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Research report

The evolving content of meals in Great Britain. Results of a survey in 2012 in comparison with the 1950s ☆

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines food eaten at meals in Great Britain. It presents findings about contemporary meal content, reflecting on the relationship between meal content and occasion, and makes comparison with an earlier study. Drawing on an online survey (N = 2784), conducted in September 2012, it describes the food consumed at daily eating events in terms of content, volume and complexity, common components and combinations, and sequence. Socio-demographic and economic differences are examined. Conceptual tools for analysing the association between food content and meal occasions are refined. The paper first explores the regularity of meal patterns. This is followed by description of the contours of the three principal daily eating events, with a brief section on snacks. The paper interprets distinctive features of current patterns by way of comparison with a similar study of eating habits in the 1950s. Findings reveal morning and midday eating events as simple and homogeneous in content, particularly on weekdays, with respondents breakfasting on cereal or toast, and lunching on sandwiches. Evening meals are more complex, structured and varied in content. Common patterns and systematic differentiation can be discerned, particularly across age cohort. Significant historical change can also be observed in relation to meal content and, to a lesser extent, meal pattern.
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Introduction

This paper analyses the foods consumed at eating events by Britons in September 2012. It reports from an online survey about the organisation of eating. Here we explore part of the data, focusing on meal content and combinations of foodstuffs, sequences of dishes and of meals, and the characteristics of the main eating events of the day. The aim is to throw light on contemporary culinary culture, rather than nutrition per se, so it examines dishes (rather than ingredients) and current patterns in the allocation of content to eating occasions. It is thus primarily a contribution to the study of the socio-cultural significance of the organisation of everyday consumption. The findings are contrasted with a comparable study conducted in the 1950s which allows comment upon changes in terms of foods eaten and the relationship between meal content and type of occasion.

Cultural processes configure more and less acceptable practices associated with putting foods together, placing them in sequence, and matching them to different social occasions. At different kinds of events, or on different social occasions, an expectation exists that particular configurations of foods will be served, or more precisely, that certain configurations of food will be excluded as inappropriate to that specific type of event. So, while undoubtedly every individual has a unique pattern or trajectory when viewed over an extended period of time, people's experiences are governed by convention, and characterised by repetition and regularity (Warde, 2013). This leads to people exhibiting considerable similarities which form persistent common patterns across groups and populations and permit probabilistic predictions of behaviour. The empirical questions are what foods suit what occasions, and how that has changed over time. An associated analytic conundrum is what terminology is adequate to capture the phenomena of configuration and arrangement.

Sociological research has typically employed the concept of the meal to capture such configurations (Holm, 2013; Wood, 1995). The term 'meal' refers both to foods that are ingested and to the encompassing social arrangements of an event involving locations, times and companions, reflecting the empirically observed interconnection between occasions and the foods served (Kjaernes, 2001; Marshall & Pettinger, 2009). As such, it is a slippery concept. Depicting and analysing that relationship poses a methodological problem, being at risk of circularity, common to explanation of

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cultural effects; the danger is that the analyst deduces the hierarchy of dishes from the frequency of the appearance of each at occasions of greater and lesser socio-culinary importance, and *vice versa*.

This charge might be levelled at Mary Douglas's formulations, one of the few remnants of the structuralist legacy still regularly deployed and which have survived in the absence of any better parsimonious and abstract typologies dealing simultaneously with events and foods (Douglas, 1975; Douglas & Gross, 1981; Douglas & Nicod, 1974, see also Marshall, 2005). Her scheme is helpfully constructed on the assumption that both foods and events are hierarchically ranked. The gist of it is that there are many equivalent ways to compose, for example, an ordinary main meal, but that meals of equal hierarchical rank will have a similar elementary structure. One problem with this formulation is that it assumes a strict homology between event and content. Another is that every event is a modulation of the most prestigious celebratory meal. These assumptions would seem to be too restrictive to understand the variety of eating events. It might be better to consider them as hypotheses to be tested rather than principles. There is a patterning of content and occasion in popular understandings of meals and in performances and understandings of breakfasts, lunches and dinners, but the patterns are unlikely to be constant or cross-culturally standard.

