



Why sustainable and ‘nutritionally correct’ food is not on the agenda: Western Sydney, the moral arts of everyday life and public policy



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ABSTRACT

Within a context of delivering food security into the future, dietary guidelines are being reframed, corporations are replacing unsustainable products, and consumers are being encouraged to become ecological citizens. While there is a growing literature on the food practices of ‘alternative’ consumers, ‘mainstream’ consumers are less well understood. This paper describes qualitative research undertaken in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of Sydney, Australia, which aimed to uncover consumer views towards sustainable and healthy diets. Most participants indicated a discrepancy between their desired and actual behaviours: while they want to support Australian, or local, food producers they gravitate towards cheap and tasty food from ‘anywhere’; and while they associate nutritious food with fresh food, they will buy processed foods which can be less expensive, appeal to children and are prone to less waste. Reflecting mainstream Australian political culture, participants were compromising household food budgets in order to pursue a socially acceptable standard of living (including decent housing, car-reliance). They were also incorporating the pleasure and desires of family members as part of ‘the moral arts of everyday life’. Using social theories of consumption and practice sociology we argue that food choices and practices – easy or not – need to be interpreted as part of the role that consumption plays in political citizenship and moral subjectivity. In the Western Sydney context, food practices are essentially household budget and family nourishment practices rather than nutrition and sustainability practices; a position which is not addressed in the government’s new food policies or wage determination processes.

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Introduction – The changing context for food security debates in affluent countries

Within affluent countries, food security is no longer focused on the poorest and most marginal groups. A number of factors are shifting the food security debate away from hunger including the global, and hence widely shared nature, of environmental changes, population growth and the unprecedented migration of large numbers of people into cities. Urbanisation not only reduces the land available for food production but urban populations are typically further removed from influencing food system dynamics, except as consumers. Furthermore with the global population classified as over-weight and obese surpassing the numbers classified as under-weight (WHO, 2013), government health budgets are being strained as they address the rise in chronic diet-related diseases (OECD, 2010).

For this suite of reasons, there is growing emphasis on the inter-relationship between food system health and population health (Hawkesworth et al., 2010). With increasing evidence that the

health of populations cannot be divorced from eco-systems broadly understood, the ecological public health movement (Lang et al., 2009; Rayner and Lang, 2012) is using the language of co-benefits (Capon and Rissel, 2010) to advocate the principle of “make healthy and sustainable choices easy choices”.

Reflecting this understanding, several European governments have begun to encourage healthy and sustainable food consumption, yet it is appropriate to ask how feasible this form of consumption is without active government support beyond more education campaigns; particularly in light of a challenge laid out by Barnett et al. (2005) that “existing research . . . fails to register the full complexity of the practices, motivations and mechanisms through which the working-up of moral selves is undertaken in relation to consumption practices” (p. 23). The study described below was designed to examine the proposition that even if healthy and sustainable foods become ‘easy’ choices in Australia (available, accessible and affordable) they might not be acceptable, an important feature of 21st century food security Pinstrup-Andersen (2009). Numerous studies examine the ‘alternative consumer’ and their motivations, with less attention paid to the ‘mass consumer’. As such, this is exploratory research using social science theories to help interpret the actions and understandings of

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mainstream consumers. We have collected data from households in a relatively disadvantaged area of Sydney, a global city which is experiencing all the pressures identified above.

The research was being undertaken as the Australian government embarked on a three year exercise to develop new dietary guidelines, and as it established a consultative process to construct a National Food Plan. In 2010, Australia's top health research body, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) established a Technical Working Group to review the evidence on the food–diet–health–disease interrelationship for different sub-populations, and to consider “the interrelationship between diet–environmental sustainability” in the framing of dietary advice (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2011). To the dismay of sections of the public health community (Sacks, 2013; Food Alliance, 2012; Selvey and Carey, 2013), that aspect of the review was not drawn upon in the final national guidelines (and was relegated to an Appendix in the review report) released early 2013. In responding to critics, the NHMRC's CEO argued that linking food security and environmental conditions was not necessary because if people eat according to the revised nutritional guidelines they will be minimising the food system's impact on the environment (Anderson, 2012). There was no acknowledgement however that agri–environmental conditions are impacting dietary intakes through food price spikes and food yield shortfalls (Erickson et al., 2010).

