Family Dining, Diet and Food Distribution:

Planting the Seeds of Economic Growth

Dr. Maria Sophia Aguirre
Department of Business and Economics
The Catholic University of America

Second Cross-Culture Dialogue of Family Harmony and Youth Growth
Beijing University
Beijing, May 15-18, 2007
The family plays an important role in the economy
- Production of human, social, and moral capital
- Resources use, economic activity, and economic structures

The family experienced economic and demographic changes regarding family life and the allocation of time.
- Decline in family size
- Increase of single parents
- Increased maternal employment
- Increase in childcare use
- Decline in traditional family activities
- Decrease in the time spent together by parents and children
- Increased concern for children’s skills
- Nutritional good habits have declined
### How Does the Family Fit in the Economy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Activities</th>
<th>Means Used</th>
<th>Role of the Family</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Human Capital</td>
<td>Basic Needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>Market</td>
<td>Human, Moral, Social Capital</td>
<td>Profit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td>Optimization and Distribution</td>
<td>Appropriate distribution</td>
<td>Wellbeing (welfare)</td>
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We know from economic analysis that in economic development

- There is a *positive correlation* between
  - human capital, infrastructure and economic growth
  - healthy institutions and economic development
  - health and income per capita

- These positive correlations reflect an *essential causal link* running from human capital to
  - healthy institutions (social capital)
  - infrastructure and technology

- Life expectancy is a *significant predictor* of economic growth
This paper examines

- Relation between family dining and human, moral, and social capital
- The impact of family dining in the economic activity
- This is relevant for both economic policy analysis and design because decisions and actions of households have long-term effects for their development and for economic growth economy.
Is family dining relevant for economic growth?

- The family has a reciprocal relationship with the economic environment

- The way households spend their time and consume goods indicate
  - value parents place on the attainment of certain skills and the quality of consumption
  - value placed on the context for learning

- How families allocate their time is in part a function of
  - what is possible and desired given the economic environment in which the household finds itself.
Family Dining and Households’ Allocation of Time
Family Dining and Household Production Models

- Increases in the cost of time lead to an increase in the relative cost of time

- Mothers spend less time cooking and instead purchase meals

- Predicts that an increase in time cost causes a change in the methods used to produce commodities but not change in the quality of consumption.

- Quality of family meals should not be affected by substituting it by other ways of meeting the food needs

- Does not include the interpersonal relational dimension of some consumption activities
Empirical evidence indicates

- Quality of the family meal has declined
  - Reduction of frequency
  - Decline in the nutritional value of home meals.
  - Low interpersonal relations among family members.

- Decrease in the quality of meals indicates
  - Family dining is not easily substitutable
  - Time spent together at meal cannot be substituted by the market
  - Decreases of allocation of time to family meals indicate they are considered an inferior good.
  - Women have retained primary responsibility for family food shopping and meal preparations
Family Dining and Human Capital
Empirical evidence across science

- Clearly indicates that healthy families are key for sustainable economic growth

- Children develop best within a family that is functional, i.e., with a mother and a father in a stable marriage

- Men and women also perform best within a stable family

- When the family is disrupted, the individual and social costs are very large
Socioeconomic Relevance

- Academic and social performance of a child is closely related to the structure of the family in which he lives -- important for the quality of human and social capital.

- The psychological stability and health of a child is closely related to healthy families -- important for worker productivity and government finances.

- Healthy families decreases the risk of abuse or neglect. Parents’ presence reduces violence, risk of pregnancy and substance abuse in children -- important for social capital and government finances.

- Married women have a lower rate of depression, enjoy higher income and lower living costs, and have higher savings and wealth -- important for human and social capital and government finances.
Percentage of Families that are in Poverty by Family Structure and Ethnicity, 2006

Percentage of Women who are in Poverty by Family Structure and Ethnicity, 2006

Percentage of Children who are in Poverty by Family Structure and Ethnicity, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Divorce vs Female Labor Force Participation

![Graph showing the relationship between divorce and female labor force participation in various countries. The countries mentioned are Australia, Netherlands, Germany, United States, UK, Sweden, France, Japan, and Italy. The data is sourced from the International Labor Organization.]

