



The problematic messages of nutritional discourse: A case-based critical media analysis



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ABSTRACT

Nutritional science has assumed a fundamental importance in shaping food meanings and practices in the developed world. This study critically analysed the content of one weekly nutrition column written by a nutritional expert in a popular New Zealand magazine, from a social constructionist perspective, to investigate how nutritional advice constructs food, food practices and eaters. The analysis identified a range of ways in which the nutrition information communicated in the articles was potentially problematic for readers. The articles advocated eating for health with recommendations based on nutritional science, but depicted nutritional information as inconclusive, changeable and open to interpretation. Fear-based messages were used to motivate making 'healthy' food choices, through linking 'unhealthy' food choices with fatness and chronic ill health. Unhealthy foods were portrayed as more enjoyable than healthy foods, social occasions involving food were constructed as problematic, and exercise was defined only as a way to negate food consumption. Healthy eating was portrayed as a matter of personal choice, obscuring the situational factors that impact on food choice and health. We conclude that the nutritional advice analysed in this study constructs a way of understanding food that, if internalised by eaters, may evoke anxiety, confusion and dissatisfaction around food and eating.

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Nutritional science is strongly embedded in the developed world, and has assumed a fundamental importance in shaping food meanings and practices. Information presented from a nutritional science perspective is communicated to the general public in numerous ways, through education, via word of mouth and through the media. Nutrition experts play a powerful role in communicating this information, and advice from nutrition experts is prolific in the media. Analysis of this advice can provide valuable insights into the ways food is understood today. The aim of this research is to critically analyze nutritional information communicated through the media, in order to better understand how the culture of nutritional science may influence food meanings and food practices. By the culture of nutritional science we refer broadly to all ways of understanding food, food practices and eaters that are constructed by a nutritional science perspective.

Food and food practices are deeply imbued with wider social meanings. What food practices are considered 'normal' or 'correct', has important consequences for individuals and society at large,

because these practices are intertwined with social relationships. From infancy, being fed is bound up with receiving care, love and rewards from others (Locher, Yoels, Maurer, & Van Ells, 2005; Lupton, 1996; Moiso, Arnould, & Price, 2004). Preparing (Mohd Zahari, Kamaruddin, Muhammad, & Kutut, 2011) and eating food together (Lawton et al., 2008) can play a significant role in strengthening social and community ties. Food and eating are an integral part of many social situations, religious rituals, and celebrations across cultures (e.g. Kaplan, 2008; Mohd Zahari et al., 2011; Schram, 2007).

How food is understood also has the power to influence the emotional experiences of individuals. Food and eating are evocative and may bring forth a wide range of emotions (Hormes & Rozin, 2011; Macht, Meiningner, & Roth, 2005; Steenhuis, 2009). Individual experience of food and eating can range from emotionally nourishing to emotionally destructive. For example, food can be so strongly associated with past happy memories and people that it may be comforting to individuals when they find themselves distressed or alone (Locher et al., 2005). However, food and eating can also be a significant source of worry, anxiety, guilt and shame (Locher et al., 2005; Madden & Chamberlain, 2010; Rodgers, Stritzke, Bui, Franko, & Chabrol, 2011; Rozin, Bauer, & Catanese,

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2003; Steenhuis, 2009). The extent to which food brings forth positive or negative emotional reactions in individuals has also been shown to differ between cultural groupings. Comparisons across cultures have reported that North Americans experience significantly more guilt, aversion and dissatisfaction around food than the French, argued to result from the differences in food culture (Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999). The meanings attached to food also differ across cultures, and these differences can shape an individual's subjective experience of eating. For example, research has reported that food described as 'unhealthy' is experienced differently by North Americans than by the French; North Americans reported a taste preference for food presented as unhealthy (Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006) whereas the French reported a taste preference for food presented as healthy (Werle, Trendel & Ardito, 2013).

Nutritional science understands food and eating from a perspective that is unique to the time period and the society within which it exists (Lupton, 1996). A scientific understanding of food has been enabled over the last hundred years or more, with the discovery of food components (nutrients) that are important for health and the measurement of how much food people consume (Coveney, 2006). As Coveney notes: "by developing criteria for judging the adequacy of the diet, nutritional knowledge was able to establish for itself rational and calculative strategies for 'knowing' food" (Coveney, 2006, p. 62). In earlier years nutritional science focused on nutritional deficiencies, but towards the later 1900s, research implicating diet in the development of disease resulted in an emphasis on the role of nutrition in chronic disease (Coveney, 2006; Lupton, 1996). Consequently, nutritional advice in the media from the early 1900s to around the 1970s represented food more as a way to improve health (Goldberg, 1992; Schneider & Davis, 2010). Once lifestyle factors became implicated in the progression of chronic disease, from the 1980s onwards, food was increasingly represented in the media as a way to prevent disease (Schneider & Davis, 2010). Thus, being conscious about health and nutrition now involves being conscious of potential health risks and how to prevent them (Crawford, 2006). Weight has also been at the centre of nutrition and chronic disease discussions. Like diet and exercise, weight has been implicated in the development of chronic disease (New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2004; Rössner, 2012; Salas-Salvadó, Martínez-González, Bulló, & Ros, 2011). Thus food, health, and weight are all constructed as intricately related in contemporary nutritional science discourses, and this shapes how food is understood in the developed world.

