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Food practices, intergenerational transmission and memory

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Dietary beliefs and behaviours are formed in early childhood and adolescence and are culturally reproduced from generation to generation (Lupton, 1994: 682). The offering and receiving of food is a key domain in family life in which relations of power are played out. Sociological studies of children's food in families have focussed on food as an index of generational relations (James et al., 2009), a medium for negotiating meanings (Cook, 2008), a vehicle for expressing identity (Valentine, 1999a) and a forum for enacting resistance (Grieshaber, 1997). There is less research in this field, however, on the ways in which parents exercise their power over their children through processes of transmission, either consciously or unwittingly. Fischler (1986) nonetheless notes that '[c]ontrol over the child's diet is vital. Not only is the offspring's present health at stake, but his [sic] whole future evolution, his entire person. Control over feeding means control of the child, guiding his development' (p. 950).

In this paper we draw upon some case material from a recent study of children's food practices in families (O'Connell and Brannen, 2016). We examine some of the ways in which parents seek to shape their children's food practices and may also unwittingly transmit their own preferences and dispositions about food. The case was selected according to this Special Issue's focus on the offering and refusal of food: a family in which the child was actively resisting her parents' considerable control over her life.¹ In particular she was fighting against the terms which they set down for the consumption of food, a domain that both symbolized and constituted the major site of resistance. The paper seeks to understand the child's food practices in the context of current family dynamics and parents' past experiences.

Intergenerational transmission and food

Intergenerational transmission within families has been conceptualised as the cultivation of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977); that is, it involves passing down attitudes, values and practices, and

¹ Permission for use of the data was given by all participants on the basis that all identifiers (names of persons and places) were anonymised.

a 'system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning which functions as a system of generative schemes, [which] generates strategies' (Bourdieu, 1993: 76). Dispositions are developed early in people's lives, thereby reproducing cultural life (Bourdieu, 1973). Given food is ingested, it is the ultimate form of consumption (Warde, 2016), a medium of cultural transmission. Food and food practices are surrounded with ritual and meaning. Habitus relating to food is literally incorporated into bodies and the eater is thereby incorporated into particular cultures (Fischler, 1988). Within families this process of 'incorporation' is one means of reproducing the family (Devault, 1991).

With respect to food practices, as people make the transition to parenthood they may seek to cultivate or 'civilise' children: that is, to ensure their children eat in culturally appropriate ways in relation to time and place (Elias, 1939/1969). As Lupton (1994) suggests, 'the parent-child relationship is characterised by a struggle for power in relation to the bodily habits of the child' (p.679). In some cases parents seek to perpetuate the experiences of their childhoods and their own parents' practices, whilst others may hope to do things differently and avoid transmitting learned behaviours. As Knight et al (2014: 312) write, drawing on data from the study that we discuss below, 'About a third of the parents we interviewed described childhood experiences of food practices negatively and, as parents, they said, were making a conscious effort to act differently with their own families ... the most common memory was being forced to eat things as a child and there was a desire not to impose this practice on their own children.'

Identities change over the life course, in relation to historical context, and in relation to the older generations that come before. Each generation seeks to differentiate itself from another and to make its own mark on that which is passed to it (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1997). In this process, ambivalences are created as a new generation aims to create a better life or bring up their own children differently compared with their parents' generation (Brannen, 2015), creating new class positions, dispositions and habits that may distance them from older generations. While cultural transmission creates, reproduces and transmits family identities, it also generates positionings against which new generations react.

Hence food is an important vehicle for transmitting heritage and cultural meaning, ranging from the 'proper' family meal to Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner (Muir and Mason, 2012). Transmission is not straightforward, since the habitus is enacted in changing fields. Even where parents seek to reproduce their own experiences, they do so in historical conditions which are

very different from those of their own childhoods, including with respect to food. Food practices are ‘not automatically ‘transmitted’ from one generation to the next; they are adapted, adopted, transformed or generated in the practices of everyday life’ (Forero and Smith, 2010: 79).

Today, family life is typically organised around both parents’ employment, a consequence of which is that they (that is mothers) have less time to spend preparing meals (Warde et al., 2007). In addition, there is an abundance today of (unhealthy) foodstuffs whilst an emphasis on consumer choice coexists alongside a contradictory emphasis on individual restraint (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006; Pirie, 2016). In the current climate of strong normativity concerning parental responsibility and what it means to eat well (Maher et al., 2010), many parents want their children to eat ‘healthily’ and to conform to the dictates of current health concerns and policies.