A lack of preparedness to articulate food system sustainability with national food security is also apparent in the National Food Plan 2013 (DAFF, 2013), despite this being a theme in numerous submissions and public hearings over a lengthy consultative process. While “access to enough safe and nutritious food for all Australians” was nominated as the first policy principle, and “sustainable production” follows later, they intersect in one sentence only (see Section 5.1 “Maintaining food security in Australia”). This peripheral acknowledgement stands in stark contrast to the strong symbiosis developed in the Food Plan between national food security and the nation's export ambitions, both to be achieved through increasing productivity coupled with “an open trade in food (including food imports)” (p. 56). The need for national government leadership in making it easier for consumers to participate in a food system that offers both food security and environmental sustainability is made clear from the findings of our study in Western Sydney.

What motivates and constrains healthy and sustainable consumer practices?

There is a burgeoning social science literature addressing the genesis of modern consumer practices, with a focus on ‘trying to do good’ through ethical consumption. This material, summarised here, provides the departure point and analytic filter for the study we describe in the following sections.

Government initiatives to encourage healthy and sustainable consumption

As part of its multi-faceted research program, The UK Sustainable Development Commission (see the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006; SDC, 2009, 2011) undertook a number of surveys over five years to assess consumer willingness to alter their shopping and consuming activities. It repeatedly found that consumers would not act unaided or spontaneously on their sustainability concerns, and that “Providing information failed to get more than a minority of people buying the most energy efficient dishwashers [for example]” (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006, p. 21). Instead the Commission supported the practice of

“choice editing for quality and sustainability by regulators, retailers and manufacturers”. By choice editing it was referring to taking poor quality and unsustainably produced products out of the market place and replacing them with healthy and sustainable alternatives (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006, p. 16) This is an approach which reflects social science understanding that everyday consumption is fostered, in part, through policies and campaigns within a broader social change narrative (Barnett et al., 2005; Dixon and Banwell, 2012).

Within some European countries, governments are reviewing their consumption narratives as they contend with damaging environmental changes and rising chronic disease rates. For example, at the European Union in May 2009, the Swedish government tabled a new national proposal, *Environmentally effective food choices*, which set out the features of a sustainable and healthy diet. In regards to meat, it advised Swedes: “To eat less meat, and to choose what you eat with care. ...”. The dietary advice was accompanied by a desired environmental objective, for example eating less meat, grass fed meat and meat alternatives would contribute to a “varied agricultural landscape... rich diversity of plant and animal life, non-toxic environment, reduced climate impact” (National Food Administration, 2009). The proposal was not adopted more broadly due to EU members' fears of erecting trade barriers, however governments in The Netherlands and Scotland (Health Council of the Netherlands, 2011; Scottish Government, 2012) have provided similar guidance as has the UK government's Sustainable Development Commission (2009, 2011). While different in emphasis, all initiatives reflect the evidence that there is a strong correlation between the dietary changes recommended for improved health and reduced environmental impact (McMichael et al., 2007; Friel et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2011).

Enacting social subjectivity, political and moral citizenship through 'the arts of everyday life'

Increasingly, consumption is recognised to be more than buying and using a commodity or service to fulfill the purely instrumental ends of daily living (Miller, 1995; Warde, 1997; Humphrey, 2010). The Sustainable Development Commission (2009) adopted this reasoning when it argued that individuals use consumption to: ‘talk to’ one another and create identities and status hierarchies; achieve desired functional outcomes and earn livelihoods; ‘master’ skills, pursue talents and practice moral self-hood; and participate in social life obeying its rhythms and norms.

As well as using consumption to act out particular social status affiliations, exercising consumption choices is one way in which modern citizen-consumers exercise political power, whether to maintain or change the status quo (Spaargaren, 2003). The idea of consuming to belong to society and a polity is central in Dwyer's work (2009) which explores how attachments to a conventional or mainstream ‘standard of living’ underpin consumer choices. According to Dwyer, the standard of living plays an important discursive and structural role. Following Veblen, she argues that goods transition from being luxuries to decencies and then to necessities, and that the standard of living itself contains important information about social standing. What becomes habituated and drives consumption is the capacity to pursue the gradually evolving accepted definition of what constitutes a ‘conventional’ standard of living. In this and other more theoretically oriented practice sociology (Bourdieu, 1977; Spaargaren and Oosterveer, 2010), consumption practices are framed as locating and anchoring individuals in a variety of social status relationships that are difficult to renegotiate.

Consuming to belong was also a central theme in an ethnography among middle-class Swedish consumers (Isenhour, 2010). Here sustainable consumption was found to be constrained by

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