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Cooking up Consumer Anxieties about “Provenance” and “Ethics”

Why it *Sometimes* Matters where Foods Come from in Domestic Provisioning

Angela Meah

University of Sheffield

Matt Watson

University of Sheffield

Abstract

Provenance is fundamentally about the point of origin of foods. It is unsurprising, then, that studies of food provenance typically focus on circumstances of production and on the routes that foods follow to get to situations of exchange and, to a lesser extent, final consumption. However, this dominant framing leads to an asymmetry of attention between production and consumption. By neglecting the situatedness of food purchase and use, much of what makes provenance meaningful and productive for consumers is missed. In response, we draw upon qualitative and ethnographic data to explore why and how it sometimes matters where food comes from. What emerges is an expanded and problematized practical understanding of provenance, where concerns for the point of origin of foods is generally inseparable from, and subsumed within, a broader range of ethical concerns about where food comes from.

Keywords: provenance, consumer ethics, practices, shopping, provisioning, care

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Introduction

They make too much of provenance. It's like a fetish. You see a recipe and it says "use Italian olive oil" or something like that ... It's a load of crap ... But you should eat fresh food as close as possible to where it's grown, for freshness.

(Ted Anderson, 65)

This quote, from one of our research participants, captures something of the currency of provenance as a concern in relation to food. This currency is reflected not only in popular food media, but also in a burgeoning academic literature which has arisen primarily within the agro-food tradition where, for example, questions relating to provenance have been largely concerned with the circumstances of production and the routes—and distance—foods travel to get to retail, their historical-geographical “careers” (Barnett et al. 2005: 25). Scholarly attention has focused on the shortening of food chains (Renting et al. 2003; Ibery and Maye 2005), the “quality turn” (Goodman 2003; Chrzan 2004; Gaytan 2004) and “alternative” spaces, such as the internet and farmers’ markets, as sites of exchange (La Trobe 2001; Holloway 2002; Kirwan 2004; Selfa and Qazi 2005).

Given that provenance is framed in terms of the point of origin of foods, this process of following foods from production is perhaps not surprising. However, it leads to an asymmetry in the view of the overall relations of production and consumption. Within this range of research, consumers are typically only engaged insofar as their consumption of products is implicated within specified alternative supply chains, products and sites of exchange. Rather than focusing on these, or on particular modes of production, the research reported here starts from a different place: the everyday performances involved in feeding the family. Drawing upon data collected via focus groups, and a household study combining food-based life history interviews and ethnographic methods, this paper responds to other scholars (Roe 2006; Eden et al. 2008; Blake et al. 2010) who have called for explorations of the issue of provenance from the ground up. The data we present reveal that where provenance appears as a concern, it is embedded within the wider ethics of food production and consumption. These ethics are often conflicting and in tension, rather than simply complementary or mutually reinforcing. Our data make visible the ways in which consumers can feel pulled in different directions, and how the various discourses which are expressed through provenance must be negotiated into the exigencies of everyday food provisioning, which itself must fit into everyday lives. In analysis and discussion of these data, it is consequently rarely possible to consider provenance as it is conventionally understood in food studies in any “pure” sense. Rather, provenance exists as an issue more complex and less clearly bounded than academic debates allow for, leaking into other ethical concerns about where food comes from. Our discussion therefore inevitably traverses across a range of issues of ethics, both continuous—and in tension—with core concepts of food provenance. By examining provenance from the standpoint of domestic consumption, what becomes visible is a shift in emphasis away from the idea of “ethical consumption,” defined in relation to particular objects of concern (Barnett et al. 2005), toward an acknowledgement of “consumer ethics”: forms of practice, including shopping, in which tensions, conflicts and ambivalences between different ethical concerns are embedded in the routines and rhythms of everyday life. Indeed, this approach enables us to understand more fully how the landscape of consumption (Everts and Jackson 2009) is situated within the broader landscape of daily interactions, obligations, responsibilities, opportunities and constraints wherein provenance becomes a resource to deploy—either through enacting or resisting it—in performing the everyday tasks associated with feeding the family.

