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Food in children and young people's lives: ambiguous agency and contested moralities

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It may seem surprising to think of food, a simple, daily requirement, as occupying a moral site, yet the 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and wrong' of children's and families' food and eating are not only routinely specified in the media, government policies and elsewhere but are reproduced within families as well. A particularly prevalent food morality in wealthier societies is the expectation that good citizens will make 'healthy choices' and that those who do not do so are personally to blame even if it is beyond their means (Greenfield, 2012; Schrecker, 2016). Indeed the 'healthy choices' approach to public health is frequently criticised for assuming that people consciously apply dietary advice to their eating practices; for failing to consider relational, social, economic and cultural contexts in children, young people's and families' eating; and for ignoring the part played by political systems and the food industry in food availability and affordability (Davies et al, 2006; Wardle and Cooke, 2008; Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Holman and Borgstrom, 2016).

When these factors are taken into account a very different picture emerges of people's attempts and constraints when attempting to take on board 'healthy-eating' messages. When they examined a group of low-income mothers' food practices in Scotland, Jeni Harden and Adele Dickson (2015) found that all the mothers had a very good knowledge about what was healthy and the sorts of food they should be feeding their children. All of them talked about the importance of home-cooked meals made with fresh produce. However, they were not able to consistently provide this: many of them relied on benefits and in order to feed their families had to go to multiple shops in order to get the best deals and the cheapest food. Without cars and with buggies and young children to take with them, this often became impossibly difficult. If children were fussy eaters it was hard to introduce new foods to them continually, because if one were rejected that was a meal wasted and there was little money for a replacement. Mothers also often lacked facilities to cook and especially to eat together as a family: many expressed a desire to do so but in the small social housing units they lived in there was no space for a dining table so meals were often eaten in front of the TV.

To understand this more fully […] Pierre Bourdieu's notions of 'capital' become useful. Eating healthily is not just a matter of individual choice but rather an outcome of many factors including: having the money to afford healthy foods (economic capital), the know-how to shop for and cook them (cultural capital) and being within a social setting where healthy eating is the norm (social capital). Eating also entails certain meanings (e.g., cultural conventions), materials (e.g., tools) and tacit and explicit competences (e.g., embodied skills). (Holman and Borgstrom, 2016: 143)

Adults' food and kids' food

The view that certain foods are inherently 'children friendly' draws on the widespread contemporary discourse of 'kids' food' employed by both parents and children in many Western societies. 'Kids' food' construes children as having inherently different embodied experiences than adults, in terms of their food taste and preferences. This 'kid/adult' generational distinction has been fostered by the food industry since the early 20th century, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, and is

widely disseminated in societies that consume high levels of processed foods. For example, Charlene Elliott (2011), in a large-scale qualitative study of over 200 children (aged 6 to 11 years) in multiple locations in Canada, found children consistently characterised ‘adult’ food as unpackaged, unprocessed, boring, plain, brown, fruit, vegetables and salad, whereas ‘kids’ food’ was packaged, highly processed, with high levels of sugar; consisted of junk, snacks, sweets and fast food, or consisted of small items and/or unusual colours or shapes. ‘Kids’ foods’ therefore disrupt moralities of health so that cookbooks and the media (in pursuit of children’s eating ‘healthy’ and ‘good’ foods) recommend adults counter this with deception, for example by ‘sneaking’ fruit and vegetables into children’s meals (Elliott, 2011) rather than expecting children as a matter of course to come to eat what their families do. In doing so they are suggesting that children’s inclinations to eat processed foods are an essential, intractable part of their nature.

Identities

… multiple studies (both psychological/health behaviour and sociological) have found that across Europe children and young people use ‘kids’, ‘junk’ or ‘fast’ food to construct child, teen and modern identities, and related to this, acceptance by peers. In Cyprus – one country experiencing a nutrition transition – Soula Ioannou spoke with young people (aged 15 to 17 years) from diverse urban socio-economic backgrounds in Nicosia about their food beliefs and experiences. Eating traditional Cypriot dishes such as beans ran counter to a young, contemporary, self-image, as in the example of a 15-year-old girl who said, ‘When you have delivery food you show a different character, more outgoing and attractive than having home-made food prepared by your mum or grandmother’ (2009: 189), indicating that fast food, autonomy and modernity were intertwined for this young person.

Perceptions that highly processed ‘modern’ foods are more desirable for young people and more expressive of their identities are also echoed in societies such as the UK that have long since transitioned to diets high in such foods. Martine Stead and colleagues, for example, examined social and symbolic meanings in food products and brands in north-east England. In focus groups, young people aged between 13 and 15 years described using food, primarily brands with higher sugar, salt and fat content, to construct desired identities, to judge others and to align with peer norms; for example, they thought that a ‘popular person’ would have “The Coca Cola and the Pepsi.” “Yes. All the fat foods basically.” “Crisps” (2011: 1135). Importantly, the findings suggested that eating healthy foods ‘conflicted with processes and values which are of crucial importance in adolescence, such as self-image and fitting in with the peer group. In other words, it was emotionally and socially risky to be seen to be interested in healthy eating’ (2011: 1131). This ‘riskiness’ was particularly pronounced in lower socioeconomic settings. However, adolescent food identities are also constructed around foods and food practices other than less healthy, heavily marketed items. In Scotland, Kathryn Backett-Milburn and colleagues (2010) found that middle-class teens identified with family healthy-eating practices, and in Canada, Svetlana Ristovski-Slijepcevic and colleagues (2010) examining food practices in three ethnocultural communities found that, following Ioannou in Cyprus, some young people devalued traditional foods of their culture favoured by their parents.

However, the Canadian young people, rather than favouring less healthy ‘fast food’ instead advocated for Western-style ‘healthy eating’ practices in their immigrant families, based on nutrition focused knowledge emanating from school and health-focused media. This suggests that at least some ‘healthy-eating’ education may facilitate change, although this may come at the expense of eating foods that are culturally congruent for their families of origin. As a 15-year-old ethnic Punjabi girl said, “My school class, like the foods classes … We’ve learned about the vitamins and everything and how like how many servings you should actually eat, and then about obesity and everything. And we watched the movie Supersize Me”. (Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al, 2010: 477) More recently, eating moralities/identities that young people engage with include invoking purity through veganism or ‘clean eating’ or power through ‘bulking up’ for high sports performance. Deborah Lupton (forthcoming) notes that images and hashtags in digital social media display specific food practices and perform identities, meanings and memberships of social groups; for example, ‘clean eating’ proponents ‘focus on practices of responsibilised selfhood’ through display of low-calorie, high-protein items that support contemporary ‘ideals of embodiment and food consumption… portrayed as morally and ethically defensible’. Food moralities are therefore multiple, complex and intersecting, variously invoking principles such as health, nutrition, responsibility, quality, purity, power, the generational order and the essential nature of childhood. As these interact in multiple ways, health and eating are interpreted through multiple lenses.