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Senses and sensibilities: stabilising and changing tastes in cross-national couples

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Abstract

This article examines changes in tastes and practice in the context of establishing and maintaining a new cross-national couple relationship. Interviews provided accounts of the experience of change among fourteen Anglo-French couples. We describe two processes of change which, because accentuated in cross-national couples, reveal mechanisms lying behind the transformation and stabilisation of tastes and diets. Explanation of the evolution of taste and diet can be found in the interplay between aesthetic and ethical drives, incorporated bodily practices, and social mechanisms of legitimation and integration. To make sense of gustatory and dietary change, tastes are best understood through their insertion in meaningful sequences, patterns, and series.

Keywords: Britain, cross-national couples, disgust, eating habits, family meals, France, senses, tastes.

This paper examines changes in the eating practices of new Anglo-French couples from their initial encounters into the early years of living together as a household. New dietary components have first to be coped with and appropriated, and then maintained in the longer term. We explore the interplay between aesthetic and ethical drives, incorporated bodily practices, and social mechanisms of legitimation and integration which are at stake in such dietary and gustatory change.

The formation of a long-term personal and domestic relationship between partners of different nationalities offers potential for food scholarship. The process involves many strategic and symbolic aspects: negotiation about a future shared diet; the substitution of new tastes for old; the establishment of new temporal routines; integration of practices from different culinary traditions; reconsideration of aesthetic standards; and much more. For one partner at least, these processes are overlain by the fact of also being a migrant. The cross-national couple is thus an interesting test bed for exploring habits, adaptation to new environments, changing behaviour and changing tastes. Yet to date there are few case studies (exceptions include Cross and Gilly, e.g. (2014); Yang (2010); and Shields-Argelès (2010)).

Studies of life-course transitions show the importance for the formation and change of eating habits and tastes of turning points, including leaving the family home, courtship and building a home, parenthood, and transition to older age (Banwell et al: 2010; Bove et al 2003, 2006; Craig and Truswell 1994; Kemmer et al 1998; Marshall 2005; Marshall and Anderson 2002; Stellar et al. 1980; Sydner et al: 2007; Worsley 1988). In setting up home, keenness to establish new shared routines, and especially that of the shared evening dinner, is interpreted as an expression of mutual commitment and love as well as pleasure. The establishment of the couple as a 'commensal unit' (Sobal et al. 2002, after Mary Douglas) is thus both steered by values and scripted by the demands of daily routines (Kemmer et al. 1998: 56, 68; Bove et al. 2003: 27).

Inquiries into couples, families and food have explored negotiation over the shared diet when examining how change in eating habits, conventions and rituals evolve over time and vary between groups. (Craig and Truswell 1994; Worsley 1988; Kemmer et al 1998; Marshall and Anderson 2002).¹ They highlight processes of convergence – immediate or in stages, symmetrical or asymmetrical – as well as patterns and sequences allowing for temporary or partial divergence. There is a presumption that in the process prior habits are eliminated, but we know little about the mechanisms by which old habits are dropped. Jean-Claude Kaufmann, however, has examined such mechanisms for young new couples around food and other matters. He saw couple dynamics as interplay between two 'patrimonies of incorporated habits' and dispositions, rather than starting from an analysis of gender roles (Kaufmann 1994). He found two privileged modes of interaction, either negotiation in a mode of mutual curiosity and adjustment, or an intense and delicate identity negotiation spurred by more or less affirmative 'projects', dreams, or 'identity strategies' (a notion which he takes up from Camilleri).

Migration is another life course transition with consequences for food consumption. Studies of re-location and migration indicate that sometimes past habits are abandoned or toned down and sometimes, conversely, magnified. Habits undergo material and symbolic re-ordering, reshuffling and re-alignment in the face of a new context. Studies tell of processes of accommodation and reconstruction of food practices (Calandre and Ribert 2010; Crenn et al. 2010; Shields-Argelès 2010; Tuomainen 2009). One source of reconstruction is the, at times wide, gap between desires and bodily capacities and bodily memory. In a wonderful paper on aging Koreans in Japan, Sandra Soo-Jin Lee (2000) has shown how bodily memories of eating rituals are cultivated but also how – due to age and the new food environment – their bodily performance stumbles upon changes in bodily capacity to enact them. The new environment allows gustatory shifts, but they are experienced as shameful and as a manifestation of unfitness for keeping up national identity. At the other end of the spectrum, the briefer encounters of cosmopolitan tourists also involve confrontation with issues of the bodily 'fit' required to take in and 'eat difference' (Molz 2007, Falconer 2013. See also Molz 2006). In Molz's work, 'fit' refers both to the physical capacity of the traveller, their bodily competence for 'tolerance and openness toward the world', and to the body's 'suitability', or 'propriety' for 'fitting in' in different environments (2006: 6).

