



Shaping a moral body in family dinner talk: Children's socialization to good manners concerning bodily conduct

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ABSTRACT

The family meal has been extensively investigated as a site for children's acquisition of eating-related behaviors and attitudes, as well as culture-specific rules and assumptions. However, little is known about children's socialization to a constitutive dimension of commensality and even social life: good manners concerning bodily conduct. Drawing on 20th century scholarship on body governmentality and good manners, and building on recent studies on family meal as a socialization site, the article sheds light on this overlooked dimension of family commensality. Based on a corpus of more than 20 h of videorecorded family dinner interactions collected in Italy, and using discourse analysis, the article shows that family mealtime constitutes a relevant arena where parents control their children's conduct through the micro-politics of good manners. By participating in mealtime interactions, children witness and have the chance to acquire the specific cultural principles governing bodily conduct at the table, such as "sitting properly", "eating with cutlery", and "chewing with mouth closed". Yet, they are also socialized to a foundational principle of human sociality: one's own behavior must be self-monitored according to the perspective of the generalized Other. Noticing that forms and contents of contemporary family mealtime talk about good manners are surprisingly similar to those described by Elias in his seminal work on the social history of good manners, the article documents that mealtime still constitutes a privileged cultural site where children are multimodally introduced to morality concerning not only specific table manners, but also more general and overarching assumptions, namely the conception of the body as an entity that should be (self)monitored and shaped according to moral standards.

1. Introduction

Being a moment of both control and interaction, the family meal has been extensively investigated as a site for children's acquisition of eating-related behaviors and attitudes, as well as cultural norms, expectations, and assumptions. Numerous psychological and sociological studies utilizing quantitative methodologies (mainly self-report questionnaires) have demonstrated that food-related family practices variously affect children's eating habits (Mahmood et al., 2021; Scaglioni et al., 2018). For instance, research has shown that the type and amount of food that children eat is influenced by family mealtime habits like eating together or watching TV (Andaya et al., 2010; Litterbach et al., 2017; Skafida, 2013; Welsh et al., 2011). Food parenting practices like using foods as rewards have also been shown to affect children's eating behaviors (Blissett et al., 2010; Ventura & Birch, 2008; Vollmer, 2021), potentially promoting unhealthy food consumption (Newman & Taylor,

1992). From a different perspective, research adopting an interactional approach has shown that family meals are key sites where children are socialized to culture-specific morality and worldviews. By participating in family conversations around the table, children acquire eating- and food-related notions as well as more general cultural and moral principles (see section 1.2.). In this rich and varied stream of research, however, little is known about children's socialization to a constitutive dimension of commensality and even social life: good manners concerning bodily conduct. This research gap is surprising as socialization to embodied conduct is a key component of the process whereby children become competent members of their cultural community. Indeed, the relationship between social life and the individual body is so tight that, as Douglas had it, "what is carved in human flesh is an image of society" (Douglas, 2003/2003, p. 173). The present study sheds light on this overlooked dimension by illustrating how children are socialized to good manners concerning body postures, gestures, and choreographies

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culturally associated with commensality. It illustrates how the shaping of children's bodies according to cultural standards and values is interactionally achieved during family mealtimes each time children participate in sequences where table manners are made relevant and addressed by the adults. It is indeed through these daily occurring micro-practices of "body governmentality" (Foucault, 1995) that children learn – one interaction at a time – that the body is not something that one merely has and uses, but something that should be (self)governed according to rules and standards. During family mealtime – although by no means only on this social occasion (see Burdelski & Cekaite, 2021) – children also learn what these rules and standards are, at least for the family community of practice.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following sections, we review extant literature on body governmentality and good manners (section n. 1.1.) as well as research on parent-child mealtime interaction as a moral socialization arena (section n. 1.2.). After illustrating the theoretical approach adopted (section n. 1.3.) and describing the data and methodology of the study (section n. 2), we provide empirical evidence that family mealtime constitutes a relevant arena where bodies are regimented through the micro-politics of good manners. Drawing on a corpus of more than 20 h of videorecorded family mealtime interactions, and relying on discourse analysis, the analytical section (n. 3) shows how such body politics is interactionally accomplished through a repertoire of multimodal resources including words, facial expressions, gestures, and material setting arrangements. Noticing that forms and contents of contemporary family mealtime talk about good manners are surprisingly similar to those described by Elias in his seminal work on the social history of good manners (Elias, 2000), in the concluding section (n. 4) we make the case that family mealtime still works as a moral arena. In this site, children are socialized not only to the culturally established principles governing bodily conduct in public, yet also to the basic principle of human sociality: one's own behavior should be self-monitored by adopting the generalized Other's perspective.

1.1. Mealtime as a moral arena: the social history of good manners

As Elias (1939/2000) illustrated in his groundbreaking work on civilization, good manners are a well-documented, constitutive dimension of the process whereby novices are socialized to the cultural canons governing the body in public places, at least among European élites. The process whereby the individual body becomes a social body whose postures, moves, actions, and expressions should align to cultural choreographies and moral norms defining what is proper and expected, suitable or unsuitable, reproachable, or acceptable has never been a peripheral issue of cultural evolution. On the contrary, the "mastery and awareness of one's own body" in public places (Foucault, 1980, p. 56) has been – as Elias maintains – at the core of the very process of (European) civilization. Being socialized to and exercising such a mastery have been the ways in which one basic cultural distinction constitutive of modernity – i.e., the 'body vs. mind' category – has been constructed and solidified, over centuries, as a 'state of affairs'. According to Elias, it is from this basic category that other categories constitutive of modernity originate: the sense of the Self as separate from the Other, the very sense of the other's eye as a locus of social judgment, of oneself as an object of social judgment, the sense of the 'private vs. public sphere' division, and even the pillar of modernity, the '*res cogitans* vs. *res extensa*' distinction are rooted in and depend on the 'body vs. mind' distinction. Far from being natural, this distinction is a socially accomplished cultural fact, something novices are socialized to. In Bourdieu's words (1977), children are apprenticed into culture-specific "body hexeis", i.e., patterns of postures that are "both individual and systematic [...] charged with a host of social meanings and values" (p. 87). Bodily behaviors like ways of standing, sitting, walking, speaking, and using artefacts are part of an "implicit pedagogy" and "capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 94). In institutional as well as ordinary life, bodies

are pervasively yet subtly shaped by disciplines (e.g., "military and educational" disciplines, Foucault, 1988, p. 59) and related practices that govern how we must or must not move our body in carrying out our business (see also Mauss, 1973/1973).

Good manners are but tools for learning how to perceive and shape the body as a plastic, (self)controllable entity, being submitted to the subject's governance or, as we would call it today, agency (Noland, 2009). Although first documented by medieval courtesy books, it is the Renaissance humanism that placed emphasis on good manners socialization as a pillar of the process by which human beings become humans, i.e., civilized. Even though etiquette rules as well as moral judgments on specific behaviors changed over time, social appearance, personal boundaries, and what Erasmus called the "*externum corporis decorum*" (*De civilitate puerum*, 1530, in Elias, 1939/2000, p. 65) have continued to be the architecture of behavior in public places.

