



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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BITTERSWEET:  
LIVING WITH SUGAR AND KIN IN  
CONTEMPORARY SCOTLAND

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## Abstract

This thesis explores sugar consumption and kin-making in a north Edinburgh neighbourhood, and shows that sugar is central to processes of social relatedness. I argue that sugar reveals the meaning of kinship in Scotland, and that experiences of kinship reveal the material and symbolic potentialities of sugar. During 13 months of fieldwork in primary schools, homes and community groups, I traced the values and meanings attributed to sugar, and its role in processes of socialisation. Sugar poses ethical problems. It is marked out as bad by educational and medical institutions as publicly bad – for individual health and bodies. Yet sugar is also marked out as privately good – for social bonding, for indexing intimacy, for recognition, compensation, and for marking out the meanings of particular times, spaces, types of relationship, and the kind of authority that infuses them. Perhaps above all, sugar stands in for instances of care and particular kinds of (dangerous?) pleasure. How people and institutions resolve the ethical problems sugar poses in their everyday relationships tells us about these relationships, about the contested place of pleasure, and notions of responsibility.

This thesis is split into two parts. Part one examines sugar ‘in public’, and moves outwards from schools and medical institutions towards the home. Part two explores sugar ‘at home’, and examines the gendered nature of parenting, as well as other kinds of homes – those of grandparents for example. Both sections overlap in showing that public and private are not given but brought into being, with sugar used to generate and negotiate boundaries between the two. We see values of home brought into school – through home-baking – to mark out practices of care in school, and public health values that travel homewards. I theorise sugar as a substance of relatedness, which reveals kinship in Scotland as processual. Sugar reveals perceptions of children, and relationships with children, as fragile, and highlights the primacy of the bounded nuclear family home as the ideal site of good kinship and successful growing of children – even as kinship in Scotland unfolds in many places and possible configurations.

I use the term ‘living with sugar’ to challenge conceptions of sugar consumption as an individual choice. In showing the pervasiveness of sugar in its many forms and negative messages about sugar in this environment, I argue that sugar’s constant structural availability – and its status as a less-than-good moral option – can be rethought as a condition of life for those bringing up children. This framing of sugar as bad, yet safe to consume in moderation, expands the value attributed to sugar, increasing its specialness and the pleasures it enables. As diet becomes an arena in which good kinship can be evaluated, the management of sugar in children’s diets can become burdensome for parents – an effort often distributed along gendered lines. The common-sense, yet ambiguous, notions of balance and moderation, presented as a relatively straightforward ‘choice’, sets up many parents (especially mothers) for feelings of failure.

## Lay summary

This thesis explores sugar consumption and family in a north Edinburgh neighbourhood, and shows that sugar is central to family-making. During 13 months of fieldwork in primary schools, homes and community groups, I explored how people give value and meaning to sugar, and how people draw on sugar to teach children how to live in society. Sugar poses ethical problems. It is marked out as by educational and medical institutions as publicly bad – for individual health and bodies. Yet sugar is also marked out as privately good – for social bonding, for intimacy, for recognition, compensation, and for marking out the meanings of particular times, spaces, types of relationship, and the kind of authority that infuses them. Perhaps above all, sugar stands in for instances of care and particular kinds of (dangerous?) pleasure. How people and institutions resolve the ethical problems sugar poses in their everyday relationships tells us about these relationships, about the place of pleasure, and notions of responsibility.

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## Introduction

Once upon a time, Hansel and Gretel are walking in the forest. Suddenly they are caught by a witch, who takes them to her house. But the witch's house isn't a gingerbread house all covered in icing and sweets. It's a healthy eating house, all fruit and vegetables. The witch doesn't notice, but the children eat it all up. They become stronger and stronger... And they escape! The end.

'I just thought it up!' Isla anticipates my reaction to her fairy-tale, a smug smile on her ten-year old face. Her mother Fiona catches my eye and suppresses a laugh – embarrassment, pride, incomprehension? Fiona had just been confessing her naughty snacks at the primary school gate, and speculating on which tasty treats they would leave out for Santa Claus.

I narrate Isla's story to another mother, who asks how my research is going. In another kitchen, over another cup of tea. June shakes her head indignantly and concludes, 'They're not being children.'

Fieldnotes, north Edinburgh, November 2018

This thesis uses sugar to explore the stories people tell about food, health and kinship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scotland. In an era of global and national campaigns about the dangers of sugar in the forms of (childhood) obesity, diabetes and heart disease, and of media messages urging us to desire sugary products, how do people eat and feed family members? How do they care for children and grow them into adults? In this thesis, we meet parents, grandparents, teachers and volunteers, building relationships with children and trying to give them a good life, according to multiple values and aspirations. We also meet children, working out how to eat, speak about food and relate to others.

'Sugar is everywhere', parent interlocutors told me despairingly. Sugar is also present in its loud absence – from a witch's house, from a lunchbox. In Edinburgh's schools, GP practices and dental practices, in international medical research and global nutritional policy, sugar is marked out as bad. Sugar is prominent as a public health object, a substance which will diminish health and future quality of life and relationships. These messages target parents particularly, and sugar was a salient topic for adults involved in the socialisation of children in

Edinburgh. While I expected my interlocutors to resist these dominant public health framings of sugar and health, I discovered that sugar's public badness instead permeated many adults' and children's lives and sense of self, as they took pleasure in sugar, avoided it, or analysed their relationship with sweetness.

In this thesis I explore sugar on private and public ground, observing its polymorphous and fluid character. At times, sugar stands in for relatedness, closeness and intimacy; at others, it becomes bodily damage and lack of care, or appears as a playful artistic substance to bend into a display of deep relationships. This thesis is a journey through different contexts of sugar consumption – classrooms, playgrounds, kitchens, and 'out and about' – following the language and taste of sugar as it speaks about class, gender, individuality, childhood, good kinship and bad, where we observe sugar's potential to sweeten situations and emotional states.

The people I write about in this thesis did not take part in this study because they felt they had an important story to tell, something to advocate for, or even a group to represent. They did so to help me write about family life in north Edinburgh – and in doing so shared the intimacy of their homes, their kinship relations, and their food and drink with me. I chose to recruit participants as parents, not as persons with non-communicable chronic diseases or above average BMIs (a few were, most were not). Many of my interlocutors form a loose community of sorts – a community of parents.

In an ethnography of food and kinship, I had imagined joyously cooking in kitchens and eating soggy takeaways in front of the television. It was not so simple. It had taken months to be invited inside Isla and Fiona's kitchen. I learnt that houses are incredibly private places, kinship relations at home even more so, and that for some people, eating habits and relationships with children feel almost like a window onto the soul. This thesis seeks to understand why sugar consumption is understood to cast light on such intimacies, and why it produces doubt in people's feelings that they are doing kinship correctly. Why and how is sugar embedded in different social relationships, and why does it so often produce tensions and ambivalence? How does sugar inform people's sense of right and wrong ways to live and to care for others? How do sugar's shifting qualities – material, moral, political, emotional – intersect, unsettling boundaries between public and private, health and illness, love and harm?

This thesis focuses not only on eating, but on living with sugar in the broadest sense. Living with sugar encapsulates sugar consumption, sugar politics, sugar work (including everyday governance), and people's various uses of sugar as a reference point to navigate the moral

labyrinths of everyday life. I use this term to unsettle the dominant framing of sugar consumption as a conscious personal choice (informed or not), and to re-situate sugar as a ubiquitous element deeply embedded in people's social environments, shared histories of family, and of the nation. People live alongside, by and with the sugar consumption, sugar policies and sugar work of others – which permeates their lives through educational and healthcare institutions, workplaces, and everyday acts of hospitality, commensality and celebration. The notion of 'living with sugar' follows the logic of Clara Han's (2017) understanding of the effects of policing as a presence in her informants' lives in urban Chile. Following Han, I suggest that sugar's presence – its constant availability as something one could have, but would be a less-than-best choice – is not merely a part of people's lives, but has become a very 'condition of life' (Han, 2017, p. 1).

I argue that contemporary ways of living with sugar in Scotland must be read in the light of wider historical processes which shape the ways in which sugar consumption has come to be experienced as lovely and terrible at once, light and harmless in some contexts and problematic in others. This ethnography of home and school life in a Scottish neighbourhood explores the public denigration of sugar, the associations forged between sugar consumption and excess, and the accumulation of charges against sugar as an illegitimate – yet ordinary – source of energy and nutrition. I trace how sugar has formed as a public object in exact opposition to health. I argue that it is this inversely mirrored positioning that enables sugar consumption to emerge as pleasurable, special, characterised by shared naughtiness, or by feelings of letting go and releasing control. Sugar consumption – one's own, or that of others – is often construed as positioned on the brink of excess. Sugar's potential harms are known yet uncertain. It is sugar's elusiveness and unruliness, its value as unhealthy, its flirtations with excess, but also its triviality and ubiquity which enable it to occupy such a key place within everyday ethics and processes of socialisation.

Sugar is adhesive. Things get stuck to sugar, or stuck together by it – a variety of values, affects, relationships and memories. Ultimately, sugar's stickiness and moral weight make it a useful substance for the creation of other values. Sugar can be converted into intimacy and closeness, care and nurture, energy and motivation; it can also be converted into greed, diminished control over oneself or others, and loss of balance. Sugar reveals things – about the self, about relationships, about the nation, about what is understood to be private or public. Sugar and affect have a sticky relationship, as each crystallises into the other.

While public health messages urge people to eat a balanced diet, the people encountered in this ethnography are also concerned with establishing other kinds of balance. This thesis attends to the ways in which people seek to establish balance in their kinship relations, and how sugar enters this equation. This includes the gendering of responsibilities, the work of finding the right balance between health and pleasure, the right distribution of control between adults and children, the balance of attention and effort directed outside/towards the home, time for oneself and time for others – where the scales should ideally tip in favour of the children. But balance is also about finding harmony and minimising tensions within the nuclear family and between nuclear and other kinship forms – between siblings, between partners, between children from different marriages, with in-laws and grandparents. Experiences of sugar and experiences of kinship mirror one another in the ambivalence they generate. Sugar both facilitates and impedes balance, revealing kinship in Scotland as both strong and unbreakable, and highly fragile. Both sugar and its absence are put to work in solidifying and strengthening kinship relations.

While policy presents sugar as something which can be extracted from everyday life, this thesis instead argues that sugar consumption must necessarily be understood in context, including an understanding of sugar policies in context. Over the course of three centuries, sugar consumption has been assembled as a public policy problem in Britain – for the economy, for medicine, for the church, for public health – even as it remains ubiquitous in people’s everyday lives and practices. I show that today’s practices of living with sugar grow through and with these histories. This thesis is a story of sugar’s contextualisation and capacity for value-making.

This introduction contextualises sugar in Scotland: in the nation’s economy, in public health, in school, and in kinship. I first trace the processes by which sugar consumption has become embedded in everyday life over time, and its problematization as a class-related issue. I next focus on sugar, morality and gender. After examining the vilification of sugar, I draw on insights from medical anthropology to understand diet and health in Scotland. I analyse policy approaches to sugar, and explore kinship and the school as key sites of intervention for the state to govern sugar and kinship. I bring in anthropological theories to critique the notion of individual choice, and show that sugar consumption can usefully be rethought through the lens of everyday ethics. I finish by contextualising sugar within kinship and reframing sugar as a substance of relatedness and individuality in Scotland.

## Sugar in Scotland: Production and consumption



*Figure 1: Sugar Bond House, Class 2 Listed Building  
Photograph by author*

Pungent smells of molasses and burnt coal no longer emanate from Sugar Bond House, infusing the air of surrounding streets. Leith's historic sugar refinery is now rented out as open plan office space, standing tall and silent among other glass-fronted buildings. The Sugar Bond's restored red brickwork offers an inconspicuous yet important architectural and material trace of the history of sugar, marking Scotland's salient role in Empire and global trade. The extraction of sugar from Britain's colonies through processes of violence and slavery and the acceleration of its spread through the nation's diet in tandem with the Industrial Revolution has left a deep and indelible imprint on the ways we eat and think about food today (Mintz, 1986). Sugar consumption is a powerful material trace of colonial history in the present.

Historical accounts are important because they remind us that desires for sugar cannot be taken for granted (Mintz, 1986), and reveal some of the processes through which sugar becomes so deeply entangled with gender, social class, labour and leisure, politics and morality. These histories offer a rereading of the ubiquity of sugar in Scottish society, and the ways in which sugar is paired with other produce in particular rhythms of consumption, with place, with good and bad moral behaviours. Mintz's work in particular has shaped the approach of this PhD research – in helping me reflect on sugar's ongoing legacy as a product of Empire, but also on sugar's flexibility and capacity to encode meaning in social context, to change and adapt over time. Public health accounts lament the cheapness and widespread availability of sugary produce, but do not connect people's contemporary consumption patterns to the Britain's wider history. I suggest a revision to these narratives – showing that sugar consumption was always already a problem of overindulgence, a matter of power and class positioning (Mintz, 1986), always already multifaceted and bittersweet.

I first gesture to sugar's role in shaping Scottish and British economies, to contextualise sugar's ubiquity as a contemporary 'condition of life' (Han, 2017, p. 1). Sugar has been historically central to the economy of Scotland and Britain – grown and harvested through the violence of Empire, fuelling international commerce and Industrial Revolution, restructuring labour and consumption patterns in British workplaces and homes. When the Sugar House Bond (Figure 1) was erected in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, sugar cane was the main source of sweetness in Britain. According to historians, sugar import, processing and refining had exploded in England by the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, transforming the cities of London, Bristol, and Liverpool (Pincus, 2009, p. 58). From the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Greenock and Glasgow became major hubs in terms of the Caribbean sugar trade, with smaller roles for the ports of Leith, Aberdeen and Dundee (Chalmin, 1993, p. 27).

Scottish ship-owner Abraham Lyle marks a strong presence in the global history of sugar. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he and Henry Tate – the inventor of the sugar cube (and founder of two London art museums) – merged to establish Tate & Lyle. Abraham Lyle continues to be known for his commercialisation of Golden Syrup in 1883. The circulation of tinned syrup represents a pivotal moment in the social history of sugar consumption, signalling new forms and enhanced portability, and the encoding of new values into sugar.

Sugar lives in its current forms through a history of conflicts, agreements and subsidies which continues into the present. Britain's sugar industry has been slowly over-shadowed since the



18<sup>th</sup> Century by European sugar-beet cultivation. Today, British Sugar is the UK's largest supplier, processing all beet grown in the UK. Sugar engenders economic and political tensions, on multiple scales. Unable to compete against European industries, Tate & Lyle fell into debt and were acquired by American Sugar Refining in 2010. The European Union's agricultural reform in 2017 abolished previous limits on sugar beet production – and was seen by British industries as a move to favour production in countries like France. Sugar is adhesive, and sugary products easily become embroiled in nationalist politics and social identities. Products like Irn Bru and Tunnocks Teacakes work as sticky symbols of Scottishness – and recent controversies (over the introduction of a soda levy, for example) can be read as a continuation of these sugar politics.

Sugar consumption patterns have always been a matter of hierarchical positioning. Initially a rare produce, sugar was first used for its medicinal purposes and as a spice or flavouring. Sugar has a long history as a 'festive ingredient' (Charsley, 1992, p. 39) which dates back to medieval celebratory feasting practices. By 1650 the English aristocracy had become keen sugar consumers, and took pride in dazzling their guests with intricate sugar sculptures known as subtleties (Mintz, 1986). In his seminal book on wedding cakes, Charsley describes 17<sup>th</sup> Century interest in sugar pastes, icings, and the rise of the plum cake, with differing fashions in Edinburgh and London. Sugar becomes a powerful status symbol – but it is an individual's capacity to transform and display sugar in novel ways which truly communicates power.

Mintz observes that 'The decline in the symbolic importance of sugar has kept almost perfect step with the increase in its economic and dietary importance,' (Mintz, 1986, p. 95). Sugar's meaning underwent radical transformation once the substance became available to all social classes, although historians disagree on the precise dates by which sugar was in wide circulation (Goodall, 2020). When the bourgeois classes started producing and consuming subtleties, the elite turned towards other forms of consumption. Sugar began to be absorbed in new ways – namely in tea, which expanded through the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Smith, 1992), and in sugared cordials (Burnett, 2001).

Mintz argues that with mass production and price drops in 1850, sugar consumption was taken up just as workers' schedules were undergoing profound transformations due to structural changes in the national economy, and rose in tandem with tea, coffee and chocolate. Mintz reveals that critiques of the unruly consumption practices of the labouring classes were always already present. For Mintz, it is the nature of work in the factory, in combination with the

growing consumption of hot drinks, that came to change the very definition of the meal in Britain, and to define sugar as energy. Early social reformers warned against the extravagance of the poor in their mounting desires for tea and sugar (Mintz, 1986, p. 7), and condemned sugar on the grounds of its manifest link to excess and vice, and time wasted (Mintz, 1997, p. 176). Living with sugar in Scotland today is a legacy of these histories.

Within the UK, Scotland perhaps has received the most negative fame as a population characterised by poor diet and ill health, most regularly expressed in classed terms. Fraser's historical research on the haggis shows how English writers and cartoonists constructed the Scottish diet as ghastly as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Fraser, 2011). Knight's research builds on this to show how contemporary depictions of the deep-fried Mars bar render it a symbol of unhealthy Scottish diets (Knight, 2016) – carefully demonstrating that this is a matter of stigmatisation of particular class groups above anything else. My analysis of sugar consumption unfolds within this environment, and privileges an ethnographic approach to understand how these negative imaginings work as a backdrop to people's consumption, and how sugar continues to be a highly desirable substance despite – and because of – its negative connotations.

The classed legacies of this historical sugar economy and history of bad diet are still felt in Scotland today, permeating the meanings of sugar, the value it has for people, and shaping what people desire or feel able to do with it. This thesis explores the complex legacy of sugar's meanings and material properties – as energy, sweetener or preservative, something soluble, solid, sculptural, sticky or binding – and the class and gendered overtones still living in sugar. I argue that the intimate role of sugar consumption in people's lives requires ethnographic attention, and can be read through a close-up account of everyday life at home and in the neighbourhood. I show that the school represents a particularly important setting in which children (and parents) are taught how to eat, how to navigate the contradictory values of sugar, how to draw on different regimes of value to situate themselves morally with regard to others.

A discussion of people's experiences of sugar as a condition of life signifies an engagement with the everyday moral and political atmosphere within which sugar is consumed, and the different potentialities attributed to sugar to affect social relationships. While Mintz reads sugar as a fuel for factory labour, feminist theorist Berlant speculates that sugar stills acts as a fuel that helps people 'get by' (Berlant, 2010, p. 29) in capitalist society today. My work takes a different approach, showing that sugar is also a fuel for social relationships – used to fuel

intimacy, kinship and togetherness, and to foster energy, citizenship, pleasure and learning, even as it continues to be haunted by classist narratives. Like Berlant, I attend to the competing pressures and affects that shape people's everyday lives. Berlant's work is particularly helpful in theorising the kind of space that eating offers— a rare window for pleasure and disconnection from the crushing physical, mental and affective energy required at home and in the workplace. But sugar consumption also generates other kinds of work and effort for people, as this thesis shows.

By 'sugar work', I refer to the governing of sugar, the teaching about sugar's values, and the forging of personal and shared relationships with sugar over time. I use the term 'sugar consumption' to include a wide variety of practices including purchasing, provisioning, preparation, cultural transformation, exchange, absorption and discarding of sugar. Graeber (2011) rightly points out that most anthropologists treat consumption as self-evident category, and lack a clear definition of consumption in their writing. In tracing the concept of 'consumption' through time, Graeber demonstrates that this is a consequence of 18<sup>th</sup> Century economic theories which divide the economy into 'two completely separate spheres: the workplace, in which goods were 'produced,' and the household, in which they were 'consumed.' (Graeber, 2011, p. 492).

This thesis purposely sidesteps the consumption/production debate, instead using sugar to show how spaces like the home, the school and the workplace are not so easily held apart – as illustrated most clearly by the circulation of home-baking, and the values that travel with it, across settings. Following Graeber's critique, I also suggest that not only consumption but the pleasure of consumption are often taken for granted and not always clearly conceptualised within this literature, e.g. (Miller, 1998). The logic of sugar as energy, or fuel for workplace productivity (Mintz, 1986; Berlant, 2010) continues to play out in public discourses – with those who live 'sedentary' lifestyles requiring other kinds of (or just less) fuel – and creates ambiguity around other uses of sugar for pleasure and socialisation.

## Sugar, gender and morality

After showing sugar's emergence and circulation within the British economy as a highly charged economic and political object, this section contextualises sugar consumption within dynamics of gender, moralities of pleasure, moderation, and affect. Historical accounts help conceptualise how sugar fits with ideas about control and moderation, and the ways in which

opposed ideas about innocence and vice crystallise simultaneously in sugar. Through close attention to what is said about sugar, and to the emotional states it is understood to stick to in homes and schools, my research reveals uneasy relationships with pleasure in Scotland. This ethnography shows how sugar is conceptualised in terms of managing gendered pleasures, and adult/child pleasures in public and in private. This section traces sugar and diet to values of puritan ethics (Rozin, 1987), as well as older ideas about diet and moderation, showing how this is shot through with assumptions about gender and class.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to review the formation of pleasure and moderation as historical objects (see Foucault, 1990; Coveney, 2006; Dupuy, 2013) but I gesture to several important ideas from this literature which throw light on contemporary sugar consumption. In ‘The uses of pleasure’, Foucault (1990) shows how moderation was constructed as an inherently masculine virtue in Antiquity – a relationship of domination over the basic pleasures of eating, drinking and sexual practice, an ethical practice which would help one become a free male citizen. While moderation was associated with status, responsibility and public life, immoderation was inversely linked with femininity, and framed in terms of passivity, submission and weakness (Foucault, 1990). Foucault shows that sexual pleasures and eating pleasures were teased apart during later Christianity with heightened attention given to controlling sexuality – a period in which pleasures were reconfigured around notions of sin and transgression (Dupuy, 2013). Bodies and their pleasures are revealed to be subjected to different kinds of scrutiny along gendered lines, and women’s immoderation, sexuality and unruly bodies have long been the subject of public fear (Yeo, 1999).

My work attends to the embarrassing nature of pleasures, and the gendered values attributed to sugar in context, by reading these through the intimate lens of kinship. Sugar appears to be sometimes subtly – and dangerously – linked to ideas about gender and sexual pleasures. Anthropologist Claude Fischler (1987) makes a provocative observation: that while sexual pleasures have become dissociated from reproduction, sugar consumption is yet to be perceived as separate from nutrition, and remains illicit as a form of entertainment. He further describes the ‘feminization’ of sweetness from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, with sweets becoming associated with light and delicate values – and becoming potentially ‘unmanly’ (Fischler, 1987, p. 12), subjecting women and men’s bodies to different kinds of pressures. Drawing on Counihan’s work, Lupton scales up this claim to suggest that all food is imbued with feminine connotations in a Euro-American context. For her interlocutors in Australia, masculine values emerge in the form of not attending to food, consuming food prepared by others, and viewing

food as fuel (Lupton, 1996) – rather than as a site of pleasure, and arena of affect, as discussed in this thesis.

The stories told in this PhD thesis explore the ways in which sugar carries with it echoes of Scotland's temperance past into the present, and how sugar's is flexible, relational, and produced as moral or immoral, embodying moderation or vice, masculine or feminine values in context. Historical accounts offer excellent examples of such contradictions. Advertisements in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain portrayed hot chocolate and confectionery as safe moral alternatives to the evils of alcohol (Yeomans, 2011), and a burgeoning soda industry promoted itself as representing temperance values (Burnett, 2001). Women's alcohol drinking was portrayed as especially dangerous in the 1900s, and framed within eugenicist concerns about the 'physical deterioration' (Burnett, 2001, p. 131) of the British race – as produced through mothers. Sugared tea was a more virtuous option embodying respectability, sobriety and private domestic life (Burnett, 2001). Yet in parallel with the rise of tea rooms as an acceptable space for women's leisure, Italian ice cream shops were targeted by local authorities in Glasgow as a public harm – and viewed as sites which embodied decadence, Catholicism, and the demise of the female body through prostitution (McKee, 1997). These narratives reveal sugar consumption as rife with contradictions – signifying dangerous carnal pleasures (in the form of ice cream), and a moderate and disciplined alternative to harmful pleasures (in the form of sugared tea, or sodas).

This ethnography of sugar consumption offers a focus on the temporality of affect, and on the processual nature of pleasures. I draw together the anthropological literature on affect, and on drug use, to help conceptualise the enjoyment of sugar in Leith. Mintz writes of sugar as an 'affect-ridden treat' (Mintz, 1997, p. 174), but does not theorise the affective life of sugar. Sensory anthropologists show how sensory and affective ties emerge between people and food, linking people to particular places, times and people (Seremetakis, 1994; Sutton, 2001). Ahmed's work also helps us here. Ahmed argues that affect is 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 29) – connecting ideas, values and objects, but complicates this picture by showing that various groups at particular times in history (e.g. colonised persons, queer persons, women) are not seen to have the right kinds of pleasure and affective lives by society's more dominant groups (Ahmed, 2010b). Ahmed reveals the processes by which some people's pleasures are dismissed as inferior and for instant gratification, rather than taken seriously and read as able to produce happiness.

