



Food, eating and taste: Parents' perspectives on the making of the middle class teenager[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study of views and understandings of dietary practices in middle class families. Thirty five parents/main food providers of boys and girls aged 13/14 years, living in Eastern Scotland, were interviewed about their and their teenagers' everyday lives, food, health and family practices. One of our aims was to understand more about the social and cultural conditions which might be promoting more positive dietary health and physical well-being amongst middle class families. Most parents' accounts appeared rooted in a taken-for-grantedness that family members enjoyed good health, lived in relatively secure and unthreatening environments regarding health and resources, and were able to lead active lives, which they valued. Although controlling teenagers' eating practices was presented as an ongoing challenge, active supervision and surveillance of their diets was described, as was guiding tastes in 'the right direction'. Parents described attempts to achieve family eating practices such as commensality, cooking from scratch, and encouraging a varied and nutritional 'adult' diet and cosmopolitan tastes, though work and activities could compromise these. These middle class families might be characterized as having future oriented 'hierarchies of luxury and choice', in which controlling and moulding teenagers' food practices and tastes was assigned a high priority.

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Introduction

In recent years increasing attention has been paid to dietary issues among children and teenagers in the UK population. This has often been stimulated by concern about increasing obesity rates in childhood and adolescence as these can be risk factors for health problems in adulthood (McCarthy, Ellis, & Cole, 2003; Wright, Parker, Lamont, & Craft, 2001) However, more broadly, epidemiological research continues to demonstrate associations between healthier eating practices and higher socio-economic status (Shaw,

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Mcmunn, & Field, 2000). In this, an individualised, behavioural approach has predominated (Warin, Turner, Moore, & Davies, 2008); there has also been less research into the socio-cultural processes underpinning these statistics (Devine et al., 2006). In particular we need to know more about everyday food choice and eating behaviour in families and the negotiations between parents, children and teenagers that underpin these processes (Backett-Milburn, Wills, Gregory, & Lawton, 2006; Dixey, Sahota, Atwal, & Turner, 2001; Eldridge & Murcott, 2000; Kaufman & Karpati, 2007). Although families are accepted as the primary setting for the establishment of patterns of food choice and consumption in childhood (Dietz, 2001), how parents and family background actually affect what teenagers eat on a daily basis is less clear. In this paper we report on a qualitative study of middle class families including at least one younger teenage child (13/14 years old) and examine what was happening in these families, from parents' perspectives.

Food and eating related practices are both embedded in and reflective of people's everyday family and domestic lives and socio-cultural circumstances; they are dynamic and culturally responsive (Curtis, James, & Ellis, 2009). Researchers, policy makers and practitioners have all called for greater understanding of the

everyday contexts which might foster healthy eating in young people (Contento, Williams, Michela, & Franklin, 2006; Royal College of Physicians, 2004). Currently, we have more information about the characteristics and contexts of population groups who seem particularly affected by health damaging circumstances and environments than about other, usually more affluent, groups who seem somewhat less affected by these trends (Ball & Crawford, 2005). It is valuable to understand more about the social, cultural and family conditions which might be seen as promoting more positive dietary health and physical well-being in the face of trends which seem to be challenging these aspects of teenagers' lives (Sarliio-Lahteenkorva, 2007).

Issues of social class and 'habitus' are central to these debates, though the ways in which socio-cultural influences affect the everyday practices and routines underpinning food choice, taste and dietary behaviours which might be seen as promoting more positive dietary health and physical well-being in the face of trends which seem to be challenging these aspects of teenagers' lives (Sarliio-Lahteenkorva, 2007). Issues of social class and 'habitus' are central to these debates, though the ways in which socio-cultural influences affect the everyday practices and routines underpinning food choice, taste and dietary behaviours which might be seen as promoting more positive dietary health and physical well-being in the face of trends which seem to be challenging these aspects of teenagers' lives (Sarliio-Lahteenkorva, 2007). Bourdieu (1984) argued that 'habitus' is about unconsciously understanding and enacting the unspoken boundaries and rules of acceptable consumption. This is particularly expressed through food, eating practices and taste and such 'consumer behaviour can be explained in terms of the role of display and social judgment in the formation of class identities' (Warde, 1997, p. 9). From this perspective, even the everyday, mundane aspects of preparing, eating and choosing food are based on accumulated habits and preferences built up within distinct social groups such as families or social classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Whether for the working class or middle class (Tomanovic, 2004), shared past and present knowledge and experience of the social world continue to shape individuals' (and families') identities and understandings of what is appropriate and possible for 'people like me' (Reay, 2005). Thus, for example, in the process of 'doing' and 'displaying' family (Finch, 2007), and perhaps centrally around everyday eating practices, classed identities are constructed and recreated.