Among the different social *lieux* where the body has been conceived of as an entity that should conform to good manners, mealtime is a recurrent one. Indeed, rules governing bodily conduct at mealtime have been a socialization topic since at least the Middle Ages (cf., Elias, 2000). Commensality, i.e., eating in the presence of other people, triggers (self) control as it implies showing and satisfying 'appetites', desires, and other individual's statuses that become publicly inspectable and therefore objects of – often embodied and emotionally enacted – moral judgment. Disgust and unease for the display of body substances or the disclosure of cavities (e.g., the mouth), yet also for certain bodily conducts (e.g., eating with hands vs. the fork, taking food with the whole hand vs. only three fingers, Elias, 2000, cap. 4), as well as related embarrassment (see Goffman, 1956) have been for centuries effective ways for social groups to shape individual bodies according to a moral mold. Conversely, displaying appreciation or even praise have been interactional tools whereby the conformity of body and embodied actions to expected standards have been ratified.

As we will show, governing bodily conduct is still an activity pervasively carried out during contemporary family mealtime: directives concerning good manners and body management are still resources deployed by entitled adults socializing children during dinner talk, and some topics even recur nowadays (e.g., closing the mouth when chewing, avoiding food-body contact, silencing body noises). In the micro order of everyday life, through the details of mundane interaction (Sacks, 1984), contemporary parents and children participate in the ongoing, never-ending process whereby "the 'civilization' which we are accustomed to regarding as a possession that comes to us apparently ready-made, without our asking how we actually came to possess it" (Elias, 2000, p. 52) is fabricated in observable, describable ways, as a product of local human conduct, i.e., "a process in which we are ourselves involved" (*ibidem*).

As the next section illustrates, mealtime has long been investigated as a key site where such a 'civilization' process occurs.

1.2. Family mealtime talk as a socialization site

Since the pioneering works by Elinor Ochs (Ochs et al., 1989, 1992), family mealtime and the interactions it affords have been extensively investigated as a major site of socialization. Being a culturally and socially organized activity imbued with symbolic meanings (Ochs & Shohet, 2006) as well as a highly valued moment in many households (Ochs & Beck, 2013), family mealtime has been studied as a daily, fundamental occasion where children are exposed to values, norms, ideologies, and gradually socialized into becoming competent members of their communities (e.g., Kremer-Sadlik & Morgenstern, 2022; Pontecorvo et al., 2001). Indeed, as observed by Blum-Kulka (1997), family mealtime talk performs not only the activity-specific function of managing the preparation and serving of food ("instrumental dinner talk"), but also the functions of sharing experiences ("sociable talk") and imposing rules, especially to youngsters ("socializing talk"). Consistently, a rich stream of research has documented that family mealtime

conversations constitute arenas where children have the chance to witness and appropriate a wide variety of cultural concepts, expectations, and norms. For example, Paugh (2012) has shown how children learn about their parents' job and work-related ideologies through exposure to dinnertime narratives about their work experiences. By talking with parents and siblings around the table, children are also apprenticed into the norms that regulate interactive activities like arguing, storytelling, and participating in multiparty interaction (Arcidiacono et al., 2022; Morgenstern et al., 2021; Ochs et al., 1992; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997). At a more basic level, children taking part in mealtime conversations come into contact with, and therefore have the chance to grasp, general ethical principles which transcend the ongoing eating activity and are tacitly implicated in parents' actions. For example, when reprimanded for their conduct toward their siblings, children acquire a foundational pillar of morality like the "sense of the Other", i.e., the idea that other people should be regarded as a benchmark for individual conduct (Galatolo & Caronia, 2018). Similarly, children being urged to finish all the food on their plate are socialized not only to this single rule, but also to the tacit, overarching idea that food is a precious resource that cannot be wasted (Caronia et al., 2021).

Not surprisingly, most studies on family talk around the table have shown how children are apprenticed to a constellation of *eating-related* notions, beliefs, and norms. These include the culture-specific sequence organization of the meal (Ochs et al., 1996), tasting and food assessment practices (De Geer, 2004; Ochs et al., 1996; van der Heijden et al., 2022; Wiggins, 2013, 2019, 2023; Wiggins & Keevallik, 2021), diet and eating habits (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2015, 2022; Paugh & Izquierdo, 2009). For example, the cross-cultural study conducted by Ochs et al. (1996) has been pioneer in illustrating to what extent family dinner talk encompasses and conveys culture-specific moral worldviews. Comparing Italian vs. American families' discourses about food, this study shows that different ways of speaking contribute to conveying distinct cultural values attached to food, eating, taste, and even family relations. In a similar fashion, Morgenstern et al. (2015) show that everyday dining activities are essential socialization sites where children acquire norms concerning the regulation of food quantity, the synchronization of talk and eating among tablemates, and table manners. As illustrated by Aronsson and Gottzén (2011), parent-child mealtime conversations typically entail references to what has been defined as "food morality", which includes procedural rules for eating (e.g., "first X then Y") and expressing taste (e.g., prohibitions to express disgust), standards for bodily conduct (e.g., eating with knives and forks) and regulation of food consumption (e.g., limits on unhealthy foods). Studies also show that family mealtime interaction is an important arena for negotiating 'healthy eating'. Through argumentative strategies (Bova, 2021; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014) and advice (Wiggins, 2004), parents attribute specific values to food, framing it as (un)healthy, (un)eatable, good or bad, better or worse. In so doing, not only do they regulate the child's local eating activity, but they also shape the ways in which children think of eating, food, and health.

Although apparently less frequent than eating-, food-, taste- or health-related topics, table manners also constitute a concern for parents during mealtime (Zotevska & Martín-Bylund, 2022). This discrepancy in frequency suggests a recurrent hierarchy of priorities within family morality; nevertheless, table manners are topicalized, indexed, and assessed during mealtime and therefore included among the "specific moralities imposed upon children's [...] eating practices" (Curtis et al., 2010, p. 293). Rules like "sit at the table", "do not play with food", and "close your mouth when eating" have been shown to be frequently evoked and enforced during family mealtimes (Grieshaber, 1997; Zotevska & Martín-Bylund, 2022). However, good manners in family conversation around the table remain noticeably less investigated compared to other topics of mealtime morality.