I argue that the Scottish primary school emerges as one place to learn about the dangers of sugar and the right opportunities for pleasure. Pleasures are processual, as social studies of drug use show. Becker's (1953) classic study of marijuana smoking demonstrates that pleasures are not given, but stem from processes of socialisation. This involves the learning of techniques, shared use, and the formation of relationships between bodies and the sensual effects of consumption. Duff takes this forward in her study of party drugs, refining a theory of contextual pleasure which emphasises the ways in which drugs facilitate social bonding and produce otherness – in association with specific acoustic and spatial atmospheres (Duff, 2008).

The pleasures of sugar appear to have become increasingly intertwined with gendered values of domesticity, although no one historical study clearly addresses this to my knowledge. Tosh (1999) hints towards the growing chasm between men and women's eating practices from the 1870s as a new ideology of home/work dichotomy is carved out along gendered lines, at least for England's middle classes. He offers the rise of afternoon tea, taken by women in the home, as one such example. Among the rare literature on home baking, Casey (2019) discusses its rise in Britain as a virtuous practice from the 1930s through an analysis of recipe books and TV shows for women. She shows how home baking draws together ideas about thriftiness, care for the health and wellbeing of both the family and the nation – and the transformation of imaginaries of baking in the 1950s to become more about entertaining and impressing guests in the home. Home-baking is potent because it aligns with multiple and changing values of femininity.

My thesis takes forward this body of work by showing how home baking becomes a way of living with the ethical problems posed both by sugar consumption, and by kinship relations. Baking – as the labour of women (Wesser, 2021) and as British and/or Scottish heritage – becomes a practice of balance and moderation, through which sugar is combined with other ingredients and personal affect, shaping it into a safe and meaningful food to consume. Cake itself allows values associated with care and home to become attached to other spaces and relationships marked out as 'school' or 'work', thus perpetually re-configuring public/private dichotomies.

## Medicalising sugar consumption

This thesis argues that sugar and health are construed in opposition to one another in contemporary Scotland – an act of holding apart that renders sugar available for particular

processes of value-making. Sugar's effects on the body were viewed as an object of medical interest by many of my interlocutors, understood as linked to bodily fatness, decay of teeth, and effects on the mind. Mintz cites evidence as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century of doctors remarking on tooth damage, increase in bodily fat as well as possible links with onsets of 'melancholic dispositions' (Mintz, 1986, p. 106). But sugar's association with ill-health only really gained ground in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, at a time when international agricultural agreements had turned sugar into one of the cheapest ingredients on the market. Rising doubts about sugar were spearheaded by Yudkin (1972), a physician who declared the non-existence of physiological needs for sugar. Yudkin claimed that sugar consumption supplied energy without nutrients, vitamins, or minerals and contributed to the onset of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and dental caries. In these new models, the dangers of sugar lie principally in its excessive fuelling capacities.

Broader concerns about the effects of diet on health crystallised into sugar, salt and fat by the end of the decade. In the search for a cause for NCDs, scientists studying the effects of diet on health identified saturated fats rather than sugar (Keys, 1980) as the predominant dietary problem – opening an opportunity for sugar to permeate low-fat products and markets. Sugar was however taken up as a key theme in campaigns addressing dental decay in children, a substance at the heart of consumer groups and coalitions' early attempts to confront industries over food labelling and advertisements (Lang, 1997).

Sugar has an important history as an object of, and in, scientific research. Studies like the 1972 Stanford marshmallow psychology experiment use sweets to measure mastery of the self – where control itself is conceptualised through sugar. Of late, sugar consumption has also been approached as a neuroscientific object. One small but influential body of researchers concludes that sucrose activates the reward centres of the brain in the same way as psychoactive drugs, and can generate addiction in rats (Avena, Rada and Hoebel, 2008; Epstein and Shaham, 2010) – a matter which sometimes enters public health debates. In this kind of research sugar is framed as a self-evident reward and source of gratification, while the cultural assumptions underpinning notions of treats and awards go unchallenged.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, sugar's negative value has intensified with the publication of important new medical evidence on sugar consumption's role in the onset of Obesity, Type 2 Diabetes and heart disease (WHO, 2015). Associations between obesity and sugar-sweetened beverages intake, and socioeconomic conditions have been foci of this literature (See Morenga, Mallard

and Mann, 2013; Stanner and Spiro, 2020). Clinical accounts have framed ‘overeating’ as a disease of poverty, mediated by the low cost of highly caloric foods and the palatability of sugar (Specter and Drewnowski, 2004). In public health literature, sugar consumption often comes to stand in for ignorant or irresponsible behaviour, which is still imagined to be redeemable with the provision of sufficient information (e.g. Forde and Solomon-Moore, 2019). Qualitative health researchers in Scotland are often concerned with barriers to healthy eating, aiming to discover the reasons why people are reluctant to engage in ‘health-promoting behaviours’ (O’Brien, Hunt and Hart, 2009, p. 363). Implicit in these analyses is the assumption that people would just opt for a ‘healthy diet’ if they had the choice and sufficient information.

My approach differs from public health approaches by suggesting that eating *for health* (Metzl and Kirkland, 2010) is not only often unfeasible, but often experienced as non-conducive to social relationships – while eating foods construed as unhealthy and naughty can act as a source of pleasure and complicity. In doing so, I follow the approach of critical medical anthropologists in denaturalizing health and illness. This approach challenges the commonsense framing of sugar consumption as a matter of choice, and a straightforward producer of ill-health (Højlund, 2014; Moran-Thomas, 2019), or as something reducible to neat nutritional calculations of energy in/energy out (Scrinis, 2008; Yates-Doerr, 2016). Indeed, my research shows that in the home, sugar consumption is conceptualised within dynamics of nurture and learning, as well as through frameworks of health. The kind of nourishment people are trying to offer is spread across networks of relationships rather than limited to a bounded individual body (see Yates-Doerr and Carney, 2015).

By deconstructing biomedical and public health discourses, critical medical anthropology scholars guide us in theorising how broader material and moral pressures are interwoven into the seemingly innocuous activities of eating – moving debates away from personal choice and responsibility. Key issues for these scholars include structural violence produced by the state and medical systems (Farmer, 2004), structural (in)access to nutritious food and health (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) and how notions of lifestyle and individual responsibility are put to work to avoid direct engagement with socioeconomic inequalities (Rail, 2012). Scholars also highlight the role of markets and capitalism in producing both ill-health and its solutions (Guthman, 2015).

Sugar feels overly available to parents as a structural aspect of their environments – as a default rather than a choice – a low-cost ingredient with malleable meanings. While it is not within the

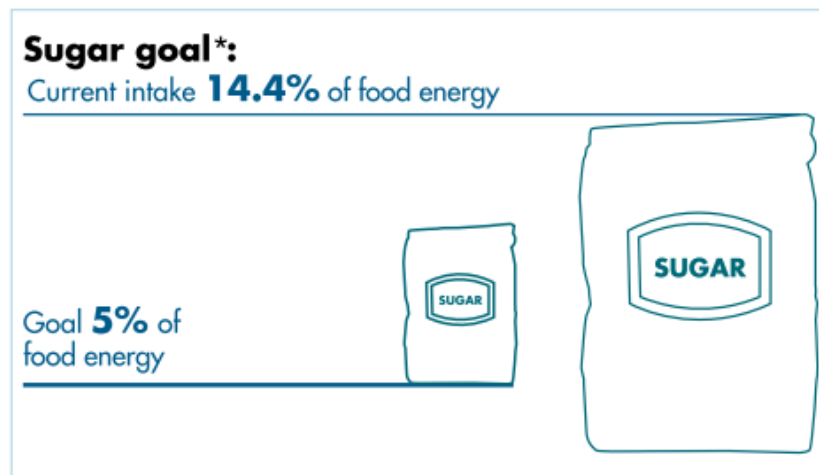


scope of this PhD study to analyse the role of industry and its influence over people’s day-to-day lives, the work of critical medical anthropology scholars informs this thesis, in particular with regards to how and where the burden for reducing sugar consumption lands. I differ from many of these scholars by taking an approach which focuses on an in-depth discussion of the enjoyments (as well as the pains) of eating.

## Sugar as choice: food policy, school and family

‘Scotland has been consistently missing its dietary goals for over 17 years’

(Food Standards Scotland, 2018, p. 8)



‘What we should be eating less of’ (Food Standards Scotland, 2018, p. 10)

The previous section analysed the rise of sugar as an important public health object in the UK. Yet despite decades of new research and policies, sugar remains a substance whose consumption authorities appear to have little purchase over. Not unlike the parents encountered in this thesis, policymakers are affected by the structural over-availability of sugar in contemporary markets, and are only able to regulate it – through the construction of particular categories of consumables – rather than abolish it from the supply chain. This section observes how policy targets schools and the nuclear family home as self-evident spaces of dietary change, and how the individual consumer continues to be the locus of change. I unveil some contradictions around the idea of consuming sugar in moderation, and dispute the common-

sense notion that moderation is a choice. I argue that anthropological approaches to choice and ethics help rethink sugar consumption as a kind of ‘moral laboratory’ (Mattingly, 2014) for deciding how to navigate between values of health and pleasure in everyday life.

Food and diet have a historically prominent position within British public health policy. Military institutions, hospitals, prisons and schools have served as various laboratories in which the state experiments with nutritional and energy intake of particular population groups. The technology of the school meal in particular has an important legacy, representing ‘a major departure in the history of social policy’ (Atkins, 2007, p. 395) through a small yet significant role in the creation of the modern welfare state. The *Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906*, in the aftermath of the Boer War, put forwards new legislation on free school meals, aimed at providing for young people newly understood to be affected by malnutrition and poverty, and initially excluding Scotland. Gustafsson argues that this ‘compulsory education of the young was part of this drive to produce the disciplined workforce required for future industrial production’ (Gustafsson, 2002, p. 670). This unfolded in tandem with new legislation covering a school medical service (Harris, 2004). The introduction of school milk schemes was a key element of this intervention – which Atkins views as a synthesis between state support for agriculture, widespread views on parental ignorance and incompetence, and a eugenicist agenda to improve the ‘Scottish race’ (Atkins, 2007, p. 399).

My ethnography explores how the management of children’s eating at school, as a sphere of intervention, continues to grow in the present. The new mantra ‘Healthy at school, healthy for life’ (Scottish Government, 2007) embodies a shift towards educational institutions taking increased responsibility for children’s diets – which can become a source of tension for some parents, as shown in Chapter Two. This mantra expands well beyond the technology of the free school meal; the playground and the school classroom also become key arenas of intervention. Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence advises that, from the ages of 3 to 18, the promotion of health and wellbeing ‘should be a continuous focus’ (Education Scotland, 2016, p. 5), and is the responsibility of all teachers and practitioners.

Some policy researchers view eating at school as enabling the development of children’s critical skills to make choices (Earl and Lalli, 2020). At schools I visited in Edinburgh, children were pressured to be as agents of ‘healthy’ or ‘good’ choices, and children’s ‘naughty’ or ‘kind’ behaviour in the playground was also questioned in terms of the kinds of choices they were making. This approach is intended to coax children into behaving well (as defined by adults)

of their own volition. A growing body of social science literature is critical of the school as a space of social control, largely through Foucauldian accounts of school life (Gallagher, 2004), or through new attention to lunch boxes as vehicles of pressure on mothers for example (Allison, 1991; Karrebæk, 2012; Harman and Cappellini, 2015). Anthropologist Gillian Evans further points out that the British school emerges as a place of middle class values and ethos – a continuum of the middle-class home which excludes working class children from institutionally recognised forms of success (Evans, 2006). It follows that children’s socialisation with regards to food relates to this ethos.

Sugar consumption (like obesity) constitutes what is referred to as a ‘wicked problem’ in policy – an issue that is complex, contentious, and defies simple solutions. Deemed a major factor in childhood obesity (Public Health England, 2015), current sugar policies are inscribed within the UK and Scottish Government’s ambitions to halve childhood obesity by 2030, depicting Britain as among the worst (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018) of Western Europe, and Scotland as the worst nation within it (Scottish Government, 2018a). Scotland has had its own dietary goals, separate from those of England, since 2001, following the devolvement of health in 1999. In Scotland, the goal for sugar consumption was halved in 2016, and an updated edition of the ‘Eatwell Guide’ (FSS, 2016) issued, with sugary foods and drinks dismissed from the food plate altogether. At the time of writing, reducing the consumption of soft drinks and discretionary foods – particularly by children and adolescents – was the main priority.

In Britain, ideas from behavioural economics have been applied to population health – namely the realisation that people’s choices are not consistently rational, and hence education alone may be an insufficient agent of change (Rice, 2013). Public health initiatives have been widespread and multi-pronged in nature, ranging from traffic-light Front of Pack nutritional warnings, to restrictions on advertising, to social marketing campaigns, consumer apps like ‘Sugar Smart’, or pilots involving ‘Stop’ signs on high sugar drinks (Local Government Association, 2018). The boldest measure to date is a UK-wide levy on soft drinks with the aim of tackling childhood obesity (HM Treasury, 2016). The levy operates with a two-level threshold whereby drinks over 5g and 8g of sugar per 100ml face different taxation, in a model reminiscent of taxes on alcohol, whereby spirits are more heavily taxed per unit of alcohol than beer or wine.

Public health research is concerned with evidence addressing: a) the prevalence of sugar intake, and through which dietary sources (e.g. Rauber *et al.*, 2019); b) the effects of sugar on

individual body weight and overall health (for a review see Morenga, Mallard and Mann, 2013); factors influencing sugar/snack intake, including (differential) exposure to advertising (for a review see Yau *et al.*, 2021), consumer knowledge/education (for a review see Gupta *et al.*, 2018), or parenting style (for example, Brown and Ogden, 2004); and d) evidence of strategies which improve people's compliance to healthy eating guidelines (for a review see Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2018). What this literature tends to disregard is the wide range of activities and (often contradictory) meanings which unfold around sugar at home, at school, and in other social spaces. My research contributes to ongoing debates by prompting a reflection on the importance of contextualising sugar consumption within social processes and relationships.

Policymaking has undergone radical change in Britain with increased understandings that people are continually nudged and pressured by food industry strategies, and that change can occur by reorganising shelves or nudging people towards other products. Indeed, the soda levy has been deemed successful (Pell *et al.*, 2021) with the joint measurable outcomes of lowered levels of sugar in products sold by industry, and a swing towards artificially sweetened drinks from consumers. Yet public health messages continue to suggest that people can freely choose between different options: high-sugar or low-sugar, even as the soda levy contradicts this narrative. The paradoxes arising within policy can be read in the light of sociological literature than documents the changing British state, from a post-war guardian – knowledgeable of its citizens' best interests and well-placed to make informed choices on their behalf – to a state that bestows choice in a consumerist model of citizenship (Clarke *et al.*, 2007; Edwards and Gillies, 2011). Presented as an equally distributed right, the notion of choice obscures 'the starkly contrasting and deeply uneven territory from which these decisions are made.' (Edwards and Gillies, 2011, p. 147).

Anthropologists show how nutrition policy and science are permeated and shaped by cultural values – including those of individual responsibility and universalism – and cannot simply exported as such into people's lives, where other values of food (spiritual, kinship) are crucial (Cuj, Grabinsky and Yates-Doerr, 2021). Drawing on this work, I suggest that within 'cultures of nutrition' (Cuj, Grabinsky and Yates-Doerr, 2021), sugar is identified as an appropriate (yet paradoxical) locus of individual choice. Choice continues to be presented as a self-evident value – both the choice to purchase sugar, and the choice to be a good parent. In this framework, failure becomes a choice. For policymakers, sugar is contextualised in people's relationship with their (or their child's) body as a site of health. For health researchers, children's sugar intake, their choices and liking for sweet foods (and implicitly, their capacities to eat for

pleasure, or for health) are assumed to unfold within, and be regulated by, kinship (see for example Brown and Ogden, 2004; Williams, Veitch and Ball, 2011).

But for those consuming it, sugar is contextualised in a person's relationships to others, with the body becoming a site for nurture, affection, education and discipline, as well as health. Public health stances implicitly frame sugar consumption as an activity; whereby simply *not buying* or *not eating* sugar emerges as a somewhat passive act. In Edinburgh, it is reducing sugar from one's life which means engaging in the highly active (and difficult) practice of uprooting sugar from a multitude of times and spaces in which it is always already embedded, and has been across time. The language of 'choice' simply does not account for different experiences of living with sugar across society, or for the desires and responsibilities people feel within their relationships. Non-compliance likewise is a poor framework, since it fails to account for the sensorial, emotional, historical and relational dimensions of eating and feeding others (Yates-Doerr, 2016).

Mol (2008) notes that choosing is just one possible type of activity among many. In a clinical settings patients do not always want choice, and patient choice (often based on the model of consumer choice) can be experienced as precisely the opposite of good care. In Leith, for example, a trip to the donut shop is not a conscious practice of choosing, but something that 'just happens' with children after a long day out shopping (Chapter Four). In other situations, people may be 'floating sideways' (Berlant, 2010, p. 34), or engaged in other social practices which override striving for health at in that particular instance, or which do not fit well with conscious practices of choosing.

Policy exhortations to choose less sugar – but not to abstain – to choose to consume 'in moderation' or 'within reason' are confusing and betray contradictory values and feelings towards sugar. Coveney and Bunton (2003) convincingly argue that a deeply rooted Protestant mistrust in pleasure lurks throughout contemporary public health discourses. While eating pleasures are usually framed as dangerous for health (see Vogel and Mol, 2014), the very same discourses also require moderated pleasure in sugar. While assumptions about the existence of stark dichotomies between health and pleasure, rationality and desire, control and excess, continue to leak into social science research (Vogel and Mol, 2014), my research demonstrates that people are not engaged in practices of 'choosing' between health and pleasure. Because of these tensions between health and pleasure, sugar consumption poses ethical dilemmas for adults caring for children in Edinburgh, and opportunities to resolve them. Kinship offers an

important site for thinking through these tensions, and for understanding how they participate in the shaping of ethical life in Britain.

In a shift away from public health approaches, I apply Mattingly's (2014) concept of 'moral laboratories' to people's everyday lives and diets in Leith, whereby parents find themselves experimenting and trying to reconcile (often contradictory) values associated with biomedical health, children's emotional and psychological wellbeing and socialisation, their own desires to express love, nurture and care, as well as pressures from the children themselves. Mattingly finds that African American parents raising children with special needs are striving to make the best possible decision for the family – among various options of what it is actually possible to do in practice. Everyday occurrences like a football match, or a child's party, become contexts which create ethical dilemmas and opportunities to resolve them – thus participating in people's quest to carve out one possible version of a good life (Mattingly, 2014). In a similar logic, anthropological research with people living with obesity in Australia shows how care in practice takes multiple forms: consuming the pleasures of sugar as a relational practice in the context of deprivation, and restricting sugar to care for damaged bodies (Zivkovic *et al.*, 2015)

I thus argue that sugar consumption works as an always available 'moral laboratory' (Mattingly, 2014) for working out one's responsibilities, the kinds and amounts of enjoyment are appropriate for oneself and one's children in everyday life, and what different social relationships should look like. Kinship has long been established a primary site for morality and ethics – whether in terms of one's moral obligations and commitments, or the possibilities of evaluation and formation of the self (Fortes, 1969; Bloch, 1973; Faubion, 2001; Paxson, 2004; Lambek, 2011; Mattingly, 2014; Dow, 2016). My approach applies a slightly different version of ordinary ethics which has often focused on the role of language (Lambek, 2010), on the role and experience of violence in everyday life and kinship (Das, 2007), or on people's struggles against the odds under the cloud of potential moral tragedy (Mattingly, 2014). My ethnography shows how questions about sugar also become an exploration of people's considerations about how to make a best good life in Edinburgh, and their dilemmas about how to grow children in the best possible way.

Unlike the public health literature, anthropological literature on kinship suggests alternative and more positive ways to conceptualise the ways in which foods move between people, and how they might participate in making people related, rather framing kinship relations (and in particular, parent-child ties) as a focus for dietary intervention. The following section examines

sugar through the lens of kinship theory. This leads me to argue that sugar's properties and effects in context – sticky, binding, transforming, transformative, risky, damaging, pleasurable – echo the many of the properties and effects attributed to experiences of kinship and social relatedness in Scotland.

## Reading sugar through kinship and relatedness

In this thesis, I show that in Scotland, sugar can usefully be reconsidered as a substance of relatedness. I argue for a multifaceted understanding of substance, which attends to the way that shared substances travel between people, how they are put to use to 'thicken' or 'thin' social relationships (Carsten, 2013, p. 247), to love, nurture and educate, as well as the deep ambivalence and potential harms which grow in intimate relations (Geschiere, 1997, 2003; Das, 2007). Within this framework of relatedness, ethnographic conversations about sugar reveal concerns about individuality and uniqueness at the core of kinship (Strathern, 1992a) and sociocultural ideas about the right levels of intimacy, authority and responsibility in different relationships. I also draw on feminist research to reflect on the intersections between food, kinship, gender and the state. In doing so, I share scholars' concerns that kinship cannot be conceptualised as separate from gender (Yanagisako and Collier, 1987) or social class (Strathern, 1981).

Much of the recent debate in kinship studies has focused on what constitutes kinship, and what kinship 'does'. Crucially, anthropologists show that kinship in Britain is not fixed or pre-determined, but involves efforts to make active connections over time (Carsten, 2000; Edwards, 2000). An ethnography of sugar consumption illuminates processual understandings of kinship and people's concerns with transmission in the everyday – how likeness and difference are passed between persons. I turn first to the scholarly contributions on the gendered labour inherent to experiences of kinship, before discussing public/private divides, intimacy and individuality in kinship, and finish by setting out my approach to substance.

My research underlines findings by sociologists of Britain that the distribution of childcare – including responsibility for and management of children's eating and health – is considered predominantly the purview of nuclear kinship (Cotterill, 1994), a task that falls disproportionately to mothers (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Cotterill, 1994; Beagan *et al.*, 2008), and to female school staff as this thesis illustrates. For example, the task of providing a school lunchbox becomes a complex task for which women feel morally and publically accountable

(Harman and Cappellini, 2015), as do school staff in Edinburgh who try to regulate such foods. Scholars have critiqued the rise of gender-neutral or ‘gender blind’ (Daly, 2013, p. 223) terms like ‘parenthood’ and ‘parenting’ since the 1950s, arguing that this language conceals the fact that mothers bear the burden of responsibility for childrearing (Faircloth and Lee, 2010). Current cultural models of ‘intensive motherhood’ (Hays, 1996) – where the child is shifted towards the centre of care – exacerbate the expectations placed on women.

Classic feminist research traces the rise of motherhood as a form of expertise to cultivate, but also as an ideology which supports the public/private divide on which contemporary capitalism relies (Hays, 1996). Growing research on experiences of fatherhood in Britain continues to develop these themes, revealing how tensions between providing and nurturing, paid work and childcare still have purchase (Miller, 2017). This ‘intensity’ has been shown to leak into expectations around fathering (Faircloth, 2014) and grand-mothering (Harman, Cappellini and Webster, 2021). Feeding (and most strikingly, infant feeding), becomes an important index of good (i.e. intensive) motherhood (Faircloth, 2013). At the heart of this paradigm is the notion of ‘parental determinism’ Furedi ([2002] 2008), or the idea that parental behaviours and attitudes are to blame for children’s (failed) development, and that risks should be managed. Sugar consumption amplifies women’s sense of guilt and failure to live up to these expectations. The UK and US literature shows that women’s guilt concerns the division of time between childrearing and paid work (Hays, 1996) or ‘second shift’ (Hochschild, 1989), as well their affective care for their partner (Gatrell, 2005).

In this climate, I show that sugar is used to signal love and intimacy, authority and control, naughtiness and indiscipline, guilt and comfort, closeness and distance within British kinship. Sugar consumption (or restrictions upon it) act as an index of the kind of relation at play. Mary Douglas’ classic research (1972) examines how the coding of meals in Britain expresses social relationships of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion. Charles and Kerr’s study of motherhood and maternal authority in northern England highlights the versatility and adaptability of sweet foods in parent-child relationships, and their value as treats, rewards for learning, and ‘symbol[s] of love and affection’ (Charles and Kerr, 1988, p. 97) – precisely because they are superfluous to children’s health. In a similar vein, Daniel Miller argues that supermarket shopping (and associated purchases of sugary treats) becomes a way for women to love, care for and exert some authority over other family members (Miller, 1998). While these studies emphasise sugar’s symbolic qualities within kinship hierarchies, my approach uses theories of



substance to analyse the transformations of people, bodies and the textures of their relationships – both vertically across generations, and laterally – through exchanges of sugar.

A key finding from my research is that relations with sugar are read as inherently personal and private. Sugar helps demarcate what is public or private, but more importantly, sugar is strongly incorporated into the process rendering times, spaces, and relationships public or private. Accounts of English kinship point to a strong association between kinship and notions of privacy and interiority (Strathern, 1992a). Drawing on these observations, I consider how kinship, privacy and closeness are understood to intersect in Scotland through the notion of intimacy. I draw on Berlant's (2000) observation that intimacy is never only private, and attend to the varied and flexible nature of closeness – ranging from the emotional, physical to the informational (Alexy, 2019). My research also differs by thinking kinship not only through the home, or through state care, but through the school – in particular how (private) values of home and kinship care are increasingly summoned into school relationships, and the role of sugar in creating and sustaining ambiguous grey areas between the two.

