



## Research report

# Young people's food practices and social relationships. A thematic synthesis

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## ABSTRACT

Food practices are embedded in everyday life and social relationships. In youth nutrition promotion little attention is awarded to this centrality of food practices, yet it may play a pivotal role for young people's overall health and wellbeing beyond the calories food provides. Limited research is available explicitly investigating how food practices affect social relationships. The aim of this synthesis was therefore to find out how young people use everyday food practices to build, strengthen, and negotiate their social relationships. Using a thematic synthesis approach, we analysed 26 qualitative studies exploring young people's food practices. Eight themes provided insight into the ways food practices affected social relationships: caring, talking, sharing, integrating, trusting, reciprocating, negotiating, and belonging. The results showed that young people use food actively to foster connections, show their agency, and manage relationships. This synthesis provides insight into the settings of significance for young people where more research could explore the use of food in everyday life as important for their social relationships. A focus on social relationships could broaden the scope of nutrition interventions to promote health in physical and psychosocial dimensions. Areas for future research are discussed.

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## Introduction

Food practices are socially, culturally and historically embedded in everyday life and go beyond nutrient intake (Beardsworth & Keil, 2013; Lupton, 1996). McIntosh (1996) explains that “people eat food, not nutrients. That is, they generally see the substances they ingest through the lens of culture and social relationships” (p. 4). Food is said to possess dual power, sustaining the biological body while nourishing social relationships (Corr, 2002). This social nature of food is central in this paper; whether eaten while interacting with family members or offered to a friend, food is seen as a way of communicating and relating to others. Food practices are embedded in daily (e.g. breakfast, lunch) and celebratory (e.g. Christmas, birthdays) rituals, and are the cornerstone of human sociality (DeVault, 1991; Fischler, 2011). Food practices are here defined as any activity in which food is involved, ranging from food preparation, gifting food, sharing meals, or cleaning up, referred to by Symons (1994) as the human food cycle. The focus is on how the integrated daily presence of food offers opportunities for social interaction and acts as a vehicle in managing social relationships.

Young people's nutrition is well researched, and often concludes that dietary intake is not compliant with public health recommendations (Knai, Pomerleau, Lock, & McKee, 2006; Müller et al., 2013; Pearson, Biddle, & Gorely, 2009). There is little room for a positive, more holistic representation of young people and food practices within health-oriented research. A strengths-based approach to young people's health emphasises that it is important to build on assets and resources, finding meaning in what can foster competence, confidence, character, social connections and caring in young people (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The new sociology of childhood pursues that young people's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right (James & Prout, 1997). Too often young people are perceived as passive participants in social life with little agency in matters concerning them. From this perspective it is important to acknowledge young people's agency in food practices and their active role in negotiating family practices and routines (Valentine, 1999). Young people can resist and shape consumption practices and exert power this way. Given that food plays such an important role in everyday life there is much scope to consider young people's food practices as significant for their health and wellbeing beyond a focus on their nutrient intake. Additionally, social relationships themselves have been linked to improved physical health (Conklin et al., 2014). In this paper we will review previous literature to examine how young people may use

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food practices to establish and maintain their social relationships as an asset for holistic health promotion.

### *Importance of relationships for young people*

Having positive social relationships and feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). Building on Maslow, Ryan and Deci (2000) pursue in their Self Determination Theory that feeling related, autonomous and competent within one's environment is essential for better health and wellbeing. Relationships are important for good psychosocial (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Maurizi, Grogan-Kaylor, Granillo, & Delva, 2013) and physical (Berkman, 1995; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) health. For young people positive relationships appear to be particularly important with most benefits gained in school, family and peer contexts (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Hruschka, 2010; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998).

Social relationships are built and strengthened through shared practices and experiences; in particular through practical sharing and caring, taking joy in time spent together, reciprocal self-disclosure, talk developing familiarity and privileged knowledge associated with trust, emotional attachment and emotional 'closeness', and expressing affection and love (Jamieson, 2011; Jamieson & Milne, 2012). Such interactional practices can be found in food practices, warranting a closer examination of young people's food practices and social relationships.

The aim of this review is not to cover the complete literature on food practices and social relationships; rather, it is to synthesise meanings of how young people use food in social relationships to initiate further theorising and research in this area. The research question guiding the review is: how do young people use everyday food practices to build, strengthen, and negotiate social relationships?