Locating Provenance in Food Ethics and Discourses

While relatively little research has explored questions of provenance in terms of their empirical grounding in the everyday landscape of domestic food provisioning, critical research on other food movements and discourses has already illuminated some of the tensions, conflicts and ambivalences with which concerned consumers find themselves presented in performing care involving food and feeding. These existing literatures provide a framework for approaching the embeddedness of consumer engagement with and appropriation of ideas and practices of food provenance. For example, closely related to provenance, the complex theme of “locality” in relation to food provides a useful means of approaching these debates. In so far as locality is a matter of the origin of products, it is a concern continuous with provenance. Importantly for our discussion, it has been noted that locality has different implications depending upon the context.¹ Feagan, who speaks of “the imagined geographies of the local” (Feagan 2007: 36), discusses how assumptions can be made regarding quality and provenance based upon terroir and labels of origin. He also highlights, as does Winter (2003), that concerns about provenance may be embedded in issues of defensive localism. Reporting data from the UK, Winter suggests that consumers may be more motivated by a defensive politics of localism than they are by quality based on organic and ecological production (Winter 2003: 23).

Provenance is also implicated in the wider ethical imperatives involving food which consumers may routinely negotiate. Indeed, Morgan (2010) highlights the multiple, and sometimes competing, “values” on offer wherein point of origin and routes to market are at stake. For example, concerned consumers may find themselves presented with arguments about food miles and carbon footprints, on the one hand, and the challenges faced by distant farmers and the importance of fair trade, on the other. Do they choose climate change or social justice? Furthermore, if it is not enough that consumers are presented with concerns over whether to support distant, local or future others, there is the additional dilemma regarding non-human actors. Miele and Evans (2010), reporting data collected from Italian consumers, suggest that food labels denoting the welfare-friendly provenance of meat and meat products have become a new tool in producing “ethically competent consumers.” Clearly, meaning is manufactured along commodity chains; as Jackson et al. observe, food is increasingly “sold with a story” (Jackson et al. 2009: 14), resulting in an ethical minefield for those consumers who are concerned with issues of provenance, in one guise or another. However, as Weatherell et al. note in relation to local foods, “interest” is not necessarily reflected in purchasing decisions as demand is traded off against more prosaic “expediency” factors (Weatherell et al. 2003: 234), including resource and time constraints and the need to accommodate the tastes and preferences of various others. As Barnett et al. suggest, “the politics of consuming ethically might not be so straightforward as is sometimes supposed” (Barnett et al. 2005: 28).

The work of Miller (1998), Everts and Jackson (2009) and Blake et al. (2010) give grounds from which to argue that a more nuanced understanding can be furnished if we connect provenance debates to ethnographic approaches to provisioning in which consumption practices are not isolated from the broader social and economic contexts in which they are undertaken, contexts which can both enable and constrain. Miller argues that shopping—whether for food or for clothes—is an enactment of love and care, compatible with feelings of obligation and responsibility, when performed on behalf of, or with others in mind, and can involve elements of sacrifice, as well as demonstrations of thrift. Meanwhile, Everts and Jackson (2009) point toward the spatial situatedness of shopping practices, through which consumers may experience personalized, face-to-face transactions as a marker of “trust” and as offering certain forms of “sociality” which are perhaps not available in other spaces of exchange, such as supermarkets, characterized with high staff turnover. Identifying concerns of provenance with where food is bought rather than its origins in production is, of course, problematic

from the point of view of uses of the term “provenance” in food studies. However, for our respondents, questions of origin were often pursued only so far as the location of retail.

It is against the background provided by this literature that we interrogate the meanings and value of ideas of provenance through data generated by qualitative and ethnographic engagement with domestic provisioning practices. This necessitates an expansion and destabilization of conventional ideas of provenance. A fundamental finding is that provenance rarely figures in our respondents’ practices as a simple matter of the point of origin of a product. Rather, in the discourses and practices of our respondents, provenance as concern for the origin of food is inseparable from a less defined concern for where food comes from.¹ It can stand for the retailer from whom something is bought, for where it has been packaged and processed and distributed, as well as for where it was grown. Indeed, as our data will reveal, consumer imaginaries concerning provenance do not always extend “upstream” beyond what is says on the packaging, or even the point of purchase. Indeed, our concern here is not to explore the analytical definition of provenance but, rather, to try to understand how aspects of provenance are deployed in the performance (here understood as the social act of doing) of the wider ethics implicated in household provisioning. Taking an expanded view of what “provenance” might mean at the level of domestic consumption enables us to see how and why concerns about provenance are both enacted and resisted, illuminating the work that it does in the everyday performances of feeding the family, an activity which is profoundly situated in the opportunities and exigencies of everyday life.