Our analysis also aims to contribute to the developing field of the sociology of the senses, and especially to an understanding of change in the 'sensory experiences of food' (Sutton 2010: 215). It has been argued that 'taste principles' and 'sense-making' come alive in cross-cultural encounters, working as 'sensorial interface' (Korsmeyer and Sutton 2011: 470; Low 2012: 279). To that extent, the experience of cross-

national couples appears a very suitable vehicle for the further sociological exploration of taste as sense. Premised on the connection between sensations and sense-making, this domain of sociology seeks to highlight the intricate interplay between normative assumptions, expectations, aspirations, and order on the one hand; and corporeal processes or responses on the other hand (Vannini, , Gotschalk, & Waskul 2012). More interest has been shown to sight and hearing/listening than in the other senses, Carolyn Korsmeyer (2011: 66) noting that the epistemic character of taste has been 'frequently ignored'. One relatively long-standing object of social analyses of the senses has been disgust, which is linked to various senses including taste, as an emotion involving corporeal and visceral reactions which is nevertheless culturally interpreted (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 24) or, rather, 'molded' (Korsmeyer 2011: 6). Korsmeyer's studies of taste, and more particularly of disgust (2011), pose the question of change in such feelings. Giving the example of the Renaissance's inspiration from Antiquity including in culinary matters, she highlights the important role played by strong aesthetic commands for changing the status (from disgusting to edible) of particular objects, e.g. in the consumption of rare meat or decaying game. This may be linked, Korsmeyer argues, to the 'moldability of pleasure out of disgust' (ibid.: 68) and the 'paradox of aversion' which brings objects which are at first disgusting into the realm of the sublime (p. 72). The aesthetic (and ethical) ambivalence of disgust is a powerful lever of gustatory and dietary change, one that we shall return to.

In what follows we examine processes of change in taste and practice among Anglo-French couples living in both France and England. Partners in cross-national couples are caught between their aesthetic and ethical desires and the limitations, at times unexpected, of their own body and beliefs. They are also faced with the demands of constructing a partnership and 'fitting in' to new contexts. Impatience with fixed ways and a will to embrace the new makes them somewhat akin to the cosmopolitan tourists studied by Molz. However, the need to establish joint routines and a shared diet imposes heavier demands. The tensions involved in negotiating between desires and embodied feelings include experiences of disgust, saturation, exasperation and trepidation. In devising strategies to cope, cross-national couples have much to teach about processes of change. We explore two different social settings at different moments of couple life: the initial encounter with its attendant discoveries in a new food environment; and the longer-term negotiation of shared diets and gustatory ranges within the elementary family.

THE STUDY

We recruited 14 Anglo-French couples living in metropolitan areas, seven in the UK (England) and seven in France, through our work networks (although none of the persons interviewed was known to us previously), through the Alliance Française websites in the UK and through social fora for expatriates in France, as well as resorting to a snow-balling strategy. In practice it proved difficult to recruit couples with French men in the UK metropolitan area selected for our study, whereas there was no such difficulty for the couples recruited in the French metropolitan area selected.

Our initial idea in selecting interviewees was that partnerships should be sufficiently recent for partners to remember their adjustments at the beginning and yet to be able to say something of their evolution

once the relocating partner felt more settled down. We therefore targeted couples with less than six years of common life. However, the relative scarcity of Anglo-French couples and the consequent difficulty of finding suitable recruits led us to relax the criterion. Moreover, we soon became aware of the crucial effects of family formation, for it seemed to matter more whether or not the couples had children.

