



Research report

What does it mean to be a 'picky eater'? A qualitative study of food related identities and practices [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Picky eaters are defined as those who consume an inadequate variety of food through rejection of a substantial amount of food stuffs that are both familiar and unfamiliar. Picky eating is a relatively recent theoretical concept and while there is increasing concern within public health over the lack of diversity in some children's diets, adult picky eaters remain an under researched group. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study on the routine food choices and practices of 26 families in Sandwell, West Midlands, UK. Photo elicitation and go-along interview data collection methods were used to capture habitual food related behaviours and served to describe the practices of nine individuals who self identified or were described as picky eaters. A thematic analysis revealed that those with the food related identity of picky eater had very restricted diets and experienced strong emotional and physical reactions to certain foods. For some this could be a distressing and alienating experience that hindered their ability to engage in episodes of social eating. Further research is needed to illuminate the specific practices of adult picky eaters, how this impacts on their lives, and how possible interventions might seek to address the challenges they face.

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Introduction

The categorisation of eating 'types' is a well-established practice in both Eating Disorder and Social Science research. Classifications such as restrained, unrestrained, picky, healthy and impulsive are used as discrete categories to analyse and compare patterns of food consumption, intake, food choices, responses to cues, and attitudes towards food and eating. These groupings help explain behavioural mechanisms in relation to eating. The label of 'picky eater' also functions as an identity. Social science research has described how individuals ascribe, take-up and perpetuate food related identities. They are expressions of the way people conceptualise their own self-image and rationalise their food behaviours. The concept of food identities can help explain food choice processes and recognise multiple meanings that people bring to and derive from eating (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002).

Picky eaters are defined as those (typically children) who consume an inadequate variety of food through rejection of a

substantial amount of foods that are both familiar and unfamiliar. Being a picky eater is also characterised by the rejection of food textures, particular food types, and the flavour and feel of foods (Dovey, Staples, Gibson, & Halford, 2008). In recent years there has been increasing concern within the fields of Public Health and Nutrition over the lack of diversity in some children's diets. In fact, the category Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) has replaced that of Feeding Disorder of Infancy and Early Childhood in DSM – 5 (from DSM – IV) (Kenney & Walsh, 2013). The revised diagnosis has been expanded to include significant food avoidance and restriction, with or without an associated medical condition (Kenney & Walsh, 2013). In the broader social context, the rise in consumption of 'children's food' has further fuelled scrutiny over restricted diets and the replacing of fruit and vegetables with processed foods (Skafida, 2013). The specific label of picky eating is a relatively recent theoretical development and, as such, there are few studies exploring picky eating and 'pickiness' remains a disparately theorised construct (Dovey et al., 2008). While there is a growing body of literature and research on children's restrictive diets there is almost no work on adult picky eaters. Adults with restrictive eating practices are not well described in the literature and little is understood about their experiences (Marcontell, Laster, & Johnson, 2003), although this is beginning to receive more attention.

This short paper aims to address this caveat by exploring the lived experiences of those who identified themselves and/or their family

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members as picky eaters. Food practices can be used to construct and maintain identities, they become part of personal food systems and contribute to consistent narratives that rationalise and explain food and eating practices (Bisogni et al., 2002). Being a picky eater has implications for health. In children, picky eaters have lower dietary variety and diversity scores than non-picky eaters and are less likely to eat vegetables (Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet, & Issanchou, 2005). As stated, little is known about habits and health implications for adults. This paper will examine what it means to be an adult picky eater by tackling the following two research questions. Firstly, what are the practices and preferences that constitute the identity of picky eater? Second, what are the lived experiences of picky eater identities for adults, and how do these vary?

Methods

Recruitment and sampling

A qualitative study of food practices, values and related identities was carried out from January to July 2010 in Sandwell, a relatively deprived metropolitan borough in the West Midlands, UK. Participants were recruited from community settings, including libraries, community centres and leisure facilities, with the help of Sandwell Primary Care Trust (PCT) staff acting as gatekeepers. Recruitment continued throughout data collection until data saturation was reached. In total, 26 adult participants (16 women and 10 men) were interviewed in a variety of settings about the food and eating practices of themselves, and members of their household. The sample was as diverse as possible in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. Full ethical approval was sought prior to data collection from Queen Mary (University of London) Research Ethics Committee (QMREC). As part of informed consent it was explained that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that all data would be anonymised. Permission to record interviews was also sought.