Methods

This paper draws on findings from a research project which focuses on patterns of continuity and change in families’ domestic kitchen practices over the last hundred years, exploring domestic food provisioning practices in context as household members interact with food and other objects at the points of purchase, storage, preparation, consumption and disposal. We draw upon findings from a series of focus groups with people segmented by age and household type,² as well as a household study—our principal empirical focus—which aims to make visible the meanings and memories of individual cooks, as well their actual practices as they interact with food, and other objects, in the shop and in their own kitchens. Food-focused life history interviews have been combined with ethnographic work, in the form of provisioning “go-alongs” (Kusenbach 2003), guided kitchen tours and meal preparation. These were undertaken with at least two generations across eight families based largely in the South Yorkshire area of the United Kingdom. Seven out of the eight households represented white families, and one of these participants was Irish, rather than British. The eighth family was Pakistani, the younger generation being British-born. All but the Irish and Pakistani families reflect a highly motivated middle-class constituency, although social mobility within these families, particularly among the older generations, is significant. Twenty-three participants from eight families were interviewed and ethnographic work completed with fifteen of the seventeen households. These represent an all-male house-share, a childless couple, families with young children, a family with teenagers, retired couples, multi-generational and lone households. Recruitment was facilitated via snowballing through inter-personal networks, but also through focus groups with existing community groups and leafleting in community centers. Informed consent was secured at every stage of the research process. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, each participant being assigned a pseudonym. A coding framework was developed via an interactive engagement between the research questions and the data.

The ethnographic work, and particularly the “go-along” offer the advantage of capturing participants’ “stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment” (Kusenbach 2003: 463). Participants were both filmed and photographed in their kitchens.³ Rapport was established between participants and the first author during the interviews, enabling her to return on one or more occasions to film meal preparation and undertake a tour of the kitchen, during which photographs were taken of participants’ practices, as well as inside cupboards, cookers and fridges. Few expressed concerns about being “judged” on the grounds of skill, cleanliness or the content of their fridges. Filming participants shopping was undertaken in a few instances but digital recording proved a discreet way of capturing the discussions which took place during supermarket visits. These events, as with the kitchen observations, formed the basis of extensive field-notes, the recordings facilitating verbatim reporting where this was deemed to be of analytical importance. These are reported extensively throughout this paper.

How Provenance Matters

Taking provenance from the ground up, it can be difficult to spot. Provenance in its conventional meaning as the point of origin of a food rarely emerges clearly as an overall concern. Where it does, it tends to be in relation to very specific products (meat, for instance), or for particular recipients (for example, children), and/or in circumstances which play a role in specific performances of provisioning (for example parenting, or when entertaining guests). In how participants talk about and around their provisioning practices, issues of provenance—as conventionally understood by producers or academics—are incorporated into much messier geographies of provisioning. Questions about where food comes from are often premised more in concerns about certifications of production methods, of particular brands or shops, as well as—and generally more than—points of origin. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the way that participants talk, issues of provenance—where visible—are generally present as part of accounts of the negotiation of diverse largely ethical considerations under which they tended to be subsumed. Between them, participants expressed the full range of concerns and a consciousness of public discourses reminding us to do the “right” thing by a range of “others.” These include: future generations (expressed through concerns about food miles, carbon footprints, sustainability); distant farmers (discussed in relation to fair trade); local and/or British farmers (discussed in terms of supporting the local economy and “trust”); as well as non-humans (animal welfare, the environment). These issues also had to be weighed up alongside concerns for immediate loved ones and oneself, either through acknowledgments of health, nutrition and risks, as well as performances of care, demonstrated via quality, value and taste. For Somali women refugees contributing to one focus group, this also meant having had to go out of their way to source halal meat, and scrutinizing product labels for ingredients which may be haraam (forbidden). Importantly, however, these issues were rarely reported in any pure sense but, in both the focus groups and household study, concerns about where food comes from were generally implicit in wider discussions about the complexities of domestic provisioning and its situatedness in everyday life. Indeed, provenance plays out in more complex ways: as a resource, as well as an obligation, in “doing family” and in performing care for self, for loved ones and for guests. Consequently, it can feature differently in our practices depending on who we are provisioning for, when, why and where.

Provenance, Consumer Ethics and “Constraints”

With a predominantly middle class range of respondents, it is perhaps unsurprising that our ethnographic observations uncovered enactments of provenance that could be recognized

unproblematically. For example, the first author was present when a family friend arrived at Ted and Laura Anderson's home to deliver a conspicuously expensive joint of on-the-bone turkey breast meat from a local specialist butcher. It had been paid for by their daughter-in-law's father as his contribution to the Christmas lunch, which was being cooked by Ted and his son, Jonathan. This moment crystallizes much of the work that concern for provenance (here mediated by a butcher who stood for the family as a guarantor of good local origins) can do in performing relations of care—the gift of the turkey crown representing both a performance of family relations and a recognition of the significance of the specific event.