The plasticity of sugar reveals itself as highly conducive to stickiness with kin, and to processes of individualisation. I follow Strathern and Edwards in attending to the work people do to try to grow children into unique individuals, while forging enduring links with previous generations. Strathern suggests 'we might consider *the individuality of persons as the first fact of English kinship*' (Strathern, 1992a, p. 14). In northern England, Edwards finds that concerns around surrogacy are intimately linked to individuality – and that variability between persons is forged through gestation and primary feeding relationships (Edwards, 2005, p. 78). Her work reveals deep fears about uniformity, and about the wrong kinds of attachments. This thesis offers the ethnographic example of the bespoke birthday cake as a direct reflection of this concern in contemporary Edinburgh.

The anthropology of breastfeeding has been an important locus for rethinking notions of attachment in Britain, and ties between kinship, gender, and governance (Faircloth, 2013). Like breastmilk, sugar is viewed as a private substance exchanged between kin yet subjected to public regulation – a domain where parents (mothers) negotiate relationships with the state. Anthropologists reveal the colossal pressures exerted by the state and by markets – either to breastfeed, or to use formula – revealing an important sphere where nurturing practices are subjected to processes of medicalisation and moralisation. Van Esterik's (1989) and Maher's (1992) influential works argue for a focus on mothers' lived experiences and the contexts in

which infant feeding decisions are made. Van Esterik critiques the disproportionate focus on the *product* of breastmilk at the expense of the *process* of lactation – later arguing that this must be conceptualised within relationships and as part of the continuity of care (see Van Esterik 2015). This thesis extends this same argument to sugar consumption.

Kinship theories of substance offer important possibilities for rethinking diet in Britain, incorporating breastmilk into a range of substances that circulate between kin. Strathern (1992a, 1992b) considers the imaginaries of substance transmission in English kinship – namely the downwards and irreversible trajectories of blood. She finds that blood flows are viewed as relatively immobile, activated only in instances of procreation, and become partially visible through traits (Strathern, 1992a). Blood is perhaps the most paradigmatic substance for conceptualising relatedness in Britain (Wolfram, 1987; Strathern, 1992a; Edwards, 2000; Cassidy, 2002), as the stuff of life as well as the stuff of social class (Cassidy, 2002). Blood's potency has not decreased despite the increasing prevalence of expert discourses on genes and biogenetic materials (Franklin, 2013). Unlike the gene, sugar consumption also has a long history in relation to both labour, domesticity and class in Britain, as discussed earlier in this Introduction.

Blood and sugar illuminate from a different angle what it means to be related. Weston uses the term 'meta-materiality' (Weston, 2013) to theorise the powerful role of blood – moving beyond the metaphorical and the material aspects of the substance. While blood's potency has been linked by scholars to its naturalizing capacities (see Strathern, 1992a; Carsten, 2019), sugar is largely viewed as an unhealthy and unrequired commodity residing outside the body, and thus offers a different perspective on kinship. Unlike blood, sugar can be dispensed with – in theory at least. Expanding Weston's line of thought, I suggest that sugar is powerful because of its stickiness with notions of kinship care – sugar's capacities not only to symbolise this care but to embody it in material form, and to become substance. Chapter Seven juxtaposes charitable donations of home-baked cake with donations of blood and organs, to reveal the preciousness of sugar in its potential to materialise care, and to transport kinship-infused care across time and space, influencing both in the process.

While blood and biogenetic substances offer an unbounded pool of connections among which relations can be forged, they are insufficient without the active connections which develop through practices of care, attention, and time accumulated together (Carsten, 2000; Edwards, 2000, 2005). Sugar is central to the work of making connections in the right way – without

damaging children's bodies, future health and emotional wellbeing, or wider familial relationships – and thus illuminates kinship as crucially a domain of ethical experience (Faubion, 2001). Sugar also reveals the quality of successful relationships: those which endure into the future, and beget more opportunities for kinship ties. Yet sugar is not merely everyday work, and sugar-as-substance describes kinship as a kind of transmission. Sugar dissolves boundaries between biological, bodily, and emotional transmissions between persons: is a sweet tooth passed on from one person to another? Can such flows be controlled or prevented? While the UK literature foregrounds the sharing of bloody and genetic substances as productive of kinship, ethnographies beyond Europe focus on shared food. Through her Langkawi ethnography, Carsten proposes of a theory of relatedness as an ongoing process which develops through a continuum of shared substances including milk and rice. In the work of Merlan, Rumsey and many others, nutritive substances move seamlessly between the land, sexual interactions and commensality to produce kinship (Sahlins 2011).

The ambiguity of 'substance' (see Carsten, 2011) is useful for capturing the ambiguity of sugar – as something highly transformable and with uncertain effects. However, I differ from these scholars by focusing on the harmful dimension of shared substances used for growing children and relationships. An implicit assumption of anthropologists of kinship is that substances are life-giving, or at least nutritive. Scholars of drug use however remind us that an 'anthropology of ingested substances' more usually refers to a framework for 'alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages, prescription or illicit drugs, tobacco, and even food' (Hunt and Barker, 2001, p. 178) – a range of substances which harm bodies. Garcia (2010) is among the rare anthropologists to probe the idea of heroin as a possible substance of relatedness in new Mexico. Her work explores how practices of heroin provision become acts of compassion, as mothers seek to relieve their daughters' suffering.

Beyond the anthropology of drugs, theories of witchcraft offer another perspective on human sociality, and fruitful possibilities for enriching theories of shared substances. In ethnographic and historical accounts of witchcraft, the feeding of poisoned food emerges as a particularly potent way for witches to penetrate people's bodies unnoticed (Geschiere 2013). In Bloch's (1999) discussion, poisoning emerges as the negative side of producing common substance through commensality. Geschiere's research in Cameroon reframes witchcraft as a structural dimension of kinship – in that witchcraft stems from within the house and reveals intimate relations as inherently charged with the potential for grievous harm and destruction (Geschiere, 1997). More recently, Das's (2007) work revisits this theme through the violent effects of the

Partition of India on women – whereby kinship is similarly revealed as already containing the seeds of its own betrayal. For Das, it is this tension between care and danger that makes relatedness such a challenge to projects in how to live.

This ethnography of sugar consumption reveals that in Scotland too, kinship carries at its core the potential to become damaged, cracked or irreversibly broken. People relate to one another under the cloud of potential kinship failure, including fears of developing relationships which propel eating disorders, excess fatness, or the loss of emotional wellbeing. The aspiration to produce health in the bodies of others emerges as a dimension of contemporary kinship – and one among many possible arenas in which one might fail. Kinship becomes a key area of experiments in how to live, as people eat, feed, and restrict consumption to manage this fragility. I use sugar to build on the approaches of the scholars above, to argue for a multifaceted understanding of substances of relatedness, foregrounding materialisation and the transmission of affect through kinship, the making and remaking of connections with individual persons in the present and across time – as a way of not only nourishing bodies, but of feeding them the pleasures and dangers of intimacy.

## Fieldwork: Context, methods, ethics

### The village of Leith and north Edinburgh

When I learnt I would be moving to Edinburgh, I did online research on the city's neighbourhoods and rapidly concluded I wanted to live in Leith. Why? Was it the lower rents, the promise of ethnic and class diversity, the echoes of *Trainspotting*, or the black and white photographs of Leith's past as an industrial port town, hopefully still harbouring a sense of community? I can't quite remember, but it must have been a romanticised cluster of such notions.

After two years in the neighbourhood, I was convinced that Leith represented a particularly fitting site for a PhD research project. Edinburgh City Council maps its wards according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD, figure 2)<sup>1</sup>, colouring people's experiences from dark blue through cyan and yellow to blood red. Life in Leith can involve all of these mapped colours – increasingly fading into the blues, while some red pockets of deprivation remain (Doucet, 2009). I did not ask interlocutors about their income bands, or seek families out on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://simd.scot/#/simd2020/BTTTTFTT/13/-3.2004/55.9563/>

this basis, but paid close attention to how people’s experience and perceptions of sugar were entwined with particular class identities and livelihoods. This fieldwork could equally well have been carried out in an Edinburgh area known for affluence or poverty. This was not the study I wanted to do. Since moving into our (dark orange) tenement flat in 2015, my partner and I had had many arguments about whether we were gentrifying and what this meant. I was interested in capturing this changing dynamic in my fieldwork, and our place within it.

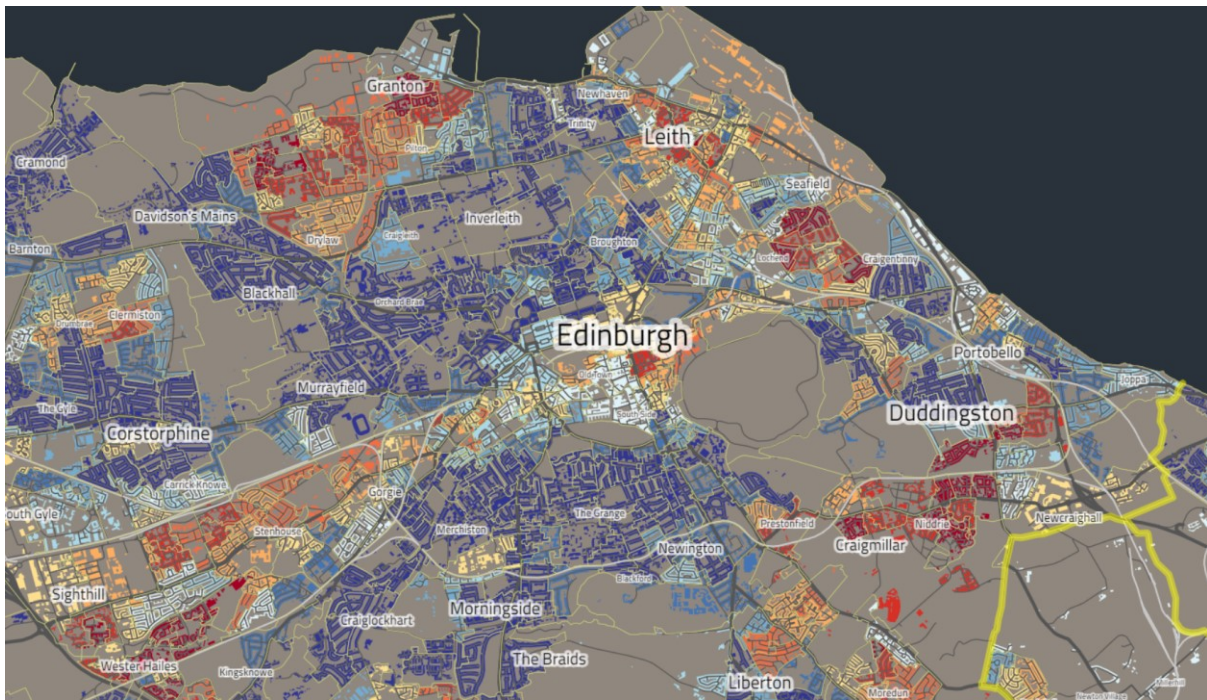


Figure 2: Map of Edinburgh according to Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Screenshot from Scottish Government website <https://simd.scot/#/simd2020/BTTTTFTT/13/-3.2004/55.9563/> [accessed 29.09.21]

Leith’s juxtaposition of iconic brutalist council housing and Michelin-starred restaurants, ongoing campaigns to save the ‘New Shops’ from becoming student accommodation, and controversy surrounding a new tramline connecting the neighbourhood to the city centre meant that many people were already engaged in thinking about what kind of place Leith was, and for whom. The power of Leith as an imagined community helped me in this study, facilitating my integration into school and other groups. A study ‘of Leith’ and the people living there made sense to residents. Many felt attached to Leith’s historic working class identity, showing me where their grandparents had worked making ropes for the ships, or the pub that marked the separation between Leith and Newhaven. Others felt connected through years of meaningful life events, and pointed out the bakery where their wedding cake was made, the

church they were married in, a favourite restaurant, the venue of a daughter's first birthday celebration.

Leith continues to be characterised by important disparities in wealth, and bears the marks of past class injuries which some participants still read in the buildings. Clearance programmes in the 1970s displaced families to Muirhouse and Craigmillar, as overcrowded tenements were replaced with high rises. The concrete New Kirkgate mall where I accompanied research participants to shop at Lidl or Greggs, harbours public and private memories of past layers of community space and meaning. A trendy new bagel shop on the central avenue polarises local residents – tasty new opportunities, or the warm bready smells of near-future exclusion? Meanwhile the 2017 release in cinemas of *T2 Trainspotting* – whose predecessor made Leith world-famous for its heroin scene, AIDS, and poverty in 1996 – showcases a sleeker side of the neighbourhood. North Edinburgh is also one of Scotland's most ethnically diverse areas. Leith was characterised by early waves of Irish and eastern European immigration in the early twentieth century (Withers, 2007) and large-scale Italian immigration, followed by Asian immigration in the 1960s (Marshall, 1986). Leith now has a high density of young workers, including significant Chinese and Spanish populations (City of Edinburgh Council, 2014).

During fieldwork, no participant pointed out Leith's historic sugar refinery to me (Figure 1), or saw Scotland's colonial history in the caster sugar they whisked into cakes. Ethnographers like Moran-Thomas (2019) and Højlund (2014) describe the legacy of sugar's connected histories in places like Belize and Cuba. In sites of sugarcane production, bodies and landscapes continue to be adversely affected by the ongoing legacy of colonial exploitation, giving sugar a bitter taste through its association with diabetes and ongoing inequalities (Moran-Thomas 2019). In his ethnography of heritage practices in Bristol, Gapud writes of the widespread understanding of the British empire as something that happened elsewhere before our time, and seen to be disconnected from current experiences (Gapud, 2020). In Scotland, the legacy of sugar as racial violence is likewise displaced and rendered invisible.

The people I met include members of many different communities, some of whose stories appear in this thesis, however their stories are not analysed along lines of race. I do not aim to frame their experiences as representative of a specific 'culture' as each family's story is too complex – often cutting across categories of class, race and gender – but instead weave in their stories as representative of the social fabric of Leith and north Edinburgh. The persons encountered in this ethnography did not frame – in their interactions with me – their

experiences of food, eating and feeding others in terms of race, which, like class, is omnipresent yet implicit in Scotland (see the following section). In the schools, homes and dental practices I visited, participants seemed careful to avoid framing the food of others in racialized terms, and as a methodological choice I decided to focus on the aspects and concerns most commonly voiced to me by participants. Leith's imagined boundedness and specificity breaks down in practice, and its boundaries are inherently uncertain. Several participants asked if I would refer to the City Council's lines slicing Edinburgh into different wards, or the limits of the town before it merged with Edinburgh in the 1920s. A few offered to dig up old maps. This study does not aim to constitute Leithness. My initial focus represented a methodological stance to construct a 'village ethnography' following Candea (2007). Candea argues for the production of an artificially bounded fieldsite, in itself multi-sited. In moving between streets and institutions, and across classed and generational spaces, my research was necessarily multi-sited. I took liberties stretching my 'village' sideways to encompass bits of Trinity, Newhaven, Pilton and Granton to the West, and Restalrig and Craigentiny to the East. This tilted village ethnography spans multiple intersecting communities: School communities, communities of neighbours, and charitable organisations striving to make the world (or just the neighbourhood) a better place. Already embedded in Leith, I had a network of contacts with various groups which proved instrumental.

#### Neighbouring, ethics and positionality: at home, at school

I completed thirteen months of fieldwork from May 2018 to June 2019. The start of my fieldwork coincided with life in a new flat, a new street, a new set of neighbours. I chose not to seek out a host family to live with – as ethnographers conducting fieldwork abroad often do. It is highly unusual in a UK context for unrelated persons to reside with a nuclear family in their home, a space imagined as bounded, a matter I discuss in this thesis. Had this been a study of au-pairing or domestic labour I might have done so, however, given the study's scope I opted to live in my own home and live as my interlocutors did – as 'neighbours'. A feeling of shared vicinity and being 'just down the road' helped me extend and solidify relationships through time. I bumped into research participants in the street, lent a screwdriver, and borrowed a stepladder. I took every advantage to 'pop over' at short notice to take part in a bake sale or a school activity.

As the research progressed, one mother expressed surprise that I hadn't become 'Auntie Imogen' yet – speculating that my role in her sons' school inhibited this. Several interlocutors started to announce I had become 'family' – testifying to the fact that prolonged periods of

time spent inside houses discussing kinship and food produces intimacy. One family member thus laid claims to a relationship with my fiancé, and endeavoured to help me repair a relationship with my father (Chapter Five). My own messy and fragmented kinship patterns offered room for complicity with participants who felt their families to have broken in the past or become damaged in some way.

It was sometimes hard to explain to my partner that our home and my work now overlapped, and it was unclear to us both whether I was inviting friends over or observing research participants, grocery shopping or note-taking. I felt anxious that my field persona was not quite the same as my home persona or university one. I found myself negotiating what I saw as collisions, and consciously raiding my wardrobe for any accessories or material things that would mark me out as *not* a teacher, nutritionist or member of an academic elite class. I felt overly conscious of a BBC accent shaped by eight years of studying English as a foreign language, combined with my new assimilation into University of Edinburgh communities.

In the first months, I spent time volunteering and visiting local mother and toddler groups, child activity groups, and adult cooking groups to meet potential participants, while waiting to enter the school gates. Conversations about a controversial biscuit plate, raisins and children's seemingly bizarre food habits informed the questions I would later ask during interviews. The families who became key were the ones who moved across these community groups and school space. Participation in these groups led to encounters with members of parent councils who facilitated my access to two local schools. Other parents were recruited by research flyers, a survey sent out through one school on my behalf, predominantly thanks to these first contacts who offered invaluable help with snowballing and friendship pyramiding.

At school, my role was relatively undefined, as confirmed by the generic sticky label or lanyard card 'Visitor'. In the first school, I arranged to observe children in the playground and lunch hall once a week, and to shadow my senior staff contact leading the children's Health Group. I assembled a partial picture of school life by observing on different weekdays, attending Friday assemblies, gardening groups, staff training days, and by volunteering in parent council meetings, social events and fundraising activities. In the second school, my presence was narrowly structured and dependent on the kindness and interest of two class teachers. I observed children in both their classes on five separate days during a learning period dedicated to health, food, and the body, continuing my observations in the lunch hall and playground on these visits. Following this period, I participated enthusiastically in parent council meetings



and festive events. My different role and status in each establishment (standing behind school management, or sitting alongside the children in the classroom) provided me with two complementary perspectives on school life. The analysis in this thesis draws on both sets of observations.

Being a white woman in a long-term heterosexual relationship, and being attached to a school influenced how I spent my time in the field and the kinds of people I could build rapport with. I vanished within the school playground, coffee mornings and child activity spaces, only standing out when I voiced my role or failed in expected modes of exchange ‘Which one is yours?’ or ‘Can you tell Jamie off? He hurted me.’ My presence was rarely questioned; as a student and ‘pre-mother’ it seemed natural that I should be interested in children and their ways. Parents and teachers often presumed that we shared common frames of reference and desires.

Already an outsider to Scotland, to worlds of schooling, and to parenthood, I found myself unconsciously amplifying my adopted French identity to produce additional distance, and to legitimize my ignorant posture and the questions I asked of people. Flexible degrees of Frenchness came with advantages and disadvantages. My biographical narrative of having lived outside the UK for over half a lifetime, including during my formative years, was helpful in disrupting shared identities and frames of reference. It explained why I wasn’t sure who Mary Berry was, and couldn’t engage in shared memories of *Bake Off* or *Strictly Come Dancing*, and why I kept ordering espresso coffee. Many interlocutors seemed attracted to Frenchness and keen to engage in forms of cultural exchange. Frenchness enabled continental complicities with Polish staff at school, Spanish families in the playground, and others marked out as away from home. On returns to France, I would fill my suitcase with gifts of regional produce to feed burgeoning relationships. There were disadvantages too. I had innocently hoped that a semi-foreign status might blur class lines. I was instead repeatedly told that French people had better food and culinary knowledge, were intrinsically healthier, and were somehow fancy or proper (espresso coffee being one of many markers), and which I had no way of disproving.

I was reticent to use a sociological approach to label participants or families based on categories such as level of education, income bracket, profession, or SIMD measures, which risks diminishing people’s complex experiences. Class is above all a relational category and an experience relating to the ways in which power is structured in Scotland (McCrone 2017). Writing in the context of England, Gillian Evans (2006) shows that social classes are by no

means homogenous groups or kinds of experiences, but internally fragmented. Like Teale's (2021) research in Scotland, I found that at the same time as class categories seem sharply demarcated, they can also be blurred, and the people I encountered often move through and across them with time, engaging with different social markers.

The experience of social class in Scotland is difficult to define, yet shared understandings of markers of class abound – even as people sometimes disagree on them (see for example what constitutes a normal 'Christmas tea' in Chapter Five). Such markers are always shifting, and may include particular brands and physical forms of foods and drinks, where a person lives, or the expressions they use, beyond the more obvious markers of profession, wealth and higher education. Despite having seemingly similar class structures, social class in Scotland differs from England. Perhaps even more so than in England, class has become a 'social condition that dare not it speak its name' (Law and Mooney 2006, p. 253) and has been 'erased' from policy discourses, despite the ongoing class divisions and structural inequalities which characterise contemporary Scottish society. In her ethnography of an English village, Strathern (1981) shows how discussions of class are recoded as stories of origins, birthplaces and kinship relations. Discussions of class unfold through different media, in this thesis, food and drink, but are nearly always implicit (Law and Mooney 2006), and my writing follows this perhaps particularly British way of engaging with class.

As an ethnographic object, I found class to be prickly. Conversations about a participant's class identity provoked discomfort and embarrassment for both researcher and researched. Participants did only on very rare occasions speak the word 'class'. Relations to class were more likely to be expressed through a range of terms, including referring to others as living 'in deprivation', on a 'lower or higher income bracket' – or just as 'some people you see' who drink litres of Irn Bru, or send their children to school with a family bag of Haribo for a snack, or send them with vegetarian sushi – often with a varying sense of 'us' and 'them'. Although I spoke to a wide variety of participants, the persons I engaged most with in this study were more likely to have an academic degree, and were unlikely to drink much Irn Bru.

In this thesis, I draw on the research of other scholars who discuss class in England, and compare what I have observed to their work. On the rare times I use the term 'class', this is my own interpretation of a given situation, based on what I take to be a shared understanding of the use of boundaries to mark differences with others.

## Short and long relationships

Prior to fieldwork, I had naively imagined myself popping in and out of flats and houses, asked to watch the children for a minute, ringing on a doorbell in passing. In most homes, my presence was more of an event or appointment, in which people placed their own meanings and associations. My presence recalled a myriad of past visitors – the family friend, the acquaintance to help out, the dinner guest, the health visitor or the social worker. In each case I was assigned evaluative powers by my participants, who invariably felt scrutinised.

The privacy of homes lay in contrast with the public nature of the primary school, where neither parents nor staff saw an issue in my speaking with and observing children and their antics. For parents, the mass of children in school appeared somehow anonymous and detached from the privacies and intimacies of kinship – although in practice pupils spent vast amounts of their time offering up information on kin and home life to playground staff and myself. My sense was that parents felt the school to be an area largely outside of their control, mostly discovering titbits through their children's incongruous narrations of school life.

With core and key families I was invited for special occasions – a birthday, shrove Tuesday, to make Christmas pudding, to eat Black Bun. These were felt to be times when 'good family' and/or Scottishness could be displayed. Most parents were confused by my desires to come food shopping, to church, or on a school run. The stand-alone interviews I did in homes made more sense to people. Interviews did not tend to be special events, instead taking place in the kitchen one morning off work or straight after school. Interviewees sometimes waved at their environment, assuring me that I had now witnessed 'everyday life'. During one-to-one interviews with parents, I asked more awkward and intimate questions. These parents and their children predominantly formed part of the school communities I visited. I often learnt more about their lives by chatting at the school gate or at soft play, and felt I could contextualise their experience a little. The analysis in this thesis combines perspectives from these different sets of families.

Data constructed through participant observation can be divided into several rough categories:

- **Two core families:** The Andersons and the Krasinskis. I visited these families biweekly for around 12 and 9 months respectively, engaged in everyday life at home and outside, and met family members beyond the nuclear household (e.g. grandparents, adult children, uncles).

- **Seven key families** I visited for long periods of time between two and ten times, and saw in a variety of other settings (e.g. shopping interview, café interview, evening meal, community clubs). Three of these relationships focused specifically on mothers, and one focused on grandparents.
- **Interviews** with school parents and grandparents integrated in school communities I was visiting, and sometimes met in other settings.
- **Interviews** with headteachers, dentists and community nutritionists.
- **Creative methods** with children at after school clubs, and at home. This included asking children to draw ‘What sugar does in the body, and how it makes you feel’, and/or ‘A recent memory of a time when you ate or drank something with sugar in it’.

The stories told in this thesis are my retelling of narratives and experiences shared by, or with, core and key families. Some interview data also appears in text. My analysis is also informed by informal conversations with parents and school staff, which do not feature in the thesis.

#### Informed consent

All adults interviewed in the context of this ethnography provided initial consent through a written form and participant observation sheet. For children’s drawings, additional consent was sought through a visual materials reproduction rights form. Consent is an ongoing process, and I had regular conversations with participants to review their role and continued participation in this project, offering them the opportunity to opt out, or to change the ways in which I interacted with their family members, and the kinds of activities it was appropriate for me to participate in. If participants did not answer a message, I did not insist but rather waited until they felt able to invite me again. One family had a change in job situation which curtailed my visits, but I was later invited to an outdoor birthday party and finished our research conversation over a coffee. The final version of this thesis reflects written and oral feedback on a first full draft given by participants.

