



Identifying motivations and barriers to minimising household food waste



Ella Graham-Rowe*, Donna C. Jessop, Paul Sparks

School of Psychology, University of Sussex, Falmer, BN1 9QH, UK

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ABSTRACT

The amount of food discarded by UK households is substantial and, to a large extent, avoidable. Furthermore, such food waste has serious environmental consequences. If household food waste reduction initiatives are to be successful they will need to be informed by people's motivations and barriers to minimising household food waste. This paper reports a qualitative study of the thoughts, feelings and experiences of 15 UK household food purchasers, based on semi-structured interviews. Two core categories of motives to minimise household food waste were identified: (1) waste concerns and (2) doing the 'right' thing. A third core category illustrated the importance of food management skills in empowering people to keep household food waste to a minimum. Four core categories of barriers to minimising food waste were also identified: (1) a 'good' provider identity; (2) minimising inconvenience; (3) lack of priority; and (4) exemption from responsibility. The wish to avoid experiencing negative emotions (such as guilt, frustration, annoyance, embarrassment or regret) underpinned both the motivations and the barriers to minimising food waste. Findings thus reveal potentially conflicting personal goals which may hinder existing food waste reduction attempts.

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1. Introduction

It has been estimated that globally one third of the edible parts of food destined for human consumption is lost or wasted each year (Gustavsson et al., 2011). Much of the waste that comes from high-income countries has been attributed to poor marketing practices and consumer behaviour, with consumers being identified as a bigger contributor than food manufacturing, distribution, grocery retail and the hospitality sectors (Griffin et al., 2009; Quested et al., 2011). In the UK alone it has been estimated that households generate 7.2 million tonnes of food waste a year, most of which is thought to be avoidable (Waste and Resource Action Programme [WRAP], 2011a), despite research suggesting that consumers have a distaste of wasted utility (Bolton and Alba, 2012). Although the figure in the UK has dropped significantly from the previous estimate of 8.3 million tonnes in 2006/07, household food waste remains a significant problem with much scope for improvement.

There are many serious negative consequences of household food waste. Firstly, it has a social impact as it contributes towards increases in global food prices, making food less accessible for the poorest as well as increasing the number of malnourished people both in developed and developing countries (Stuart, 2009). Secondly, it has an economic impact: buying food, not eating it and

then throwing it away currently costs the average UK family an estimated £680 a year (WRAP, 2011b). Thirdly, the production and supply of food, which is subsequently wasted, has a number of environmental costs. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2012), food waste contributes to the demand for agricultural land, placing increased pressure on the world's already dwindling forests. Food waste further has implications for water wastage. For example, it has been estimated that in the UK 6.2 billion cubic metres of water per year is wasted producing food that is then thrown away – the equivalent of 243 litres of water per person per day (Chapagain and James, 2011). Furthermore, the disposal of biodegradable waste into landfills contributes to the release of gases, most notably methane. This is a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, with 34 times the global warming potential over 100 years (IPCC, 2013). In summary, according to WRAP (2011a), greenhouse gas emissions of approximately 17 million CO₂ equivalent tonnes are associated with the manufacture, distribution, storage, use and disposal of edible food that is wasted in the UK.

Despite the obvious imperative for research to identify key factors that motivate, enable or prevent household food waste minimisation behaviour, little research to date has directly addressed this objective. Studies that have concentrated explicitly on household food waste have primarily focussed on identifying what food is most likely to be thrown away (WRAP, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), who is most likely to throw food away (Brook Lyndhurst, 2007; Doron, 2012; Koivupuro et al., 2012; WRAP, 2009a), and how people feel

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 01273 876638.

E-mail address: E.J.Graham-Rowe@sussex.ac.uk (E. Graham-Rowe).

about food waste. For example, Brook Lyndhurst (2007) identified people's top three concerns about food waste as: (1) that it is seen as a waste of money; (2) that it is seen as a waste of good food; and (3) that it makes them feel guilty. More recently Doron (2013) has also identified environmental concerns as a further category of concern about food waste, however WRAP have concluded that environmental concern is not a key concern at present (Quested et al., 2013).