However, in the general run of mundane provisioning that was the core of ethnographic observation, such clear moments of concern for provenance in any pure sense were rare, despite many participants being well disposed to being concerned about where their food came from in the course of conversation. In conventional approaches to provenance, and to other food ethics imperatives in public and popular discourse, their limited reach in affecting behavior is often accounted for by the identification of “barriers” against consumers enacting concern. Perhaps not surprisingly, cost and convenience are the most commonly cited barriers to ethical consumption, including concern for provenance. However, when we start to explore participants' conflicting concerns relating to provenance, the situation is revealing, not least of the limits of the concept of “barriers” to account usefully for empirical reality characterized by distinctly nonlinear processes (Bulkeley et al. 2005). Indeed, in highlighting the range of conflicts and ambivalences which emerge from consideration of various issues, exploring themes of convenience and cost begins to make visible the complexity of consumer ethics in practice and facilitates an understanding of how individuals see the limits of the possible effects that their actions might have in the market, contesting the extent to which they have responsibility.

Cost

Participants of different ages, social class backgrounds and household types acknowledged affordability as the most significant barrier to being able to buy goods deemed to be “desirable” according to public discourses of ethical consumption, which—for many of our participants—existed largely at the level of the abstract. “It comes down to cost ... your conscience is weighed up of, like, “I can't afford that,” reported an employed expectant father in his midthirties. Among other participants, there was an acknowledgment that “morality is a privilege of the rich, to a certain extent,” requiring consumers to “try and find compromises that you're happy with.”

However, as noted by Miller (1998), there are many ways in which ethics and care can be performed, beyond what counts as “ethics” in the public discourses of ethical consumption. For Miller, thrift emerges as a way of demonstrating care, or “making love in supermarkets.” In our research, those who expressed a preference for meat reared using more welfare-oriented methods of animal husbandry admitted that this was something that they had to “shop around” for. This might involve looking out for “when the deals are on,” or making special trips to the supermarket when they know that stock will have been reduced in price. In her interview, the wife of a former dairy manager, Sally Charles (40), spoke with conviction of the couple's commitment to supporting their local butcher, who rewarded their loyalty by giving them a discount on their monthly order. However, during a shopping trip to an extremely large supermarket, her husband, Stuart (42), pounced on meat in the “reductions” chiller: “Look at this!” he said with excitement as he topped his trolley up with free-range chicken and rump steaks approaching their use-by dates. Such bargains, he admits, have led to a reduction in what the family spend at the butchers but, as “we spend far too much money on food,” supporting the local

economy and having a more precise knowledge of the provenance of their meat seem like a necessary sacrifice.

Another interviewee, John Elland (41), expressed support for a range of issues in which provenance was implicated; food miles and the reduction of carbon emissions were one, supporting local businesses another, as was animal welfare. He reported that he and his wife had discovered that free-range chicken could be sourced at a local butcher more cheaply than at the supermarket. However, as at the time of interview they both worked full-time and he was a reluctant shopper, this meant that the responsibility fell to his wife who was much less committed to his ethical values. For her, convenience (and cost) came before issues of provenance.

Convenience

As illustrated by Jackson et al. (2006), Short (2006) and Blake et al. (2010), provisioning must fit into the obligations and opportunities afforded within everyday routines and practices, meaning that convenience emerges as a significant determinant of participants' consumption decisions. According to Blake et al., consumers can frame convenience in a number of ways by: being able to buy everything in one place at the same time; being able to park easily; being close to home; being able to call in on the way to/from some other place that they need to be (for example, the collection of children); along with distinctions between a big weekly shop and "top up" shopping (Blake et al. 2010: 5). Short (2006), meanwhile, notes how wanting to spend more time with one's family might involve shortcuts in what is bought and consumed. All of these points were raised by our participants.

In the excerpt below, a traditional gendered division of labor puts more pressure on Liz Elland's (37) time and she is resistant of her husband's injunctions to source more of their food at local independent shops (see John, above):

I'm not going to work and then, start fucking trawling all of the different, erm, the groceries, whatever, whatever. Whereas if I can go to Tesco, I'm sorry everybody, and erm, go and buy everything, then I do do. I also do use the butchers and we use the greengrocers as well, but if I'm doing a big food shop then I'm not going to trawl around ... to get your shopping list ... It's about convenience and cost.