This particular way of understanding food has had political, economic and social consequences. At the political level, current dietary guidelines advocated by the US government are the result of a negotiation between nutritional science recommendations and economic pressures (Nestle, 2002). In Australia and New Zealand, the government advocates similar guidelines that are shaped by a nutritional science perspective (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2013; New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2012). At the economic level, nutritional science has altered the way food marketing operates. By adhering to the discourses of nutritional science, by removing 'bad' components such as fat, or adding 'good' vitamins and nutrients, food manufacturers can sell processed foods as healthy food (Goldberg, 1992; Nestle, 2002; Scrinis, 2008). Therefore, nutritional science has allowed for the emergence of new markets where "grocery store aisles are now littered with low-sodium, reduced-fat, calorie-wise and health check symbols on food items" (Ayo, 2012). At the societal level, nutritional science has changed common eating practices. In many Western countries, what the current generation eats is markedly different from what their parents and grandparents ate (Lupton,

1996). The influence of nutritional science recommendations has been argued to be a significant contributing factor in affecting this change (Lupton, 1996). Research has suggested that the media are considered a primary source of information regarding health and nutrition by the general public (e.g., Ayoob, Duyff, & Quagliani, 2002). This is despite reports that suggest media messages are not necessarily consistent with current official dietary guidelines (Ostry, Young, & Hughes, 2008), and what constitutes 'healthy eating' is often poorly defined (Wills, Dickinson, Short, & Comrie, 2013). Nutritional messages have been reported as changeable and confusing by the general public (Madden & Chamberlain, 2010; O'Key & Hugh-Jones, 2010; Prior, Hall, Morris, & Draper, 2011). Concerns have been raised as to how nutrition information is communicated through the media and what messages are conveyed to consumers and health professionals alike (Wills et al., 2013). However, these media-based messages refer to nutritional science and so contribute to the wider culture of nutritional science that pervades our everyday understanding of and relation to food. Nutritional recommendations are widespread and have a significant impact on individuals, who must choose whether to embrace or resist 'correct' dietary practices (Madden & Chamberlain, 2010).

Nutritional science has had a significant impact on how people eat today. Hence, critically analyzing nutritional information in the media can reveal important insights into how the discourses of nutritional science influence food meanings and food practices. The present study critically analyses the content of a nutrition column, in a popular New Zealand magazine, written by an expert in nutrition. The analysis looks in detail at how nutritional science constructs food and eaters, and the kind of food practices that are legitimized.

1. Method

Data for the present study were taken from the nutritional advice column in the New Zealand Listener magazine. This column was chosen for analysis on several grounds. First, the New Zealand Listener is a popular and well-respected national magazine, first established in 1939 (New Zealand Listener, 2015). It describes itself as "the country's only national, weekly current affairs and entertainment magazine. It covers the political, cultural and literary life of the country" (New Zealand Listener, 2015). The magazine editor describes the target audience as upper middle-class and middle-aged New Zealanders (Bauer Media Group, 2016), and the articles are generally intellectual in tone. The New Zealand Listener is a weekly magazine, with a circulation of 63,930 and a wide readership within New Zealand that is estimated to be between 241,000 and 269,000 (New Zealand Listener, 2012; Roy Morgan Research, 2013). As the total population of New Zealand is approximately 4.5 million (Statistics New Zealand, 2012) the readership of this magazine is significant, at around one fourteenth of the adult population.

Second, this column discusses a wide range of nutritional topics. Therefore it provides a good representation of the more general nutritional knowledge that reaches the New Zealand public. Third, the weekly nutrition column has been written by a qualified nutritionist, Jennifer Bowden, since 2007 (New Zealand Listener, 2015). Thus, unlike some magazines which present advice written by non-experts, the column's advice is representative of expert nutritional knowledge as it is communicated in the media. It might be considered a limitation that the articles are written by one nutritionist. However, Jennifer Bowden's advice can be considered representative of a nutritional science perspective. Jennifer Bowden is a University graduate and qualified nutritionist (Thinking Nutrition, 2012). She has won numerous scholarships and awards

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