Douglas postulates that every type of eating event is a greater or lesser simplification of the most prestigious of all occasions. This presumption has often been echoed in formulations of, especially, the family meal. The 'family meal', the 'proper meal' and the 'cooked dinner' are variously deployed as ideal-types against which to observe deviation. It has proved too easy to get from the observation that a substantial proportion of actual meals fail to meet all the criteria defining the family meal to the prognosis that everything is falling apart and the very principle of meals is in jeopardy. The manner in which concepts are formulated and deployed has often led to a prediction of collapse rather than careful focus on the specific elements of a configured practice in the process of change. The risk is that a particular contingent combination becomes reified into a universal template for eating arrangements. For example, Charles and Kerr (1988), writing about Britain in the early 1980s, made an excellent case for the coincidence of several features of the proper meal which accounted for its role in the organisation of the British family. Serving cooked meat with potatoes in the presence of all co-members of the nuclear family with domestic preparation involving cooking by the female head of the household were the essential attributes of the most socially significant eating occasion in Britain (see also Murcott, 1982). At the time this was a practical ideal, with families aspiring to this arrangement even though it was often unattainable. Yet each of these qualifications would now appear far from necessary or deserving of committed observance. The proliferation of formerly less available foodstuffs, the spread of specialised diets such as vegetarianism, shifts in family and household structure (in particular diminishing household sizes, see Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009), changes in the distribution of paid and unpaid labour across the sexes (Brannen, O'Connell, & Mooney, 2013), and significant increases in eating out (Warde & Martens, 2000) mean that the social significance of meals is manifesting in different configurations of the elements of eating occasions (also see Marshall & Pettinger, 2009, for a good summary of shifts in the food system). There is plenty of evidence that the meal, and particular named meals such as breakfast, lunch and dinner, continue to hold enormous social significance, but their attributes, meanings, and other dimensions such as how they are eaten and with whom, are subject to creeping change (Cheng, Olsen, Southerton, & Warde, 2007; Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009).

Changes in the social arrangements for eating are limited to neither the content nor the social nature of eating occasions; both are affected, as are the ways in which they relate (c.f. Jaeger, Bava, Worch, Dawson, & Marshall, 2011; Marshall, 2005, 76). A variety of factors including market forces, working rhythms and their temporal–spatial implications, and cultural norms and conventions all configure the social organisation, content and practice of eating. Much literature has circulated around the defining and categorising of different aspects of meals (Bisogni et al., 2007; Douglas, 1975; Jaeger et al., 2011; Kjaernes, 2001; Marshall & Pettinger, 2009). Yet a vocabulary is needed for cultural and historical comparison which does not presume constant relationships between the different aspects of the 'meal', but captures the greater flexibility in their coincidence in contemporary localised practices. The essential component elements of this cultural complex are: *foodstuffs*, the key ingredients; *dishes* – combinations and preparations of foodstuffs typically arranged together on a plate; the *pattern of eating events* – the structure of analytically discrete but intrinsically related and sequential episodes; *event formats* – the organisation, in parallel and in series, of dishes (including courses); *preparation and provisioning*; and *social occasion*, referring to place, company, and social context. Such an extended terminology allows the diagnosis and description of rules or regularities pertaining to the matching of food to event, and dish to specific configurations occurring in different periods or contexts.

Comparison, across space and time, has been a primary object of interest in the analysis of eating (see for example Cheng et al., 2007; Kjaernes, 2001; Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009), yet it also presents some of the field's greatest methodological challenges. It is needed in order to be able to give due proportion to claims about approaching crises, of which many are predicted, and to estimation of the impact of new and alternative practices, like for instance the encroachment of foreign or global cuisine on local tradition. An accurate balance between continuity and change is hard to strike. Instability is exaggerated when the focus, at a given moment, is on one particularly dynamic feature of an overall configuration, while, on the other hand, operating with ideal-typical concepts (like the family meal) often disguises or minimises change through the temptation to adjust observations to maintain the model fit. Reliable estimates of change are also difficult to achieve, partly due to lack of suitable data but also because our vocabulary is insufficiently precise. Practically, cross-sectional surveys make for imperfectly reliable comparison, and longitudinal surveys with sufficient suitable detailed data do not to our knowledge exist. For the purposes of this paper, an interesting comparator study from the 1950s (Warren, 1958), which offered a rather simple descriptive analysis of what was eaten and when, permits some well evidenced estimation of the extent of purported changes, allowing us to inquire whether some features change more than others.[1] The empirical project is to unpick the sense of necessary association between the elements of eating, focused primarily on meal content, through a description of eating habits in 2012 in comparison with those of 1955/6. Thus, the elements discussed are: patterns of eating events, in terms of number, duration and sequence; foodstuffs and their composition into dishes; and formatting in combinations of dishes and courses.

[1] In this paper we have in mind debates about the de-structuration of meals and about the integration of dishes attributed to foreign cuisines into the British repertoire. The second of these poses considerable problems of terminology. One widely discussed change, usually dated from the 1970s, concerns dishes imported from the cuisines of nations other than the British, dishes such as pasta, pizza, curry and noodles. Aware that such items were less available in 1955/6 we feel justified in adopting a naïve pose for the purpose of assessing change, demarcating them as Italian, South Asian or East Asian, even while recognising processes of continual hybridisation, creolisation and the shifting in content, meaning and structure associated with the classification of recipes (see James, 1997; Panayi, 2008).

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