Memory and food

Food provokes, indeed embodies, memory (Sutton, 2001). Memories cohere around bodily experiences that stretch back into the past (Narvaez, 2006, citing Mauss and Halbwachs). According to Proust ‘[t]he past is somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which an object arouses in us)’ (cited in Narvaez, 2006: 51). While the past exerts a strong grip on embodiment ‘so that the unfair spectres of tradition will thus have an incarnate presence in the body and thus become organically present in life’ (Narvaez, 2006: 68), embodiment is also a ‘structure of possibilities’, a site of learning and change, where new practices emerge.

In seeking to account for the ways in which they shape their children’s food practices, parents may draw on positive memories relating to experiences of their own childhood and family cultures. Some want to continue these with their own families. For example, they may want their families to eat together in the same way that they recall doing as children. Others draw on negative memories of food in childhood. Food evokes strong emotional responses including resentment, dislike, physical revulsion, security, love and nostalgia and is often associated with feelings of past powerlessness (see for example Lupton, 1994). In effect, memories of past experiences are themselves forms of transmission (Thompson, 1993). These may have

unintended consequences both for the individuals concerned and also for the succeeding generation. The themes of parental control over a child's eating practices and of the child's attempt to resist this power, by hiding or refusing food, run through memories of past intergenerational relations relating to food and through current intergenerational relations in which a struggle for power between child and parent continues to be played out (see for example Nott, this issue).

The study

The 'Food, families and work' study aimed to examine the effects of the rise of maternal/dual parental employment in England on the quality of children's diets and on how children's food practices changed over time. It asked a number of research questions. How does parental employment influence family food practices, in particular the diets of children aged 1.5 to 12 years? How do working parents manage food work? How do children's food practices vary across contexts (home, childcare and school)? How do children and parents negotiate children's food practices? How do changes in parents' and children's lives influence children's diets?

The study adopted a mixed method and longitudinal design. A purposive sample of 47 households of employed parents and their children aged 2 - 10 years was selected from a national survey, the National Diet and Nutrition Survey Year 2, 2009-10 (Bates et al. 2011). The study was conducted between 2009 and 2014 and families were followed up after two years. With the children, the methods were used flexibly, to suit the wide age range. They featured interviews and visual approaches, including photo elicitation methods, in which children photographed foods and meals consumed within and outside the home and discussed these with the researcher at a later visit (O'Connell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were carried out at both waves of the study with parents who were the main food providers² and sometimes with an additional parent or care-provider who was involved in family foodwork and also wished to participate in the study. Secondary analysis of a range of variables from several national surveys was also carried out for the quantitative phase of the study.

² The Main Food Provider (MFP) is defined in the NDNS survey as the person 'with the main responsibility for shopping and preparing food'.

Amelia: parental control and child resistance

The following case of Amelia and her parents has been selected because it suggests some of the complexity that is implicated in the 'food habitus' of a particular family and the power dynamics that played out and were observed between parents during the interviews. As Milburn (1995) suggests, interviewing household members together enables the dynamics of household relationships to be explored (Valentine, 1999b). It highlights the relationship of the child to the parents who, while actively seeking to control their child's diet to positive effect, transmit mixed and conflicting messages, intended and unintended, and provoke resistance from the child.

Amelia was nine years old at first interview and an only child. She attended a private school and lived with her two parents in a higher income white British family in a village on the outskirts of a city. Amelia's father, a salesman who worked mainly in the evenings and at weekends, was the main food provider and did all the food shopping and cooking during term time (his wife was a teacher and therefore home in school holidays). At Wave 1, neither Amelia's mother nor father considered Amelia capable of making 'good' food choices, saying that 'in fairness if she had her own choice she wouldn't be as healthy as she is, would she?' For her part, Amelia strongly resisted her parents' control over what she ate. This was evidenced both by Amelia and by her father who described giving Amelia little say about what she ate at home. Amelia's parents also attempted to control what she ate at school, instructing her about what to 'choose' and trying to check what she had eaten. They noted also that their attempts to ensure their daughter ate a healthy diet were often counterproductive.