Table 1 - Respondents

	UK (England)	France	Total
British men and French women	5 (of which 1 with children)	3 (of which 1 with children)	8
British women and French men	2 (of which 1 with children)	4 (all with children)	6
Less than 6 years together	4	4	8
More than 6 years together	3	3	6
Total	7	7	14

We opted for an interviewing strategy similar to the one used by Christy Shields-Argelès in her study of Franco-American couples in France and the United States (2010).² We first interviewed couples together about their current eating habits; how these had been arrived at; the food story of their encounter; accounts of changes since they came together; how their habits compare with those of friends and relatives; and their plans for the future. Wherever possible follow-up interviews took place with the relocating partners on the history of their eating habits, their trajectory of migration, and how this had affected their way of eating. In two cases this second interview was not possible due to lack of time and the interviewer sought to cover the relevant additional themes during the couple interview. In two more cases the reverse happened: the respondents, during the couple interview, themselves started talking about their childhood and what had happened to them on relocating, making a follow-up interview redundant.

Conducted by a bi-lingual interviewer (Darmon), some interviews were in English, some in French, and some oscillated between both languages. Some were conducted at the interviewee's workplace, but most were in their homes. The choice of location for the recruitment of interviewees was primarily a matter of convenience in the light of difficulties in finding couples which fitted the criteria. Recruitment occurred in two large metropolitan areas whose specific spatial features have only marginal relevance for the comparison undertaken. Interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and coded using NVIVO. The study was conducted as part of an investigation into mechanisms involved in the changing of habitual behaviour, within a wider programme on sustainable practices.

The meeting of tastes

Embracing the new

The early phase of a new permanent relationship is one context where change in eating habits is very likely to occur (Marshall and Anderson 2002). It might be anticipated that problems of mutual accommodation are potentially greater for cross-national couples. However, this is typically mitigated by a determined willingness and expectation that new cultural forms will be explored.

Although very few of the couples interviewed carried a strong cosmopolitan project, they entertained desires and anxieties usually associated with cosmopolitan aspirations, in particular impatience with fixed ways and relations. Cosmopolitanism is certainly not the only channel for such feelings – generational awareness is too, and criticism of the rigidity of parents in law features alongside both (e.g. see Sobal et al 2002: 389). However, our relocating respondents echoed Ettore Recchi's and Adrien Favell's 'movers', who distinguish themselves from 'stayers' (Recchi & Favell: 2009), and expressed relief at having escaped a life of repetition of their own folks' lives. This was especially the case for those who had relocated prior to encountering their partners:³

I have lots of friends who live around where we grew up, and their children are going to go to the same school that we went to; and I've always thought to myself, "I don't want that to be me, I don't want my life just to have been in one town, in one city, in one country; I'd like to see a bit more and do a bit more and experience a bit more" (Rachel, late 20s, lives in the Paris region with Cedric).

'A bit more': life had to offer 'a bit more' than repeating the customary ways, a bit more experience, a bit more meaning. Food is a privileged site for what Amanda Wise has called 'prosaic forms of low-level cosmopolitanism' (Wise 2010: 82): to our respondents, food is a terrain for aesthetic experience and distinction – as shown particularly by our English respondents living in France with their French partner, enchanted by the persisting aura of French cuisine. But it also provides a channel for ethical quests for personal unification – as shown especially by some of our French respondents relocating to the UK who had felt uncomfortable in, indeed unfit for, the French food environment.

Compare the assessments made by Dan, an international lawyer in his 20s, who has enthusiastically espoused French food culture through the persona of his wife, well versed in French gastronomy, and by Romain, who professes himself a 'foodie', in his early 30s, on his way to vegetarianism, who lives in England with his also foodie wife.

Dan: English chefs... Everybody's after them, it's just the last fad, but here in France, [food] is really something that is simply here. Whereas in England it's something new... In England it is the middle class which likes chefs and all that. But in France it is... anybody. Anybody has an interest.

Romain: As I am getting older, also the ethical point of view, and the point of view of health also, but above all the ethical point of view [starts to matter more]... In England, it's cool to be

vegetarian, there are lots of shops in [CITY]. It's less taboo for a start... You go to people's places and you say: "I am vegetarian" whereas the French mentality doesn't like difference too much.

The imagined naturalness and effortlessness of French food culture evoked by Dan figures as the apex of distinction, a form of natural grace always associated with the higher ranks become democratic in France, by comparison with the visible and always slightly comical efforts of the parvenu (for Dan: gourmets in England). However this 'democratic' character also means that French cuisine is supposed to be valid for all (Ferguson 2006). What is regarded as 'dietary preference' in an urban environment in the UK (Romain's vegetarianism) may be acknowledged rather as an exception to the norm in France, although the notion of dietary preference is far from being unknown there (Fischler 2013).