1.3. The language socialization approach

Besides the specific topics of concern outlined above (section n. 1.2.), research on family mealtime as an arena for cultural apprenticeship mostly draws on the language socialization paradigm which posits that through their participation in language-mediated activities children do not only learn language but are also and concurrently socialized into culture-specific ways of speaking, thinking, and behaving (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). The interactive practices whereby parents monitor and correct children's behavior have been shown to be key instruments of socialization. Through "control practices" (Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018) such as directives (Craven & Potter, 2010; Goodwin, 2006; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2012; Kent, 2012), negative evaluations (Caronia et al., 2021), and requests for accounts (Sterponi, 2003), parents convey the problematic nature of children's (mis)behaviors, evoke presupposed moral orders, and channel children's moral development in culture-specific directions. Even though language-in-interaction is uncontestedly the primary tool through which individuals become members of a community of ideas and practices (Duranti, 1997), talk and linguistic resources are not the only means whereby children are socialized into the crucial dimensions of their social world. Exploiting the increasing technical sophistication of audio- and video-recording and analyzing tools, recent research has documented how embodied resources, such as gestures, facial expressions, gaze direction, prosody, and vocal sounds conventionally associated with affective stance also play a crucial role in indexing the (un)suitable, (in)appropriate, or (un)expected quality of children's behavior. For example, touch and "shepherding" gestures are often used to monitor recipients' embodied conduct (Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018; Cekaite, 2010, 2015, 2016), while intonation contour in questions contributes to conveying moral stances (Gunthner, 1996). Such a multimodal approach has been adopted to study infants' socialization to food tasting during mealtime. As Wiggins (2023) illustrates, parents' formulations of infants' embodied "likes or dislikes", their verbal and embodied assessments concerning food and the child's eating behavior (e.g., vocalizations expressing pleasure, Wiggins, 2002, or disgust sounds, Wiggins, 2013) are the main communicative tools through which infants are introduced to social taste.

Without underestimating the agency of language in children's becoming competent members of their communities (Caronia, 2021), recent research has increasingly documented that socialization should be conceived of as a multimodal communicative process where talk and other semiotic resources combine to introduce children to the crucial dimensions of the world they live in (e.g., local or larger social orders, moral norms, systems of priorities). Building on this stream of research and adopting the language socialization framework, the present study aims at investigating family mealtime as a privileged cultural site where children are multimodally introduced to a morality concerning not only specific table manners, but also more general and overarching assumptions, namely the conception of body as an entity that should be (self)monitored and shaped according to moral standards and cultural choreographies governing the design of embodied (eating) behaviors.

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

The data used in this study consists of video-recordings of family dinners collected in 2014 in six family residences in two regions in Northern Italy (Emilia-Romagna and Veneto). The families involved in the project were composed of two parents and at least two children aged between 1 and 6 years of age. Participants were recruited by the first author through her work connections and were first contacted by e-mail to explore their willingness to participate in the study. To minimize the potential impact of the research setting, the video-recording process was self-administered by the parents in compliance with the researcher's

Table 1
Bodily conducts targeted by parents' good manners talk.

Bodily conduct targeted	Examples of phrases used	Instances
1) Stay seated	"Stay seated" "Stop standing up" "Do you stand up at school?"	N = 50
2) Sit properly	"Sit properly" "Put your legs below the table" "Why are you resting your head on your hand?"	N = 32
3) Drink and eat silently	"Eat properly without making all that noise" "You're misbehaving" – in response to the child drinking noisily	N = 4
4) Eat with cutlery (not with hands or by licking plate)	"Can you avoid eating like a dog?" "Fork" – in response to child licking the plate	N = 17
5) Chew with mouth closed	"What are you doing? What's that thing?" – in response to the child opening her mouth with food in it "Close that mouth"	N = 6
		Total = 109

guidelines. Each family was provided with a small video-camera, memory cards, and tripods, and given guidance on how to record their family dinners during a two-week period. Parents were requested to place the camera at a distance that made it possible to frame not only the family members and dining table, but also their immediate surrounding space (e.g., the kitchen). Parents were asked to turn on the camera when they started setting the table and turn it off when all family members had left the table. The dinner event took place where family members normally ate (i.e., in the kitchen, dining room, or terrace). Participants' seats at the dining table were also maintained unaltered. All families video-recorded a total of five dinners (as requested by the researcher), except for one family who only recorded three dinners for personal reasons. In total, 28 dinners were recorded, amounting to more than 20 h of video data. Only parents and children were present during the recordings and the duration of each dinner as captured on tape varied from 23.47 min to 78.51 min. All families spoke Italian as their first language and were middle-class.¹ The decision to involve middle-class families was made in alignment with most research on family mealtimes adopting the language-socialization approach. No other demographic or socioeconomic information was collected as the study aims to analyze instances of everyday family dinners in the home without ascribing mealtime practices to variations in demographics or other values.

As for ethical considerations, the project was reviewed and approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Bologna. Informed verbal and written consent was given by the parents for both themselves and their minor children, according to Italian and European laws regulating the handling of personal and sensitive data. All parents gave written consent for the dissemination of anonymized transcripts, still images, and video clips to be used in academic publications and presentations. Parents had full control over the dinners they video-recorded and gave to the researcher; they were also allowed to watch and delete any recordings before the cameras were returned to the researcher.

2.2. Analytical procedures

In line with the language socialization paradigm (see section n. 1.3.), in this study social interaction is viewed and analyzed as the main means whereby subjects demonstrate their culturally and morally informed understanding of the activity at hand, transmitting it to children. Consistently with the abovementioned framework, in analyzing the contingent and interactive ways in which parents and children interact during dinner, we have adopted discourse analysis, particularly a conversation analytic approach. As literature has long demonstrated

¹ Ascription of a family to "middle-class" can be complicated due to the variety of indicators that may be used (e.g., property and income amounts, education level, job type). In this study, we considered "middle-class" the families where both parents 1) worked outside the home (dual-income families), and 2) had at least a high-school diploma.

(Sidnell & Stivers, 2013; Wetherell et al., 2001), this approach is particularly suited to tracing participants' orientation to cultural and moral assumptions as well as to illustrating how culture and morality are taken for granted, (re)affirmed more or less explicitly, and transmitted to new generations in the unfolding of ordinary conversations.

The full video corpus was observed to identify sequences of parents' talk about good manners. Given its systematic orientation to a normative model of behavior, we consider parents' talk about good manners as a kind of "moral talk" (i.e., "messages about right and wrong, better and worse, rules, norms, obligations, duties, etiquette", Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, p. 5) addressing children's bodily conduct, i.e., the ways in which children manage their body (e.g., posture, sitting vs. standing) and use it to accomplish specific, eating-related actions (e.g., cutting food, bringing food to the mouth, chewing, swallowing).