At Wave 1, Amelia internalised a healthy eating discourse but she also desired 'unhealthy' foods, for example saying that she found cakes 'very tempting'. She thought that children should be encouraged to eat healthily but should also be allowed some leeway to eat junk food on occasion; '[children should] have a few junk foods but don't gorge on them like I do.' Asked to complete a timeline activity about the foods consumed at different times of day and how much say she had in regard to each, Amelia said she could not choose what she ate at home. Amelia rebelled, admitting to lying about what she ate at school: for example, telling her parents she had eaten a roast when she had eaten pasta. She also confessed to stealing cakes

and chewing gum from her mother's handbag, eating them in secret and stuffing the wrappers down the back of the sofa. During the interview, Amelia flaunted her refusal to go along with her parents' wishes, as suggested by the way she completed a research activity in which she was asked to fill a supermarket shopping trolley: she drew a range of contraband - lemonade, bubble-gum, sweets and cakes.

At Wave 2, when Amelia was 11, the situation intensified both in regard to parental control and Amelia's resistance to it. Both Amelia and her father were quite open about Amelia 'gorging' on sweet foods, stealing food and hiding the evidence.

Father: [...] if there are sweets in the house, she likes those, obviously, and cakes and things and will take those.

Amelia: I like cake.

Father: Oh, and tins of custard, yeah.

Amelia: I like custard, custard is nice.

Father: Mmm, she goes to the cupboard and we'll find the empty tin.

Amelia: (Laughs) you've done behind the sofa ...

Interviewer: Do you put the empty tin back in the cupboard?

...

Amelia: Behind the sofa.

Father: When was it? Sun - was it last - no, last week at some point, the tin lid was in a box of teabags that had only just been opened, but not been put away, the tin was in the bin and the spoon was in the dishwasher.

When asked if Amelia ever helped herself to food, her father said, 'Anything she can find in the cupboard if we're not around'. Amelia commented 'Junk food basically... Ice cream, chocolate. [laughing] Doesn't matter what type of chocolate, I'll gobble it all up.' This gorging on food had led Amelia to being hospitalised more than once for bad stomach pains. The father wondered whether he and his wife were being too restrictive and Amelia seemed to agree, explaining that she lied about what she ate because she wanted to please her parents.

Conflicting messages

In seeking to understand Amelia's food practices, an analysis not only of what was said but of the dynamics in the interview are indicative, suggesting that Amelia was exposed to very different and conflicting messages about her diet from each parent. In addition, the parents'

own food tastes and dispositions differed significantly, with consequences for both the couple's dynamics and for their parenting.

In Amelia's mother's case, her food practices veered between extremes - between eating 'rubbish' and eating healthily (vegetables and salad). She also asserted that her diet depended on her 'mood', often eating 'junk' in the evenings because she felt bored with being stuck at home when her husband had to work. Amelia's mother also resisted sitting down to eat with Amelia and her husband when she got in from work, saying that she preferred to eat later in the evening. On the day of the interview (Wave 1) Amelia's mother said she had missed breakfast and lunch in the school canteen. By the afternoon she felt 'starving' and so she went to the Spar and bought a tuna sandwich, a Galaxy, a muffin and a Milky Way. She also bought a chocolate bar which she 'hid' for later. Although she was not planning to eat dinner with her husband and Amelia, she did because they were having salmon. She noted, 'What I find is if I don't eat at lunchtime and I get to the afternoon, I eat rubbish. And once I've started the day with rubbish I end the day with rubbish.'

In contrast to these inconsistent food practices, Amelia's father sought to provide consistency by cooking the same hearty meals for Amelia and himself. For this he was castigated by his wife who said: 'You can't actually get away from meat and two veg'. Amelia's mother was highly critical of her husband's lack of variation in the foods and meals he cooked, 'every single night, with either a meat or salmon or a pie, every night'. Amelia's mother never shopped with her husband and had little idea about their food budget. Given the father did the bulk of the cooking and that money was tight because of his currently reduced hours, he was careful about expenditure, which was another source of tension between them.