In any case, diets, ranges of dishes, flavours and textures appear amenable to wholesale change. Contrary to what may happen for other groups of migrants, many of our interviewees, like cosmopolitan and 'culinary tourists', coveted, prepared and cultivated change (Lee 2002, Molz 2006 and 2007, Falconer 2013). Yet the distance between desires and bodily capacity is in both cases at stake. Like the tourists of Molz's and Falconer's studies, our respondents took their own positive bodily reactions, such as a 'healthy appetite' or a capacity to 'keep up' with drinking, as an asset for their discovery and enjoyment of difference. By contrast, disgust and difficulty in coping with specific flavours or dishes were sometimes perceived as a limit, a constraint on the fullness of aesthetic experience of new ranges of flavours and textures, or as a challenge on the road to ethical unification. Nevertheless the relation between desire and bodily fit was not necessarily only one of 'dissonance' (Lee 2000; 219). Negative body reactions were sometimes interpreted as a latent truth of the body which signalled the need for a change (see further below). In all cases, and as we will continue to see in the rest of this paper, understanding gustatory change seems to require the unravelling of the relations between desire, injunctions, and bodily 'fit'.

Avuncular aesthetic instruction

Josh, a young English man living in Paris with Marion, his French girlfriend, narrated how he had no particular aesthetic curiosity for French gastronomy at first – even though Marion and her family came from the South West and greatly enjoyed some of the highlights of French cuisine from that region (duck in all its guises: confit, magret...); how his interest was awakened by an uncle of his girlfriend, acting as initiator; but how, nonetheless, becoming able to enjoy meat cooked rare had required playing tricks with his own body:

I have completely changed the way I consume meat. In England it was always with a sauce, even if only on the side, but there would always be a sauce with some wine or something... And the meat was well done, always, very very cooked. I used to hate rare meat but now... I like it rare. If it's too well done, I don't like it... I know why, it's because the blood seems like a sauce...It's her uncle who told me: "no, try it like that!", and I loved it. And I remember why I had never liked it, it was because of the taste of blood, that's why I didn't like it at first, but I like to have a sauce. [Blood]'s like gravy, it's gravy in fact, I know that's why [I've come to like it].

Disgust, according to Rozin and Fallon (1987: 23), is a food-related emotion and can be defined as 'revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object'. The 'unmaking of disgust' (ibid.:

38) is rare and difficult. However, precisely because disgust is linked to socio-cultural boundaries (Rozin 1996: 101) it can be regarded as an anachronistic and awkward limitation to the kind of aesthetic enjoyment demanded by cosmopolitan foodism and the tasting of the exotic other. Although not perceived as offensive in French gastronomy, there is a generalised and acceptable disgust with offal in other Western countries (Mennell 1985). However, disgust linked to particular modes of cooking is less acceptable, and feels more like direct cultural criticism. In other words, certain kinds of disgust with certain kinds of objects might be taken to evince lack of fit.

Josh's distaste and reluctance were overcome through a combination of factors (emerging aesthetic curiosity, quest for distinction, emotional bonding with the uncle, not to mention a definitely carnivorous bent). Josh also played tricks with his own bodily memory, drawing on the registered association {meat + sauce} for easing in the (in his eyes) comparable association {meat + blood} and so as to not only overcome disgust but also develop a liking. The attitude of Marion's uncle, however, seems to have been key. Anglophile and curious about the English language and customs, he showed interest in Josh, not only to teach him cherished aspects of French culture – especially wine and meat cooked rare – but also to talk about Britain, rugby and the wonders of the English language. The uncle's attitude and his hunger for aesthetic exchange seem to have unlocked the possibility for Josh of playful experience of 'France' which everyday life with his girlfriend had partly failed to deliver. Discovery through play, adventure, experiments with oneself and the world, and masculine bonding lies on a very different plane to the intense emotional and social stakes surrounding family meals. To borrow from Amanda Wise's suggestive phrase,⁴ the 'cultural fragrance' of wine tasting or playful meals is much lighter than that of dinners with parents-in-law or even with a partner intent on fostering assimilation.

Encountering oneself

Relocation and life with a partner from the host country does not only awaken aesthetic desires but may also both reveal, foster, and emanate from desires that could be termed ethical – in the sense of a quest for a personal unification of conduct. Kaufmann has argued that there is a 'Pygmalion effect' at work for all couples,⁵ even though it may be more or less explicit and conscious: dormant potentialities and latent competences are suddenly 'discovered' thanks to the more or less assertive Pygmalion attitude of the other partner (1994: 319). In relocation, Pygmalion may not be confined to the partner, but might designate new relations. Indeed an inner resonance can be felt with the whole new living environment. 'Encounters' with oneself can be mediated through a particular 'structure of feeling' in the host country (Williams 2001: 36) or, more prosaically, latent quests can feel more legitimate in the new environment than in the host country.