Source: International Labor Organization.
Developed Countries Welfare Expenditures vs. Developing Countries Debt in 2005

Family Relationships and Its Relation to the Frequency of Family Dining

Source: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University.
Academic Performance and Its Relation to the Frequency of Family Dining

Source: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University.
Substance Abuse and Its Relation to the Frequency of Family Dining

(% of Teens Who Have Tried Abuse Substances)

Source: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University.
Quality of Family Dining and Its Relation to their Frequency

(%) of Teens

Source: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University.
Percentage of Children Whose Families have Family Dining by Family Structure

![Bar graph showing percentage of children in married and single-parent families.]

- **Married**: 45%
- **Single-Parent**: 13%

**Source:** Administration for Children and Families, Department of House and Human Services

*3.5 times higher*
Summarizing

- Frequency of family dining affects the quality of social and human capital generated in the family
  
  - Strengthens the family relations
  - Increases academic performance
  - Helps prevent substance abuse
  - It is not enough for a family to eat together
  - Quality and the family structure where the family dinner takes place are important as well
  - Married couples eat more frequently together
Family Dining and Economic Activity
Chinese Famine 1958-1961

- Unexpectedly occurred when grain per capita had increased
- 30 million casualties and 33 million postponed births
- Causes thus far put forward are able to explain its magnitude but not how it first started:
  - Bad weather
  - Reduction in sown acreage
  - Government’s high grain procurements
  - Forced collectivization
  - Bad management
  - Collapse of incentive mechanisms
Communal Dining Halls

- 1958 Mao and Party created 2.65 million.
- Private kitchens were destroyed.
- Peasants’ private food stocks were collectivized.
- Cooking woks and pots were collected and melted down to serve as iron or steal.
- Free food was provided and food products were channeled directly unto dining halls.
- “Open your stomach, eat as much as you wish, and work hard for socialism.”
Consequences

- **Overconsumption** (a six month supply was depleted in three months)

- **Inefficient use of resources**
  - Leftovers thrown away
  - Wasted food in the process of transfers from storage to cooking due to neglect or poor management

- By the end of 1958 **food shortage/starvation**

- Mao refused to reverse this policy until the mid of 1961

- At the time most **farmers chose to return to home dining**

- By the end of 1961, famine was ended in six months
Number of Deaths by Percentage of Population Use of Communal Dining Halls

Source: Chang and Wen (1997), Table 5.
Children consumption in cities higher than that of adults.

Parents provide to children their food wishes but no balance diet.

Family meals have been replaced by milk, cookies, cold drinks, or health supplements children do not need.

Children experiencing many health digesting problems.

Forecast show Chinese families can’t support pattern of consumption and therefore standard of living for parents are falling.

Negative human and social capital effects.
Government level

- Multiple tools available: taxes, education, health care, homeownership, and work participation policies.

- Three issues to address: working hours, after school activities, and long commutes.

- Work and school activities: revision of structure itself.
  - Long working hours and short school hours combined with a myriad of extra curriculum activities are not conducive to frequent family dinners.

- Change in paradigm required: address the needs of the family as a unit and not the needs of each of its members independently of each other.

- Time should be crucial component of public projects involving time savings, mostly transportation.
Private Sector

- Businesses need to respond to the need of strengthening the family.

- Length of the workday as well as its structure requires immediate attention.

- Some initiatives include:
  - systems of flexible working hours for men and women
  - work sharing
  - provision of facilities so to allow parents, especially mothers, to work from their home some days of the week.
Individual Level

- Education and information regarding the importance of frequent family dinners, their role in the creation and growth of human capital, as well as the normal development of children

- Only in this manner the allocation of time will be optimal in this area

- Mothers have a special role: generally it is she who has primary responsibility for the performance of household tasks, especially in the area of food shopping and meals preparation, even though she might work also outside her home

- Distribution within the family is usually carried out through the women
We sought to establish the relevance of family dining for economic growth.

- Relationship with the allocation of time.
- Relationship between family dining and human, social, and moral capital.
- Relationship with consumption
Frequent family dining affects positively food and economic activity

- Efficiency of distribution and consumption of food.
- Affects intertemporal dimension of consumption

Frequency in family dining is higher in stable families, i.e., within marriage.

- Not enough to seek the implementation of remedial polices, i.e. attend dysfunctional situations.
- Frequent family dinners need to be facilitated through friendly family policies in all sectors of society.
“Many of today’s human, social, and moral capital problems are not going to be resolved in court rooms, legislative hearing rooms or classrooms, by judges, politicians, or teachers.

Rather it will be solved in living rooms, dining rooms, and across kitchen tables – by parents and families”

Frequent family dinners are one of the simplest; most effective and important aspects of family life where the engagement between parents and children takes place and strong tides develop

This sustains economic growth