After repeated observation of the data, we identified 109 instances of parents' moral talk about good manners. A coding sheet was used to specify each instance, where it occurred within the corpus and how many instances occurred in each dinner. Through *post hoc* categorization, we regrouped the identified instances of talk about good manners into different clusters according to the bodily conduct prescribed, proscribed, or otherwise shaped by parents' talk (e.g., "stay seated", "sit properly", "chew with the mouth closed"; see Table 1, section n. 3). All instances of good manners talk were first transcribed in a words-only transcript. Selected instances and the longer conversational sequences in which they occur were then transcribed in more detail to include aspects concerning speakers' intonation, voice volume, overlaps, and pauses (Jefferson, 2004). In line with a multimodal approach to social interaction (Goodwin, 2000; Mondada, 2016), transcripts have been enriched with notations and screenshots illustrating gaze, gestures, body movements, and orientations to objects when ostensibly relevant for the participants to unfold the interaction. In the transcripts, all names have been fictionalized and other personal information has been removed. Transcripts are presented in two lines: the original Italian transcript is followed by an idiomatic translation in American English. Consistently with conversation analytic principles, each instance of parents' talk about good manners has been analyzed in its sequential context, i.e., by considering its placement in the unfolding of the exchange as well as the effects it had on the child's subsequent conduct and talk.

3. Results

In all 109 instances of good manners talk identified in the corpus, parents framed the child's bodily conduct as problematic by negatively evaluating it and prompting the child's correction. Instances of parents' good manners talk about children's bodily conduct occurred in every family, at various moments of the meal, in 25 dinners out of 28. Most occurrences of good manners talk were addressed to the older children in the corpus, i.e., children aged 4–6 years old (64%). Such talk varied a lot in terms of extension, ranging from a single parent turn (e.g., "Sit properly", see excerpt 3 below) to extended sequences composed of a

variety of parents' and children's turns (see excerpt 7 below). It also varied in terms of the targeted bodily conducts, which we regrouped into five clusters (see Table 1).²

Below, extracts from the corpus are presented to exemplify parents' good manners talk belonging to each cluster (Table 1), with some excerpts featuring talk ascribable to different clusters (e.g., chew with mouth closed and stay seated). The analysis identifies the different linguistic and non-linguistic resources whereby parents issued such good manners talk. By relying, even multimodally, on summons, directives, requests, negative evaluations, and accounts, parents reproached their children for their bodily conduct, treating it as morally inappropriate. As the analysis shows, these resources contribute to conveying the taken-for-granted and unquestionable nature of the moral assumptions they build on, thus socializing children not only into the specific table manners made relevant by parents (e.g., sitting properly and chewing with mouth closed), but also into the taken-for-granted, underlying idea that the body is an object of moral evaluation and should be (self)monitored and managed according to moral standards. As the excerpts will show, after parents' good manner talk, children typically complied with the evoked rules. Only in few cases, they further engaged in the same problematic behavior during the same or following meals.

The first excerpt shows a brief sequence where the mother makes relevant the imperative of remaining seated at the table during the meal (cluster 1, Table 1). In the mother's directive, this imperative is associated with other mealtime-appropriate behaviors, like eating and talking. All family members are sitting at the table and eating the first course when Giulia starts moving, conveying her orientation to leaving her seat.

Excerpt 1 – “Stay seated”

Mother; Father; Giulia (six years old); Agnese (one years old)

1	Giulia	<i>((places the fork on the plate, then turns to the side))</i> [fig. 1]
2	→ Mother	<i>((blocks Giulia by grabbing and holding her arm))</i> [fig. 2]
3	Giulia	(da [papà] (to dad))
4	→ Mother	[TU: STAI SEDUTA ^a tavola ^^e <ma:ngi>. e: pa:rli, e [mangi. stay seated at the table and eat and talk and eat ^((indicates the plate))
5		
6	Giulia	^^((turns toward her plate and sits straight))
7		[AGNESE: , Agnese ((to her sister))

In line 1, Giulia interrupts the eating activity: she places the fork on the plate and then decidedly turns to the side (Fig. 1), thus conveying her orientation to getting off the chair. As soon as Giulia's action trajectory becomes manifest, the mother, who has been observing her, intervenes. First, she blocks the progression of the child's movement by grabbing and holding her arm (line 2, Fig. 2). Through this “embodied directive” (Cekaite, 2010, 2016), the mother conveys the problematic nature of the course of action initiated by Giulia (i.e., getting off the chair), preventing her from continuing it. After that ‘control touch’, in partial overlap with

² Particularly noteworthy is the absence of any good manners talk about technology, especially mobile phones, as a potential disruptor of family commensality. As a matter of fact, children in the data never asked for or used a mobile phone during the recorded mealtimes. This is probably due to the fact that the children in the data were too young to have their own mobile phone. Furthermore, smartphones apps for children entertainment were quite rare at the time when the data were collected (i.e., in 2014).



Fig. 1. Giulia places the fork on the plate, then turns to the side.

what sounds like a child's account for standing up (“to dad”, line 3),³ the mother issues a verbal directive, which has the double function of accounting for her own gesture (at line 2) and, at the same time, instructing Giulia on the behavior she must adopt: “stay seated at the table and eat and talk and eat” (line 4). With this verbal directive, the mother problematizes the child's behavior (i.e., stopping eating and standing up, line 1), urging Giulia to remain seated and engage in other activities that are framed as acceptable and appropriate to the mealtime situation, i.e., eating and talking. The higher voice volume (“TU: STAI SEDUTA”, line 4) conveys the mother's annoyance, emphasizing the problematic nature of the child's conduct, while the marked and prosodically stressed use of the second-person singular subject pronoun (“tu:”, line 4) may be seen as stressing the child's agency and responsibility for such a problematic conduct.

By combining haptic, verbal, and prosodic modalities, the mother in this excerpt conveys a basic good manners norm concerning bodily conduct during mealtime: the child must remain seated. At the same

time, she provides a family-sanctioned list of bodily activities that can be implemented during mealtime, which include talking and eating. This message is taken-for-granted, made relevant in response to the child's deviant behavior, and thus ratified and transmitted as an unquestionable principle that should govern eating-related bodily conduct. Such a principle is not challenged by the child: even before the mother finishes issuing the directive, Giulia complies with it by sitting straight (line 6).

The imperative of remaining seated at the table is invoked in the next excerpt too. In this case, both parents cooperate to make this moral assumption relevant by relying on different resources.

Excerpt 2 – “Can you sit down? You have not been allowed”

Mother; Father; Giacomo (six years old)

³ Through this account, Giulia might be seen as presenting her conduct (i.e., standing up) as an acceptable move. Indeed, her conduct is framed as “going to Papà” rather than as leaving the table altogether.