Interestingly, the uncovering of new capacities can be rooted in making sense of past disgust when long-standing distastes suddenly acquire a novel positive status in the new culinary environment. Disgusts vis-a-vis items of one's own culture are re-evaluated in the country of arrival if a chord is struck with its food culture, less as an aesthetic drive towards experiencing difference than as a definition of self-identity. Several of the French respondents relocating to the UK who had vegetarian leanings or strong distastes found solace in an environment perceived to be more tolerant of 'dietary preferences'.

Christelle (34, lives in England with Richard) has vivid memories of her disgust at butter and milky products as a child. This was – and still is – dealt with by her family as ‘exception’ to the conventional rule of the shared meal (but accommodated as such):

In my family they like butter. When a kid, I went once a week, every Wednesday afternoon, to my sister’s childminder. She used to cook meat in a thick layer of butter. The smell of fried, cooked butter was impregnating everything in the house, and I just have memories of feeling I had to vomit... I have always been disgusted by butter, so, each time we made pasta at home, my father had to remind himself: “Let’s not put butter for Christelle”, and so I had my luxury plate, with my comté [cheese], I was the only one – they all had gruyere and butter. So for me, independence was like, at last I can put olive oil in my dish, no risk of having butter. And my father, it’s always the same, I am 34 now, and my father, every time, makes the same remark [on her visits]: “I haven’t put any butter”. “Thanks dad,” I say.

Her disgust, so to speak, feels much more at home in England today. This however is not so much because of any absence of butter from the range of customary tastes in England (butter has also been a strong feature of the British diet), but because what was regarded as an exception in her family is considered a ‘dietary preference’ in the UK. This change of status enabled the reshuffling of Christelle’s embodied range of tastes, the incorporation of new tastes, and re-assessments of prior disgusts. It also unveiled a quest for personal healthy eating (articulated as a spiritual quest for harmony). Interestingly, the two conceptions coexist for her today. She sees her habits both as an exception which confirms the rule of shared meals when back in France with her family, and at the same time as rooted in a conception of food as something which must correspond to her whole particular being (a conception she developed in Britain).

In her French childhood, her disgust had been interpreted by her family in a personal, individual key. It had felt as a signal of bodily unfitness with respect to the demands made by family meals, and thus a more general sense of lack of fit with the norm. Making more positive sense of that disgust was first possible in the lighter idiom of dietary preference. It then became the spring for a project of holistic personal health, which also allowed her to detach some specific foods formerly inserted in the repelling range and convert them in highly desirable items. Thus porridge switched from a loathed food associated with milk (and too reminiscent of bodily waste – a common cause of disgust according to Rozin and Fallon) into a cherished item of everyday breakfast. The revision was facilitated by the substitution of milk by rice milk but can only be accounted for through the more general change in her food preferences as they acquired a unified meaning in her own eyes.

Both above cases are illustrations of the ambivalence of disgust and its susceptibility not only to aesthetic commands, as pointed out by Korsmeyer, but also to ethical ones. Disgust is a key emotion for understanding processes of dietary and gustatory change.

Evolving relationships and the recurrence of habits

Establishing a common menu

Cross-national couples cannot but encounter challenging issues of cultural difference. Even if there is a strong predisposition to respect the cultural origins or traditions of the other, some situations present themselves as difficult. Potentially discomforting new routines are often dealt with by compromise, although in the very early stages of the relationship they are barely noticed or easily brushed aside, seen as part of the adventure involved in a special relationship.

Most couples interviewed dealt with their initial differences by evolving mutually congenial compromise patterns. For example, some had alternated cooking during the week and the week-end with each cook distinctly adopting a different repertoire of recipes, thus widening the range of cuisines and dishes for both. Items were added to suit an individual, as with the carnivorous partner adding ham to a vegetarian dish. Dishes were customised either for both partners, in order to take into account one partner's restrictions, for example using less cream and butter, or for one partner to cope with the other's recipes, as with adding cream to a curry dish to soften it.