### **Method**

The review presented in this paper follows a protocol used by Thomas and Harden (2008). These authors argue that thematic synthesis provides a tested way to synthesise qualitative research in a transparent manner and achieve higher order thematic categories. The generation of new themes beyond the descriptive content of the articles is a crucial characteristic, and should lead to the creation of a whole greater than its constituent parts. Thomas and Harden (2008) outline three stages in thematic synthesis. These three stages provided the framework for the synthesis presented in this paper. Stage one involved line-by-line coding of the article findings, stage two involved the development of 'descriptive themes', and stage three the subsequent generation of 'analytical themes' leading to a synthesis of new interpretive accounts.

The study sample "is purposive rather than exhaustive because the purpose is interpretive explanation and not prediction" (Doyle, 2003, p. 326). Therefore, the aim was not exhaustive coverage of the literature, but conceptual saturation by including studies from diverse contexts and disciplines. The initial method for identifying studies was through keyword searches (adolescent\* OR teenager\* OR young people AND nutrition OR food OR eating AND meaning OR culture OR perspective OR choice OR influences OR identity OR belonging\* OR connectedness) on ERIC, psychINFO, medline, CINAHL, and Academic Search Elite. Subsequently research trails from both articles cited within a study, and articles that had cited the study were traced. Original research articles were included if they were published in English, included young people (defined as 10–24 years) as participants, discussed food-related practices, employed a qualitative methodology, and presented a good range of quotes from young people throughout the article. Determining an

age cut-off is arbitrary but necessary, as the emphasis within this review was placed on young people and relationships as they gradually become more independent from adults and gain more autonomy, which is most pronounced during this period. A further rationale for including this age range was that young people face many transitions during this period, starting from the transition to secondary school, going to university, and moving out, periods where maintenance of old, and establishment of new relationships are common (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

A total of 61 articles were identified in the initial search and included in a preliminary list after being screened for their relevance in the title and abstract. Following a more detailed assessment of the 61 papers, 26 were considered relevant, and these are summarised in Table 1. Papers were excluded if there were no relevant findings for the review topic. For instance, an article by Harrison and Jackson (2009) was excluded because the findings only related to perceptions and meanings of healthy and unhealthy foods, and no relevant data could be found regarding food practices and social relationships. If studies included children (under age 10) exclusively then they were excluded; if the age range covered children and young people then studies were included if the results could be identified by age group. The quality criteria applied to the articles was adopted from Mays and Pope's (2000) criteria for assessing qualitative research.

Identifying qualitative data for reviews can be challenging because data can be more intertwined with discussion (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Following Thomas and Harden's approach we included the result sections of the articles and extracted the verbatim findings from the studies. The included studies utilised diverse research questions, addressed in various ways to young people's food practices. For instance, in some studies the interview questions directly addressed young people's social relationships and food, whereas in other articles the themes emerged indirectly. As the aim of the review was to gain greater understanding of the whole phenomenon, deliberate or chance elicitations were deemed relevant to how food practices mediate young people's social relationships.

The first step involved inductive coding of data line-by-line according to meaning and content. Any practice that involved food within the results was coded to reflect food-related interpersonal activities. Similar codes were subsequently clustered together, and overlapping codes were merged. A total of 67 codes emerged from the initial stage capturing food practices that occurred in social relationships. The second stage involved searching for similarities and differences in the codes and generation of new codes that grouped together codes from the initial coding. Codes were grouped into multiple codes if the finding related to more than one grouping; for instance practices were divided into familial and peer practices, but also into interaction types, such as interacting with others through food. The second stage resulted in a set of related descriptive themes, which were drafted by the first author. Critical discussion of these with the other authors resulted in a final set of 28 themes. The third stage involved the development of analytical themes, which is the most challenging but also most defining stage of qualitative synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This was achieved by applying the descriptive themes that had emerged from the former stages to the review question, which further clustered similar descriptive themes into groups. This resulted in eight overarching analytical themes describing how food practices affected young people's social relationships (see Fig. 1 for example of data coding process). Independent coding by all three authors of all identified quotes according to the final set of themes resulted in 72% concordance.

Because the studies often had a different focus than this review, the quotes were read for findings beyond the interpretation of the article authors. We identified differences, commonalities, and themes to synthesise existing findings into a new conceptual framework of food practices and social relationships.

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