The issue of where and how to shop also manifested itself for mothers with very young children. Here, Hannah Faulkner (35) highlights the inconsistencies of her current provisioning practices, which are organized around part-time work, childcare and the demands of her daughters, aged 22 months and four and a half years. Asked about where she does her shopping while she wrote her shopping list, she explained that ethics often have to be sacrificed for convenience:

I'm really inconsistent. Yeah, I think Tesco is really bad, but I still shop with them because it's easy ... Sometimes it's just what's quick and what's easy. Convenience comes above ethics at the moment ... I buy organic meat, but sometimes I don't. When I have the time and I think about it, but sometimes if I go to Tesco Express and they don't have it, and I need it, then I won't go somewhere else to buy it. I buy what they've got ... You know how you were saying about Tesco's and the whole sort of values and ethos, I buy all sorts of things and because it's a big shop and sells everything, this means I don't have to go into town, get [toddler] out, find somewhere to park ... and just the thought of taking the children out, taking the pushchair, getting the timing right and all that stuff. (Field-notes, 02-03-2011)

Accompanying Hannah and her younger daughter on a trip to the supermarket, the first author observed how plans for a leisurely browse round the aisles, studying the packaging for quality and value, had to be abandoned in favor of speed shopping when presented with an irritable and upset toddler.

For these participants, provenance appears to stand for “local,” the local being represented by the proximity of the retailer. However limited an interpretation of possible concerns for food origins this appears in relation to meanings invested in provenance by food studies and food movements, this is the extent of concern for participants such as these. Liz’s apology: “I’m sorry everyone,” and Hannah’s: “I think Tesco’s is really bad,” is an indication of their awareness of the good/bad dualism that Hinrichs (2003) refers to in relation to the local/global. However, regardless of participants’ awareness of the pressure to consume on the basis of what they (or others) perceive to be “correct,” in ethical terms (see Barnett et al. 2005 and Lockie 2009), their provisioning practices must fit into the schedules, rhythms and—ultimately—finite time available in each day.

Conflicts and Ambivalences

Clearly, our data indicate a consciousness of what participants felt they should be doing but, for whatever reason, they do not. In the focus group discussions, chicken emerged as a product particularly likely to induce ambivalence among participants. Here, Bert (85) highlights that people are aware of the conditions in which chickens are kept, but because there is a general concern about prices, people prefer not to acknowledge this:

But we don’t know where, today you don’t know where your chickens have come, you do really, but you prefer not to acknowledge it in a lot of cases. Because you know, to provide chickens at the price they pay, charge today, there’s got to be a kick-back somewhere along the line.

Younger men were also prepared to acknowledge the ambivalence with which they viewed the production and consumption of chicken. Here, for example, participants in a focus group comprised of male house-sharers admitted that a “nasty” part of oneself questions what difference the actions of one individual can make:

John: ... well they have that horrible, crap life anyway, how’s ... me taking a stand [laughing]

Andy: ... Everybody else is gonna buy it anyway so I might as well...

Implicit in John’s language is an element of judgment, either of the self, or some assumed judgment on the part of others.

Reconciling Tensions between Public Discourses of Concern

While our participants spoke of what they felt prevented or deterred them from consistently consuming with an eye on the various ethical demands of provenance to which they could feel obliged, they also revealed a number of ways in which they thought about and managed to negotiate the various aspects of caring as called to by different public discourses of responsibility and concern.

As highlighted by Morgan (2010), for some, there was a tangible awareness of the trade-offs involved in making the “right” decision and potential implications of making the “wrong” one. Here, fair trade

is cited as an example. Dave (35), for example, reported the “stress” involved in trying to decide who/what to “save”—the farmer trying to support his family, but who may be using harmful pesticides, or the environment:

I used to stress about that ... which bananas do I, I can save these farmers in ... you know, Puerto Rico or wherever, or ... But they might have, yeah, they might have sort of pesticides, or I can do this organic stuff, so am I saving the environment or am I saving some little farmer who's looking after his family?

The question for Dave appears to be as much about doing least harm as it is about doing most good.

Among other participants, there was cynicism in relation to the exploitation, by multinationals, of consumer concerns regarding the origins and processes involved in producing certain foods, leading them to point toward a limit of trust in the claims made by retailers. In one focus group involving cohabiting couples, concerns are also raised regarding conflicting “knowledge” on the subject of carbon emissions and food miles:

Rob: ... I think the main problem is that there's so many contrasting messages, “you should do this, you should do that, you should spend locally.”

Liz: You see that annoys me, I hate this “you should do this, you should,” sorry.

Rob: People don't necessarily all know [about] the environment, and even if they do have the knowledge, do they trust it? ... Where do they get it from, do they read it on the internet, or do they read it in a scientific journal?