There were also tensions. These were more acute and manifest in couples where a dominant cook attached to a particular project – such as everything being home-made or striving for aesthetic excellence – had initially defined the joint menu. Such cases were probably more frequent than normal in our sample; six out of 14 couples could be said to be so affected. This may have been the result of having recruited interviewees with a strong interest in food. In four of these couples the dominant cook was the male partner from the country of residence (some of our English male respondents were keen teachers). The relocating partner had to adapt to the cooking of their partner as well as to the new food environment. Such problems were largely covered up initially, as the drive to experience difference may have led migrant partners to suppress their reactions. However, moments occur when the stickiness of past habits and routines were more acutely felt, revealing conflicts of bodily, emotional and value dispositions and aspirations. This transpired above all when it was felt legitimate to express one's discomfort. Saturation, by which we mean overload with certain flavours or dishes, becomes more keenly felt and is made visible to others, at what life-course researchers call 'turning points'. Turning points often signal 'relatively drastic changes that often involve changes in personal identities', rather than the usually small adjustments accompanying transitions (Devine 2005: 123). One such point is pregnancy and parenthood.

Parenthood

For a time Amy, a young woman in her late 20s, living in the Paris region with her French husband Pierre, accepted what she refers to as her husband's 'complicated' way of cooking, not only out of the desire to please him or because adopting these new foods and routines materialised her aspiration for an elsewhere, but also because food had become a privileged terrain for experiencing this elsewhere. Thus, failing to appreciate the other's cuisine could seem like betrayal of the shared project. Nevertheless, exasperation made its way into the joint interview:

Amy: There are things that my husband prepares and which I find are too complicated. Sometimes [turning to Pierre] you are very proud because it's something to which you have added this and you have added that, and I'll say: "yes but it's too many spices mixed together, too many tastes".

Pierre: Yes, it's not that it's complicated, it is that sometimes there are tastes which are too strong for you and that you don't like.

Amy: I don't know, sometimes in the vinaigrettes there is oil, lemon, plus herbs, plus spices, plus plus plus – and for me it would just be fine with a mayonnaise. ... if I was the one cooking I would do it simpler.

The physical sense of literally being fed up comes out in adverbs like 'just' ('it would just be fine with a mayonnaise'), and very explicitly in the repeated use of 'plus' in Amy's complaint. The request for more simplicity expresses the need for a break from the partner's elaborate cuisine (and is perhaps a judgment on the latter's competence). It also enunciates a longing for some aspects of her past foodways, possibly pointing to the memories of childhood and teen-age innocence referred to by Shields-Argelès. Nostalgia appears to have been particularly pronounced when the non-cooking partner was also the person moving.

However, only with the experience of motherhood, which coincided with Pierre's change of job and abdication of primary responsibility for cooking, does it seem to have become possible, indeed imperative, for the young woman to challenge her husband's cooking for everyday eating. She feels vindicated in her 'simpler' tastes by the fact that she has to care for the health and welfare of her children through her cooking – a line of argument which is completely accepted by Pierre. Her statement is thus indicative of persisting bodily reactions, of how she interprets them, and of her new confidence for opening herself to them, as parenthood legitimates concerns with nutrition. As in Christelle's case, feelings of disgust or weariness, which had been suppressed as a source of worry, can be asserted as a protective shield against excessive ingestion by re-framing them as a 'truth' of the body based on an implicit association, accepted by both Amy and her husband, between motherhood and instinctual knowledge. Research on eating and parenthood has emphasised the value attached to instinctual knowledge by young mothers as well as to their mother's experience, for example in ambiguous opposition to nutritional recommendations (O'Key and Hugh-Jones 2010).⁶ Our interviewees' invocation of a mother's instinct, and of their own mother's wisdom, was accompanied by an assessment, in rational key, of the relative advantages of French and UK supermarkets for providing healthy food for children – which completed and reversed the previous assessment of comparative aesthetic merit.

Due to difficulty in recruiting young French mothers in the UK, we do not have more than anecdotal evidence of their behaviour. One respondent, Christelle (mentioned above), who became a mother shortly after the study and with whom we had maintained contact, told us that she was turning to her own mother for nutritional advice and that she was very wary of 'all that junk food' for children in the UK. Thus the comparison of the health merits of both food environments led to similar apprehension about the available results in terms of diet (towards more 'natural', unprocessed food), although possibly on opposed grounds for English and French mothers. 'Junk' and 'processed' foods are widely supplied in both countries but assessments differed as to whether this was a core feature of the 'English' or 'French' food environments. It is interesting to note how 'ranking' the two countries on various dimensions thus gave a seemingly scientific touch to assessments – which at times were not far from cultural prejudice (when they were general sweeping statements about 'France' or 'the UK') – and an objective gloss on rather more deep-seated fears of surreptitious contamination.