Picky eater identities apply to a very specific subset of the sample. The findings presented here are, therefore, based on the accounts of, or about, 'picky eaters'. Four of the participants self-identified as picky eaters and three described some of their teenage or adult children as picky eaters. In total, the diets and practices of nine picky eaters were described. The four participants who self-identified were all female and aged between 23 and 52 years. The five teenage and adult children who were identified by their parents as picky eaters consisted of four males and one female aged between 14 and 22 years.

Data collection

The study used both photo-elicitation methods and go-along interviews in order to capture food practices across different social and physical contexts. Photo-elicitation required participants to photograph everything they ate and drank, where and with whom for a 4-day period. The methodology refers to approaches that require participants to take photographs that are then subsequently discussed at interview (Harper, 2002; Oliffe, Bottorff, Kelly, & Halpin, 2008). This exercise generated a participant food photo-diary. The overall aim of was to compile a very detailed 'what, where and who with' snap-shot of individual and household eating habits. These photo diaries were then presented back to participants at subsequent interviews and used to structure discussion about routine food habits, preferences, social context, values and tastes. In order to best accommodate participants, the photo-elicitation interviews were conducted in a variety of venues, sometimes in the community settings in which participants were recruited and also in food establishments. Interviews were often held in cafes and cafeterias, and often food was eaten by both the participant (and their companions) and the researcher during them. This approach

prompted some interesting conversations and revelations about food practices.

The second data collection task was the go-along interview. The go-along interview is an in-depth qualitative interview that is conducted by a researcher accompanying individual participants on outings in their local environments (Carpiano, 2009), in this case the local food environment. Go-alongs are a combination of observation and interview. They provide direct experience of the natural habitats of informants, and allowed access to their food practices as they unfolded in real time and space (Kusenbach, 2003). This took the form of accompanied food-shopping trips to a variety of grocery stores, and trips to fast food outlets and cafes. Participants were accompanied on a routine food shopping trip of their choice during which topics emerging from the photo elicitation interviews were followed up and participants were asked to explain their food purchasing decisions in context.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The NVivo9 software package was used to support a thematic analysis of the whole data set. A thematic analysis necessitates that the researcher identifies themes from the transcripts which describe and exemplify the subjective perceptions and everyday experiences of participants (Nicolson & Anderson, 2003). Thematic analysis, like grounded theory, depends on a process of constant comparative analysis in order to achieve consistency and validity. This process develops ways of understanding human phenomena within the context in which they are experienced, based upon a rigorous interrogation of actions and descriptions across both participants and physical and social contexts (Thorne, 2000). Open coding was first used to identify and categorise specific food practices, physical and social context, and references to food related identities. Selective coding was then used to identify the preferences, values and practices that were used to construct these identities. There were a variety of eating-related identities talked about in the interviews and explored in the analysis. For example, five of the participants had, at some point, been vegetarians, all of whom constituted 'being' a vegetarian in slightly different ways. Three of the participants observed religious dietary practices (one Sikh, one Hindu and one Muslim). In passing, participants often described having a 'sweet tooth' or being a 'snacker' or 'picker'. A range of affective food related identities were also talked about, including being a 'food lover' or an 'easy eater'. However, one particularly striking and detailed identity emerged from participant's descriptions that individuals applied to both themselves and others, that of 'picky eater'. This identity compelled or rationalised certain behaviours and beliefs and had both positive and negative connotations for participants.

Results

What it means to be a picky eater

Those participants who self-identified as picky eaters spoke of strong physical and even emotional reactions to foods they rejected. They all described being a 'picky eater' since childhood, despite numerous attempts to try new foods and broaden their diet. It was more than a matter of disliking some foods or being 'picky'. Picky eaters were characterised by numerous, exacting and even severe reactions to certain foods and properties of foods such as texture and smell, methods of cooking, and portion sizes. Typically, fruit and especially vegetables were the foods that provoked strong physical and emotional reactions. Participants spoke of how trying to eat some foods made them feel physically sick. Tracy, a 33 year old teaching assistant who identified herself as a picky eater talks about her strong dislikes in the extract below:

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