This research involved different levels of consent. Within the schools, formal permissions were received from Edinburgh City Council and headteachers. Teachers gave written consent if they agreed for be interviewed, or for me to observe within the classroom for a longer duration. I did not seek written consent from all staff members, however I was explicit about the nature of my research, and requested permission orally to take notes during meetings which I attended.

I do not discuss issues from staff or parent council meetings which my interlocutors or I judged to be sensitive. The meetings which appear in this thesis are described in a way that focuses on interlocutors (e.g. members of senior management) from whom I had written permissions and negotiated ongoing consent.

With children I observed at home, or over several sessions in the classroom, I requested initial consent by explaining my project, and distributing a form designed for children, which children could tick if they wished to take part. I initially planned to ensure ongoing consent using a trialled magnet system method (Kustatscher, 2014). However, given the short amount of classroom time allocated, and the complex logistics of the magnet system, I instead opted to remind the children on each visit of the optional nature of participation, specifying that they did not have to talk to me if they did not wish to. Most important in my view was attending to children's non-verbal cues. I also made an exaggerated display of scribbling in a notebook to give children the continued option to ask what I was writing about, and often asked 'Can I write down what you said? I'm writing this down so other people can know what children think about this.'

While at home I requested written opt-in consent forms from parents, with children in classrooms I distributed an opt-out form to parents (which parents/carers were asked to return to the school only if they did not wish their child to take part), at the suggestion of teachers and in line with other classroom research (Kustatscher, 2014). Just one parent opted out, then agreed for their child to participate after receiving more information about the project.

### Sugar as method

'Sugar' is not a self-evident category of consumables. The Oxford dictionary alone lists seven different meanings of 'sugar'<sup>2</sup>, and illustrates an important divide between a physical and material definition of sugar as extracted from sugarcane or sugar beet, and a molecular or structural understanding of sugar as a kind of carbohydrate, a chemical compound. Scientists currently distinguish between several categories of carbohydrates: simple sugars, which are either monosaccharides, which represent a simple molecular structure (glucose, fructose and galactose), or disaccharides, a dual structure (sucrose, maltose and lactose), as opposed to polysaccharides, or complex carbohydrates, visualised as chains of hundreds or thousands of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sugar>

monosaccharides. In Edinburgh, people moved between different molecular and material understandings of sugar, continually remaking what sugar means through their knowledge practices.

While there were some mentions of the sugars (often in the plural) structurally contained in fruit – widely viewed as ‘good’ sugar – the idea of sugar (in the singular, with a capital S), as an idea or theme, sometimes glossed by participants as ‘the white stuff’, carried overwhelmingly negative connotations, which is a key focus of this thesis. Sugar in general (with a capital S) most often elicited conversations about health, chronic disease and markets at one level, and individual control and emotional patterns on another. The sugary materials (for example, honey, icing sugar, or brown sugar) seen to be embedded within particular foods – sweets, cakes, treats – instead seemed to elicit conversations about kinship. Sweetness in food opened onto reflections on everyday interactions with family members, unearthing shared memories as well as deeply private ones, involving love, belonging, hardship, death, wartime, migrations, anxiety, abandon and pleasure.

As an idea and a physical substance contained within foods, sugar became a technology for people in my fieldsite – a way to connect oneself to others, to signify one’s place in society, a tool for learning, to facilitate relational repair, or inversely, sparked tensions. When one participant suggested that I start abstaining from sugar to observe how people reacted, I realised that I had been using sugar as a method. I was deploying sugar to build closeness – bringing biscuits or madeleines (‘French’ sugar) to interviews and social events or avidly consuming sweet things to mark out who I was: a female friend, part of a shared community, an ordinarily deviant citizen and insider rather than an authoritative health professional. When this came up in conversation, I unwittingly framing myself as incapable of taking up the challenge of sugar abstention, subjected as I was to the diffuse powers of sugar myself.

On certain occasions the biscuits or chocolates I brought caused things to happen – a child to run off with the box, a parental discussion of when and who would be eating these, the divulging of a story brought to mind by Ferrero Rochers, or the confession and mixed feelings about a new diet for weight loss. In the first months, I had avoided carrying sugar, going to great lengths to select flowers, small toys or stickers, out of concerns of methodological bias. As the research progressed, I realised that bringing sugary things is part of the annoying or nice things that ‘other people’ (friends, grandparents, neighbours) in Scotland do, and thus provided space for commentary, shared experience or minor tensions. Questions about sugar and food

were questions about living together, the practicalities and emotional experiences of living out kinship, rather than reflections on the theoretical definition of what it means to be related.

## Mapping the thesis: The chapters

Part One examines sugar ‘in public’, and moves outwards from schools and medical institutions towards the home. Chapter One explores the flexible role of sugar within different school spaces, observing how sugar takes on different public meanings and values. Sugar is present in school life in myriad ways, co-opted into processes of socialisation and learning, or by its publicised absence. In a classroom lesson on health we encounter some of sugar’s negative values. Sugar is extracted as something to be worked on – identified, avoided, remembered – in an inculcation of the ethic of ‘my body, my responsibility’, as one teacher notes. Yet sugar also erupts in its material forms, when a child with special needs brings a (school) home-baked cake into class, created in the context of a parallel lesson about repairing social relationships. Sugar becomes publicly good and naughty at once on Hot Chocolate Friday – an incentive introduced as part of a novel programme to alter children’s and adults’ behaviour in school. School normalises the paradoxes of sugar. Boundaries between school and home can be murky, and the use of ‘home-baking’ in school is significant. Here, specific values of home are pulled into the school, as the institution tries to become a more caring space, and to foster relationships which compensate children for inadequate parenting.

Chapter Two focuses on messages travelling towards the home. It asks what is wrong with sugar, and explores the politics of discussing sugar’s negative values with children. Children are co-opted by school management into producing a low-sugar diet as part of their individual and collective rights to a healthy future through a compulsory fruit snack initiative, which shifts responsibility for health from parents to school staff and children. Focusing also on the perspectives of dentists and nutritionists who intervene in schools, I show that health messages about sugar offer particular ways to think about the body – as chronic disease, fatness or rotting teeth. Health professionals are less concerned as to whether children will feel loved by their parents, and instead worry about sugar’s transformation of bodies into bodies of deprivation, and future subjects of chronic healthcare. This risk is complicated by the inverse dangers of overthinking sugar – which can crystallise into negative self-image and disordered eating.

Chapter Three explores children’s ideas about sugar, and the links children form between healthiness, sugar consumption and good/bad behaviours and identities. ‘Being healthy’

becomes an institutional virtue taught by adults in positions of authority at school, and in certain kinds of homes. I argue that the dominant framings of sugar as oppositional to health enable children to play creatively with sugar, using it to solidify friendships, to expand their control over others, or to defy authority. Sugary foods are also associated with experiences of belonging, enabling children to engage in shared identities or to solidify relationships with peers within and beyond the school gates. This chapter critiques the limitations that frameworks of behaviour offer for eating, and reflects on the zone of permissible naughtiness that sugar consumption creates.

Part Two explores sugar 'at home' or 'in private', and examines the gendered nature of parenting, as well as other kinds of homes. Chapter Four explores mothers' experiences, and locates sugar at the heart of feelings of ambivalence about what it means to be a good parent. Sugar emerges as both a substance of pleasure and as a substance of guilt. Through accounts of their pregnancies, women show they have absorbed the negative public values of sugar, and desire control over their own and their children's intake. Yet in practice, avoiding sugar feels impossible, particularly since women feel that sweets are a source of pleasure for children in a way they aren't for adults, and that caring mothers should offer children a childhood that involves sweet things. I show how sugar produces gendered forms of complicity, shared experiences of guilt, pleasure, concerns about indulgence and pathological eating. Sugar is understood to reveal something about one's moral life and the kind of person one is.

Chapter Five focuses on fathers' experiences at home, starting from the observation that men often felt embarrassed to discuss the role of sugar consumption in their lives. While men regularly claimed to have nothing to say about sugar, sugar emerges as an idiom to talk about the intimacies of family life. Sugar's association with indulgence and an inability to exert control in some cases threatens to make sugar-coated things somehow unmasculine. I argue that some men often find themselves doing more work to sugar to make it appropriate to consume, and to disentangle it from associations with childhood and/or femininity. There is a complex web of what care means as a father, in a context where many men feel driven to embody post-patriarchal masculinities. Men's failures to cook, insistence on baking something no one likes, or other ritual performances of failed parenting emerge as conducive to good kinship ties. This distinguishes good fathering from good mothering, where failure was more likely to be experienced and spoken of in terms of guilt and blame.



Chapter Six focuses on sugar in grandparents' homes, and describes relations between grandparents and grandchildren as mediated by parents. I argue that grandparents' homes foreground the specificity of the nuclear family home by offering a counterpoint – other home spaces characterised by different logics. In interactions between grandparents and parents, discipline and sweet foods emerge as polarised, with sugar helping grandparents to establish a non-parental role and 'special' relationship with grandchildren. With the advent of grandparenthood, people experiment with a new layer of relatedness, plastered over and transformative of their previous accumulated roles of parent and parent-in-law (as well as child, sibling, widow or great-grandparent). The birth of a child reshuffles ways of relating, and can create new tensions and pressure points. Sugar and sweet treats often materialize as a sticking point and idiom for speaking about deeper discords. Sugar helps adults distribute time and authority over children, marking boundaries between different kinds of relatives.

Chapter Seven travels with a group of women who bake birthday cakes for deprived children free of charge, to argue that the sugar of birthday cakes is understood as a necessary substance of relatedness. For these bakers, the idea that a child would not receive an iced cake on their birthday to mark their existence in the world as a unique individual is unthinkable, and a problem to be remediated. Baking a sugar-filled cake for another parent by proxy is a solution enabling good kinship to emerge. These bakers have experiences of powerful past connections through cake – as children, parents, or siblings – and continue to bake in order to honour, solidify, and extend these fragile connections from the past into the present. Sugar connects strangers; home-baked sugar powerfully glues related persons. Having poured love and personalised care (or possibly kinship itself) into these cakes for a child, bakers must create distance through protocols of anonymization. In combination with others, this final chapter shows how messages about sugar travel in multiple directions simultaneously.

Parts One and Two overlap in showing that public and private are not given but brought into being, with sugar used to generate and negotiate boundaries between the two. Sugar-fuelled practices moving between home and outside – through the birthday cake network, school nurture spaces, the bake sale, or more intimate ones like a sweet treat sent into a husband's workplace or concealed in a child's lunchbox – continue to give value to sugar and shape its public meanings in positive ways, even as messages circulating in the same sites highlight sugar's dangers and harms to individual bodies. Sugar can signal care, love, kinship, disease, or bad parenting. Its meanings are produced in context. I conclude that the characteristics

commonly attributed to sugar (sticky, binding, lasting, transformative, brittle, potentially harmful) reflect those commonly attributed to kinship ties in Scotland.

## PART ONE: SUGAR ‘IN PUBLIC’

### Chapter One: School sugar

This chapter uses sugar, in the multiple material forms in which people perceived it, as a lens to ask how one generation attempts to educate, socialize, care for, nurture and exert a certain authority over another. I draw on fieldwork carried out in two primary schools in north Edinburgh, and interviews with four headteachers at other Edinburgh schools to explore people’s day-to-day lives in Greenside Primary and Oakfield Primary – two communities where school space is constructed and managed by a predominately white and female staff base. The chapter traces the changing meanings of sugar and sugar consumption as these permeate different registers and spaces of primary school life, both as a set of ideas and as an array of physical objects to exchange. What are different kinds of sugar doing within, and for, social relationships in the school? In an era where children’s rights rhetoric and restorative approaches to behaviour are firmly embedded in schools – bringing subtle changes to power dynamics and social relationships – I ask: What role does sugar play in the transmission of educational, moral, economic, political values? I ultimately argue that through relationships at school, sugar becomes stuck to lessons about creativity, social proximity, generosity, respect, recognition and compensation, even as it signals potential vice and future ill-health.

The chapter starts with the arrival of a new headteacher at Greenside Primary, and explores the role sugar plays in the new head’s quest to change the school into a space of improved learning, better behaviour, and shared health. Starting in the morning assembly hall, we travel to the flexible dining space to follow the implementation of a ‘Hot Chocolate Friday’ pilot initiative. The chapter follows sugar into the classroom via the ‘Talking Space’, to discuss sugar as a device for learning, a food group, and as a substance with the power to transform social relationships. The analysis finishes in the playground at pick-up time, with reflections on sugar, school and the welfare state. In attending to the ways in which sugar mediates school relations, formal learning processes, multiple forms of care and their temporalities, I seek in this chapter to contribute to a broadening of the anthropological understandings of the intersections between school and kinship, and to bring discussions of pleasure and intimacy to the forefront of debates on care and health.

Sugar does not often emerge from the school institution – when it does, it is special, exceptional. Becker’s (1953) research with marijuana users suggests that pleasures in substances are culturally learnt, and a growing body of literature on drug use shows that pleasures are contextual (Duff, 2008). School teaches us that sugar is hard to resist, and what kind of pleasures around sugar are possible and acceptable. In this chapter, I argue that the meanings of sugar are partly made in school – where sugar is produced as a potentially harmful yet ultimately innocent substance – a substance which one should enjoy yet express some ambivalence about. I show that sugar is understood to be good for the health of the school community in myriad ways – enabling children’s learning, pleasure, relationship building, celebration, raising funds, generating special forms of commensality and special time – even as it proves somewhat irreconcilable with the health of children’s individual bodies. I argue that sugar’s power lies within its material flexibility and ability to bind together a variety of persons and contradictions.

An ethnographic attention to icing sugar and baking in this chapter reveals the co-opting of values of home to render the school a more a caring place. Here, school emerges as a site where children may experience joy, pleasures, adult attention and consistent forms of care, but also as an institution which must shape children into disciplined, caring and kind individuals and citizens. In attending to sugar, I attend to the multitude of women who enter the primary school, and their work of socialising and educating children in different ways and towards different ends. The chapter traces an important historical shift towards the school as a site of nurture and emotional labour, characterised by relationships with adults which subtly seek to compensate children for inadequate parenting and gaps in care at home – again revealing people’s perceptions of kinship as fragile. In this chapter sugar emerges not so much as a substitute for care, but as a substance that mediates care and softens potentially threatening forms of adult attention.

This chapter opens Part One of the thesis by focusing on the sugar that is delivered and distributed through the school. In a reverse twist, Chapter Two picks up this analysis to explore care for children through practices of protection *from* bad forms of sugar, and how prevention fits into quite different understandings of good care. There, I discuss the regulation of sugary produce brought into school from home, and the channelling of health messages towards the home to mediate children’s kinship and to make the home a site of health. While Chapters One and Two focus largely on adult perspectives, Chapter Three continues this analysis by

exploring the ways in which children themselves manage their sugar, their kinship and processes of socialisation.

Taken together, these first three chapters (Part One) highlight – through sugar – the multiple faces of care for children, and the conflicts between them. I examine the tension between the kinds of care that sugar is understood to enable, and the kinds of care that are understood to be given through protection from sugar – and how these map onto different temporalities of care. I show how sugar is simultaneously (and ambiguously) embedded in multiple regimes of value – moving to and fro between children’s need for nurture from adults, children’s health, children’s collective rights, and their individual desires. Part One approaches sugar ‘in public’ – however I quickly show that sugar challenges dichotomies between public and private spheres. I instead demonstrate how sugar participates in rendering places, moments and relationships private and intimate, shared and public, school time or free time.

## Introduction: The assembly hall

‘Good morning boys and girls.’

‘Good morning Mrs Glenn.’

The school’s four youngest classes have been steered into the hall, where they sit row by row on the floor, cross-legged, a sea of bright blue school sweaters. The staff of Greenside<sup>3</sup> Primary sit on brown plastic chairs carried in from the corridor, lining the walls. Piano chords from Joni Mitchell’s song *River* float melodically in the background. A manual projection screen shows Mitchell’s album cover on YouTube, an indigo face caught in the shadows. A woman with long hair and a vermilion trouser suit, steps forward, and stops. She raises a flat palm into the air, indicating she wants silence. She wants to see ‘listening bodies’ from everyone, please. Children should be sitting on their bottom.

It’s a dry Friday morning, and the second assembly to be delivered by the new headteacher, Mrs Glenn. The breeze carries hushed gossip between staff and parents as to whether she will be up to the job – given her previous experience at a more affluent school. The atmosphere in is thick with curiosity and anticipation. I lurk at the back of the group with Lydia, the senior development officer. Like the headteacher, Lydia is smartly dressed and keenly ensuring that

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<sup>3</sup> The names of the schools, staff and children used in this thesis are pseudonyms

children are not engaging with one another but facing forwards. Mrs Glenn's strong voice pierces the quiet, reminding us of her programme. She is going to make the Greenside Primary a 'rights respecting school'. Today we will be talking about human rights and discrimination.

Like the children, I'm excited. These are some of my first days on the inside of a primary school. So far my visits had been limited to one of Lydia's flagship Pupil Equity Fund (PEF)<sup>4</sup> projects: building an edible garden with members of a local allotment. Lydia is happy to have me along to document the garden project, to help the children hammer nails into planters, watch them taste pea shoots, cook 'delicious soup' and pose for pictures snapped on a school iPad. While Lydia is delighted by my participation – meaning a higher ratio of adults to children – I'm frustrated at being tied to projects on 'healthy eating'. Throughout the year I spend in school, I'm uncomfortable with my immediate association with vegetables and cooking skills, and find myself constantly seeking out the sugary sides of school life.

Mrs Glenn collapses the browser page, and opens a PowerPoint display. A full-screen slide appears, offering a giant patchwork of colourful images: a bag of Chocolate eclairs, a sea of Liquorice Allsorts, a packet of Fruit pastels, a packet of Polo Mints, and loose M&Ms. The reaction is instant. A sudden ripple passes through the hall, followed by excited exclamations from the children. Shhhh. The head lifts a flat palm into the air again, and we follow suit. Once the silence is complete, the head addresses the school:

'Please put up your hand if your favourite sweetie is Liquorice Allsorts.'

A few hands go up.

'Staff you vote too. Adults and children have a favourite sweetie. We all have a favourite sweetie, even if we say we don't. Hands down. Put up your hand if your favourite is Chocolate Eclairs.' *Part of the room raises a hand. Mrs Glenn lists the other sweets, continuing to count the votes.*

'Oh, Fruit Pastels are the most popular! People who liked Polos please put your hand up again?'

Mrs Glenn pauses dramatically, assessing the room.

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<sup>4</sup> The Pupil Equity Fund is a sum of money allocated to schools based on numbers of schoolchildren receiving a free school lunch.

‘Polos are my favourite sweets too. Because I like minty sweets. Everyone who voted Polos gets extra break time. Everyone else goes straight to class.’

The hall explodes into a cacophony – cheers of ‘Yay!’ and rumbles of outrage ‘No! What?’ ‘That’s not fair!’ The head raises a hand for silence.

‘Do you think that's fair? Talk to the person next to you.’

Follows a hubbub of arguing between the children. The senior development officer and I can’t help overhearing the conversations among the P4 girls at the back. We stifle a chuckle upon on hearing a girl in plaits explain to her neighbour:

‘I don’t think it’s fair, but I’m definitely keeping my extra break because I voted Polos!’

The children listen carefully to the rest of the assembly, and participate with singing and gestures in a song ‘We have rights’. Mrs Glenn has seemingly won over the audience. The children leave to the tune of Amazing Grace, replaced by a second split assembly for pupils from P5 to P7. To my surprise, in this second assembly Mrs Glenn’s favourite sweetie has mysteriously changed to M&Ms.

She seems good, Lydia agrees, during a rushed cup of tea in her office after assembly. We are meeting to set out my schedule for observations at the school. I want to ask about sugar’s potential as a tool for learning, but instead I save what I feel to be a controversial question for later. Lydia is relieved to have someone ‘dynamic’ take on the headteacher post. Since the departure of the school’s last acting head, she and the deputy have felt crushed under the extra workload.

Meanwhile, other staff members and parents are more concerned about the potential overhaul of school traditions. Some shifts aren’t too controversial. The new focus on positive relationships and proposal to change school values to ‘Ready, respectful, safe’ in line with other local schools influenced by restorative approaches to behaviour, are uncontested (see later in this chapter). But Mrs Glenn has already nettled the school parent association by suggesting they discard the party for primary school leavers, or at least reduce it in scope. Like

the majority of school staff, Mrs Glenn finds the idea of children wearing heavy fake tan and prom dresses and being driven in limousines to be wildly inappropriate.

As members of the senior management team, Lydia and Mrs Glenn seem to share a vision of the school community as a laboratory, using their position in the school hierarchy to trial new initiatives – whose impact on children’s educational attainment and wellbeing may be measured and showcased. During my year in school I observed ephemeral and mostly sustainable webs of diverse skill-building initiatives, gardening projects, mindfulness and wellbeing initiatives, breakfast clubs, and creative attempts to fight bullying, promote kindness and to improve collective behaviour in different ways. While parents and health researchers reading this may presume that sugar merely needs to be extracted from primary schools – as a state institution whose role is to promote young people’s health and wellbeing – this ethnography reveals the work that sugar is doing in school. I argue that sugar must be contextualised within different school projects, aims and approaches, within the broader context of interpersonal relationships and structures of school life. This chapter examines the way sugar moves through life as a learning device, an object of knowledge, and a substance mediating pastoral care with individual children and care for the school community at large. Along with sugar, travels ambivalence, also entangled in different processes of learning and socialisation.

In the five schools I visited across Edinburgh, I saw Smarties used to convey logical thinking, ice cream to visualise states of science, and pictures of jam-filled slices of Victoria sponge cakes to teach fractions. Across schools (including private ones), Irn Bru was called upon to illustrate Scottishness, even as its physical presence was strictly forbidden. Mrs Glenn’s lesson on discrimination and citizenship could have drawn on clothes, colours, or animals, but sweets were a more obvious choice. Mrs Glenn finds it useful to all have a favourite sweet. A sugary form that serves to distinguish us from others, but something we unarguably have in common, across age groups, gender, social class and ethnic differences. Sweets are framed as universally desirable and something that creates complicity, able to collapse the stiff, institutional hierarchies between children and adults. By their imagined cultural presence in children’s everyday lives, sweets are framed as relatable, making them obvious to harness for digesting abstract notions – offering the possibility of a tasty shared language. Sweet things are good to think with, as learning devices and reassuring evidence of common humanity, even as they are bad to possess or ingest.



Against this backdrop, children are continually reminded in myriad ways of the need for ‘moderation’. The first lesson in moderation is to become aware of the perilous moral character of food – in particular sugar. Bodies like Public Health England (PHE) have crept into certain spaces of the school, urging everyone to become ‘Sugar Smart’.<sup>5</sup> A giant poster on one side of the dining hall reminds anyone passing through, with the aid of plastic sachets containing sugar cubes and exclamation marks – a fading relic of a past group activity carried out under the previous headteacher. I argue that sugar is also a useful tool for learning about moderation itself.

As certain staff members teach about (or with) sugar, and showcase themselves as role models of sugar consumption and moderation, sugar emerges as both a subject to learn about and a tool to promote learning – as well as a substance buried within foods to be exchanged, regulated, indulged in or resisted. Moving through different school spaces, I offer four ethnographic vignettes to reveal the illustrative, relational and communicative power of sugary things within contemporary schooling practices.