Indeed savouring the other, to take up a frequent metaphor in the literature on food and cosmopolitanism, has its dangerous obverse in contamination. The aesthetic embrace can give way to the fear that the new food environment is working its way through one's body without the body even taking notice. In her study of aging Koreans in Japan, Lee (2000) takes up Connerton's notion of 'traceless incorporation'⁷ to suggest that fear among older Koreans of becoming contaminated by Japanese tastes in spite of themselves and insidiously losing their capacity to perform their own rituals. The feelings at stake in our respondents were of a different range, of course: Lee's respondents waged a struggle with their own bodies to resist complete domination in a context of persisting cultural contempt from the Japanese. The young English mothers interviewed in France felt suspicious of French food for children, especially the unchecked sweetening and processing of cereals and *goûters* (snacks) and, more generally, the manufacturing of children-specific food. They interpreted their own feelings of overload and 'saturation' as a signal that their own bodies were alert to unhealthy food or excess.

Amy's case illustrates how suppressed reactions of aversion and feelings of disgust, part of initial submission to joint aesthetic pursuits and mutual discovery, may be followed by their re-affirmation as 'saturation' or overload, by considerations of health. Health was an extremely powerful legitimating area of discourse for our couples (in a way that, for example, sustainability was not). This shift from suppression to reaffirmation then relativizes the importance given by our respondents to their own bodily reactions – for they are checked by what is felt to be legitimate. As noted by Korsmeyer, disgust may arise with foods initially considered repellent, but also with foods considered tasty when taken in small quantities, but which 'cloy when one eats too much and reaches surfeit' (2011: 63). 'Saturation' is the emotion corresponding to disgust through excess. Saturation thus may signal a tension, and possibly a partial shift, between two normative realms, aesthetic enjoyment and health. Aesthetics and health emerged as the two privileged terrains for passing judgment on the new food environment and at turning points when change is contemplated and requires justification.

Finally, this example illustrates how the insertion of tastes in meaningful series and patterns matters for sensory change. Amy's previous familiar taste range (in the UK) used to be mainly structured around the pair bland/spicy,⁸ broadly oriented by nutrition-oriented concerns. However, at the beginning of her life with Pierre, this contrast was relegated to holiday periods back home, as the everyday menu invariably featured what Pierre refers to as the 'strong' tastes of his cuisine, obtained through a combination of flavours.⁹ Motherhood provided Amy with a way of reinstating the contrast she had known whilst growing up, as the 'bland' pole of the British taste range regained importance for meals during the week, whilst the 'strong' tastes of her husband's cooking were shifted to the pleasurable pole, at week-end meals. Inserting the 'strong' flavours in a series associated with the relaxation of nutritional concerns (alongside or in substitution for spicy foods), assuaged feelings of saturation by reshuffling the pattern ordering their sensory experiences. Thus saturation may be associated with the experience of lack of contrast rather than attached to a particular range of tastes and flavours, such that the allocation of flavours to different series with different meanings plays a key role in their sensory acceptability.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have explored two instances and phases of change in taste and eating practices among Anglo-French couples living in France and England: first, relocation and the associated disruption of habitual ranges of flavours and dishes; and second, renegotiation of the shared diet during family formation. In both cases we learn about tensions: between desires and body fit or the constraints of fitting in socially; and between aesthetic or ethical pursuits on the one hand and imperatives of social inscription and the incorporation of conventions and norms on the other.

The paper contributes to understanding habit, and of how habits change. Dietary change emerges from the interplay between desires and fears, and bodily habits and dispositions, mediated by legitimating discourses and projects for change. Our research suggests that some habits remain suppressed for a period of time without being eliminated from the repertoire. Often sets of habits are not so much replaced as retired, for they can be mobilised differently when context alters. In that connection, we suggest that the 'Pygmalion effect' analysed by family sociologists, through which dormant dispositions come to express and deploy themselves, applies not only between partners but also in encounters with a new environment. Other habits may be incorporated into new patterns which, for example, dictate alternation during the week or across the year.

