



Research report

“Eat like a man”. A social constructionist analysis of the role of food in men’s lives[☆]Mark A. Newcombe^a, Mary B. McCarthy^{a,*}, James M. Cronin^a, Sinéad N. McCarthy^b^a Department of Food Business and Development, O’Rahilly Building, University College Cork (UCC), Ireland^b Teagasc Food Research Centre, Ashtown, Dublin 15, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a social constructionist approach to investigate the role of food in the production of identities and social experiences for men. With recognition that relational and experiential processes are central to men’s lives, the purpose of the paper is to inductively explore the personal and interpersonal complexities of this group’s food related behaviours. Empirical data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with 33 men, comprising of 4 age groups, (18–35, 36–54, 55–64, and 65+ years). Regardless of age, an analysis and interpretation yielded three emergent themes, food as a component of: (1) role-play; (2) contextual interactions, (3) and the management of a functional vs. hedonic dialectic. Across these themes various tensions and contradictions emerged suggesting a complex reflexivity to male food life experiences. Relational issues emerged such as the observation that some men concede control to their partners throughout their food experiences. Overall, our men’s consumption practices construct a specific socio-cultural articulation of masculine roles whereby their internal paradoxes are leveraged as a means to produce desirable experiences and self-identifications.

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Introduction

Gender based differences in consumers’ food related attitudes, beliefs, practices and life choices have become the focus of an extensive body of research and speculation in recent years (Gough, 2007; Sobal, 2005). Concurrently, the fervour with which social theorists have pursued the notion of gender in the food area has been replicated by industry decision makers as exemplified by the growing use of gender in food advertising and promotions (Childs & Maher, 2003). Nevertheless, despite the upsurge of interest in gender and food related behaviours various authors have recognised that studies concentrating specifically on men’s lived experiences with food are still quite rare (Gough & Conner, 2006; Melanson, 2008). Women are largely regarded to be more involved in domestic food work than their male counterparts (Fürst, 1997) and consequently men, as a unit of analysis, have been studied less frequently.

As it stands however, there are issues beyond involvement which should attract attention to the food consumption of male consumers. Men outnumber females in their susceptibility to

obesity, heart disease hypertension, and cancer (Flint et al., 2010). In addition, morbidity statistics indicate that men on a global scale tend to lead less healthy lifestyles than women, and engage in far less health-promoting behaviours (Devaney, 2008).

Investigative work into men’s self-representations and their interaction with social groups, within which their selves are embedded, may aid in shedding light on men’s relationship with food and any latent health risks. Bisogni, Connors, Devine, and Sobal (2002), have theorised ‘identity’ and ‘personal history’ as key informants of food choice while recent empirical studies have shown ‘social interaction’ to instil food products with deep seated symbolic meanings for consumers (Cronin & McCarthy, 2011; Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins, 2012). Research however which examines how men use food to represent their individual selves and to aid in the production of interpersonal relationships and encounters with others is lacking. The purpose of this paper is to inductively explore the complexities of men’s food behaviours as embedded in expressions of identity and the search for social experience. Specifically, this paper sets out to empirically reveal how men use food in their personal and collective performances and as a grounding force for self-expression.

Men, masculinity and food. A background

As an initial point of establishing theoretical foundations, the social constructionist perspective is a useful viewpoint from which we can interrogate the lived experiences of men with food. This

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perspective emphasises its dependence on contingent aspects of consumers' social selves and asserts behaviours and objects of consciousness develop through social performances (Danzinger, 1997). These social performances are everyday interactions or considerations amongst individuals who exercise their conduct either individually or among others by negotiating and enacting cultural scripts (Vannini, 2008). Individuals can be completely unaware that their performances are scripted and faithfully enacted, that their roles are collectively determined, and that fellow interactants constitute an audience for their actions. It is according to this dramatised system of social programming, that it is theorised men enact behaviours closely prescribed by the concept of 'masculinity' assumed from their culture (Courtenay, 2000b). Importantly, gender does not dwell in the person, but resides in social transactions defined as gendered (Crawford, 1995).

The dominant form of socially constructed masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, tends to subordinate femininity and other forms of masculinity (Courtenay, 2000a), and is said to be the 'masculine ideal'. It refers to the most honoured ideas about manhood, whereby men tend to be positioned by society as strong and resistant to disease, while a concern for health is typically looked upon as feminine behaviour (Connell, 2000; Lee & Owens, 2002).

