through when the participants talked about convenience foods their family consumes. For instance, instead of expressing using single-packaged meals so that everyone could choose what they want to eat, the women tended to prefer products that include helpings for the whole family. Thus, in general, more emphasis was put on collectiveness than on individuality.

Overall, despite the notable role that technology plays in our society today and in spite of all the existing possibilities for expressing individuality, some "simple" things still seem to play a significant part in people's lives. It appears that feelings of belonging and collectivity are sought after and family is much more than a collection of individuals. Food seems to be a powerful vehicle for bringing people together and it is also an important ingredient in identity construction processes of mothers. Furthermore, even though nowadays countless of different operations can be outsourced to outsiders and machines, family's dinner table is a place where outputs of manufacturers and machines do not receive a warm welcome. It appears that the more manufactured food products a child eats, the less of a good mother woman is. However, mothers seem to make use of explanations and excuses in order to justify the consumption of convenience foods. These explanations enable and help women to construct and sustain a caretaker identity that is laden with positive value.

### 6.1.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

Like much of other research this work faces many limitations. First of all, the data was gathered solely by conducting one round of interviews with only a few respondents. Also, one has to bear in mind that the premise of this research was that knowledge is contingent, i.e. culturally, socially and historically bound, and always up for negotiation. Hence, the reflections presented here might not be applicable to, for instance, other cultures. Furthermore, by interviewing solely mothers only the viewpoint of one family member was gained. When considering the remarks and insights introduced in this study one should keep in mind that they only present one possible explanation of the topic. Analysis and interpretation of the data carried out by other researchers could lead to other plausible accounts.

Future research could deepen the insights and reflections made here by making use of, for example, observation in addition to interviews. This might lead to richer and more fruitful insights about the role of consumption and consumption objects in the construction of family and self-identity. Moreover, it would probably be useful to conduct longer interviews or carry out more than one round of them. Knowledge concerning the interplay between eating practices and identity construction might also be extended by interviewing both mothers and women with no children. The possible points of similarities and differences might lead to very thought-provoking insights and identity representations.

Additionally, it could be interesting to interview other members of the family as well and include also single-adult families to the group of participants. It would definitely be interesting to study how men use different food-related discourse practices in the construction of self-identity. When talking about men and provision of food, some of the women in this study seemed to employ discourses that can be linked to self-actualization and individuality. So, it would definitely be interesting to hear how men themselves talk about eating and provision of food. Also, what kind of discourses do they employ when talking about food and convenience food in particular? In addition, it would be intriguing to study the representations that contemporary adolescents craft for homemade and convenience food, as well as the ways in which they utilize food-related discourses in the construction of identity.

## 6.2 Conclusions

Nowadays, it seems that we are surrounded by food and cooking related matters and that some sort of a food craze is prevailing in our society. Food and eating practices involve meanings that go beyond their functional aspect of nourishment. Therefore, it seemed interesting to study how they are talked about and what kind of part they might play in the construction of family and self-identity. In this study particular attention was paid to the ways convenience foods were talked about. In general, different eating practices were presented as playing a central role in the communication between family members and in the fostering of family relations. Thus, eating together appears to be a vital part of the construction and reproduction of family identity. Overall, this study suggests that dinner could be described as family time as opposed to mealtime.

The way provision of food was talked about hinted that the women wanted to represent their families as free from traditional gender roles. However, the closer examination of the data led to the perception that in some cases the provision of food was still viewed as being fundamentally the mother's duty. This study suggests that the discursive practices that mothers employ when talking about food tend to portray themselves as knowledgeable caretakers who consider others before themselves. In addition, one might argue that mental work that mothers carry out conveys care and nurture - things that are usually linked to preparation of homemade food.

It appears that sometimes along with convenience foods come feelings of failure, guilt and self-disappointment. Consequently, in order to craft and sustain the identity of an informed caretaker, mothers appeared to have a need to excuse and explain the use of convenience foods. So, the discourses regarding convenience foods had a negative ring to them and they were portrayed as unwanted yet regular visitors of the household. In some cases "bending the limits" of homemade food appeared to be a means to sustain the aspired identity of a family that does not consume convenience foods (at least not often). By avoiding certain convenience foods and by transforming convenience products into a homemade meal through some personal effort, alterations and additions the identity of an informed caretaker could be somewhat supported. The reasons for feeling that the serving of convenience foods does not quite fit the requirements of a good and caring mother seemed to stem from the uncertainty and unhealthiness related to convenience foods. What is more, it seemed that the mothers linked their remarks concerning convenience foods and them not doing any favors for one's body to some common knowledge. Why this is the case could be a topic of another study.

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