Whilst the findings of such research are doubtless important, they don't address the question of why food gets wasted. Some research has attempted to identify the specific behaviours that result in household food waste. Potential behaviours identified have included: buying and/or cooking too much, not planning meals in advance, failing to compile or comply with a shopping list, failing to carry out a food inventory before shopping, impulse purchases, and throwing away food that has passed its sell-by-date (Brook Lyndhurst, 2007; Doron, 2012; Exodus, 2007; Parfitt et al., 2010; Stefan et al., 2013). Research has also highlighted relatively low public awareness of the negative impact of household food waste (Brook Lyndhurst, 2007; Quested et al., 2011, 2013) and a lack of awareness of one's own food waste contributions (Brook Lyndhurst, 2007; Doron, 2013; Exodus, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2005). However, most of the research addressing these issues has used methodologies that involve people being given closed-ended questions followed by a series of possible responses. These methodologies have limitations as they impose responses on the participant and don't give them the opportunity to voice their own views about a particular phenomenon. Qualitative research methodologies can overcome these limitations as they allow for the researcher to explore and therefore better understand complex phenomena without imposing limitations (William, 2007).

To date only two published peer-reviewed studies have attempted to elicit participant beliefs about household food waste using qualitative methods. Wansink et al. (2000) investigated people's motivations for purchasing grocery items that they subsequently failed to use. A random sample of 423 US household purchasers were asked to locate one item that they had purchased at least six months prior but had as yet not used. They were then asked in an open-ended questionnaire to explain why they had purchased the specific item, why they had not managed to use it and what they intended to do with the item now that they had been brought to their attention. Results revealed that the majority of the items people reported buying and not using were non-versatile and had been bought with the anticipation of a 'specific occasion' or 'specific recipe' in mind. However, as the occasion to use the product had failed to arise, many of the participants reported that they had forgotten about the item and – now it had been brought to their attention – they intended to throw it away. Although this study provides valuable insight into why people may fail to use specific items of food which they had purchased, it does not tap the range of factors that may influence household food waste behaviour.

More recently, Evans (2011, 2012) carried out a sociological exploration of food practices in 19 households in the UK. In-depth interviews revealed a number of potentially important themes relating to how and why household food gets thrown away. The papers were structured around issues such as: (1) feeding the family; (2) eating 'properly'; (3) the mismatch between the materiality (its short shelf life and packaging) of 'proper' food and how this interacts with the social-temporal demands of everyday life; and (4) anxieties surrounding food safety and storage. Evans concluded that household food waste is not a consequence of individuals' thoughtlessness but rather a result of the social and material conditions in which food is provided; he suggested that interventions and policy should target these conditions rather than the individual, if household food waste is to be reduced.

Although the themes uncovered in these studies represent an important starting point there is still a lack of understanding of the nature of household food waste minimisation behaviour. Knowing more about people's food waste minimisation motivations (whether goal-based, habitual or emotionally motivated) as well as their perceived capabilities to minimise food waste and perceived opportunities or barriers to food waste minimisation practices is essential if effective interventions are to be designed. Accordingly, the aim of the current study was to directly address this gap in the literature.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and sampling procedures

Participants ($N=15$) from thirteen households were recruited from the South of England, through a UK University online recruitment database. The database comprised students and non-students who had expressed a willingness to participate in research in exchange for course credits or a small fee. We employed an "illustrative sampling" method (Turrentine and Kurani, 2007) to generate a sample representing a mix of characteristics. Our sampling frame was defined by: (1) age (18–29 years/30–49 years/50+ years), and (2) household size (e.g. family/couple/single). Recruitment of participants was supplemented using opportunity sampling when it was not possible to recruit a mix of characteristics/demographics from the database alone. In order to take part in the current study, participants had to be aged eighteen or over and have sole or joint responsibility for household food purchasing. Accordingly, one or two participants per household could be eligible for inclusion. When two members of a household wished to be included in the study they were interviewed together. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

2.2. Interview procedure

The participants were invited to take part in a study about various topics on food. The interviews were carried out between May and August 2011 at the researcher's office or home, or at the home of the participant. Before the interview commenced, participants were required to read a study information sheet which contained information on the study procedure, confidentiality and the right to withdraw. If the participants elected to continue they were asked to sign a consent form and were told that they would receive £10 at the end of the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured, with the interviewer asking participants questions about the following topics:

- (1) Thoughts and feelings regarding purchasing food (e.g. *Tell me how you shop for food for your household. Can you describe a typical food shopping trip? How do you feel about shopping for food? How do you decide what food you are going to buy?*)
- (2) Thoughts and feelings regarding food choices and food preparation in the home (e.g. *Once at home, how is it decided what food is going to be eaten and when? When, if at all, does food get thrown away in your household? Can you describe why you think this happens?*)
- (3) Thoughts and feelings regarding throwing food away (e.g. *Tell me about your thoughts and feeling regarding throwing food away. Tell me how your thoughts and feelings may have changed over the years. Why do you think other people you know throw food away? Tell me how you think other people you know feel about throwing food away?*)
- (4) Thoughts and feelings regarding reducing food waste (e.g. *What do you think are the best or most effective ways to avoid or reduce*

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