Men who adopt these hegemonic beliefs tend to subscribe to traditionalist gendered expectations of risk-taking behaviour, a denial of weakness and reluctance to seek help, all of which have the potential to exacerbate health problems (Courtenay, 2000a). Particularly, these beliefs have been associated with unhealthy behaviours, which include smoking, alcohol and drug use and behaviours connected to safety, diet and sexual practices (Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988; McCreary, Newcomb, & Sadava, 1999). The gendering of foods serves as a mechanism in buttressing the presence of hegemonic masculinity. Food practices help men confirm and subscribe to traditionalist tastes of manhood thereby allowing the construction of strong male identities and relationships (Jensen & Holm, 1999; Roos, Prättälä, & Koski, 2001). Alcohol products, for example, serve as indicators of maleness in various cultures whereas consumption of vegetables, fruits and sweet foods is disregarded as feminine (Roos, Hirvonen, Mikkilä, Karvonen, & Rimpelä, 2001). Men are considered to be less likely than women to avoid fat, eat fibre, eat fruit and diet, and attached less thought to healthy eating (Wardle et al., 2004) while being motivated to consume more protein and vitamins (Levi, Chan, & Pence, 2006). Red meat, for example, with its high protein content and bloody constitution has been found to represent for men a totem of virility and strength (Adams, 1990; Fiddes, 1991; Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012). Sobal (2005) extends empirical work into this symbolism of meat for men by taking into account their social relationships with others. He suggests that marital meat consumption does not necessarily follow formulaic, hegemonic gender patterns and that, instead, pluralistic views of masculinities offer adjectival gender scripts that can be selectively invoked in negotiating meals shared between partners: "*Multiple cultural scripts for strong men, healthy men, wealthy men, sensitive men, and other conceptions of masculinities are employed in marital negotiations about "doing meat"*" (Sobal, 2005, p. 135).

Sobal's argument demands attention as the existence of multiple cultural scripts dilutes the argument for pre-determination of male roles and muddies the waters when it comes to social constructionism of food choices. There is an implicit argument of emancipative relativity which suggests rigidly defined structures of 'singular masculinity', which assume the dominance of one set of male norms in a particular society and historical period, is giving away to the perspective of 'multiple masculinities', which assume plural conceptions of maleness in a society and time period (Sobal, 2005). This pluralistic perspective recognises that there is a fragmentation and diversity of social performances in late-modern consumer soci-

ety and this heterogeneity brings with it a diversity of cultural scripts for particular actions (e.g. Connell, 1995, 2000). Moreover, outside of the food literature, Holt and Thompson (2004) theorise that there are contradictions inherent within the hegemonic model which further complicates and diversifies the heterogeneity of 'multiple masculinities'. Holt and Thompson suggest men who strive for domination and respect are conflicted between the ideals of "what is a real man's man?" They suggest there is a complicated balancing act between the "breadwinner ideal" (i.e. a veneration of monetary earnings, achievement and professionalisation) and the 'rebel ideal' (i.e. chauvinist, rugged individualism and displays of physical prowess). The authors suggest men use these two competing masculine ideals to socially construct 'dramatic pleasurable tensions' (Thompson & Holt, 2004). 'Dramatic' here does not infer ostentatious or the histrionic but implies men engage in role-play as per the thespian sense of the word. Men's resolution of role-play tensions help men win patriarchal status games on their own terms and deepens the waters of social constructionist theory. Their argument can be conceptualised as a recognition that men's masculinities are often faced with many contradictions that must be reconciled by displaying in some ways that one is in control.

There has been some theoretical convergence with Holt and Thompson's argument across the social sciences whereby the plurality of various alternative masculinities forms the basis of late-modern hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within this understanding, masculinities are thought of as configurations of practices (Connell, 2005) that are created relationally in the various social interactions that exist between men and within the wider context of gender (Connell, 2005). From this perspective, gender is often seen as a dynamic, social structure whereby men are not powerlessly conditioned by their surrounding cultures, they are active agents in building, renegotiating and reconstructing dominant norms of masculinity. This concept of agency, which is the role people play in exerting power and autonomy in their individual lives, is central to most recent forms constructionist theory and forms a primary assumption in the current research (Courtenay, 2000b).

With recognition that there is heterogeneity, complexity and contradictory ideals within the broad structural category of "men", we are left with an insightful point of departure for analyses of this cohort. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding men's food experiences and reveal some of the individual and social processes by which they interact with food in the construction of identity.

Methods

The research presented here is grounded within a larger national quantitative study (the National Adult Nutrition Survey) documenting the diets and lifestyle patterns of Irish Citizens. Having completed a food diary a lifestyle survey and a food choice survey, all participants from 5 of the 25 sampling points used in the national survey were invited by the researcher during the last of three visits, to partake in an interview to speak about their food lives. Those who agreed were contacted and a time for interview was set up. In-depth semi-structured interviews were selected as a suitable method as they have been shown to be effective in revealing how food consumption patterns are associated with symbolic meanings and social patterns (Kleine & Hubbert, 1993). From 146 men invited, 33 men agreed to participate in an in-depth interview, representing a 22% response rate. With this sample size we were confident of reaching data saturation (Guest, Arwen, & Johnson, 2006). The sample was designed to maximise diversity across key demographic characteristics such as age, (4 groups: 18–35, 36–54, 55–64, and 65+ years; mean age = 72), social status, living location (urban/rural) and weight status. All interviews took place

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