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<sup>5</sup> See the PHE campaign ‘Sugar Smart’ <https://www.sugarsmartuk.org/>

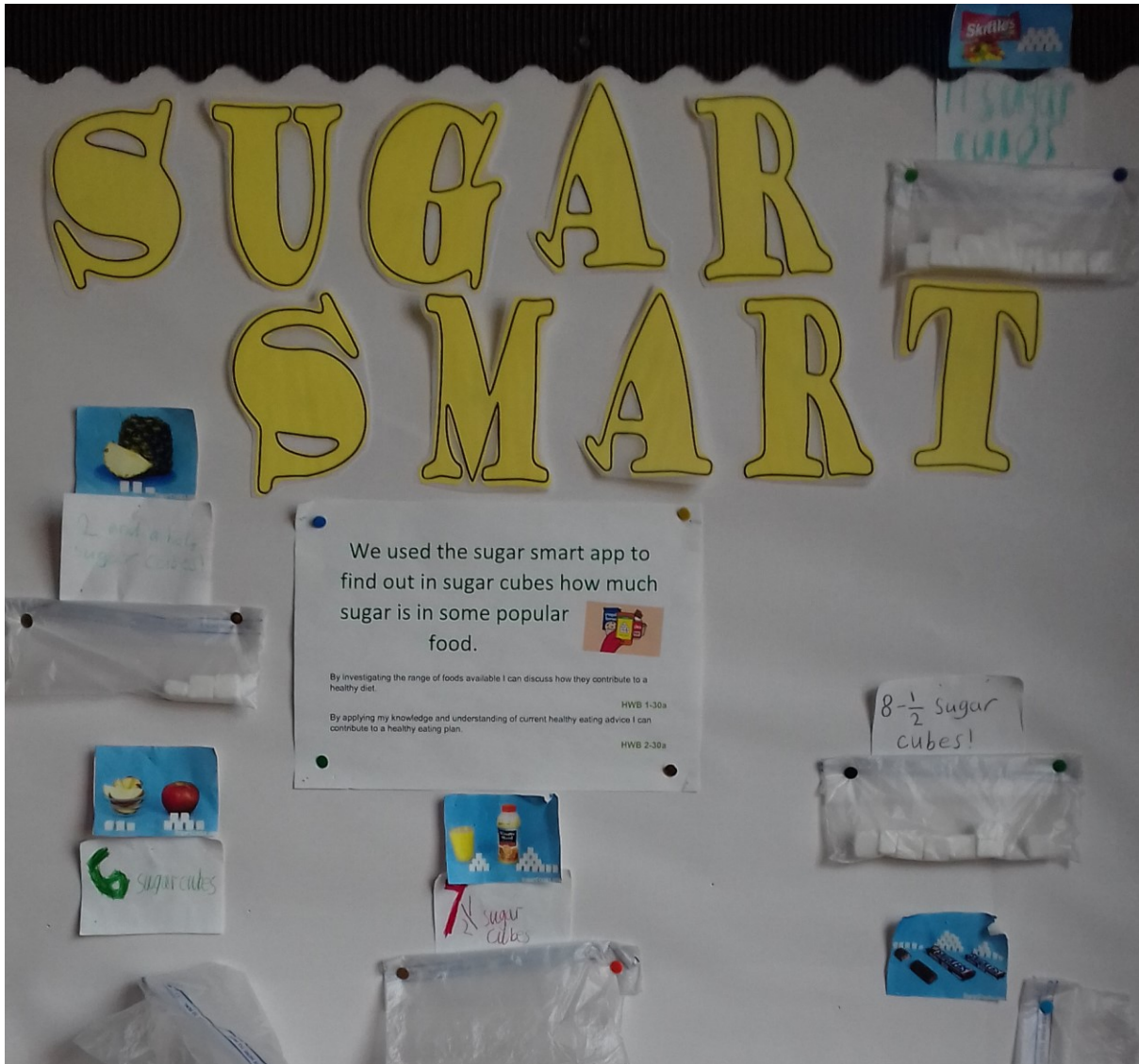


Figure 3: Poster displayed in the dining hall

## Above and Beyond: Hot Chocolate Fridays

While the children are on their last day of the school holidays, the school holds an in-service staff training day. For the staff members involved, this means dressing down, watching PowerPoint presentations, and talking about current school issues in breakout groups. Mrs Glenn is surprised I wish to attend, and expects I will be ‘utterly bored’. At 9am, we pull up child-size chairs and settle down facing the manual projection screen. Cups of tea are perched on desks and table edges; the atmosphere is relaxed – a room full of women exchanging anecdotes from our week’s holiday. Rupert, one of the few male staff members, arrives to set up the computer, and Mrs Glenn stands up to speak first, dressed in a sweater rather than her usual formal attire.

Mrs Glenn introduces the day's programme, apologising for her jetlag resulting from a trip overseas. The morning's topic is the implementation of a positive behaviour policy across the school. Following this is a discussion led by Lydia on awareness and action to counter the effects of child poverty. Mrs Glenn expertly passes through her slides, and presents the idea of running a pilot Hot Chocolate Friday. This will be reserved for children who have gone 'Over and Above' adult expectations – a school practice developed and trialled by Paul Dix. What do we think?

I immediately recognise the bold red and blue letters on the front of Paul Dix's (2017) best-seller *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes: Seismic Shifts in School Behaviour*. I've seen it on headteachers' desks, in meeting rooms, on coffee tables in a number of schools. Dix defines himself as a behaviour training expert, and embodies the latest chapter in a longer historical shift for rethinking how schoolchildren should be disciplined in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The use of such approaches in schools derives from a broader rise in interest in ideas of Restorative Justice in Europe and North America since the 1990s, in large part due to concerns about increases in prison populations – of young offenders in particular. As an alternative to retributive justice, these approaches strive for a reconceptualization of the relationship between the offender and the victim of a crime, and a greater concern for the wellbeing of both parties.

In a Scottish context, the rise of restorative approaches in schools largely follows from an influential report 'Better Behaviour, Better Learning' published by the Discipline Task Group – a group set up in response to concerns from teachers' trade unions and others about worsening behaviour in Scottish schools. Pilot restorative approaches have been trialled in Scotland since 2004 (see Kane *et al.*, 2006). Beyond an increasing concern for children's wellbeing, this also reveals a deeper concern for what is the right level of control over children, and how adult authority should be exerted – an issue of crucial importance to the parents and staff in this study. I discuss this further in Chapter Three through a reflection on researcher-child relations.

At the heart of school restorative and positive behaviour approaches is the idea of acting 'upstream' to create positive learning environments in which children feel safe, and in which they learn to value particular types of interactions and behaviours rather than comply out of fear of being punished. Strategies from Dix's books and articles have already been trialled and implemented by some teachers Greenside and Oakfield. These include the move away from the traffic light behaviour monitoring system, from exclusions of children from Golden Time or Choosing Time (essentially forms of play to close the school day), and the implementation

of a class ‘Countdown’ – a progressive collective move towards silence determined by an external beeper rather than the teacher’s command.

Dix’s rationale for improving school behaviour is located in a shift away from sanction-based regimes towards practices of improved pastoral care – which he claims have been put aside in an era where children are conceptualised as units of attainment (Dix, 2017). These relationships should be based on mutual trust and in consistent attitudes from all adults working for the school: ‘the same consistency that comes from great parenting, where you can’t put a cigarette paper between the approach of mum and dad.’<sup>6</sup> Dix locates this model within the good nuclear family. This approach is also about shaping children’s sense of self: ‘That is the person I know, that is the Chelsea I need to see today.’<sup>7</sup> Hot Chocolate Friday is one of many incentive schemes which aims to collectively shift the school population’s psyche towards heightened expectations. In Dix’s book, the rationale for this initiative falls under the heading ‘Noticing the Unnoticed’.

Hot Chocolate Friday is targeted at the children who because impeccably but are too easily forgotten. As we’ve seen, it might be tempting to invite those children who have been appallingly behaved as soon as they spend an afternoon without throwing a chair. Of course, we should recognise their determination to resist the urge, but their behaviour cannot be on a par with the child who is making all the effort but none of the noise.

(Dix, 2017, p. 48)

The Greenside staff murmurs in agreement at the end of the Hot Chocolate slides. Mrs Glenn pulls from her backpack a giant sachet of pretty wrapped chocolates purchased at the airport, and throws a generous handful onto each table. Nibbling politely on the chocolates, the staff members discuss the suggested initiatives. They agree that pupils who go ‘above and beyond’ at this school are indeed often forgotten amid the chaos, and the school could benefit from an additional reward and incentive scheme, such as the hot chocolate drinking. Mrs Glenn believes that Hot Chocolate Friday could work; it doesn’t have to be hot chocolate, it could be pizza, or something else.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Dix, ‘Behaviour management: Standing Together’  
<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/behaviour-management-standing-together>

<sup>7</sup> Paul Dix, ‘Teaching Tips: Volume 2, behaviour management’  
<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/teaching-tips-volume-2-behaviour-management>

A first pilot session is run the following week. Coincidentally, I'm visiting the P5 classroom to observe the children's artwork – an activity organised in the context of 'Scots Week'. Inspired by Scottish artist Gillian Kyle, the children are busy drawing large dinosaurs with skins inspired by Tunnocks wrappers, Tunnocks caramel wafers, Irn Bru packaging, or Scots porridge (although less so the latter). The nominated children's names are called out during morning assembly, to enthusiastic applause and whooping. The chosen 21 children reconvene at 11.20am in the dining hall, where the headteacher, a PSA and I have set up two rows of tables, and are frantically stirring Cadbury's hot chocolate powder into Vegware cups. There is concern about the temperature of the drinks, and the checking for possible allergies and intolerances. I'm given the task of cutting up marshmallows. The headteacher serves the cups and addresses the seated pupils:

Normally I would never give something disgusting like this to children, but this is because you've gone above and beyond. You're the first children to get this. Take as much cream and marshmallows as you like! I won't think you're being greedy; you're allowed to be as greedy as you like today because it's your special day. Imogen, can you give them a top-up? Anyone for more whipped cream or marshmallows? Have some more! No one will think you're greedy, you've deserved it.

The headteacher takes photographs of the children with their hot chocolates filled with marshmallows and chocolate fingers, and topped with whipped cream and sprinkles, which are broadcast via the school's social media accounts. The adults serve but do not drink hot chocolate themselves. At the next edition of Hot Chocolate Friday, a staff member will also be nominated. The event is accompanied by a big (sticky) brown envelope addressed to the parents, containing an official letter of congratulations, with a special hot chocolate stamp, in line with Dix's suggestion. For children who don't like hot chocolate or have a particular intolerance, glasses of squash and gluten-free dairy-free biscuits are offered instead.

When Mrs Glenn has to rush to a meeting with a parent, the deputy pops in to help us clear up. I ask the deputy's opinion. Did it go well? 'Yes really well, I think they really enjoyed it, they'll go back to class and talk about how amazing it was, and then the others will want to get it too.' But maybe it is best to keep it to every other week to make it more special, she muses. This new tradition forges clear institutional links between one's behaviour as a good school 'citizen'

and the reception of desirable sugary consumables in return. This event takes place in select company, not every week, and during class time.

The new hot chocolate paradigm is a rarer and hierarchically superior mechanism of achievement as compared the school's longstanding paper award system, whereby all children attending the school are sequentially recognised. The Hot Chocolate award is different, in that it is reserved for a newly constructed behavioural elite. Some children will never be eligible. This leads the headteacher to feel concerned about the gender imbalance of hot chocolate Friday. So far 75% of recipients have been female. 'It is what we're looking for that's gendered, or are the girls exhibiting the behaviours we're looking for?' Mrs Glenn wonders aloud. Or does it reflect the school population? Mrs Glenn invites the (90% female) staff base to reflect on this at the next staff meeting.

Although the Over and Above reward could also have been pizza, or 'something else', a hot sweet drink made obvious sense, and was financially and logistically much simpler. A crate of sugary consumables, a hot water urn, and disposable cups were the only ingredients required for a pop-up ceremony. Sugar's cheapness and chemical properties – its instant dissolvability and long shelf life – make it an ideal resource, a flexible substance enabling the materialization of unplanned celebrations. Sugar's frivolity, stemming from the fact that it is not deemed nutritious, nor something required for children's health and development, renders it highly available to recast as a reward or prize (Charles and Kerr, 1988).

Yet hot chocolate drinking appears fraught with a foray of possible moral dangers. I'm expecting parental complaints. With a wave of a hand, Mrs Glenn encourages me to 'top up' the marshmallows and cream. Bottle in hand, I linger, unsure, held back from squirting more cream by what feels like an invisible force. Should I really take Mrs Glenn's assertions about greed and zero limits at face value, or is it a turn of phrase? Or has the responsibility for the limits on indulgence been subtly delegated to me? I quietly lean over to request instructions on how many times to top up. As if obvious, she raises an eyebrow: 'They can have as much as they want, within limits of the reasonable.' This paradox encapsulates the complex messaging about indulgence and moderation, control and pleasure, that form an important part of children's learning at school.

One child however seems concerned, and when Mrs Glenn's back is turned, asks me if she 'has to' drink the hot chocolate. Only following my negative answer does the girl start to drink. Discussions of control and pleasure from the children's perspectives are presented in Chapter

Three. Drinking hot chocolate under a giant poster reading ‘Sugar Smart’ must make for an interesting experience. The following conversation occurs between Mrs Glenn and the sticky chocolate-fingered children sitting in the dining hall. One child asks:

‘Is Hot Chocolate Friday, basically you come in here, and get a whole load of sugar put into your body?’

Mrs Glenn: ‘Yes, I guess so! It’s not really very good for you is it? But sugar isn’t the devil is it...As long as you’re not having it every day? You wouldn’t want it every day, would you.’

Gary: ‘I would!’

Mrs Glenn: ‘Would you really? If I have too much sugar, I find I feel quite sick. It feels good while I’m putting it into my mouth, then afterwards I feel horrible.’

Graham: ‘Me too! Oh no, I regret!’ He mimes being bent over in half in pain. We all laugh.

With Hot Chocolate Friday, there are lessons within lessons, and contradictions within contradictions. We can indulge as much as we want, within the reasonable. It is acceptable to be greedy, if this is deserved. An invitation to celebrate without limits cannot be taken at face value – we must learn to limit ourselves, and notice reprimands stemming from our own bodies. We are being taught how to manage pleasure, pain and regret, and how to tread the fine line between enjoying the best thing in the whole world and feeling morally and physically horrible. This is ultimately a lesson about how to feel ambivalent, and about embodying the knowledge that sugary indulgences are inherently bittersweet.

As marshmallows melt into whipped cream and chocolate powder, values of reason and moderation lie in waiting, ready to surface at any moment – and it is this tension which creates the specialness of the event and potential for complicity. Even as she stirs the naughty hot chocolate, Mrs Glenn is careful to role model a diet of health based on moderation and self-control. As she distributes the chocolate digestives to squeals of delight, she admits that she ‘couldn’t help looking at them’ when they were on her desk, and considered eating one – after her apple. Mrs Glenn builds affinity and closeness through the divulgence of knowledge about her preferred biscuits and personal experiences of temptation, yet seamlessly merges this with

role-modelling (historically Protestant) values of self-restraint (see Coveney and Bunton 2003). Although nothing has been asked of me, I realise I also feel compelled to embody moderation, and this has blocked my hand on the nozzle of the cream.

In Daniel Miller's *Theory of shopping* (1998), treats are a way of managing the dubious and problematic boundary between rewards and self-indulgence. The treat is usually demarcated as out-of-the ordinary, and designates the recipient as special and worthy of attention – a practice to do with managing affect and relationships. Treats also signal a liberation from work and obligations (Miller, 1998). The notion of the treat holds together the two sides of Mrs Glenn's paradox: sugar is permissible when it is the exception, not the norm. In categorising sugar as a well-earned award for embodying school values of kindness, fairness, respect and desires to learn, sugar consumption is normalised as an educational device and ordinary aspect of citizenship. The harms, pains and potential obscenity of sugar must be acknowledged for hot chocolate to acquire its high moral value, and for the pop-up celebration to be marked out as a special treat.

But Hot Chocolate Friday isn't merely about indulging in sugar. It is also about indulging in a special relationship with adults of higher status. It is a space where children might safely challenge authority, with controversial accusations of adults filling children's bodies with unhealthy substances. We learn things about Mrs Glenn and other staff members in this selective out-of-class setting – valuable knowledge about the out-of-bounds lands of their homes. Children learn that Mrs Paterson has two naughty cats, and that Lydia (just occasionally!) lets her daughters eat whipped cream on its own – a similar form of decadence 'in moderation' played out within the home. Sugar seems to work for 'remembering' unnoticed children, marking them out as special, and inciting others into behaving well to sugar-fuelled recognition. The next section examines a quite different kind of sugary treat – one from Fairyland.

## The sweetness of Fairyland

Occasionally, sugar in particular material forms becomes part of classroom-based learning. On Tuesday morning, I receive an email from a staff contact, 'FYI: Shona is coming in to do some baking with the kids.' I hurry down the road to the school, through P1 and P2 corridor decorated with painted cardboard rolls and photographs from a school visit from the dentist, looking for Shona.



In the long thin room dubbed the ‘Talking Space’ tucked away along a maze of corridors, I encounter a woman lifting a set of cumbersome boxes of cooking equipment. I interrupt to explain my project and Shona nods, glad to have a second pair of hands. Born in the area, Shona’s husband and daughter both attended the primary school. Shona runs an after school sports club, and feels very attached to the school, often dropping by to deliver help. There isn’t time to talk further, or for Shona to explain the activity.

On the central table are large boxes of Rice Krispies, gluten-free cereal, golden syrup, a small disposable paper bowl for each child. Shona marches efficiently to and from Mrs McRae’s class, making rapid calculations, how many children per session, which ones have allergies. She shepherds the first four children walk in, and brusquely directs them to specific spots around the table.

Shona: ‘We got a letter from the dragon. He needs your help. He has asked the children to make some fairyland treats...’

Noah: ‘...Is that honey?’

‘No it’s syrup. On normal days, dragons eat honey because they’re healthy, but for a treat they like syrup. Darling, now you stand over here because the dragon knows that you get a sore tummy if you eat some things. Does anyone know the name of this spoon?’

Mary: ‘Er, Shona?’

Shona: ‘No, it’s not a person’s name, it’s the name of the type of spoon. This one’s called a ‘tablespoon’. It’s good for eating things like soup and pudding, and maybe your cereal in the morning. The dragon wants you to learn about your counting, so I want each of you to take five pink marshmallows and five white marshmallows.’

Shona carries out several tasks simultaneously – melting squares of Tesco chocolate in the microwave, and giving instructions: how to drip the golden syrup off the spoon, fold the ingredients together with a spoon, and transfer the mixture to a cupcake case using a pinkie finger. Shona massages and rolls out white fondant, and assembles a selection of cutters for the children to choose from. ‘They like butterflies in Fairyland’. Shona helps the children tap a

brushful of edible glitter over their creation, and set it on a crate next to their name. We take three more groups of six children. The structure doesn't vary, but sometimes Shona introduces new sections:

Shona: 'What's healthier, honey or syrup?'

Max: 'Honey!'

Shona: 'Dragons usually have banana and honey, but this is for their treat. What's important to get honey?'

Max: 'You have to eat healthy first.'

Shona: 'Yes but what else?'

Chris: 'You have to have it in the house?'

Shona: 'Yes, you do, but I mean where does honey come from? How do you make honey?'

Chris: 'From bees!'

Shona: 'So we have to plant lots of nice bee-friendly flowers.'

The bell rings and Shona and I let out a breath in unison. 'That went well?' We head towards the staffroom for a cup of tea. Shona carries two boxes of mini tray-bakes for the PSAs and teachers, whom she greets enthusiastically. I learn that Shona is often 'helping' as she puts it, usually meaning unpaid pupil support work, in which the school is lacking. This kind of care – one-to-one attention with a high ratio of adults to children – is of high value for the school, and regularly outsourced to association workers and volunteer parents with Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG)<sup>8</sup> clearances. With both children now older, Shona misses the primary school community and arranges slots to visit and organize activities, usually baking, a particular hobby of hers.

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<sup>8</sup> PVG scheme membership, delivered by Disclosure Scotland, is a criminal record check required for any adults undertaking regulated work with children.

Back in the cooking room, Shona suggests we finish packing the mixture into cupcake cases for the teachers – ‘They work hard! They need a treat’. Shona makes a special one for a teacher who doesn’t like marshmallows, and two special gluten-free ones, all of which she delivers in person. Like Hot Chocolate Friday, sugary treats are about recognising the value of unnoticed school staff. I ask Shona if the ‘dragon treats’ are a learning activity or just something fun, immediately regretting my wording. Shona frowns at my glaring ignorance of Primary 1 and Primary 2 learning objectives. It is learning. Maths – counting. Science – measuring, with the spoons. Motor skills – she holds up the sticky cutters.

For Shona, both golden syrup and honey represent particular material forms of sugar, which rank differently in terms of health. Are Shona’s questions to the children about sugar and honey to teach them about health? Shona laughs. ‘No that’s just a reflex, I always say things like that, encourage them to be healthy.’ Shona has a degree in nutrition and works in sports. ‘I can’t help it!’ Could it have been something savoury or just sweet? Shona shrugs. Because it’s a fairyland theme, sweetness was naturally more adapted. Fairyland is indeed a sweet place, and spreads well beyond the designated left hand corner of Mrs McRae’s classroom. Mrs McRae is admired by other staff for her creativity, drive, and firm approach with the children. Mrs McRae shows me around her classroom, proud of her storyline approach to learning. Letters from the dragon line the wall, sharing the space with maps of fairyland, and a three-dimensional paper beanstalk growing out of a real packet of bean-shaped sweets. Several inches along is a letter from the tooth fairy, asking the children for their best advice on looking after teeth.

Mrs McRae speaks passionately of the co-invention of fairyland as a way to engage the children. If they can tell a story, this will improve their writing skills. Imagination and creativity are valuable skills placed at the centre of childhood learning – and can be enhanced with edible glitter, melted marshmallows and sticky icing. Presented in the playful form of making treats for imaginary dragons away from home, sugar conceals mathematical thinking, scientific knowledge and key motor skill development. Concealed as play, sugar acts as a mediating substance – enabling forms of learning seen as less traditional or less intellectual, and thus engaging with a broader cross-section of children. Because sugar is not a nutritional requirement, sugary substances are free to take on new meanings (Charles and Kerr, 1988), including magical ones.

At home, many parents I spoke to used similar techniques: using cake recipes to improve children’s reading skills, weighing out ingredients to improve adding and subtraction skills –

inventing hidden ways to engage children in study. Sugar offers myriad possibilities for translation. Learning how golden syrup drips off a spoon, how sugary mixtures clump and resist transfer, how icing reacts when pressed with a cutter, are all valuable lessons. The storyline approach is about being more creative, and sugar is assigned a role in developing children's creativity. Last on the list of learning activities, dragon traybakes close the school topic, a well-earned 'treat' before the Easter holidays – with treats signalling a release from work (Miller, 1998). Sugar serves to mark time, bringing the term to a close.

For Shona, co-producing tray-bakes is an easy and useful life skill, both for family and for her work in the community. In the context of her afterschool club, a significant percentage of the funds raised – enabling extra events and trips not covered by council funds – are gained through bake sales. Sugar allows for this flexibility: learning, dreaming about magical worlds, and producing worldly funds, bringing home values into other spaces through baking. She had briefly considered an activity focused on cutting fruit, but this would have been logistically complex and riskier from a safety perspective. Ideas about the wrongness of sugar and moderation also permeate these lessons, reminding the youngest schoolchildren that the sugary home baked items are a 'sometimes food', even in the imagined universe of friendly dragons. Other kinds of visitors like the tooth fairy are close neighbours in classroom mythology.

Spaces like the 'Talking Space' are defined by their flexibility – allowing for multiple forms of communication and relationship building to take place, through baking, cooking lessons, meetings, play and nurture sessions. Sugar seems to mirror this flexibility. This is due to values attributed to sugar as a unique material form with specific chemical properties: instantly dissolvable, binding, changing. Just as the sugar of hot chocolate magically dissolves the dining hall into a ceremonial sitting, the sugar of dragon snacks offers a magical journey from the school into a space of multi-layered learning and imagination. The values of playfulness and creativity regularly attributed to sugar, and its place in the lives of women like Shona who provide labour for the school, make its presence in school activities seem safe and innocent.

### Healthy eating: Sugar as food group

In the classroom not all sugar is as delightful – some sugar needs grounding in its earthly incapacity to sustain human bodies. It's after lunch break at Oakfield, and the children sit on the carpet facing the smart board, ready to start a new topic: Healthy Eating. Most of the children's names have gone up on Mrs Reid's board for good behaviour, in line with new ideas

about positive relationships and behaviour. If all the children get up on the board, we'll be allowed to do a special clap altogether when the school bell rings – a crocodile clap, or a marshmallow clap, or maybe a collective firework clap.

On the activity planner, this topic follows on from 'Food and Farming' and 'The Human Body'. Mrs Reid has shown me her slides from last week. During their work on the body and its key organs, Mrs Reid asked the children to take their pulse, run 30 seconds on the spot, measure it again, then repeat this activity one minute later. The images on the slides as a backdrop to the lesson included a cartoon figure of someone running, a red and yellow carton of chips, and the message 'Foods high in fat can lead to obesity'. Mrs Reid explains, 'We were thinking about taking care of your body – whose responsibility is that? Getting them to think: my body, my responsibility.' I hadn't been present for 'The Human Body', but I recalled a similar conversation during a 'Food and Farming' session on food provenance labelling. Mrs Reid had asked the children: 'If you're going to put something into your body, you want to know where it comes from, right? You don't want to be drinking a cup of poison do you?' The children had nodded in all seriousness, understanding that food was inherently filled with risk – and that it was their task to interrogate it to make sure if it is safe. One child put his hand up to interject, 'I wouldn't want to drink milk straight out of the cow because it might not be good.'

Today's session introduces the Eatwell Plate and the notion of food groups. The topic started with a 'mapping activity' – a walking visit of Leith, to visit local allotments. Not much growing in December, Mrs Reid points out to me, but the aim is to show the children that even in the city some people grow their own (healthy) food. Back in the classroom, Mrs Reid distributes cartons of milk with the assistance of a child on the milk rota, and turns on the projector, a low whirring in the background. The children sip on their straws, waiting for the 'Healthy Eating' lesson to commence. Several children snuggle up to me on the carpet. 'Can anyone tell Imogen what we learnt about last week?'. The children are informing me about the skin that covers everything and the squishy-squishy brain, when Mrs Crawford – a pupil support assistant who assists Tom, a child with special needs – puts her head around the door. Tom was taken out of class this morning for thumping another child and throwing furniture. In a loud stage whisper, Mrs Crawford asks how many children are in this afternoon. 'We've got a surprise for you! It's cake.'

Mrs Reid looks around at the children expectantly. 'Ooh! After we get through our next activity, we'll all get a piece of cake.' The class door closes, and Mrs Reid presents the idea of

‘food groups’ and asks the children what kinds of food we need. The children shout out ‘fruits’, followed by ‘vegetables’. Mrs Reid is visibly pleased. Do we only need fruit and vegetables or do we need anything else? The children remain silent, blank-faced. Mrs Reid waits for a few minutes, then interjects:

‘What about meat and fish? What do we need that for?’