Above all our research contributes to the developing sociology of the senses. Our enquiry casts further light on disgust and how it interacts with injunctions and legitimation mechanisms in triggering dietary change. Feelings of disgust or 'saturation' (overload) are signals to oneself, but they are interpreted according to the direction of one's desire. Disgust felt on an aesthetic journey may be interpreted as lack of body fit and an obstacle to be overcome. However, disgust can also be interpreted as the revealed truth of the body and a clue to personal unification in an ethical quest. Both feelings are significant for individuals choosing to live abroad and each may affect one and the same person at different points over time. Understandings may change at a turning point in life, e.g. parenthood, when the legitimate quest of care for the children and their health recasts feelings of 'saturation' as quasi-instinctual knowledge. Thus disgust and saturation emerge as powerful indicators of a tension or shift of personal orientation of conduct and habits between two normative realms.

To make sense of gustatory and dietary change, tastes are best understood through their insertion in meaningful sequences, patterns, and series. The association of rare meat with blood produces initial disgust to the unprepared eater. Reframing that association as a variant in the {meat + sauce} series, in which {meat + gravy} also features, makes it acceptable to an aesthetically adventurous eater. The association of porridge with milk produces disgust; but its association with rice milk converts it into a perfect food. This is, so to speak, a weak association, between types of food which have substitutes. Substitution prompts insertion of the combination into a new series, moving it from inedible to healthy food or a suitable vehicle for aesthetic distinction. At another level, the unchallenged reign of the 'strong' flavours of a French partner's cuisine threatens to become unbearable, but insertion in a pattern where it alternates with 'bland' 'English' food restores its enjoyable character. Positioning a range of flavours

and dishes in a different series, patterned rather than uniform, confers them with an entirely different character and meaning, which may prompt further change. Gustatory change thus should not be conceived as the switch from one element to another, but rather as a process in which former associations are undone and new ones are formed, oriented to newly meaningful drives.

In such examples broad concepts of health and care on the one hand, and injunctions of aesthetic enjoyment on the other, emerge as two dominant legitimating discourses on food. They proved to be the most powerful steering devices for making sense of feelings and legitimating change (both the acquisition of new habits and reversion to past habits). The relocating partners in cross-national couples are particularly suited carriers for the analysis of these injunctions. They embrace emotionally their partner's culture, but also fear contamination by foreign ways which, perhaps surprisingly for such culturally aware individuals, seems quick to emerge at a turning point like parenthood.

¹ Bove et al. (2003) offer a very useful review of the literature on couples and food.

² There are advantages and drawbacks to interviewing couples together or rather in separate interviews, and these must be weighed against their relevance for the problems researched (Valentine 1999). We do not develop the point, as this article does not focus on the couple and family dynamics.

³ Bénédicte Brahic makes this important distinction in her own study of cross-national couples in Manchester. See Brahic 2013:703.

⁴ Wise borrows the notion of 'cultural fragrance' from Koichi Iwabuchi (2002), who contrasts the 'cultural odour' of consumption products (their cultural marking by their country of origin) with 'cultural fragrance', which is but the 'smell' become positive, 'culturally and socially acceptable' (Wise 2011: 88-89).

⁵ Kaufmann takes this concept from François de Singly and Gilda Charrier, to designate an attitude of partners in some couples, who transform former 'dormant' resources of their partners into 'capital', and thereby act as Pygmalion with his Galatea (1994: 319). However Kaufmann argues that such behaviours, which produce what he calls a Pygmalion effect on the other partner, are more widespread and general than suggested by Singly and Charrier, though of unequal intensity.

⁶ Séverine Gojard (2000) unravels the crucial class differences of attitude vis a vis 'scientific' recommendations and norms.

⁷ Connerton opposes 'traceless incorporation' to inscription, the other way in which 'societies remember' (1989).

⁸ It is interesting to note how this 'blandness' of British everyday food, often referred to by our respondents, features as the healthy pole in the structuring opposition with spiced, pleasurable food, in marked contrast with the 'blandness' claimed for Chinese food, beyond all polarisations and a symbol of detachment. See J. Hansen's review of François Jullien's *In Praise of Blandness*.

⁹ Elsewhere, we have explored the very different ways in which contrast between ranges of foods, tastes and flavours obtains in the British and French environments – and we have suggested that looking at contrasts and polarisations is a dynamic and fruitful way of comparing food environments. See Darmon and Warde 2014.

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