John: What you've just said is exactly why people get confused. It's like ... you're told that food has a big carbon footprint if it's shipped from the other side of the world. So you think, “alright I'll buy stuff that's grown locally,” and then another report comes out that says, “well actually”, you know, “some stuff isn't better locally, it's better if it's shipped from the other side of the world” and you're like, well, what's right?

Clearly, it is both confusing messages and a perceived lack of faith in the reliability of information that opens up room for the negotiation of ambivalences.

A very small minority had the time and financial resources, and the inclination, to juggle a number of concerns in which provenance was implicated. In many circumstances, however, participants of all ages and social backgrounds reported making gestures toward tokenistic doing-the-right-thing (Barnett et al. 2005: 37). For some, it was a question of balance: “I make some compromises,” said Anne Elland (63), unsolicited, as she selected a box of Fair Trade tea while on an accompanied shopping trip. When probed about what she meant by this, she explained: “Because I also buy things that aren't [Fair Trade].”

Among a number of participants, of all ages, there is an acknowledgment of the desirability of feeling “morally OK.” But what practices enable participants to achieve this, and are they exercised on an everyday basis or in relation to specific commodities, on particular occasions, or for different individuals? Not surprisingly, chicken production featured as a common concern as most people consumed either eggs or chicken meat products. While participants acknowledged discomfort at the processes involved in the production of battery farmed eggs, cost meant that their concerns were less likely to prompt a shift toward the consumption of free-range chicken. Chris (28), for example, acknowledged the hypocrisy in always buying free-range eggs, while at the same time having “no

qualms about buying really cheap chicken that's obviously had a really shit life because the other chicken might be too expensive." And even those who were in a better financial position reported other constraints which required compromises in practice. For example, prior to the birth of her children, Hannah Faulkner used to be a vegetarian. However, as a working mother she has made the decision to sacrifice her abstinence from meat as she does not have the time to prepare separate meals for herself, in addition to non-vegetarian meals for her husband, and the simple dishes that will satisfy the requirements of two small children. Echoing Miller's (1998) observations about the degrees of sacrifice performed by women who provision on behalf of their families, during the ethnography Hannah reported that the reintroduction of chicken into her diet had been undertaken on the condition that it was organic. However, because organic chicken is "really expensive," she buys the smallest packet and bulks out the meal with vegetables, explaining: "I would rather have better quality and feel nicer about that." Through compromises in practice, she is enabled to negotiate a path via which she can feel confident about demonstrating care through the feeding of her family, but also comfortable with her own ethical values within the limits of the time and money she has available.

Individuals are involved in performances of care in different circumstances and in relation to different "others," but there are also particular times and contexts wherein these performances have increased significance. For example, while many participants might be happy to routinely source their meat from the supermarket, it was also acknowledged that there were occasions when something more might be required as a demonstration of generosity and hospitality. These "exceptional" occasions included entertaining particular friends or, as mentioned above, the expensive turkey breast purchased for a Christmas lunch. The above examples illustrate the extent to which participants' concerns with provenance are not situated only amidst the sometimes conflicting demands of public discourses of responsibility and concern. Rather, they are also contingent upon the wider context in which the ethics of care are situated and performed in relation to oneself and particularly in relation to close others, including family and friends. This becomes clearer still when we consider the ambivalent role that consumer imaginaries can play in how they relate to products and matters of their provenance.

Consumer Imaginaries

In performing care, either for themselves or for others, it is clear that various consumer imaginaries were mobilized in justifying particular provisioning decisions, and these were often premised in concerns about provenance in the conventional sense: point of origin. For example, on an accompanied shopping trip, Kate Faulkner (63) spoke of how she "always imagine[s] the rather slapdash methods" of shrimp farmers in the Far East, hence her preference for North Atlantic prawns. Likewise, Liz Butler (55) "thought" the chickens she bought direct from her local farm shop were grown there. She explained that it was only when it occurred to her that she had never heard a chicken while at the site that she queried it with staff. On finding out that there were "bought in," she shifted her practice and started to buy her chicken from a source in which she could feel more confident regarding provenance. The issue of scale in relation to geographies of the local were expressed in a range of ways beyond imagined production practices, safety, trust and environmental concerns. Some participants expressed a sense of responsibility and loyalty toward local businesses threatened by large supermarket chains which have shareholders to please. Here, the comments of John Elland (41) reinforce Everts and Jackson's (2009) observations concerning the sociality of shopping and continuing importance of face-to-face interactions afforded by smaller, independent shops:

I think ... you should support your local shops and your local community, because otherwise you're gonna end up with no choice you know, you're just gonna end up

where you've got five supermarkets to buy from and that's pretty much it, and that's kind of sad you know. We need, we need people running the local shop round the corner as well.