1 Giacomo ((stands up))

2 (7.4) ((Giacomo slowly moves away from the table while crunching a fennel; Mother and Father are talking with each other))

3 Mother ((turns toward Giacomo))

4 Giacomo?
Giacomo?

5 (0.9) ((Giacomo keeps walking away slowly from the table))

6 Father [Giaco^mo]=
Giacomo

7 Mother [Giaco^mo?]=
Giacomo?

8 Giacomo ^((turns toward Father))

9 → Father =ti metti a sedere? [non^^ hai avuto] l'autorizzazione
can you sit down? you have not been allowed

10 → Mother [sta^fi seduto:]
stay seated

11 Giacomo ^^((starts walking back to his seat))

12 Father (.) a tirarti su
to stand up

13 (0.7) ((Giacomo sits down))

We join the interaction when Giacomo stands up and slowly moves away from the table where the rest of the family is sitting and eating (lines 1–2). As soon as the mother notices, she summons him (lines 3–4). However, Giacomo continues walking, apparently not hearing the mother's call: he seems absent-minded, and is staring into space, slowly crunching on a slice of fennel (line 5). At this point, the father joins the mother's attempt to get the child's attention: he summons him too (line 6), in unison with the mother's second summon (line 7). Having drawn the child's attention (Giacomo turns toward him, line 8), the father asks him to sit down (line 9). Despite claiming less entitlement than a directive (cf. excerpt 1; see [Curl & Drew, 2008](#); [Craven & Potter, 2010](#)), the father's request frames "sitting down" as the appropriate action to be accomplished, making the child's compliance relevant. The mother immediately echoes the father's moral message: she issues a directive by partly recycling his words ("stay seated", line 10), which contributes to

the child's bodily conduct, but also his *verbal* behavior, i.e., the lack of request for standing up. Giacomo finally complies with the father's request and the mother's directive by sitting down at his seat (line 13). Similarly to excerpt 1, bodily conduct is a target of parent's concern and a topic submitted to moral judgment: the good manners principle according to which children must stay seated during family meals is taken-for-granted and ratified in the unfolding of interaction. In this case, the parents' cooperation and 'merged voices' contribute to constructing this principle as obvious and unquestionable.

If the moral imperative of "staying seated" is frequently evoked during family mealtimes, parents' good manners talk also aims at prompting children to "sit properly" (cluster 2, [Table 1](#)), as illustrated in the next excerpt.

Excerpt 3 – "Sit properly"

Mother; Father; Laura (six years old)

1 Laura ((is sitting at the table keeping one of her legs bent)) [fig. 3]

2 → Mother mettiti ;COMpo:sta (con::-)
sit properly (with)

3 Laura ((brings the leg down)) [fig. 4]

4 Father eh::
eh ((sighing while staring at Laura))

constructing 'sitting at the table' as the appropriate behavior the child should display. Following the father's request, Giacomo projects his incipient compliance by starting to walk toward his seat (line 11). The father then accounts for his request by explaining that Giacomo has not been authorized to stand up (lines 9 and 12). In so doing, he further conveys the inappropriateness of Giacomo's conduct: standing up is framed as an activity that is not always acceptable and rather needs to be allowed. Thus, the problematized conduct in this case concerns not only

When the mother notices that her daughter Laura is sitting in a particular position (she keeps one leg under the table and the other one bent with the knee at the table level, line 1, [Fig. 3](#)), she issues a directive urging the child to "sit properly" (line 2). By using the Italian adjective "*composta*" ("proper"), the mother sets a standard concerning the sitting posture, urging the child to behave accordingly. Even though the mother does not precisely describe the appropriate position that counts as "sitting properly", Laura demonstrates that she knows which specific

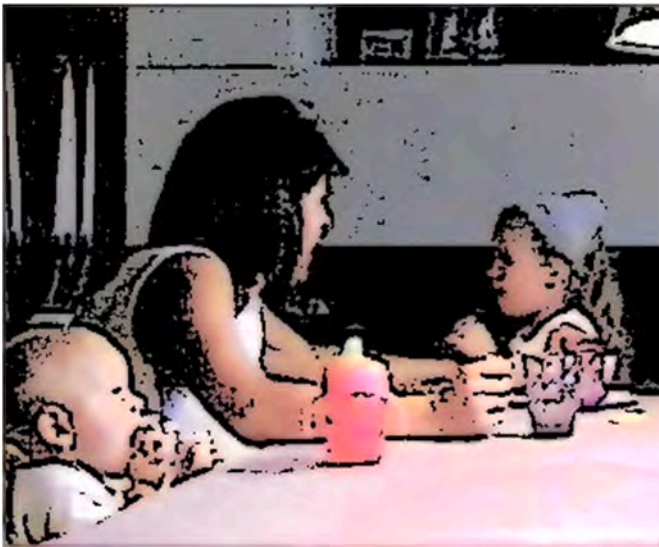


Fig. 2. The mother blocks Giulia by grabbing and holding her arm.

body configuration fits the normative standard addressed by the mother. Indeed, she immediately complies with the mother's directive by

1	Mother	vuoi assaggiarlo intanto così vedi se ti va? <i>do you wanna try it so you see if you want it? ((offering a spoonful of meat to Tobia))</i>
2		<i>((spoon-feeds Tobia))</i>
3	Tobia	<i>((chews noisily with open mouth while looking at Mother and then Father))</i>
4	Father	buo: no? <i>good?</i>
5	→ Mother	mangia bene senza far tutto quel rumore dai <i>eat properly without making all that noise come on</i>
6	Tobia	<i>((chews silently))</i>
7	→ Mother	dai tirati su: <i>come on sit up straight</i>
8	Tobia	<i>((pulls himself up))</i>
9	Mother	o:::lè <i>there you go ((moving Tobia's chair closer to table))</i>

bringing her leg down (line 3, Fig. 4).⁴ The father's ensuing sighing while staring at Laura (line 4) further problematizes her previous sitting posture by conveying his annoyance with it. This short excerpt clearly shows to what extent the moral imperative of "sitting properly" is pervasively assumed and made relevant by parents. During mealtime, parents constantly monitor the child's embodied behavior and correct it, even by relying on minimal prompts like brief directives (line 2) and nonverbal expressions (line 4).

Excerpt 4 shows another instance of a parent making relevant the moral imperative of "sitting properly". Yet, in addition to – and even before – that, the mother in this excerpt problematizes the child for

⁴ This example shows a recurrent phenomenon in our corpus: children (from around the age of four) happen to break good manners rules (e.g., one must sit properly at the table) despite demonstrating that they know them (see also ex. 6).



Fig. 3. Laura is sitting at the table keeping one of her legs bent.

another behavior that is treated as morally unacceptable: chewing loudly (cluster 3, Table 1).

Excerpt 4 – "Eat properly without making all that noise"

Mother; Father; Tobia (two years old)

Spoon-fed by his mom (line 2), Tobia starts chewing the meat he is tasting for the first time (line 3). In doing so, he opens his mouth repeatedly, making noise. While the father appears oriented to the child's tasting activity by asking him about the food ("good?", line 4), the mother targets his noisy chewing through a directive (line 5). By associating "eating properly" with eating silently, the mother's directive (line 5) problematizes the child's noisy chewing and prompts Tobia to eat quietly, which the child immediately does (line 6). Having corrected the child's loud chewing, the mother addresses his posture: through another directive, she urges Tobia to change his posture ("come on sit up straight", line 8). Once again, Tobia immediately complies (line 8), which is positively acknowledged by the mother (line 9).

In the next excerpt, a mother evokes another moral assumption concerning appropriate bodily conduct at the table: using cutlery (cluster 4, Table 1).