Harry: ‘To make your teeth strong?’

‘Yes, because different foods do different things for your body. What else do we need?’

Simon: ‘Water?’

‘Yes it’s true we do need water, otherwise our body would dry up. But let’s stick to food groups for now.’

Simon: ‘My family has an allotment and we grow things there.’

‘That is great Simon. What else? What is friends with veg?’

Mrs Reid eventually gives the answer: ‘Grains. I want you to remember the different food groups. What else?’ *Mrs Reid gradually fills in the Eatwell plate on the slide.*

Harry: ‘Sugar? A little bit of sugar gives you lots of energy.’

*An animation on the slide adds in a section with sugary products – the children react with noises of excitement.*

Ashley: ‘Sweeties!’

Mrs Reid: ‘So we’ve got our sweeties, our fizzy drinks... But they’re not very good for you.’

Harry: *Sadly, to the rest of the class* ‘That’s why we can’t eat them.’

Mrs Reid moves on to 'Fats'. She quickly stops the class, distracted by the noise of two children quarrelling over a pencil. 'I don't think we'll be having cake if this continues!'

Ashley: 'Shhh you! Anyone want cake or not?!'

The children answer Mrs Reid's question on the food we need through a nutritional lens, fruits and vegetables are the only correct answer, the only identifiable foods required for the body to function. As with the Fruity initiative described in Chapter Two, fruits and vegetables have come to embody health to such a degree that they require no explanation. Inversely, sugar (with a capital S), as an idea or theme, embodies the absence of health with no explanation required. The mere mention of sugar by adults provokes giggling and excitement – highlighting sugar's particular transgressive moral status in spaces of formal learning. Alongside this, the looming threat of no sugary cake becomes a powerful tool to restore silence and concentration until the end of the activity.

When the food groups have been duly guessed and noted, Mrs Crawford and a proud-looking Tom reappear in the doorway. The child is carrying a plate loaded with 20 small squares of cake, tilted at a precarious angle. Mrs Reid addresses the class:

'Tom has very kindly made us a cake. Ooh, it's still warm, it smells delicious. What do we say to Tom?'

Class: 'Thank you Tom.'

Harry: 'Er, don't touch them Tom...'

Mrs Reid; 'Let people help themselves please.'

Tom walks clock-wise around the circle of sitting children. He makes to hand me one.

Mrs Reid: 'Give pieces to all the children first and see if there's any left.'

Tom, addressing me: 'You haven't got one.'

Mrs Reid: 'No Tom that's not how it works. Give one to all the children.' Tom stares at me for a long time, and then moves on. Noises of 'Mmmh', 'Yummy!' rise in the classroom as the children lick the frosting and their fingers. Watching the spectacle from her desk, Mrs Reid lifts a disapproving eyebrow: 'We don't know if Tom likes it or not because he is just licking the icing.' To my surprise, the children spontaneously start to comment on their experience of the cake.

Jack: 'It's delicious! Thank you Tom.'

Chris: 'I love the texture.'

Katie: 'It's so light and fluffy!'

Harry: 'It's very spongy. I think it's lemon cake.'

Capitalising on this instance of reflexivity, Mrs Reid spins around on her desk chair. 'What a good opportunity! What food groups do we think are in this cake you're eating just now?' The children shout out the answers joyously, mouths full of cake.

'Sugar!'

'Fat?'

'What else?'

'Grains...?'

*The bell rings.*

Mrs Reid: 'Maybe if you're all good, we can ask Tom to bake something for us again.'

Harry: 'Or we could bake something for Tom to say thank you?'

The children file out, and Tom stays, looking content. Mrs Reid whispers to Tom: 'Next time we could get the ingredients and make my special recipe,



couldn't we?'. Tom smiles. What is that? I whisper. They exchange a secretive smile. 'Truffles!'

In Mrs Reid's class, we learn that the body is full of amazing (and squishy) organs to take care of, and that we have a moral imperative to do so. My body, my responsibility. We also learn about the easy coexistence and the everyday harmony of knowing the wrongness of sugar and consuming it formally anyway – possibly in the very same sitting. We learn about the enjoyment of these contradictions. Through food, we learn more about Mrs Reid, and the relationships that we can have with her. We discover the value of baking: its deliciousness, and its ability to repair past wrongs and reconstruct relationships in the present. We observe cake's capacity to take on multiple layers of meaning – apology, incentive, reward, masterpiece, and a physical object whose materiality is good to discuss, both structurally (food groups) and empirically (taste, texture). Mrs Reid even weaves in lessons on British cake-eating etiquette: not to touch someone else's slice, not to lick icing off the top. The children learn that when home-baked cake is served, it signals a winding down in pace, a relaxing of institutional rules, a spreading of an atmosphere of togetherness and time off work – allowing for out-spoken reflections, and requests for more baking.

In schools, cakes do not float free, but are channelled within particular structures. Tom is presented with the activity of baking during his nurture session with Mrs Crawford, where it emerges at once as a learning activity (literacy, numeracy, motor skills), an expression of his relationship of care with Mrs Crawford, and as Tom's 'individual' initiative to make amends and repair relationships with Mrs Reid and the class. Baking fits snugly with Dix's shift from sanction-based regimes to pastoral care and adult attention. Tom is not shamed into publicly apologising for his harmful behaviour earlier this morning. He is encouraged to bake this cake to 'share' and to express his care for others. This is a lesson in socialisation for Tom and the other children around sugar's affective value. Chapter Seven discusses cake as a technology of conversion of temporal kinship and care.

Sweet foods can soften the hardness of school discipline. The profuse thanking of Tom frames cake-giving as an act of individual kindness, rather than an institutional activity, masking the educational processes at work. Harry borrows this discourse of sugar-fuelled kindness to put the case to Mrs Reid that other children be allowed to undertake the enjoyable activity of baking too, using the rationale of the reciprocity of the gift. As at Greenside Primary, Oakfield's new positive behaviour policy favours restorative approaches, where punishment and sanctions are

side-lined in favour of positive action to restore relationships. The reparation cake does just this. Hence Tom's confusion. How will the restoration be complete if Mrs Reid and I do not eat cake? But 'how it works' is that children are the priority, another lesson to be learnt. Children are the true recipients of the forms of compensation that cake promises – compensation for the learning time lost through Tom's disruptive behaviour, and a reward for their respect for school hierarchy. As adults, Mrs Reid and I don't need rewarding or compensating with the small pleasures of cake.

Children's pleasures are the priority. Again there are lessons within lessons, and it is no coincidence that Mrs Reid and Tom share a history beyond lemon cake, including a secret chocolate truffle recipe. Mrs Reid teaches one thing about food in the school curriculum – that unhealthy foods like cake (or truffles) must be translated into food groups, nutrition, and risks of obesity. Both in class and after the school bell, Mrs Reid teaches children about sugar's potential to create intimacy and togetherness, and repair to relationships through baking and its promises of sensory pleasure.

The 'nurture spaces' (or 'talking spaces' at Greenside) within which cakes like Tom's are baked, are on the rise in Britain. Such spaces are moulded with the intention of being spaces between 'home' and 'school', catered towards the most challenging children, those often understood to be living in contexts of financial or emotional deprivation and who struggle with the rules and codes of the school environment. In nurture spaces, baking, eating snacks or meals together at the table, high levels of adult attention, polite conversation, the encouragement of self-control, and a wide variety of play options to stimulate children creatively and intellectually, are understood as ways to help socialise the most challenging children – and all of which subtly incorporate tropes of intensive mothering in Britain (see Faircloth, 2013) .

Through her ethnographic work schools and working class communities, anthropologist Gillian Evans argues that the British school is fundamentally a place of middle class values and ethos – a continuum of the middle-class home (Evans, 2006). Following Evans (2006), I argue that these nurture spaces reveal a rationale for channelling disruptive children through sets of spaces and relationships more akin to (imagined, ideal) middle class homes and nuclear kinship forms, in order to effectively care for children, integrate them into school environments, and make them into good citizens, thus substituting for bad kinship at home.

School home-baking is an oxymoron. It reveals the subtle role attributed to sugar in producing more caring forms of schooling – more and more akin to ideals of good mothering at home.

Needless to say, these forms of affective work can be hard work for the staff members responsible for delivering it, and to children to whom they are not related. In Scotland, 90% of primary school teachers are women (Scottish Government, 2018b). Baking – as a form of affective work – easily slots into culturally expected practices of providing nurture to children by women, is this instance extended to settings outside the home. This gendered expectation for female school staff to nurture is explored further in Chapter Two, where teachers are delegated the responsibility of feeding a morning snack normally issued by parents.

In an era of health promotion, sugar and home-baking are rare occurrences in school education, but ones which surface in particular times and places, to do a specific kind of affective and symbolic work. In the last section of this chapter I explore a second ambiguous space between home and school – the school bake sale – where mothering with, or through, sugar permeates the school gates. I discuss this outwards extension of the home and its values into school space, and the kinds of possibilities of care this opens up.

### Monetising sugar

‘Savage’ Jane remarks, as we’re crowded out by children holding out coins and touching the cakes. We’re in the playground, with two school benches pulled together in guise of a shop window. It’s Jane’s son’s bake sale. At the sound of the bell, children and adults appear from nowhere and mill about the stand. I surprise myself by loudly tutting and scolding a child who has put their hand straight into the tin.

Jane and the other two mothers behave as if we’re in a commercial shop, asking ‘Who’s next? Is anyone waiting to be served?’. I follow suit, packing tiny cupcakes with squashed icing topped with dolly mixtures into tiny transparent bags, trying my best to not touch any of the cakes with my fingers. Another mother addresses Jane: Who made these gingerbread men? Helene, the French mother to my right. Helene developed an interest in baking and decorating since moving to Edinburgh ten years ago. She has just started telling me about edible metallic sugar balls, when a second wave of children and parents flood the stand. Then all is left is crumbs. Jane counts the tin. About one hundred pounds in total once the float has been removed. Not bad.



Figure 4: Helene's gingerbread men, Bake Sale June 2018

There has been a weekly Friday bake sale for as long as anyone can remember. While different policies have ebbed, flowed, waned – reducing sweets, teaching healthy eating guidelines, bringing in new measures of hygiene and food safety – the baking stand has continued to stand solid, gently lapped by each new wave. I ask both a previous and current headteacher about this. The first shrugs. You simply can't interfere with the bake sale. It is parent council territory. The current head frowns, and explains the bake stand has been put 'outside' – in the playground – to show that the school does not endorse this. There are mixed feelings, and micro-politics at work. But the extra money for school projects is certainly welcome.

Bake sales are a culturally appropriate way to raise funds in Britain, and a model frequently adopted in the five schools I visit. Yet they are not without tension. One mother tells me about an unplanned playground bake sale for Dementia. 'Imogen, it was carnage. In all seriousness: *carnage*'. Some children hadn't got a cake, and were crying. Some children had got a cake, but without their parents' consent. Mrs Tiger, the head of one local school explains:

So there was something *contentious*, is that the right word? Some people in the school, well one person [staff member], in particular said 'How can we be a health-promoting school and do bake sales?'. So that had to be discussed. But bake sales are the most effective way of fundraising, an easy way of raising money.

Mrs Tiger, sighs. Yes. Bake sales – for the school, for the parent council, for charitable causes – were contentious yet inevitable. Since the school foregrounds the importance of ‘pupil voice’, the children often request bake sales, so there is no choice but to respect this. But bake sales are fraught with dangers beyond the harms of sugar. For one, the potential for food allergies, for which the school institution would be held responsible. Secondly, the bake sale spearheads inequalities, due to the fact that not all children can bring cash to school. Because of cake, children risked being socially excluded, which breaches school value of fairness. As Mrs Tiger saw it, an informal policy had to be invented to make sure everyone had a cake. However, in other potentially sugar-infused spaces – such as the school bus – it was better that no one should be offered a sweet by the driver. Sugar in the school requires policy upon policy, which easily contradict one another.

At the end of one bake sale, Helene pulls me aside and addresses me in French to share what she has learnt about the ‘bizarre’ UK system, as she says, since her arrival in the country. Helene doesn’t want me to get things wrong in the thesis. Yes, Helene and the other mums *do* have fun baking and decorating. Particularly using (British) sprinkles and silver balls she had never seen before, and definitely wouldn’t eat herself, because ‘*beurk!*’ (‘yuck!’). Helene wants to make sure I have understood the situation: the school’s lack of funds. She hopes I will share her outrage at the flimsy welfare state. ‘Do you know how it works here? The teachers have to apply for grants, except they don’t have time to. We don’t *want* to bake and sell cakes, but that’s why we do it. (...) In France, the state pays!’ [my translation].

Helene and I continue to bond over our mutual expectations of the welfare state, based on our shared home across the Channel. In her view, sugar is compensating for work the state should be doing. People should be paying taxes, not baking and purchasing their own cakes. Baking can be mistaken for kindness. As I interrogate the aim of the bake sale, I discover it aims to flatten socioeconomic inequalities – since the very funds raised are poured back into the school to enable all children from one class to participate in a school trip. Some parents made a point of dropping extra coins into the tin. ‘Keep the change’. In Mrs Tiger’s school, every child got a cake, regardless of whether they could pay for it.

Purchasing cake in the playground entails ingesting sugar and collective aims – an expression of one’s solidarity and investment in school life. In a certain sense, the bake sale aims for small-scale redistribution at the level of the school. Where it might be distasteful to speak about monetary concerns, baking and eating school cake is a tasteful activity. The gendering of cakes

and their association with motherhood gives them a positive value, making them hard to challenge, or regulate. Chapter Seven discusses the associations of baking with motherhood in more detail. The time, money and effort spent on baking is undertaken by mostly white and often the more affluent mothers in each class – not with a charitable goal, but in the aim of improving the school community at large, and thus their particular child’s experience within it. These mothers are role-modelling for their children, showing good citizenship through engagement for the things they care about – and in a safe way, since baking and cake are viewed as relatively innocuous rather than highly political activities and substances.

## Conclusion

During one of my first weeks at Greenside, I’m asked to make marshmallow tray-bakes with a group of children for the school fair. The head of the parent council phones me later to ask how it went. Just before hanging up, she asks ‘Are there any resources left?’. It takes me a moment to register that the leftover ‘resources’ I need to return are a bag of white caster sugar, a packet of marshmallows, cooking chocolate and a box of Rice Krispies. Yet this term accurately describes sugar’s role in the schools I visited. In the myriad forms it takes, and foods it penetrates (marshmallows, but also honey, hot chocolate powder, and cake, in this chapter) sugar emerges as a valuable ‘resource’ in both senses of the term – as a material supply, an available means, and a creative strategy to which one might have recourse in particular circumstances.

Sugar emerges as both a fast and slow substance: a combination of speed and longevity. Its value lies in its capacity to provide quick sensory pleasures with minimal cooking or transformation required – with a long shelf-life which means that as a resource it never spoils. Its flexibility is paramount. With the addition of variable amounts of time, effort, flour and eggs, or a splash of hot water, sugar can be rapidly converted into money or instances of creativity, learning, reward and nurture. The sugar of hot chocolate powder dissolves into a special drink in under two minutes – enabling the abrupt transformation of the school dining hall into a ceremonial space. Dissolved in a pop-up liquid reward, sugar bends school space to create new atmospheres and ways of interacting with adults. Stirred into dragon treats sugar helps children voyage to magical and creative places. Mapping sugar onto a high adult-to-child ratio and levels of attention wraps produces dynamics of care and recognition of children as special, and as citizens of in a particular community. These uses of sugar – newly framed within

a positive behaviour model – draw the private values, home values, or mothering values of sugar into the public arena.

Sugar's temporality is also periodic, seasonal. Sugar serves to mark time in the school: Easter, Christmas, and the end of term are marked by sugary school activities such as dragon snacks, as well as token sugary gifts from teachers. Many instances of school sugar consumption are future-oriented. Hot chocolate drinking aims to improve the future behaviour of the school population as a whole; At bake sales parents and children ingest sugar to build solidarity and a better school community. The multiple temporalities and moralities of these different projects dissolve the clear public health link between sugar and ill-health/reduced chances.

Within the school, sugar is important as a material, but also as an idea. In its more abstract form, sugar is drawn upon as an easy shared language. As the assembly example shows, school staff understand how the language of sugar captures children's attention, enabling the translation of complex concepts such as democracy, inequality and discrimination. At the same time, sugar is an object whose consumption must be continually learnt about, including its moral dimension. This concern with sugar's detrimental effects leads to complex layerings of formal and informal school policies which aim to weed out specific forms of sugar while growing others.

From the youngest age, children become comfortable with the multi-polar approaches to sugar in Scotland, and the ways in which the place of sugar extends and shrinks within the institutions they frequent – where one can learn which food groups to avoid while eating frosting-topped cake, or indulge in a decadent hot chocolate under a poster urging one to be 'Sugar Smart'. Sugar's physical and metaphorical presence in school is deeply paradoxical. Sugar is presented as something to avoid, to consume and enjoy in specific ways ('in moderation'), and thus becomes a ubiquitous tool of learning and socialisation. Tensions between the multiple values of sugar, and the ambivalence this causes, become an integral part of the fabric of children's day-to-day lives. This irreconcilability is through the notion of sugar as an exception or treat. In turn, the notion of the treat generates more paradoxes, since exceptions easily multiply and become stickily regular – the bake sale, the sweets issued by the bus driver, or treats brought in to share on a child's birthday.

The next chapter focuses on ambivalence and other ways of channelling sugar – away from the school, away from the home, and away from children's bodies. Rather than drawing the positive values of home into school, as we have seen in this chapter, Chapter Two focuses on

the dangers of sugar and the negative values of sugar that are pushed into the home from school and medical institutions.

## Chapter Two: Dangers of sugar

### Introduction: Types of hurting

It's my last visit to Hannah and Ross's terraced house. I've asked their ten-year old twins if they would help me by drawing 'what sugar does in the body, and how it makes you feel.'<sup>9</sup> Other children of this age group largely refused my invitation, but Lily and Hugo dutifully settled down on stools at either end of the kitchen island. Lily's sketch (see annex) depicts a large creature poised to eat a lollipop. A header reads 'It's like normal food but it tastes better and it *doesn't* fill you up.' The creature's body parts are labelled 'rotting teeth', 'hurting stomach' and 'brain (don't know what's going on)'. Hugo's picture (see annex) offers several floating drawings under the caption 'I don't feel heavy when I eat sugar and I don't feel anything. It doesn't hurt'. There is a rotten smile illustrating 'yellow teeth' and a figure whose stomach has been circled: 'Makes it hurt and then you get diabetes.'. Hugo is slower to finish, and he answers the second part of the question separately, in writing. 'How does it make me feel? I don't really think about it but I will be careful.' There is a pensive silence as Hannah and I examine the two drawings side by side. My audio-recorder continues to run in the background. Hugo clarifies:

Hugo: 'This is diabetes by the way.'

Hannah: 'You see how parents' attitudes affect how kids think... Don't they. Sort of telling.'

Hugo: 'What?'

Hannah: 'I was just saying, you see what an impact parents' attitudes have on the way kids think about things. I feel a little bit bad about that actually. You can have sugar and it's not going to give you diabetes. It's only if you had *loads*.'

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<sup>9</sup> See Introduction for a full description of this method.



Hugo: 'Still. You taught me that.'

Hannah: 'I know, I know.'

Hugo: 'It's your fault!'

Hannah: 'I know.'

In Lily and Hugo's stories, sugar hurts the body in multiple ways. They include a variety of sensations, affects, moral values and bodily sites. The hurting stomach, the rotting teeth, certain dubious effects on the brain, a superior taste and a stark opposition to normal food, heaviness and emptiness, the looming threat of chronic disease, and the overarching imperative to be always more attentive and to exercise control. The distributed responsibility for protecting children's bodies is there too, as both the work of parents ('your fault') and of individual children themselves ('I will be careful'). Hugo and Lily's drawings encapsulate the overlapping and contradictory concerns that unfold around sugar at a broader scale in Britain, and the ways in which children and adults try to make sense of these in the context of their relationships to one another.

Chapter One focused largely on the positive values of sugar, illustrating how sugar materially emerges in children's lives at school as a substance enabling nurture, pleasure, creativity and learning. Here I offer another angle on sugar as a language through which to communicate with children, and reveal some of the more negative values and facets involved in living with sugar. I focus on people's perceptions of the dangers of sugar, how these might be mitigated, and how sugar's harms should be narrated, in particular to children. Moral paradoxes emerge within sugar, a substance which comes to stand in for dental rot, unhealthy weight gain, diabetes, passivity, ignorance and bad parenting, while somehow maintaining its status as a substance of innocence appropriate for consumption by children. I show that underlying certain negative messages from health professionals about sugar (and the importance of avoiding it) resides a second message formed of expectations and subtle injunctions to consume *some* sugar.

Sugar is a morally overburdened object – whose consumption shifts between the ethically important and the utterly trivial in social context. Both the morality and temporalities of sugar's effects emerge through social relationships. In this chapter, sugar is on the move – linking together the home, the school, and healthcare institutions. Sugar emerges as both a physical object and a set of concerns, whose effects can be traced onto individual bodies and the

collective family body. Sugar becomes a lens onto notions of public responsibility for children's bodies, and the distribution of responsibilities between people in the spaces of home, school and medical institutions. While Hannah expresses this as parental influence, this chapter explores how these messages travel homewards from school and from encounters with medical professionals. Protecting children from the threat of diseases associated with sugar consumption emerges as an important kind of adult care, carried out through education, physical activity, and bodily hygiene. Conversations and interventions around sugar reveal the increased pressures on parents to make the home and nuclear kinship a site of public health, and the role of educational institutions and relationships in substituting failed kinship care.

I explore how interventions around sugar frame human bodies as fragile, in particular the bodies of children. Sugar emerges as both detrimental and necessary to children's growth and self-formation – understood to be fragile processes with long-lasting effects into adulthood, and ones which unfold predominantly within relationships of nuclear family. Chapters Four and Five take this argument further to fully explore this fragility of children through the lens of kinship, showing how kinship relations are conceived as always already in danger of breaking, with parent-child relations containing the seeds of their own destruction (Geschiere, 2003). In this chapter, I focus on the paradoxes between views of children as fragile, and the weight of expectations placed on them – including the notion that children should act as vehicles delivering health knowledge and messages homewards, and can take responsibility for embodying their rights to health (Boni, 2020).

The chapter starts with an examination of the filtering practices of health messages by parents and health professionals at home and at school, before moving on to analyse several examples of health interventions targeting children in school and nursery, and finishing in the medical space of the dental practice. What are the dangers of sugar to health, and how should these be communicated to children? How is health and (low-sugar) diet governed through educational institutions? What intersections exist between children's health and good kinship? This chapter does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the dangers of sugar to health, but focuses instead on the contexts in which they are voiced, the sites and moments when sugar is brought to the surface for discussion or acted upon – my questions and presence being an obvious one of these. The language of being healthy, including having healthy teeth, become a central focus of this chapter for this reason. Teeth emerge as a politically appropriate or more sensitive way of discussing sugar's harms – and this is in itself another paradox since dental health is an important marker of health inequalities in Britain.

## Temporalities of sugar consumption: ordered and disordered eating

Given the devastating consequences Hugo has mapped onto the body as a result of sugar consumption, the ten year-old feels the need to clarify a paradox: Consuming sugar ‘doesn’t hurt’ per se. In our ensuing conversation, Hannah probes: ‘Because it is bad, it should hurt, but it doesn’t?’ Hugo nods.

Imogen: ‘Hugo, how much sugar would you need to get diabetes?’

Lily: ‘Lots every day?’

Hugo, *after a long pause*. ‘One hundred tablespoons.’

Imogen: ‘What, in total, or in one day?’

Hugo: ‘Oh, that’s like, an amount. You could probably get lower. I’m just, like, rounding it up. Or rounding it down.’

Lily: ‘If you have too much it hurts your tummy, doesn’t it?’

Sugar, in this portrayal, is white and granular. In children and adults’ accounts, sugar tends to accumulate in the body unseen, only later resurfacing as pain and disease. Sugar’s effects leak and spread across different temporalities and sites of the body. The dangers of sugar are understood to grow from the accumulation of past excess, or inadequate control. For Hugo, such an accumulation can be roughly quantified and visualised: one hundred tablespoons. An excessive behaviour provoking onset of disease across time, and pain into the future. Hugo’s analysis draws on a broader overhanging (puritan) narrative, that morally bad behaviour – indulgence in sugar – should have negative consequences. What tastes good and involves pleasures must ultimately be bad for you (Rozin, 1987).

During fieldwork, I viewed the monolithic badness of sugar, often as white and granular, to be an irritatingly omnipresent public health trope, with serious methodological disadvantages. But through time, and from house to house, I found that sugar’s harms and badness remained uncertain and elusive to people. How much is too much? Is there a place for sugar in the balanced diet? How do glucose and fructose compare to sucrose? Besides, sugar’s visceral effects on the body cannot be counted in tablespoons, Hannah points out. In other families,

with other drawings, sugary things produced rashes, allergies or hurting tummies, yet these effects occurred in sporadic, inconsistent and uncertain ways. I came to realise that sugar, in its different forms, offers a rich mosaic of ways of ‘feeling bad’ – from mild nausea to physical pain, at the surface of the skin to the depth of the gut, from light regret to self-disgust, chronic guilt and shame – which I discuss further in Chapter Four. Chapter Four further details how the elusiveness of ‘too much sugar’ can become a source of anxiety for mothers.