Additionally, however, these comments also point toward the expression of the kind of defensive politics of localism reported by Winter (2003). John's assertions are backed up by his friend, Rob (30), who echoes Seyfang's (2007) finding that consumers may also be concerned with keeping money in the local economy:

... and then there's a strong argument with buying local ... if we all bought local we probably wouldn't have had the economic downturn we've just had. Erm ... if you spent a pound at the Tesco's down the road, something like 26 pence of that pound was spent in Sheffield the rest would go to Tesco's head office. If you spent a pound in the butchers up the road, 74 pence will stay in Sheffield, and therefore your local economy grows, and builds a resilience to external effects.

But the imagined geographies of the local are problematized when we consider the observations of Mary Green (67), who originates from Ireland. In the excerpt below, we observe how localized loyalties can become more complicated when an individual finds themselves geographically displaced from where they were born or grew up:

While walking past the dairy aisle, Mary spontaneously said: "I like the Wexford cheddar because I like the taste of it, but also there is that thing that it comes from Wexford, from where I come from." Similarly, she has a preference for Irish rather than British beef: "I think it's nicer, I seem to do better cooking it and it doesn't seem to ... it's, it's always tender, whereas I've had bad experiences with some of the others." She says, "I think it's a cultural thing and supporting where you come from." (Field-notes 04-03-2011)

Likewise, accompanying Nazra Habib (55) on a visit to her local South Asian continental shop revealed further conflicts. Nazra and the first author came upon two Bangladeshi men selling fresh produce out of the back of a van. This particular van and its owners were unfamiliar to Nazra, but she explained that it was one of an increasing number of "mobile shops" servicing the terraced streets which are home to a large South Asian population. When probed, the men revealed that they bought most of their stock from the wholesale markets at Bradford and Birmingham, so it is possible that they themselves came from outside the area. Nazra bought some things from them which were much cheaper than at her regular shop, but she explained that she must buy things from the shop as well, or the owners would be "upset." Thus, despite the wider selection of largely better-quality produce at cheaper prices from the van, there remains a consciousness of community-based loyalty. These ethnographic encounters with participants as they negotiate the private space of home and the public spaces in which provisioning take place illustrate what Barnett et al. describe as the "micro-performances of ethical consumption in the most intimate contexts of inter-subjective interaction" (Barnett et al. 2005: 37).

Within the dynamics of provisioning, there was evidence of a range of contingencies and contradictions, demonstrating that concerns are always practiced situationally. For example, Gina (27), who is motivated principally by cost, quality and care of her family's health—as opposed to concerns about animal welfare—explained how she would pay extra for mid-range chicken which she believes to be of better quality, but at the same time buys "economy" eggs. She recognizes that this appears to be a false economy and that "it's pointless me having paid a fiver for four bits of chicken

when I could've paid a fiver and got ten of the ones that are pumped full of water, and I think it ends up outweighing ... But in my head that's alright." These comments illustrate the point, made by Barnett et al. (2005), that "everyday consumption routines are ordinarily ethical." Defining "ethical" as referring to "the activity of constructing life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct," the authors suggest, that "the very basics of routine consumption—a concern for money, quality and so on—can be seen to presuppose a set of specific learned ethical competencies" (Barnett et al. 2005: 28). When performed on behalf of others, in particular the family, these competencies—as evidenced in the work of Miller (1998, 2001)—are often guided by moral sentiments in which altruistic concerns about the environment, distant strangers or non-humans come second to the health and well-being of one's own family (Jackson et al. 2009: 20). Here, we are reminded of Massey's observations regarding the "hegemonic geography of care and responsibility which takes the form of a nested set of Russian dolls. First there is "home," then there is locality, then nation, and so on" (Massey 2004: 8–9). A hierarchy of "caring" is therefore seen to exist within everyday provisioning practices.

But the contradictions between an awareness of the prevalent discourse of ethical consumption and the absence of consistently ethical shopping practices (Jackson et al. 2009: 20) could not always be explained away in terms of "morality" and hierarchies of caring. Indeed, some participants spoke with candor about the range of practices they engaged in, provenance sometimes mattering, and sometimes not. Here, for example, we have Rob (30) who, in some respects, fits the profile of the "cultural omnivore" as discussed by Warde et al. (2007). His enjoyment of high-quality, high-status food is counterbalanced with more mundane acts of everyday provisioning and eating which include economy brands and fast food:

Yeah, I'll admit, I won't keep a secret, I will drive to the farm and buy a piece of award-winning meat, that's lovely born and bred that, you know, served in a Michelin starred restaurant, at the same time I'll buy economy stuff from Asda and I'll do McDonald's and KFC 'cause it's all about balance for me.