Excerpt 5 – "Use the fork"

Mother; Nicola (four years old)

1	Nicola	<i>((takes food from the plate with his hand))</i>
2	→ Mother	<i>((blocks Nicola's hand by grabbing it))</i>
3		metti giù la mano. put your hand down
4	Nicola	<i>((lowers hand then eats food from it)) [fig 5]</i>
5	Mother	<i>((pulls Nicola's hand and the food in it away from his mouth))</i>
6	→	metti giù e usa la forchetta. forza put it down and use the fork. come on
7		<i>((takes the fork from the table))</i>
8	Nicola	<i>((moves on the chair))</i>
9	Mother	ne vuoi ANCORA o no? do you want more or not?
10	Nicola	<i>((nods))</i>
11	Mother	allora mangia. ^(.) e mangia °per bene°. then eat. and eat properly
12		^((passes the fork to Nicola))
13	Nicola	<i>((starts eating with the fork))</i>

When Nicola takes some food from his plate with his hand (line 1), the mother intervenes immediately by grabbing and holding his hand (line 2). Through this embodied directive, the mother temporarily blocks the action initiated by Nicola (i.e., eating food from his hand), thus treating it as inappropriate. Such a gesture is followed by a verbal directive whereby the mother urges the child to lower his hand (“put your hand down”, line 3). Nicola complies with the mother’s directive (he lowers his hand, line 4); nevertheless, he eats the food in his hand by lowering his head and quickly taking a bite (line 4, Fig. 5). Such conduct is problematized by the mother, who reiterates and upgrades both the embodied and the verbal directives. She pulls Nicola’s hand – and the food left in it – away from his mouth (line 5), thus preventing him from eating from his hand again. Then she issues another verbal directive, this time explicitly requiring Nicola to eat by using the cutlery (“put it down and use the fork. come on”, line 6). By formulating her previous directive, particularly by expanding it (“put your hand down”, line 3, vs. “put it down *and use the fork*”, line 6), the mother gives Nicola specific instructions concerning the appropriate behavior he should adopt, which

consists not so much in lowering his hand (as may be conveyed by the mother’s previous directive, line 3) as in no longer eating with his hands and starting to use the cutlery. This moral socialization sequence is closed by a final, multimodal directive (lines 11 and 12). By prompting Nicola to “eat properly” (line 11) and passing the fork to him (line 12), the mother further conveys the good manners rule at the origin of her intervention: cutlery must be used to eat. Nicola finally starts eating with the fork (line 13), thereby adopting this morally appropriate behavior.

Chewing with an open mouth constitutes another bodily conduct problematized by the parents in our data (cluster 5, Table 1), as illustrated in the next excerpt. This exchange is particularly interesting in terms of moral socialization as the mother negatively evaluates the

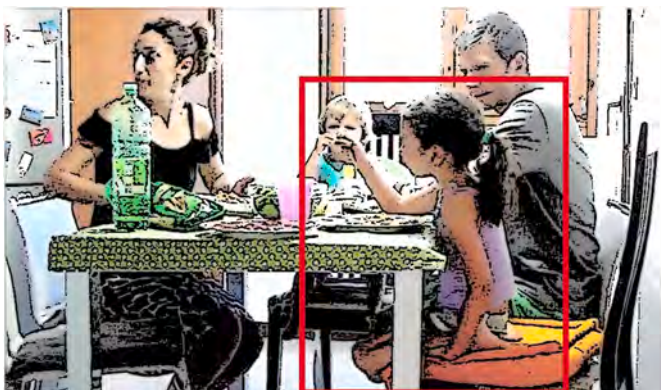


Fig. 4. Laura brings her leg down.

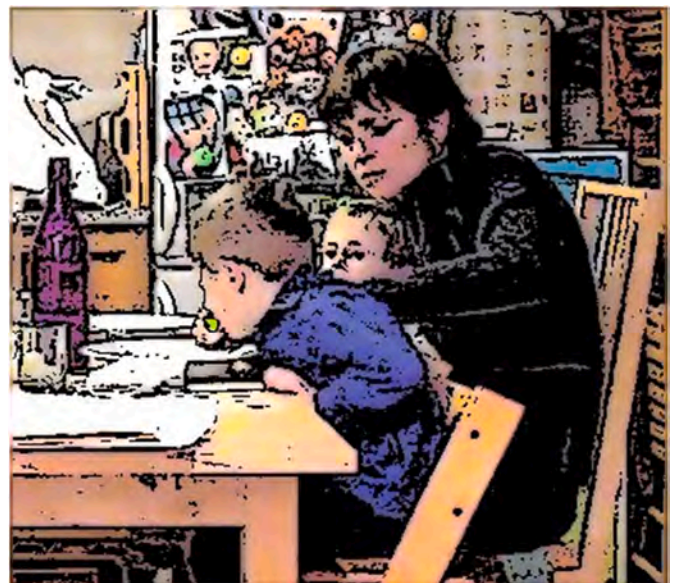


Fig. 5. Nicola lowers his hand then eats food from it.

child's conduct by referring to the evaluative gaze of an Other and framing it as a locus of social judgment.

Excerpt 6 – “Close that mouth”

Mother; Father; Giacomo (six years old)

- 1 Giacomo ((is chewing with mouth wide open while moving head side to side)) [fig. 6]
 2 (0.8) ((Mother looks at Giacomo while he continues chewing with mouth open))
 3 → Mother Giaco^omo chiudi quella bocca
 Giacomo close that mouth
 4 Father ^((looks at Giacomo))
 5 Giacomo ((closes mouth, stops chewing and laughs))
 6 Father [no stai facendo un po' l'asino eh anzi mo:lto] l'asino
 no you're acting a bit like a fool eh actually a lot like a fool
 7 → Mother [è veramente::, ^(.) <bruttta> ^oquella cosa^o]
 it's really ugly that thing
 8 ^((makes a disgusted facial expression)) [fig. 7]
 9 (0.6) ((Giacomo stares motionless at Mother))
 10 Mother poi se ti abitui a mangiare con la bocca aperta,
 then if you get used to eating with your mouth open,
 11 lo farai sempre <senza ^oaccorgertene^o>
 you'll always do it without realizing it
 12 Father E come tuo padre.
 like your dad ((smiling, to Giacomo))
 13 (0.3)
 14 Mother ed è proprio:: (.) ^oBRU:tto da vedere
 and it's really ugly to see
 15 ^((makes another disgusted facial expression)) [fig. 8]



Fig. 6. Giacomo is chewing with his mouth wide open while moving head side to side.