The couple also had different ideas about Amelia's diet and openly disagreed in the interview. Asked about the healthiness of their daughter's diet, whilst Amelia's father felt her diet was good compared to the majority of children, her mother judged her daughter's diet to be inadequate compared to her private school (middle class) peers:

Interviewer: And do you think Amelia has a healthy diet?

Mother: No.

Father: Yes. I would say in general, compared with a lot of children I would say yes she did.

- Mother: Not for the school she's going to and if you look at say socio economics, and you know actually I think that where she is in the school she's at, actually her diet should be better.
- Father: yeah I mean.
- Mother: People from middle...yeah so the environment that she's in her diet should actually be better than it is.
- Father: Yes.
- Mother: And most probably her range of eating should be better than it is.
- Father: Yes, no, I agree with that, no I do agree with that.
- Mother: So no actually think that...
- Father: But compared with the majority of children I would say yes.
- Mother: She's never had things like an avocado, no anyway.
- Father: Yeah but compared with the majority of children.
- Mother: I suppose.
- Father: It's a minority that go to public school, private school, sorry.

Amelia's father said he was '90 per cent happy' with her diet but would like Amelia to eat a wider range of foods. His wife, on the other hand, considered that Amelia ate too much, noting that she was 'developing 'fatty deposits on her bottom'. Amelia had clearly taken her mother's views on board and focused on fatness and anorexia rather than 'health' in her interview. On the 'junk' food that Amelia was eating, Amelia's mother saw her husband's cooking as responsible while Amelia's father blamed it on his wife:

- Mother: I think she eats more than what you think she eats. Now I say that because I know that when I open this [freezer], we've got these [pulls out a frozen pie and shows interviewer]. And, I say well no, actually it's processed and it's not healthy and=
- Father: But that's one day a week.
- Mother: Yeah but=
- Father: The junk that Amelia eats is when she raids the cupboards and your handbag and things, that tends to be what it is, because she roots it out. If she knows it's there, she'll make sure that she sneaks at some point and eats it.

In this context it is unsurprising that Amelia was also inconsistent or, as her mother put it, played her parents 'off one another'. But the power play, as both Amelia and her mother noted, also concerned Amelia not knowing which of her parents to keep happy.

Mother: I find her sometimes, she was heading a little bit towards the getting picky, playing us off against each other. [Father] [doesn't] buy brown [bread], all of a sudden she no longer likes brown bread. I will buy brown and tell her she starves if she doesn't eat it. Cos I know the minute that she will eat it she loves it. ... So I am more -, aren't I? When it comes to food...I am more, I won't let her... But sometimes she doesn't know who to keep happy. Because she knows that [husband] only likes white bread. So sometimes she doesn't know who to keep happy, does she? ... If she chooses brown she'll keep me happy, if she chooses white she'll keep you happy.

Shadows of the past

While Amelia's father feared that he and his wife were too restrictive of Amelia, they did not desist. Indeed the father seemed to blame himself and reflected on some of the detrimental ways in which he may have unwittingly influenced his daughter's eating habits: 'that's probably my fault that she doesn't [eat a wider range of foods], because I'm very limited with what I eat as such and I do wish she wasn't.' While he willingly took on responsibility for food work, he was aware that his own conservative tastes meant he was not an adventurous cook: something that his wife reminded him of and criticised him for in the interview and in front of Amelia.

Amelia's parents both reflected on the influence of their own backgrounds on their approaches to food. Amelia's father reflected on *consistency* with his childhood that had made him conservative about food. He described growing up in a corner shop that had meant he could help himself to food items and make himself something else to eat if he did not like what was on offer at home. He described himself as 'a fussy child', again blaming his daughter's diet on himself. 'My dad he was very, he was a plain eater like me, my mum would eat anything. But because my dad used to do a lot of the cooking, in fairness he did, especially later in life ... and therefore I don't like different things. Er, and to some degree that's my fault with Amelia 'cos she ought to try more but my limitations stop her.' At the same time, Amelia's father went to great lengths to hide his severe phobia of cheese from his daughter (he had to hold the cheese

in plastic in order to grate it). Now that Amelia had become aware of his phobia, he said he allowed his daughter to grate her own onto her pasta.