At the kitchen table, the conversation continues with Hannah taking on the role of the interviewer to ask Lily if sugar had ever hurt her tummy or her teeth. ‘It rotted Clara’s teeth,’ Lily points out. Hannah explains the ripple of shock of this dental filling on Clara (Lily’s best friend), on Clara’s family who were ‘in shock’, on Lily, and on the wider community of children at the private school. This was a rare event, and the child had proceeded to shock the other schoolchildren by giving up sweets. Hannah and Lily can access sweets once a week, on a Friday – a tiny assortment of Haribo in a coloured plastic bowl. Hannah often reminds the children they do not want to end up with teeth like their mother’s, damaged and in need of life-long medical maintenance, an uncomfortable legacy left by a generation of past parents who did not know how bad sugar was. Kinship is also about connecting past, present and future (see Carsten, 2000; Cannell, 2011; Shryock, 2013). Lily and Hugo might want sugary treats now, and feel deprived – but Hannah knows from her own experience that Lily and Hugo will also be able to look back on sugar consumption (as a lens onto their childhood) from a distance. These are different kinds of living with sugar, that cross different temporalities.

Health policy occurs in the home, through the work of parents, as well as through encounters with health education (or the damaged bodies of others) at school. But there is more to Hannah’s story than dental decay. When we find ourselves alone, Hannah expresses the horror and concern she felt in witnessing her cousin’s daughters grow up overweight – embedded in a life of home-baked cakes and puddings, intended as a form of care by her cousin’s wife. Hannah finds it tragic to see how the weight of this has stuck on into adulthood. ‘I would just be ashamed of myself as a mother if my kids were overweight. I’d be ashamed. That’s why I make my children suffer.’ In Hannah’s account, the dark side of kinship (Geschiere, 2003) emerges through maternal care. The destruction of these children’s futures through the growth of excess fat is hidden in the seed of parents’ desires to nurture. Hannah never bakes, and strives to live in a way that prevents either pattern of kinship care (the cousin’s baking, or her own parents sweet-giving) from repeating itself.

Another night at the dinner table, Hugo's father proudly plates up wedges of his own homemade brownie. It isn't a 'guilt-free' pudding, Ross specifies in an American accent softened by decades of life abroad. He adds for my benefit, 'You don't want to get into body shaming, but child obesity is a real problem, and at some point you've got to tell them: 'If you eat too much of that you'll get fat'.' Hannah frowns, but Hugo looks unimpressed, and counters: 'I burn it all off at football, at the park.' Hugo's off-the-bat response reveals ways children are taught to think about the body in terms of a metabolic economy, including at the dinner table. Avoiding the passive accumulation of sugar as energy is a lesson contextualised within parent-child relationships – even as Ross also feels driven to share nostalgic sweets from his childhood with his children.

Striving for health requires being active in the face of sugar. This includes activities of knowing, measuring, reflecting, restraining, choosing, and afterwards, burning off through physical activity to ensure that sugar is safely evacuated from the body and not secretly storing up anywhere – except in fond memories of childhood. Sugar metrics are to be found inside the home, and in people's most intimate ways of relating to the body. Medical anthropologists show how metabolic logics and calculations break down when confronted with people's lived experiences of eating (Yates-Doerr, 2016), and how understandings of what it means to be a mother are at odds with individualistic caloric notions of diet (Warin *et al.*, 2008). In Ross and Hannah's home we see how parents try to resolve the clashes between striving for public health frameworks of feeding children, and their desires to cook pudding for the family, or to share memories of childhood and a sense of belonging.

The parents I met during fieldwork often found explicit messages about fatness, obesity, or the shape of children's bodies to be somewhat inappropriate, and in need of filtering. Hugo's father (like Chris in Chapter Five) flags the dangers of distorting children's body image. Parents often felt concerned about the effects of discussing their children's challenging eating habits as a problem in public, in their presence. For example, when I meet the parents of four-year-old Enlil (who eats everything) and six-year-old Celka (who only eats bread, cheese, and sweet things), the girl's mother explained in a whisper:

I think the only thing we always find uncomfortable for us is to talk about food in front of her, because I'm very conscious of it never being an issue, because I'm very conscious of her... being a girl, and you know, just any kind of

complexes for children. I always try not to... Which is why I'm talking a bit quieter.

Food can quickly become an 'issue' or 'complex'. The fear of provoking disordered eating in children through the home was shared with me at many points. Over a year in Leith, a number of adults shared secrets of past or present disordered eating with me – so I could better understand and contextualise their current attitudes towards food. Fears of disordered eating appeared to weigh on those caring for children as much (or possibly more) than policy messages about overweight. Excess talk of sugar and 'bad' foods was understood to carry the weight of changing children irreversibly – potentially destroying their futures as healthy and balanced individuals. In a US context, Lester's (2019) ethnography describes the challenges of treating patients with eating disorders. Her work includes auto-ethnographic vignettes where she shares memories and retrospectively analyses her changing relationship to food as a six-year old, as a consequence of hearing herself described as fat by members of kin. Warin's (2009) research with young women in Canada also grounds anorexia in social relatedness. These ethnographies point to the life-changing effects of disordered eating, firmly basing its development within periods of childhood and adolescence, and within kinship structures.

With the exception of Ross, most other parents in this fieldwork poured effort into *not* talking about weight and eating difficulties in front of their children. When parent interlocutors brought up this topic, voices would lower, a door would be quietly pulled to, or an explanation would be delivered over the noise of the microwave. Fatness was gestured to silently – on thighs, stomach or hips. The effects on parental weight-talk on children's wellbeing is a matter of concern to nutritional researchers also (for a review, see Gillison *et al.*, 2016). But how do you explain to children why they cannot have sugar, whilst filtering health messages for your children in a way that seems appropriate? This was also a matter of concern for health professionals discussing diet with children in more public settings. One afternoon I meet with Tina, a dietician, whose pilot initiative combining sports and healthy eating in schools I had observed over a number of weeks. I had some queries about how the messages in the booklet were put together.

Tina stands over the filing cabinet, flicking through the spiral bound pages of the booklet 'Get Fit, Get Healthy, Have Fun' in block orange letters. Vegetables grin up at us from the cover. As a dietician, it's annoying for Tina to notice when a resource for children is written by sportspersons rather than specialists.

I stop her at a white and green page: ‘Sugar – You’re sweet enough’. Over the pale blue bubble of cereal and yogurt icons, Tina has scrawled an annotation, for later. ‘Healthy teeth’. Healthy teeth? I ask aloud.

‘With children, you don’t want to talk about weight, or body image, so it’s good to talk about teeth. Because teeth are more...’

‘Teeth are more what?’ I ask. Tina doesn’t answer. ‘More... Neutral?’ I probe.

Tina shrugs with a meaningful look, and tells me there are other problems with the booklet too. Sugar and salt shouldn’t be on the same page, for example.

Only certain types of communication and action around sugar are possible in Tina’s view. Certain qualities of sugar – its relationship with body weight and chronic disease – should not be spoken about to seven and eight-year olds. Likewise, Tina has barred mentions of ‘nutrition’ in the booklet and replaced these with ‘food’. Feeding children’s desires for sugar is unhealthy; yet sharing too much knowledge about the effects of sugar consumption on the body is possibly even more dangerous. Viewing food through a nutritional lens is tangled up with questions of self-image – and carries with it the genesis of chronic forms of psychological ill-health. Teeth are somehow a safer zone. The last section of this chapter explores the paradoxes of focusing on dental health, and the links between dental health and deprivation.

In Britain, childhood is read as a state of fragility. Children may not be able to digest negative messages about the links between diet and weight. For Tina, the power of sports can be harnessed to alter eating practices in a more positive and safe way. Sports acts as a vehicle with which to enter schools and deprived children’s homes – and seemingly the only place in which ‘health’ and ‘fun’ might collide. Tina is irked that I’ve observed the project in its early stages, and decided to pull the programme before they ever reached Sugar and Salt. Schools don’t want nutritionists, and can be surprisingly uncooperative, she grumbles. On the occasions I visited the programme and participated in sports games with the children, I observed that these games and activities offered important opportunities for play and pleasure. Being coaxed into tasting a healthy vegetable curry, or quizzed about one’s food behaviours at home by the coaches and dietician however, did not. The few children who remained for this aspect of the session sat on the bench stony faced, and one hid under the bench.

Tina was pleased at the programme's progress in a school in another city where things were less 'operationally difficult'. She'd been to see things on the ground, and had asked one boy, 'What do you think fibre does?' He had replied, 'It takes the bad stuff out of your body, like fat, and throws it away'. Tina was impressed. Good on him. This is the kind of knowledge she likes to see, digested and re-emerging in a child's words and images. Yet fat remains central to this explanation.

As we sit in her glass-walled office, I float the idea of visiting during Sugar and Salt week. 'Sugar and salt are two completely different things', Tina muses. 'Sugar is a longer journey. It's linked to our evolution, because tribes would have had to walk hundreds of miles to get to honey. To change your habitual response, salt is a lot easier, you can change your palate in two weeks.' In Tina's image, sugar becomes a journey through historical time, embedded in collective history, as well as an intimate journey through the formation of individual palates across a lifetime and through layers of everyday practices. Sugar-as-journey offers different possibilities to sugar as choice. While choice has become a self-evident value in public health – and neatly ties in with ideas of children as agentive rights-bearing subjects – how do choice and care intersect? What to do when children (or adults, on children's behalf) make choices that are harmful? Can the removal of choice offer other possibilities for care (see Mol, 2008)?

The next section shows how formal and informal regulations around what children can and cannot eat at school – and the ambiguity in which regulations are shrouded – reveal deep tensions around care for children in contemporary Scotland. Like Punch and colleagues' study of food in Scottish residential care, this ethnography reveals irreconcilable clashes between ideals of children's self-determination and adults' responsibilities for children, and the 'difficulties of 'doing rights' in practice' (Punch, McIntosh and Emond, 2012, p. 1259). Conflicts over children's sugar highlight unresolved questions about what a good society looks like – the ideal form and level of authority of adults should take, and whom can be gifted (or burdened) with responsibilities for children.

## Fruity

School staff are also living with sugar as a condition of school life. Governance over children's diets and sugar consumption levels is awkwardly distributed. While governments decide on messages about food in school curricula, Edinburgh Council manages the size, form, and nutritional content of school meals. Neither body exerts control over all the other foods



circulating in the school – those consumed during school breaks, out of lunch boxes, or prepared in school nurture spaces. Whether and how such foods may be regulated was a grey area in all four state schools I visited. Some policies unfold at individual school level. These include clear-cut initiatives (for example, a fresh fruit initiative, or a ‘litter-free’ snack) but more often involve multi-layered decisions and more informal policies regarding when, and in which contexts, it is acceptable to regulate. Can birthday cakes and birthday sweets be brought into school? Can teachers, janitors and bus staff distribute sweets during national festive seasons? Can they realistically be prevented from doing so?

Greenside Primary’s Fruity initiative offers a salient example of how schools attempt to regulate foods travelling from home into school space. The project is a school-wide initiative, which draws on children’s collective rights to health – as framed in the United Nations convention – to make the case for children eating fruit provided by the school at morning break in lieu of their parentally-provided snack. I use Fruity to illustrate a reverse trend to those discussed in Chapter One, where values from home are pulled into school to make the school a more caring space. I show instead how values of school are pushed towards home, and new responsibilities delegated to school staff. To improve the overall health of the school community, parents are asked to refrain from feeding their children at morning break.

For some time, a recurring story is told at staff and parent council meetings. This includes expressions of collective horror at the ‘family bag’ of Haribo, and the monstrous multi-pack bags of crisps regularly sighted in the playground. What can these parents be thinking? And more importantly, do these children ever eat fresh fruit and vegetables? These children have a right to a healthy future, school staff argue. ‘Healthy futures’ is part of the school’s remit. The parent council agrees with the senior management on this matter.

Fruity proposes to rearrange longstanding school rules surrounding morning snacks with the explicit aim of targeting a type of chocolate, sweets and crisp consumption considered problematic, replacing these with fruit, viewed as healthy and containing natural sugars. It seems a good use of the school’s Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) money, a sum of money allocated yearly to schools based on numbers of schoolchildren receiving a free school lunch, and for which projects must be tailored towards reducing inequalities. The Fruity project neatly joins up with the senior development officer’s one-in-five child poverty concerns – discussed on the same in-service day as Hot Chocolate Friday (Chapter One). Collective head-shaking has materialised into a multi-pronged approach driven by the senior management team: getting rid

of the offending multipack snacks, increasing healthy eating, making the school day cost-free, reducing litter in the playground, and also ‘a nurture type thing – a social thing, that they’re sitting down together rather than quickly getting something down their throat while running around,’ as one senior staff member put it.

This holistic change to the ‘snack culture’ means providing class teachers with a box of pears, apples and bananas to distribute in the classroom, instead of children consuming a home-brought morning snack outside in the playground. The aim is to instil a fruity commensality accompanied by a story or activity. Implicit within this, is the wider narrative of particular populations being out of control with their consumption and pleasures (Ahmed, 2010b) as discussed in the Introduction. Underlying the disapproval of the ‘family bag’ of sweets, is an unspoken comment on inadequate parenting, passivity and potential insouciance regarding children’s futures. Lydia’s own children attend a private school where packed lunches are not authorised, and teachers and children eat the same food at the table together. She sees value in these forms of commensality and wholesome togetherness.

Lydia works to make senior management’s message more salient and legitimate by co-producing this campaign with the pupil Health Group. I’m invited to the children’s group meeting, where we design an interactive quiz about snack consumption for parents at the next school coffee morning. Usually biscuits are provided at such meetings, but parents will be served bowls of fruit instead on this occasion.

The Health Group children file into a refurbished school classroom known as the ‘Nurture Room’ – a polyvalent space serving for the school breakfast club, calm club, and ‘nurture group’ for more challenging children who struggle with the school environment. Ten children sit around the table with an iPad. Lydia, the senior development officer, coaxes: ‘Imagine you are the parents’. Lydia has designed the quiz, and the task attributed to the children is to illustrate the quiz with images. The children are excited about taking photographs of each other with the iPad, and squabble over who gets to read out the questions.

Lydia: ‘Question 1. How much fruit should schoolchildren eat per day? We need some fruit. Logan do you want to do this one? Here, you two take an orange and you hold the avocado. Stand over here. One of you sitting down? I can’t see your faces.’

Logan: ‘Can I juggle with the oranges?’

Lydia: ‘Great idea! Right, next question. What percentage of children had crisps, chocolate or sweets for their snack at Greenside...? Do we have any sugar?’ Lydia and I raid the nurture cupboard, quickly locating a bag of icing sugar and marshmallows. ‘Great. OK, Ella, you hold the marshmallows, Finlay you take the sugar. Put your thumb down? No, down – like bad!’ Ella is doing a thumbs up, which Lydia walks over to correct to a thumbs down. ‘Finlay, put your hand on your cheek like you’ve got toothache?’

Coaxing the children into role modelling good diet for the rest of the school, and for their own families, is presented as a fun and creative activity. From Lydia’s perspective, it is desirable that the children (literally) embody the school’s healthy values, since it isn’t technically possible (or desirable) to ban the more ‘unhealthy snacks’. The campaign’s success relies on children and parents’ cooperation. At the next staff meeting, a few teachers nervously speak up to clarify the ruling of fruit after break – what should be done if children refuse to have fruit, and eat their crisps instead? Mrs Glenn reflects, and advises.

[Some year groups] have got into bad habits. What I advise is try to encourage them. ‘Why don’t you keep that until lunchtime?’ I talked to a few of them. Obviously I didn’t try to scare them with cancer and statistics! *All laughing.* I wonder if we could we get someone in from [a local football team] or something to talk about diet...

The school is in need of more low sugar role models. Mrs Glenn jokes about the temptation to speak about heart attacks and cancer in the search for the most persuasive arguments. But as previously established, it is highly inappropriate to inform (or ‘scare’) children regarding the links between their snacks and chronic disease. It is no coincidence that the children’s photographs must mime sugar-induced toothaches – read as less dangerous and stigmatising. There is much emphasis on persuading the children to embody their own collective desires for health, and to make them agents of reducing health inequalities. I’m surprised a ban is clearly out of the question. I tell Lydia about a local headteacher who tried to implement a ban on sweets, only to find that the Board of Education refused to back him. Lydia snorts. ‘Well you can’t do that can you? You’re legally not allowed to stop them having their snack. All you can do is suggest, you can’t force them.’ Children and parents have rights, although the nature of these is somewhat ambiguous.

After the first day of Fruity, I linger after school. I approach a group of mothers, one of whose daughters I know to have been spotted with ‘problematic’ snacks. What do they think of Fruity? The atmosphere becomes leaden. ‘Was this your idea?’ I shake my head emphatically. ‘No, I’m just interested in parents’ reactions.’ The women relax. Laura, who works as a childminder points out, ‘I’m sorry, but my Barry won’t eat fruit. Great that the school is offering the children fruit. It’s fine – just as long as they can have some choice’. Her friend Sheila adds ‘You can’t just take away their snack! What about the kids who don’t like fruit?’ The least is to offer some ‘other options’, the women agree.

Some women felt threatened by this group of (mostly middle-class) mothers’ judgment of their feeding practices, and propositions to encroach upon them. But there wasn’t a widespread resistance to Fruity as a persuasive mechanism – as long as it did not become a ban. The main dissatisfaction was the range: the choice between apple, pear and banana was insufficient to children’s preferences and contextual desires. Two understandings of children’s tastes conflicted – as an expression of their individuality and personality, or as an area to work on and cultivate.

Other mothers preferred a forced commensality and the elimination of choice. They were relieved to shift the locus of control over eating for health (and the conflicts accompanying it) from home to school. While other forms of food provision (e.g. sweets, cakes, hot chocolates) from the school were seen as threatening to mother-child relationships by a number of interlocutors, these same mothers were glad for the school to be feeding fruit, and thus to delegate the responsibilities for health normally located within nuclear kinship. They were delighted with the scheme and the positive forms of ‘peer pressure’ the scheme promised, but *only* as long as it included a ‘ban-like’ element. Some form of regulation was required to ensure that other children weren’t consuming ‘unhealthy’ (read ‘tastier’) snacks. These mothers had cooperated by not sending a morning snack to school. In another interpretation of unfairness and inequalities, these mothers deemed it unfair for their own children to eat fruit while other children could enjoy more desirable foodstuff.

Fruity brings to the fore different interpretations of children as persons and rights-holding subjects. Children’s health is enshrined in the UN convention as a right to health, but not a right to choose *whether* to care for one’s health or not, in the same way as the right to education is not a right to skip school – a set of rights often understood to involve adult control (Punch, McIntosh and Emond, 2012). In north Edinburgh, good mothering sometimes equated with

recognising children as consumers in their own right – giving a child a snack that suits their preferences, and which they consent to eat, even if this means ‘bad’ sugar. If this mothering role is delegated to the school, the institution must replicate this logic, by (at the minimum) offering children choices among several ‘good’ options. For others, good mothering equated with viewing children as incapable of making informed choices – and needing to be socialised into responsible citizens who can be disciplined or pressured into consuming healthy foods in public. Care and choice align or clash, depending on the logic at play (see Mol, 2008).

The fact that schoolteachers would be carrying out the morning feeding of all children in this catchment area – adding control and management of snacks to their growing list of responsibilities – was not contested. The lack of resistance to this delegation of feeding care to teachers can be understood in the context of gendered conceptions of care, and in broader historical shifts towards the school becoming a site of nurture as described in Chapter One. Fruity reveals the increasing blurriness around which facets of childcare fall to parents and to the state, with school staff taking on more and more parentally-infused roles, in a bid to make up for inadequate kinship care at home. Chapter Six offers another angle on this discussion by exploring conflicts around the distribution of care and responsibility between parents and grandparents.

This lack of resistance can also be understood through the transformation of private food brought from home, and its reconstruction as public food in the space of the school. The relative success of Fruity reveals the intensification and normalisation of messages around healthy eating in schools. Initiatives like Fruity are no longer extraordinary events. The headteacher interviewed in a local school who had tried – and failed – to implement a ban on sweets ten years ago felt this wouldn’t have been an issue today. Lastly, this must also be contextualised within broader processes of gentrification transforming local school populations.

Fruity is as much about educating parents as it is children: parents’ feeding practices are governed through the school. In continuation with the discussion in Chapter One, Fruity offers an illustrative example of the latest chapter in a historical shift towards the school as both a site of health promotion and affective care, with responsibility for providing the correct nutrition for children in a caring way delegated to female school staff. Policies like Fruity draw their legitimacy (and sometimes funding opportunities) from encounters with the school parent association. The association largely represented the more engaged parents, those who felt driven and had the time and capacity to impact on the quality of children’s education and school

life. Nearly all were women. Like Hannah at the start of this chapter, they felt that children needed to be deprived of unhealthy things for their own good. These were often mothers who worked part-time, from a variety of backgrounds but generally among the more affluent section of the school population, and those who felt most threatened by other children's sweets and crisps.

Sugar-related policies can be brittle. They fluctuate and overlap – amplifying or dissolving – with the turnover of staff and funding possibilities. For Lydia and the senior management team, universal initiatives represent good care – even if they are costlier to roll out, and structurally uncertain. Positions such as Lydia's last only a few years. And once the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) money – issued by the state through taxes – for the year has run out, will they be able to convince an industry partner to support the initiative? As a staff-run 'moral laboratory' (Mattingly, 2014), the Fruity experiment aims to improve the worst diets by excluding classed parental influences in one specific setting. Universal fruit is hoped to mitigate the effects of diet on body weight and future chronic disease in some segments of the population, without these ever being mentioned, and the innocence of children safeguarded. The work of allocating PEF funds allows the school to become a laboratory for initiatives to be created and trialled. The scaling up and endurance of such initiatives can be more challenging.

Such initiatives reveal contradictions in how these adults view children. Children must be shielded from the dangers of family bags of Haribo, but also from hearing about cancer or scary health statistics: they are profoundly fragile and in danger of losing an innocence that should characterise childhood. At the same time, they need to be empowered into becoming agents of their own health – transcending the authority of their parents – even as they cannot be relied on to make the best choices, and ideally need their morning snacks removed for this to happen. Children's communal eating in class, with a small element of choice between different healthful options, is seen to create a small window of fairness – in a context of deep structural inequalities and lack of fairness in wider society. The next section analyses another kind of universal intervention: ChildSmile, which operates conceptually further downstream when undesirable foods have already been ingested.

## ChildSmile

Teeth have emerged so far as a symbolic and appropriate way to discuss the dangers of sugar – an integral part of efforts *not* to speak of fatness and chronic disease. It is paradoxical that

teeth are viewed as less stigmatising, since on another level, dental health acts as a potent marker of health inequalities in Britain today. In Scotland, the programme ChildSmile seeks to mitigate the effects of unhealthy diets consumed within the home. In doing so, it also outsources care for teeth – usually located within nuclear kinship, and more precisely the home bathroom – to the more public settings of primary schools and nurseries. If some parents are not taking sufficient care of children’s dental hygiene, or are not regularly attending the dental practice, the clinic must travel to the children. The following section reflects on ChildSmile as a device for mitigating the material effects of sugar, and the health inequalities associated with high-sugar diets.

Across Edinburgh, dental support workers visit nurseries, primary schools and secondary schools according to Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)<sup>10</sup> statistics to deliver talks about what and how to eat, and the importance of removing residual food from teeth. In Scotland, children receive free dental check-ups every six months, and dental workers visit schools in areas categorised as deprived to ensure children’s exposure to good oral hygiene practices. While under 18s can access dental care free of charge, adults must pay the costs of dental treatment – a model which reveals childhood as a special phase with regards to health and socioeconomic inequalities.

As a national initiative launched in 2005, ChildSmile builds on previous programmes, focusing on ‘preventive and anticipatory care and promoting health improvement from infancy’ (MacPherson *et al.*, 2010, p. 73). In practice, this involves distributing toothbrushes and toothpaste free of charge, forging links between the home and the clinic through the role of dental support workers and health visitors (thus providing additional pathways of referral into dental services) and by imposing an institutionalised brushing of teeth across class divides, as supervised by nursery staff (Shaw, Macpherson and Conway, 2009). ChildSmile aims to prevent the deterioration of teeth through inadequate kinship care.

The nursery children crowd around the dental support worker on the carpet, mesmerised by Marius, the giant monkey puppet sitting on her knee. Jo and Marius show the nursery group how to brush in giant circles in the sky. All the food you’ve eaten all day sticks to your teeth. You want to brush *all* the food away before going to bed! The children watch in rapture.

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<sup>10</sup> See Introduction

Jo's session finishes with the children taking a turn to move a giant yellow plastic toothbrush in circles over Marius's teeth, frowning in concentration, serious in the task to hand. There are some questions from the children. 'My daddy brushes my teeth.', 'I have my own toothbrush at home', or 'My big brother doesn't brush his teeth'. The early years practitioner films the children brushing Marius's teeth on the iPad, for their development journals. Most children run off to play after their turn, but a throng of four stay behind to ask more questions.

'Does Marius have a daddy?'

'Yes.'

'What is his name?'

'Er, Tom.'

'And does he have a mummy?'

'Yes! I'm his mummy!'

'Does he eat any puddings?'

'Marius doesn't have many puddings or treats, if he does have a treat he has it at mealtime, not at snack time. Snacks should be lots of fruits and vegetables.'