At the beginning of the excerpt, Giacomo starts chewing with his mouth wide open, concurrently moving his head side to side, perhaps in the attempt to draw his parents' attention (line 1, Fig. 6). When the mother notices (line 2), she begins producing what develops into an

extended reproach sequence. First, she issues a directive, prompting Giacomo to close his mouth immediately (“Giacomo close that mouth”, line 3). The use of the child's first name in turn-initial position does more than addressing: it contributes to emphasizing the problematic nature of his conduct as well as his personal responsibility for it (Pauletto et al., 2017). Despite immediately complying with the mother's directive (he closes his mouth and stops chewing), Giacomo demonstrates he has not taken it very seriously as he begins to laugh loudly (line 5). Arguably due to this playful attitude displayed by the child, the parents continue the reproach. The father joins the sequence by depicting Giacomo's conduct as “acting like a fool” (line 6). Concurrently (see the overlap), the mother continues problematizing the child's behavior. First, she explicitly frames it as a ‘bad thing’ (“it's really ugly that thing”, line 7), accompanying this evaluation with an embodied display of disgust (Fig. 7); then she issues a warning about the risk of “getting used to eating with your mouth open” (lines 10–11). By the very fact of warning Giacomo, the mother demonstrates that she considers chewing with an open mouth, especially if done unintentionally (“without realizing it”, line 11), as extremely problematic conduct, which the child absolutely needs to avoid. Two good manners issues are addressed by the mother and strongly sanctioned: the bodily conduct as such and the lack of awareness and self-governance of one's own body.

Despite having previously aligned with the mother's serious stance and contributed to her reproach (line 6), the father now intervenes in a more light-hearted tone. He ironically completes the mother's warning by describing himself as being used to chewing with the mouth open (“like your dad”, line 12). Being produced in a smiley voice and addressed to Giacomo, this turn appears to be aimed at downplaying the seriousness of the mother's reproach. However, this ironic comment is



Fig. 7. Mother makes a disgusted facial expression.



Fig. 8. Mother makes another disgusted facial expression.

ignored by the mother (see the gap in line 13), who instead multimodally stresses the “ugly” nature of the child’s conduct again (“it’s really ugly to see”, line 14, Fig. 8). It is worth noting that, in this repeated negative assessment of the child’s conduct, the mother focuses on its visible dimension: chewing with an open mouth is described as “ugly to see”. While recycling the adjective, this evaluation includes and is based on the ‘gaze of the Other’, and treats it as a relevant benchmark (Galatolo and Caronia, 2018; Kremer-Sadlik, 2009). Given its sequential positioning (after Giacomo’s potentially provocative behavior and laugh, lines 1 and 5, and the father’s ironic comment, line 12), this reference to the Other can be seen as a form of upgraded criticism, emphasizing the problematic nature of the child’s conduct. Individual bodily conduct is thus framed as something that needs to be (self) controlled according to specific standards and, especially, based on the moral gaze and evaluation of other people.

Throughout this reproach, the mother (and initially the father) multimodally constructs “chewing with an open mouth” as an unquestionably inappropriate conduct. The long-established prohibition to “disclose body cavities” in public situations (Elias, 2000, cap. 4) appears to still be relevant in contemporary families: it is assumed, confirmed as self-evident, and transmitted to new generations, together with the taken-for-granted, underlying idea that the body should be (self)monitored and managed according to moral standards.

The final excerpt illustrates how parents assume and ‘put into words’ the moral messages belonging to two clusters: chew with the mouth closed (cluster 5) and sit properly (cluster 2). Similarly to excerpt 6, in this excerpt the mother makes explicit the basic assumption that tacitly upholds all the interactions we have seen so far, i.e., the idea that

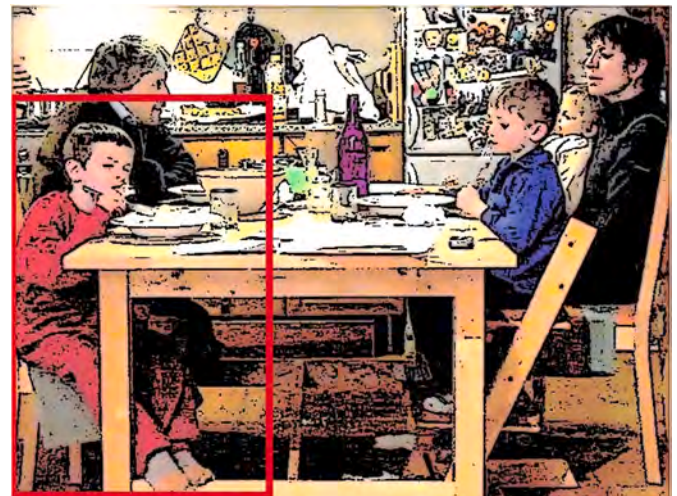


Fig. 9. Giacomo eats a mouthful by pulling meat from the fork.

individual bodily conduct at the table should be shaped to conform with the moral gaze and judgment of others.

Excerpt 7 – “You’re eating really badly”
Mother; Father; Giacomo (six years old)

1 Giacomo ((is sitting sideways and eats a mouthful by pulling food from the fork)) [fig. 9]

2 Mother ((looks at Giacomo))

3 Gia:como?
Giacomo?

4 Giacomo ((looks at Mother while chewing with mouth open))

5 Mother Giacomo
Giacomo ((staring at Giacomo))

6 Giacomo ((keeps chewing with mouth open))

7 (2.0) ((Mother stares at Giacomo))

8 Giacomo ((pulls another mouthful from the fork and chews with mouth open))

9 Mother stai mangiando <veramente M:A:LE>.
you're eating really badly

10 Giacomo ((keeps chewing with mouth open and food coming out of his mouth))

11 Mother =[ma proprio, (.) M:A:LE.
but really badly

12 Father [SEI-SEI ↑^STORTO, (.) IL PIATTO, ^^È ↑STORTO,
you're-you're crooked your plate is crooked
^((moves Giacomo's chair closer to the table, then moves his cutlery))
^^((moves Giacomo's plate and glass))

13
14
15 ((touches Giacomo's head to put it straight in front of the table)) [fig. 10]

16 Mother ↑proprio, (.) M:A:LE.
really badly

17 Father METTITI DRITTO,
sit straight ((moving Giacomo's legs to fit them under the table))

18 (2.0) ((Giacomo sits with his back straight while chewing with closed mouth))

19 Father (e) non fare [°ste schifezze°.
(and) don't make such a mess

20 Mother [ma scusa .hh
come on

21 (3.1) ((Giacomo keeps sitting straight while staring at Mother))

22 Mother >allora< ↑o uno mangia bene, oppure mangia da <s:olo>
so either you eat properly, or you eat alone

23 perché gli altri devono avere piac:e:re nel-nello stare
because other people have to enjoy being