In contrast, Amelia's mother described her *rejection* of the way she had been brought up in relation to food: she attributed her dislike of eating the same foods time and again to the fact that she lived with her Nan for many years when she was older 'and had ham sandwiches every day for five years and it does get a bit monotonous'. She also mentioned that, on the one hand, her diet as a child reflected what was acceptable at the time – 'that there wasn't the fresh fruit and veg the same and you used to eat your tinned carrots and your tinned peas, and your spam', but, on the other, she had been brought up to exercise, 'Like I've been brought up with my dad going jogging. I use to go running with my dad, I use to play squash with my dad'. However, in the current context in which she worked long hours in a stressful job, Amelia's mother appeared unable to enact her preferred food practices during term time:

Mother: In the holidays it's different because I tend to do the supermarket more, and so the different things start coming in to the house and Amelia and I will eat differently. I insist on the brown bread and she enjoys it all. So it starts to change when I'm off. The stir fries start to come out and things that we [mother and daughter] enjoy. Whereas, you're into pies aren't you?

Discussion

The processes and dynamics played out in this family are not necessarily conscious projects or calculations in which individuals and groups wittingly engage. The cultural transmission of class and family cultures is implicit as well as explicit (Bernstein, 1996). Parents influence children's food preferences and intakes both by the foods they provide and by the behaviours they model. Both these entail traces of pasts enacted in the present. At the level of discourse, mothers are held responsible for feeding and producing healthy children. At the level of practice, their job is to provide healthy diets and inculcate self-restraint and preferences for healthy foods. The present includes material and temporal resources, emotional states and family dynamics or interpersonal relations in which food, imbued as it is with meaning, mediates and expresses power relations.

Amelia's father's food preferences suggest continuity with his past. He resembles his father who liked plain food. His food phobias limit the range of foods he can eat and whilst he attempts to reduce the influence of his limited diet on his daughter, his deeply embodied food dislikes mean he does not seek, or feel able, to break with his past. The mother, however, seems more aspirational. She displays a cosmopolitan attitude in her tastes for foods like stir fries and curries in contrast to the processed and monotonous food she ate as a child and young adult. She is conscious of the preferences and practices of middle class children and seeks to expand her daughter's palette. At the same time she appears somewhat disenfranchised in a context in which she feels responsible but unable to enact her preferred practices and she is keen to assert maternal control in the interview through disparaging the father. However, she also models (unhealthy) food practices that are inconsistent with her aspirations for her daughter. In this context, Amelia exerts control over the foods she eats and uses food to control family relationships. Amelia seeks both to please her parents and, at the same time, to carve her own path through rejecting parental practices and engaging in the popular food practices of her peers.

Conclusion

With respect to one family, this analysis has, we hope, thrown some light upon the context in which a child enacts agency with some potentially damaging consequences for herself (gorging on forbidden foods). In particular we have drawn attention to the mixed messages that her parents convey about food to their daughter, the ways in which parents interact with one another in conflictual ways concerning food and the influences of their own different tastes and sometimes troubled food practices that they developed in childhood and enact currently.

Everyday family food practices are negotiated in relation to current norms concerning 'good' diets, the customs and practices that surround the production and consumption of food in families and the wider material contexts of food production and consumption. Parents seek to act in their children's 'best interests' by instilling preferences for those foods they consider to be healthy and appropriate, while the market also has an interest in inculcating tastes in children (O'Connell and Brannen, 2016). Many children's diets are high in 'children's foods' that, in the UK at least, are typically highly processed or designated 'junk' (James, 2008). Parents may seek to moderate or avoid the effects of the market on children's diets, but parental control can

be counterproductive. Moreover, whilst food is subject to and a means of parental control of children, children's food is also a means by which society disciplines parents. Self-surveillance or regulation arises in the context of discourses of parentalism (Furedi, 2002) and parental, usually maternal, blame (Garey and Arendell, 2001). Parents, typically mothers (but also in this paper a father), felt that their children could eat better, comparing their own food practices with those they developed as children and describing feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

We have in short suggested how family food practices are negotiated in the shadow of the 'baggage of previous experiences' (Lupton, 1994). Memories and experiences, embodied and reflected upon, are not simply the foods eaten: they also inscribe meaning to particular foods or food events, mirroring past and current feelings and social and familial relations. As a result, the offering or receiving, the withholding or refusing of food are, both consciously and unconsciously, reproduced or discontinued across the generations and are mediated through temporal lenses.

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