This article follows on from a previous qualitative study examining the views and understandings underpinning the dietary practices in families with young teenagers living in poorer socio-economic circumstances (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006, Willset et al., 2006). This complementary study, focussing on middle class families with at least one younger teenage child (13/14 years old), involved interviewing a parent (almost exclusively the mother) and the young teenager. This paper presents middle class parents' perspectives on young teenagers' food choices, eating practices and taste. Firstly we examine parents' descriptions of their and their teenagers' everyday lives, food, health and family practices against the backdrop of the middle class environments in which they lived. We then discuss their attempts to control teenagers' tastes and appetites and how parents spoke about managing teenagers' increasing autonomy. We show how they tried to move the teenagers' diets in the 'right' direction and conclude by considering how all of these social processes were contributing to the creation of the future middle class adult.

Methodology and study design

An iterative qualitative approach was employed which allowed the exploration of themes emerging during data collection in addition to those formulated at the outset (Britten, Jones, Murphy, & Stacy, 1995). This second study focused on young teenagers and their parents living in higher SES, 'middle class', families in Scotland; 36 young people (aged 13–14 years, equal numbers of boys and girls) and 35 of their parents were interviewed. The sample was further divided into two categories, defined by their Body Mass Index (BMI) as normal weight or overweight/obese. At the schools the young people were weighed and measured, in private. Findings about weight and overweight will be presented elsewhere.

Recruitment of participants

Following ethical approval from relevant education authorities, we gained access to four schools in relatively advantaged areas in Eastern Scotland: three state schools and one private, fee-paying school; two were in a city, one in a town and one in a semi-rural area. We assessed middle classness through a range of socio-economic and cultural indicators. The schools had below average numbers of students eligible for free school meals (a proxy indicator in the UK for socio-economic status). We selected teenagers where at least one parent's occupation was reported to be in class 1 or 2 of the NS-SEC (Office for National Statistics, 2005). Family affluence was ascertained from positive responses to 2 items adapted from the Family Affluence Scale (Currie, Elton, Todd, & Platt, 1997) – the teenager having their own bedroom and the family having at least one holiday in the past year. Deprivation was assessed using the 2001 Carstairs scores for Scottish postcode sectors (McClone, 2004) the Scottish Index of Deprivation (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2006/10/17104536>); households falling into the least deprived quintile were eligible for interview.

A screening questionnaire was administered to teenagers aged 13/14 to collect socio-demographic information (parent/s' occupation; home postcode; family affluence; household composition), details of their physical activity and favourite/regularly consumed foods. The families interviewed were predominantly White/Scottish, reflecting the ethnicity of the local population. The composition of the families varied, including 2 lone-parent families (mother only) and 4 step-families. Out of the 35 parent interviews 4 were parents of single children, 31 were parents of more than one child. Double consent was sought: parents were asked to 'opt out' if they did not wish their child to participate; young people and parents each gave written consent to be interviewed.

Data collection

From November 2006 to December 2007 we conducted visits to several schools to select the sample of teenagers; interviews of teenagers and their parents took place between November 2006 and February 2008. Out of the 36 families recruited into the study, interviews took place with 35 parents (33 mothers and 2 fathers) who were identified by teenagers as their main food provider (one parent declined to be interviewed for personal reasons). Almost all of the mothers in the sample families were working: two thirds (21) were in full time employment, 11 worked part-time, 2 had no employment and 2 were full time students. Most fathers in the sample (29) worked full time; only 3 were not currently in employment.

Qualitative interviews, lasting about 1 hour, took place in parents' homes and were tape recorded with consent. The topic guide mirrored that used previously with the teenagers. We asked interviewees to talk through typical and non-typical days, enabling us to probe about all food consumed by the participating teenager and his/her family and the context for this consumption (where, with whom and when consumption took place). Thus, food, eating and taste were explored in the context of descriptions of the everyday lives of parents and teenagers at home, school, work and leisure. Topics also included perceptions of health and 'healthy behaviours' (e.g. physical activity; weight maintenance strategies) in relation to their teenager, themselves, family and friends.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Field notes and interview summaries were written, enabling reference to the whole sample during analysis. Selected transcripts were read by all team

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