24 con te a tavola.
with you at the table

We join the interaction when Giacomo is sitting sideways, eating a spoonful of meat by pulling it from the fork and ripping it into pieces (line 1, Fig. 9). This conduct is immediately noticed (line 2) and problematized by the mother, who repeatedly summons him (lines 3 and 5). Despite hearing these summons (he looks at his mother, line 4), Giacomo does not change his conduct: he maintains the same posture, chews with his mouth open, and then pulls another piece of meat from the fork (lines 4, 6, 8). Vis-à-vis the lack of correction from the child, the mother intervenes again, this time by making the problematic nature of Giacomo's conduct explicit through a prosodically stressed negative evaluation: "you're eating very badly" (line 9). However, Giacomo still does not

change his conduct: in addition to continuing to chew with his mouth open, he lets a piece of meat fall out of his mouth (line 10). While the mother issues another negative evaluation by partly recycling her previous turn and upgrading it ("but really badly", line 11), the father, who is sitting next to Giacomo, intervenes multimodally to correct the child's conduct (lines 12–15 and 17–18, Fig. 10). First, he targets the child's posture, describing it as "crooked" (line 12). By reorganizing the surrounding material setting (i.e., the chair, plate, glass, and cutlery, lines 13 and 14), adjusting the child's posture by moving his body (lines 15 and 17), and urging him to "sit straight" (line 17), the father problematizes Giacomo's current posture, imposing a new one on him. After the child adopts the requested, treated-as-appropriate posture (line 18), the

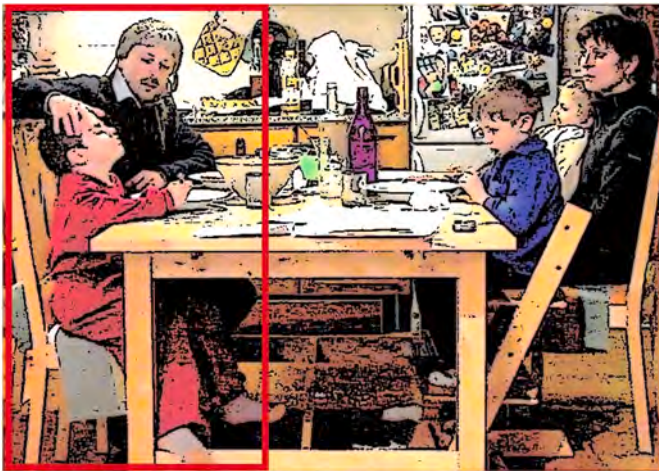


Fig. 10. The father touches Giacomo's head to put it straight in front of the table.

father targets another problematic dimension of his conduct: his way of eating. Through the final verbal directive, the father frames Giacomo's eating so far as "making a mess" and urges him to stop this kind of behavior.

This control sequence is followed by the mother's explanation for the reason behind the parental intervention (lines 22–24). After the turn-initial "allora" ("so", line 22), which projects a summary of previous talk, the mother issues a general rule concerning eating behavior: "either you eat properly, or you eat alone" (line 22). The "either-or" format logically presents "eating properly" as the necessary condition for sharing the meal with other people, while the use of the indefinite pronoun ("uno", translated as "you") combined with the present tense constitutes this claim as a general and indisputable rule: worded as a statement, the rule is conveyed as absolute. The rule statement is followed by an account whereby the mother explicitly formulates the assumption at the basis of this rule and table manners in general: "other people have to enjoy being with you at the table" (lines 23–24). Similarly to ex. 6, the explicit reference to the Other as a benchmark for embodied conduct can be seen as emphasizing the problematic nature of the child's conduct by framing it as having effects on the tablemates. In this exchange the mother ratifies and affirms the taken-for-granted principle according to which individual behavior should be oriented to other people and their morally informed gaze.

4. Discussion

Contributing to research on the family meal as a site for children's socialization to eating-related behaviors and culture-specific worldviews, this study has shown that parent-child mealtime also constitutes an arena where apprenticeship to good manners unfolds as a moral apprenticeship as such. By taking part in everyday meals with their parents, children are socialized not only to the cultural principles governing bodily conduct (e.g., "sit properly", see excerpt 3; "eat with cutlery", see excerpt 5), yet also to the basic principle of human sociality, i.e., one's own behavior must be self-monitored according to the perspective of the generalized Other (see excerpts 6 and 7). It is indeed through these daily occurring micro-practices, through "the insistent, persistent, meticulous work of power on the bodies of children" (Foucault, 1980, p. 56), that children learn – one interaction at a time – that the body is not something that one merely has and uses, but something that should be (self)governed according to collectively established canons. Centuries after the Medieval courtesy framework and Renaissance pressure on self-control as the habitus of civilized élites (Elias, 2000), mealtime is still a privileged arena for apprenticeship to 'appropriate' bodily conduct. Commensality transforms the individual

body's conduct in a public, ostensible, scrutinizable behavior and makes mealtime talk a perspicuous locus for shaping the bio-anatomical body and transforming it into a cultural entity. As our study illustrates, some Renaissance's good manners topics such as "chew with the mouth closed", "drink or eat silently", or "eat with cutlery", the basic orientation to avoiding publicly displaying what is "inside" the body as well as maintaining Erasmus' "externum corporis decorum" (Elias, 2000, p. 237) are also part of contemporary children's socialization, at least in our corpus. The same is for the right, appropriate posture, as if learning that the body should be self-controlled, how to control it, and the forms it should take were still part of the never-ending process through which culture shapes, and is shaped, by everyday interaction. As Norbert Elias had it, at the core of the civilizing process are bodily educational practices. Individuals learn that individual bodies are occurrences of a social body and how their postures, moves, actions and expressions should align to cultural choreographies and moral norms defining what is proper and expected, suitable, reproachable or acceptable, disgusting or attractive.

Despite the limitation due to the small dataset, this study focusing on good manners talk contributes to previous research on family meals as sites for the transmission and acquisition of eating-related behaviors. Particularly, our analysis concurs with previous interactional research that demonstrates the socializing function of family mealtime talk. Our study extends upon these findings by shedding light on an underexplored dimension of socialization, i.e., good manners socialization, as it occurs in mundane family life within the home context, meal after meal, one interaction at a time, achieved through a repertoire of multimodal resources including words, facial expressions, gestures, and material setting arrangements.

Such good manner socialization is at stake in everyday family mealtimes: any time postures, gestures, bodily sounds, ways of drinking, chewing, or using meal tools become accountable, participants renew this process. However, there is more than this. As our study illustrates, contemporary forms of mealtime good manners education also renew the 'body vs. mind' distinction as well as a related normative assumption: the body is and should be a mind-governed entity. If we accept Norbert Elias' hypothesis that many categories constitutive of modernity (such as the '*res cogitans* vs. *res extensa*'; the sense of the Self as separate from the Other; the sense of the Other's eye as a locus of social judgment; the 'private vs. public sphere' division) originate from the 'mind vs. body' ontological premise, then we have to admit that everyday family mealtime and particularly parent-child good manner talk are culture-building activities far beyond what a general understanding would suggest.

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Ethical statement

This research was reviewed and approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Bologna. Adult participants gave informed written consent for both themselves and their minor children prior to taking part in the research and gave their permission for anonymized transcripts, still images, or video clips to be used in academic presentations and publications.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Letizia Caronia: Writing – review & editing. **Vittoria Colla:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

The authors have no competing interests or conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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