Likewise, while John Elland expressed concern about food miles and carbon emissions, when probed—during a shopping go-along—as to whether John's concerns extended to alcohol, his wife, Liz, asserted: "John'll take on board what it suits him, but not when it doesn't, whereas I don't tend to be a hypocrite. [Where it's from] doesn't bother me, ever." Clearly, for John, provenance matters only some of the time.

In explaining the apparent inconsistencies in individuals' incorporation of certain values or knowledge into their everyday practices, the work of Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2010) is useful. Speaking of how "scientific" knowledge about diet and nutrition is negotiated into practice, he observes:

Ideas come from the outside and are stored in a separate mental stratum that may be either active or dormant and which is divorced from our actual practices. They have no immediate effect on the underlying mechanisms that govern our practices and reshape the things that make individuals what they are day by day. The personality splits into two: a concrete, active being on the one hand, and a sort of parallel cognition that takes the form of an ethical consciousness on the other. (Kaufmann 2010: 23)

Thus, we see that while we might understand, cognitively, the difference between "good" and "bad" products and the ethical implications, or impact on our health, this is often overridden—as we have illustrated—by other factors such as habit, routines, taste and personal preferences which may differ from one week to the next.

Conclusion

In moving the focus away from point of origin, supply chains and alternative spaces of exchange, this discussion examines provenance from the ground up, making the contingent nature of consumer practices the lens through which provenance is explored. What results is a broader understanding of what provenance comes to stand for consumers, amidst a broader shift in emphasis away from notions of ethical consumption in which particular ethical positions, such as in relation to fair trade or to local production, can be abstracted as in academic and public discourse. That shift moves instead towards an acknowledgment of consumer ethics; forms of practice which while ethically significant, are often complex and in tension, and embedded in the exigencies of everyday life. Our data suggest that concerns about provenance are embedded in the wider ethics of food production, distribution and consumption and enable participants to engage in diverse performances of care on a range of scales, from caring for local or distant farmers, future generations or non-humans; but, as our data illustrate, these are not “performed” as conscious strategies or cynically “deployed” justifications for particular choices. They simply form the basis of everyday choices which are contingent upon circumstances and opportunities, routines and personal preferences. Indeed, for most of our participants, everyday decision-making regarding food purchase and consumption takes place within a loose ordering of priority, in which global concerns are subsumed under, and appropriated to, a more immediate concern to demonstrate love and care for those closest to us. Seen in this light, whether in the shop, or at the table, or through performing intimate acts of caring for the tastes and preferences of oneself or a loved one, provenance does matter; at least some of the time. However, performances of care are profoundly situated, with the tensions and ambivalences between different and often competing concerns leaving ample space for consumers to negotiate them into everyday practice. In the ways in which our participants talk about and do show concern about provenance, it is clear that such concerns are subordinated to the ethical imperative to do feeding and eating “properly,” and food provenance is also enrolled to this primary ethical imperative. Nonetheless, in responding to the calls of those scholars who have suggested that more nuanced understandings of the intricacies of provenance issues can be furnished only by including the standpoint of the consumer, what we see is the complexity of provisioning in practice. Showing the limits of conventional approaches to influencing consumer choice towards more ethical consumption, it is clear that the ethical imperative to do good, or at least less harm, must be weighed up and accomplished—as Jackson et al. (2009) and Blake et al. (2010) previously illustrated—in the context of the opportunities, obligations and constraints of everyday life.

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Angela Meah. University of Sheffield, UK (a.meah@sheffield.ac.uk)

Matt Watson. University of Sheffield, UK. (m.watson@sheffield.ac.uk)

Notes

1 See for example Hinrichs (2003) on issues of scale and Selfa and Qazi (2005) on the different meanings of “locality” to producers and consumers.

2 Thirty-seven participants contributed to the seven focus groups, including thirteen men. In addition to a mixed pilot group, one group was with young male house-sharers aged 23–30; another with older people aged 63–89 living in a former mining village; one was comprised of Indian and Somali women with school-aged children; one of low-income mothers aged 27–38; one with married or cohabiting couples aged 29–41; one with people aged 39–79 living in rural Derbyshire.

3 Selected images from the go-alongs and kitchen tours can be accessed via the project’s online photo gallery: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/52548860@N08/sets/>.

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