'Why is Marius being put away?'

'He needs to go to sleep for a bit. Sometimes he finds it quite noisy being in here with lots of people. And I'm taking him to another nursery in the afternoon.'

'Sometimes I think, I just got paid to do that!' Jo grins at me. Today's performance involved some improvisation – producing a father's name for the monkey, and creating a learning scenario when one of Marius's teeth unexpectedly dropped out onto the carpet. Jo's colleagues use other puppets – a dragon, a crocodile – but you can tell they aren't real, so don't produce quite the same effect. 'With the monkey it's quite realistic, and you can see some of the children aren't quite sure.' Jo smiles affectionately.



The presence of a friendly (real?) monkey who speaks through the dental support worker makes for an object of curiosity and thought experiment for the nursery children. I'm struck by the way the children challenge Marius's dietary practices and tooth brushing as floating untethered from kin relations. They want to find out how Marius behaves at home, his relationships with his parents, and how these compare to their own home situation. The issue of puddings is an important one to gather information on. How does this imaginary child manage relationships and obtain access to sugary things? Might other children live differently? How is sugar valued in other people's households and child-parent relationships?

Jo and I chat afterward, as I help unwrap and sort toothbrushes. James, blue snake. Tia, yellow squirrel. This one, too splayed, for the bin. A staff member, Susie approaches to ask Jo if she has any little buses left for toothbrush storage. The children really loved them. Jo and Susie lament the loss of the buses, which were easier to organise. With the new system, there are different animals and colours on each. Three children might all be a blue snake. Far from being trivial, multiple blue snakes are a source of concern, not only for matters of hygiene, but for practical matters of marking out children as singular and special individual persons (see Chapter 7).

On the way out the head of the nursery accosts me. 'Could you come and give a talk about sugar? I think parents don't realise how much sugar is in things.' Staff at the school level consider the nursery an ideal place to engage with parents, since their presence is more frequent and sustained. School and nursery are as much about educating parents. As in school, this is often done through the children themselves, today taught how to brush before bed, and the importance of doing so. I writhe away, protesting that I'm interested in the parents' perspectives and don't want to be seen as a health authority. 'Well maybe you could give them some facts about sugar, afterwards?' she cajoles, as I slip off. I was a frequent recipient of such requests. As young woman attending university, my expected role was to care about children's wellbeing, and to impart knowledge to with less of it – namely SIMD postcode parents.

While I remain entangled with the head of nursery, Jo is leaving to apply fluoride to teeth in another neighbourhood. Don't they get fluoride here? I inquire. 'No. It's only the SIMD schools. Here used to, but the SIMD numbers have changed.' Children in SIMD areas are understood to be disproportionately exposed to high-sugar high-fat diets – the same population to be targeted in a year's time through the Fruity initiative.

Jo's joke that medical care for children and puppet storytelling is hardly a paid form of labour is significant – and shows again the blurry lines between different forms of gendered care for children, particularly those which cross boundaries between school and home. Coincidentally, Jo moved into dental support work to adjust to her own childcare duties out of a concern for missing significant moments of her son and daughter's young lives. I meet her again in a café, in her medical blue uniform. Jo explains that the problem with the nursery interventions is that the wrong audience is targeted: 'It's not the four to six year olds who are making the healthy choices at that age.'

With the younger ones it's more games, like food bingo, introducing them to healthy foods. Sometimes we'll bring along, do you know those plastic shopping baskets, and the plastic foods you can get? And we'll bring along a whole lot of things like milk, veg, but also lollipops and fizzy drinks. Then we have a green plate and a red plate, we don't want them to think in terms of 'good' and 'bad' foods as such, the red plate is the 'stop and think plate', it's not that you can't have those at all, but it's to get them to stop and think. Encourage them to make healthier choices. We tell them that things on the red plate are good to have at mealtimes. Sugar attacks should be kept to mealtimes, or kept as special treats.

Jo highlights the problem of separating foods into 'good' and 'bad' categories – tidy evaluations of foods which collapse when they encounter everyday scenarios of eating (Yates-Doerr, 2016). But figuring out what to do instead is more challenging. How to impart the dangers of bad diet to children without using unspeakable notions? Health messages about sugar focus on evaluating, rather than enjoying, foods. Within Jo's teaching, 'sugar attacks' are an exciting affair. They should be kept to mealtimes, as in ChildSmile guidance documents (e.g. ChildSmile, 2021) or 'as special treats'. This is also how sugar becomes so special. In her examination of practices of lay Catholicism across time, Mayblin (2017) reveals how subtle spaces for indiscipline and lenience can be written into legal rules (or here, healthy eating guidelines) and the level to which they are implemented. Jo's is one example among many of how health messages strongly embed sugar's normalcy and specialness within the diet and within adult-child routines and temporalities of eating – for pudding, or a treat. It is never a question of removing sugar altogether.

Through women like Jo, ChildSmile makes links between the home, clinic, nursery, and school. Like the free fruit snack initiative, the universality of the ChildSmile practice attempts to conceal class divides in the nursery, in its proclamation that all teeth present require institutionalised brushing. ChildSmile outsources tooth brushing – like snack provision, an activity normally undertaken at home – to nursery staff. This model relies on (generally low-waged, female) employees to engage in forms of care and patient work which would normally fall under parents' remit, thus blurring lines around responsibility for children's welfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The relationship between Jo and the staff reveal this. Their careful attention to children's preference for small buses and their desires to singularise children through distinct colour-animal toothbrush combinations communicate their concerns about how best to care for children's health, how to make them feel cared for, and entertained – concerns largely associated with mothering. Jo reassures a nearby child. She isn't here to watch *them* today. It is the start of term, and that wouldn't be fair. But is she ever really? Jo appears more interested in observing how the ChildSmile cupboard is organised, if the nursery staff are putting the toothpaste on a plate or on individual brushes, what happens if a child drops a toothbrush, and whether the children are spitting out toothpaste or not. Subtly hidden behind the grandiose displays of puppetry, Jo is visiting to check on the nursery staff's behaviour at the tooth brushing station and beyond. And to issue (parental) advice, as necessary.

## Good and bad teeth, good and bad kin

For physical and forensic anthropologists, teeth are those things which remain long after most other traces of social life have vanished – a tool enabling the identification of individuals and social roles, and knowledge about the dwelling, diet, health and diseases prevalent among a particular population. Teeth have a tendency to reveal things about people. For health professionals in Britain, the state of teeth is read as wider social inequalities mapped onto the body. For the parents I encountered, the state of teeth was read through the lens of past and present relations with kin, and summoned questions about care and responsibility.

Sugar, and sugar-exposed teeth act as a surface upon which things can be written and read – about class, education, and parenting. But teeth are not merely a metaphor. Teeth are fragile, and the pain and economic costs of damaged teeth are real and persist through time. Relations between sugar and teeth reveals a particular societal context and approach to health. Hannah

(opening vignette) had terrible teeth growing up, but now a filling in her daughter's class stands out as an anomaly. During fieldwork, some health professionals pointed out that the decay of the less affluent is more readily tied to lack of education, or lack of resources needed to provide a healthy diet – an approach that subtly frames some groupings of parents as potentially inadequate providers of care. One dentist pointed out to me that the decay in the mouths of those on higher incomes is often linked to the high sugar and acid content of fruit juice and smoothies, understood by those parents to be beneficial to children's health. This reading of the state of teeth in the neighbourhood points to the ways in which the ethical dimensions of feeding and kinship are often all too readily attributed to perceived class differences.

I accompany Karine, a north Edinburgh friend and her one-year old son Theo to an appointment with Jade, their family dentist. I stand awkwardly looking at the photographs of Jade's toddler on the walls, as Karine lies back in the chair. Jade blows into a purple glove and ties a knot – a makeshift toy for Theo to bat about – as Karine is asked questions about the general medical situation, numbers of teeth, dummy use, regularity of tooth brushing. Once a day is not enough, Jade scolds, recalling the new guidelines. Jade herself still brushes the old-fashioned way in the morning before breakfast, she explains. But for Jade's son, it is breakfast followed by tooth brushing before walking to school.

'How is his diet? Tell me his routine then. What are we doing?' Jade leans forward on her chair, listening intently, while Karine lists: breastmilk, then a breakfast of porridge or eggs, fruit puree or a cheese, a snack, like a biscuit, more fruit puree, a sleep. Lunch, some protein, like a beef casserole, fresh fruit. Jade nods 'OK'.

'Sugar-wise, we have some. Daily.' Karine interrupts.

'What are we having, sugar-wise?'

'Brioche, you know, Tesco's brioche? Because he just loves it. For a snack or something. And my mother-in-law has just realised that he loves that, and she just gives him it.'

'Grandparents can be really great with that, huh? They help out with some part of childcare, but it's the disciplining that doesn't come into it! But you know what, I get it, and that's fine. And occasionally will be fine. Even once a day

would be OK. But if you're starting to give it to him above four or five times a day, then I would get a little bit...'

'No no no. just once a day. And at his birthday, he had a lot of cake...' Karine admits apologetically.

'Oh of course!' *Jade bursts out laughing. Karine joins in.* 'Yeah, no, that's absolutely fine.'

Jade's relationship with Karine is one of complicity, grounded in the shared challenges of mothering. Awkward laughter together is important. Jade is keen to show that she really understands, she 'gets it'. She offers a subtle distribution of responsibility for children and adults' bodies, indicating where zones of flexibility in the guidelines may lie. Care for children must be standardised and subject to strict state guidelines – care for children carries a public dimension. Adult care may meander according to habit and preference – revealing it as a private and personal matter.

Jade draws her authority from the experience of growing a child herself and negotiating with related others. Grandparental brioche is to be expected. An area of feeding situated outside of one's control. Karine's personal enjoyment of feeding Theo brioche is subtly legitimated – as long as this is tightly controlled, exercised in moderation. Jade offers a spectrum of choice: very occasional brioche, once a day brioche, below four or five daily instances. Through this hierarchy of options for controlled brioche, Jade holds maternal guilt at a distance, and carefully acknowledges the regimes of care Karine and her relatives are engaged in. Jade's gentle ridiculing of Karine over birthday cake as a dental concern is a clear message. Of course she *must* celebrate Theo's birthday appropriately. This is not only fine – but even a desirable source of sugar consumption (see Chapter Seven). Jade carefully carves out spaces for Karine to feel recognised as a good mother.

'And then dinner?'

'Dinner, then last thing at night, so before he goes to bed, he has a cup of milk, then after that I do brush his teeth, and then give him teeth powder for the teething. And then I breast feed him. So it's not the last thing he does... But if he is kind of quite sleepy he breastfeeds?'

‘Obviously ideally as I said, we would prefer last thing at night, but again I understand. I know most of the time he is probably going to fall asleep while he’s breastfeeding, which is great. If you can, possibly give him a little bit of water after that, it will at least rinse his mouth out so the sugars from the milk aren’t staying, sticking onto teeth. It’s more an issue with bottle feeding, because the bottle then stays there. [...] You won’t succeed every day, you won’t be able to get water in his mouth some days, and some days you will, and that’s OK. We’ll obviously keep an eye open.’

Jade goes on to explain that this is more of a problem with bottle milk, which can drip into the mouth through the night. In the dental literature this is known as ‘nursing bottle caries’. Breast is best, but even sugars from breastmilk can be dangerous. If breastmilk is allowed to linger, its natural sugars can stick onto teeth. Maternal breastmilk was often cited by my interlocutors as children’s – and the species at large – reason for liking sweet tastes. As a shared (sugared?) substance, breastmilk emerges as both the epitome of maternal care and a possible source of harm.

As a profession, ‘we would like’, but as an individual, Jade ‘understands’. As a mother, Jade is concerned about how children fall asleep – a current priority in Karine’s everyday life. Jade frames lingering breastmilk on teeth as a failure, but also exonerates Karine from feeling responsible for it, acknowledging having set an impossible task. Jade concludes, before moving on to Karine’s teeth. ‘His mouth looks nice and healthy. You’re doing everything sensibly’. Sally, Jade’s assistant gives them a sticker. Karine smiles, ‘I’m putting those in our book of memories’. In this set of relationships, trips to the dentist for Theo become good memories for Karine, to be archived as evidence of successful motherhood.

While Karine discusses her own dental appliance and tooth pains, Sally, Jade’s dental assistant translates the encounter with Theo into medical notes, kindly letting me watch and ask quiet questions as she fills out the history.

### Theo

Pt very tired, but cooperating. Pt using dummy. Advice given on dummy. Diet seems reasonable but admitted to sugars (i.e. brioche). Advice given to limit sugars.

## Brushing X1. Advice given brushing x2.

Sally shows me a drop-down window. She has selected MCR – medium caries risk, because of the sugars. On the schema, she shows me Theo’s white caries at the back, due to breastfeeding. Jade’s complicit exchange with Karine is recorded on paper as compliance and non-compliance to current guidelines, admittance to sugar consumption, and medical advice distributed. In the medical notes, Theo appears as a distinct file, bureaucratically held apart from Karine, even as the notes merge who is doing what. The patient has cooperated by playing with a glove and letting his mouth be opened. He uses a dummy and his diet appears reasonable, yet there was a confession of sugar. The distribution of responsibility for children’s health is ambiguous.

In Jade’s regime of responsibility, inadequate control and surveillance of one’s own teeth is forgivable, as long as high levels of control and restriction are applied to offspring’s teeth. The shape and state of one’s own teeth is not a subject of individual control, but largely forged by a previous generation of parental responsibility with differing degrees of knowledge available. The state of children’s teeth in the present – the absence or presence of caries and decay – is a matter of total parental responsibility. A lack of the right kind of care is inscribed on bodies forever.

However, things are more complex, and patients are not necessarily equal when faced with the effects of sugar. Dentists refer to this as differences in susceptibility. Dental decay is an interaction between plaque, fermentable carbohydrates, time passed, and surface. Dentists referred to this as Stephen’s curve, or ‘textbook’ (See Sheiham and James, 2015) on the role of sugars in the formation of dental caries). If the other ‘textbook’ ingredients for decay – plaque, fermentable carbohydrates, and time passed – remain constant, surface is highly specific to each individual. It would be a good research experiment, Jade’s collaborator John muses, to give a number of mouths the same ‘sugar stimulus’ and measure their reaction over time.

As the following chapters illustrate, sugar is more potent in its relationship with some bodies, and lives than others. One dentist I visit offers the case of identical twin he sees, who both have ‘rubbish oral hygiene’. But one has nothing wrong, and the other has gum disease, severe decay. A puzzle. It could relate to a large range of factors, ‘your individual make-up, your ethnicity, your saliva flow, medical reasons, medications...’. Jade adds to this, inhalers, dentures, diabetes and hypertension, mental health conditions. A combination of genetic and

environment. Some patients' salivary content will naturally have a higher acidic content, meaning those patients will be more prone to decay. But people don't need to know about their acid content in Jade's view. It is prevention through good diet and oral hygiene which is key to avoiding decay. At the end of this long interview discussion with Jade, I ask out of curiosity, if she has a sweet tooth. Jade smiles.

'Actually a lot of patients ask me as well, and yes, I do have a sweet tooth, and I do have sugar of course, in my diet, but I do obviously then go and brush my teeth. So... And it's not ideal. But as a parent, my son is quite restricted! His sugar content is fairly restricted, and I think I've kind of drilled it into him, I do floss his teeth every day, and I do brush his teeth twice a day sort of thing. And he only gets a treat when... a treat occasionally, so he doesn't get sugar in his diet every single day sort of thing, or added sugar in his diet.

I ask Jade's collaborator John too.

'I love chocolate. I'm on a diet at the moment, but I love sweets and chocolates. As we do. Just because you know, just because have the knowledge doesn't prevent you from being foolish.'

Having a sweet tooth is not necessarily something to conceal from patients. Consuming sugar, and being foolish 'as we do', marks John out as sharing a common humanity. Jade and John situate themselves as travelling alongside patients, practising life-long moral striving as individuals and/or parents in the face of sugar – even as the need for sugar pops up in their private lives too. When asked by patients, Jade resists any moral superiority, instead foregrounding shared experience and modelling the best behaviour under the circumstances, or 'being realistic', as Jade would put it. Concerning her own sweet tooth, Jade re-contextualises this within mother-son relationships – her son's consumption is successfully 'restricted'. In such informal conversations, Jade offers a particular model of parental control, responsibility, and intergenerational transmission.

## Conclusion

My final visit to Jade's practice is in December, and we discuss patient gifts. She opens a lower cupboard behind her to reveal boxes of Maltesers and Quality Streets.



‘We don't admit it, but we actually quite like it. Although not good for us because it will make us fat! I was amazed when first moved to the practice. Cupboards in the back full of chocolates and biscuits that patients have given us. Ten years ago people gave a lot more. They would give a wrapped Christmas gift to the postman, to the dentist. Now less so. In modern life people don't have time anymore.’

Even within the dental clinic, chocolates continue to stand in for care and attention, for the right kinds of social relatedness, even as it is precisely the consumption of such foods which cause the need for dental surgery. Sugar consumption emerges as ethically important in medicalised spaces and moments of policy intervention directed towards extracting particular foods to promote children's health – at the same time as it is portrayed as part of normal family life. Sugar ‘in public’ and sugar ‘in private’ are not easily held apart, even at the dental practice. This stands in contrast to Chapter One, where sugar enters behavioural policies and nurture spaces, and in doing so generates spaces of privacy and intimacy within school life. Through persons at school, nursery and the clinic, educational messages about sugar's negative value are pushed homewards into parent-child relations, yet this harsh message is softened by the compassionate message that this is too big an ask, and opens up expectations of leniency and sugary indiscipline. Contained within health messages and nutritional discourse at school is the confusing injunction to enjoy *some* sugar.

There is a place for sugar within a balanced diet – an ambiguous one. The temporalities of sugar's risks for children's health are multiple, stretching across time as chronic disease, lifelong dental maintenance, or as disordered eating developed through anxiety about food and body weight, with far-reaching effects. In encounters with sugar, children are defined by their fragility and plasticity. Preventing sugar's effects is an important kind of labour, distributed between parents, educational staff, and health professionals, largely along gendered lines. In both cases such effects are understood to threaten the child's self-formation, and successful child-parent relations unfolding into the future. Given these dangers, many parents and health professionals feel the need to filter health messages for children. It is this filtering work that enables children to continue to take innocent pleasures in sugar – pleasures that are hopefully less bittersweet than those of adults.

Sugar amplifies questions of responsibility. Health professionals and educational staff who engage with children are also living with sugar as a condition of life. This chapter has revealed

multiple and potentially irreconcilable conceptualisations of children – as citizens and rights-holders, consumers, or vulnerable beings requiring protection. Following Mol (2008), I have shown how choice is a necessary ingredient of good care in some formulations, and a hinder to good care in others. Kinship ties are often viewed as an obstacle to healthy choices. From the perspective of dentists, sugar consumption – from grandparents’ brioche to mothers’ breastmilk – is inevitable, even as it evokes tensions between maternal care and harm, love and pain. In nutritional discourses, sugar can become a ‘path’ taken, through kinship and class, through the collective history of the species, through individual memories of eating in child-parent dyads to becoming a parent with responsibilities oneself. Sugar consumption is about control over and linkages between oneself and others. The next chapter takes this up through a discussion of the meanings of sugar in children’s relations.

## Chapter Three: Children's sugar

### Introduction

'That's to thank you for being good and helping us with cooking.' Six-year old Duncan is pressing an orange Refresher sweet into the palm of my hand. We're at the end of a pilot cooking class targeting vulnerable families. Today was a recipe for a 'healthy stew', including activities for the children – moving icons of food to their proper place on the Eatwell Plate. I'd been assigned to a table chopping vegetables with Duncan and his mother.

'Oh thanks Duncan how kind of you!' I exclaim a little too enthusiastically. Duncan presses a second sweet into my hand. 'You can have a second one. But you are not allowed more than five!' I show my new collection of sweets to his mother and the nutritionist. His mother laughs approvingly. The nutritionist nods at me, in satisfaction. 'I think the kids really enjoyed it.'

The irony of this exchange with Duncan stayed with me. Duncan had used the Refresher packet newly at his disposal (distributed at the end of the class by his mother) to reverse our assigned roles. Shaking me out of my role of educator and representative of public health, he had used the sweets to shift the situation and recast himself into a position of authority – doling out a sugary mark of attention to reward me for my good behaviour. Was Duncan using his sugary resources to tip me for my service, as a kind and generous customer, or patronising me, evaluating my behaviour based on his experience of the structures of everyday life as a child? What did the simple gesture of sharing sweets, while limiting my sweet consumption, communicate about our different relationships and subjectivities?

This chapter uses sugar to throw light on the (sometimes confusing) experiences of being a child in contemporary Edinburgh. What does sugar have to do with practices of childhood? What can children do with sugar, and how does sugar play into their understandings of themselves, their place within kinship structures and social hierarchies, and the ways in which they interact with a range of children and adults in different social positions? The chapter examines how children's sugar work varies between social settings and relationships. Woven through the argument is the story of how child interlocutors used sugar to negotiate their

relationship with the researcher as a particular type of new adult in their lives – both a potential new recipient of, and gatekeeper to, sugar.

Logan is standing in the second floor corridor – a pale freckled boy with a mischievous grin playing at the corner of his mouth. ‘What are you doing here?’ the seven-year old interrogates me. ‘I’ve been asked to meet Mrs Reid’, I lie awkwardly, embarrassed to have been caught on my way to the staff room to eat lunch with the teachers. ‘You’re not allowed here!’ Logan points a finger at me. I smile, aiming for complicity. ‘Am I not? I don’t know anything about school yet, you tell me.’ Logan gives me a secretive grin. ‘You want to see something?’ He puts his finger to his lips, and beckons me over to where he is standing.

‘If you come right here, you can see the teachers eating their lunch!’ I crouch down next to Logan – he adjusts my position – and he’s right. From this very specific angle, peering down the spiral staircase through the murky glass window panels, you can spy Mrs Reid laughing animatedly with Mrs Peterson, over a low table scattered with a variety of meal deal sandwiches and colourful plastic wrappers.

Maybe they drink alcohol down there, older girls whispered to me between raucous peals of laughter. And apparently, Mrs Jeffrey had once been spied drinking a Diet Coke. Any form of fizzy drink is banned for children’s consumption in school – one of the many rules and restrictions that characterise school life. Some of these restrictions create new spaces and opportunities for misbehaviour and secret practices, thus creating pleasures of transgression (Foucault, 1990). Children may not visit or ‘spy’ on the adults in the staffroom, observe, comment upon, or influence what adults decide to eat or discard. Logan’s school day involves being shepherded from space to space to the sound of loud regular bells – from playground to classroom to dining hall to playground to classroom – by adults. Moments of surveillance or control over adults’ eating emerge as enjoyable.

In the UK, the terms ‘parenting’ and ‘schooling’ refer to two disparate ways in which sets of adults attempt to mould children – evoking the image of a downwards flow of disciplinary, educational, and nurturing practices. This chapter tries to understand children’s experiences of adults’ attempts to educate and socialise them. Where adults might see children using food simply to test the limits and coherence of rules pertaining to home or school, I show that

engaging with sugar consumption offers a range of flexible opportunities for children to shape their social relationships with other children and adults. Children not only receive or resist adult practices of education and socialisation (Boni, 2018b) – children employ sugar to shape the adults in their lives.

Children's complex ways of living and interacting with others are not always legible to adults. I use children's engagements with both sugar and healthy eating discourses as a lens onto children's practices of care, nurture and control over social interactions with others. Within the logics of parenting and schooling which shape children's lives, food practices – eating or refusing to eat, having expensive tastes or lack of taste, quietly consuming healthy foods or making loud demands for sugary foods – are routinely made to equate with public displays of good behaviour or practices of misbehaviour, naughtiness and secrecy. The chapter focuses on notions of friendship and siblingship among children, and the ways in which sugar becomes a useful tool for negotiating social hierarchies, intimacy and the future possibilities of gradually 'thickening' or 'thinning' (Carsten, 2013, p. 247) social relationships. I reveal the tensions that emerge between children's desires to eat and share food under their own conditions, and adults' attempts to care for children through feeding or restricting their consumption.

In telling stories about school and home, friendship and kinship practices in the dining hall, playground, classroom, out and about, and at home, this chapter critiques the kinds of framework 'behaviour' offers for eating (or non-eating) children. Chapter Four continues this analysis to show how many adults also think of their own eating in terms of compliance and non-compliance to authorities, and the naughtiness, enjoyment and guilt that ensues from failing to comply. Drawing together stories of children's interactions in Leith and the more affluent areas at its edges, I argue that dominant framings of sugar as oppositional to health and good behaviour enable children to engage with it in these ways. As a frequently restricted and often contentious substance, sugary things are understood to belong to specific times and spaces, where ambiguous rules of consumption and values are navigated. At the same time sugary things are highly available and often understood by children and adults to be relatively harmless in small quantities – a nuisance rather than a real danger. This paradoxical situation makes them ideal for accumulation and channelling into different kinds of social endeavours – enabling children to make relations out of sugar.

This chapter is an invitation into the pains and pleasures of consumption, and engagements with a contentious substance. In terms of methods, I followed the tradition of academics

working in ‘new childhood studies’ who suggest the researcher should become an ‘unusual adult’ (Christensen, 2004) in children’s lives rather than a figure of authority. In adopting this role, I encountered the same problems facing school staff and parents attempting to make activities more ‘child-led’ and in respect of children’s rights. I found myself fighting to avoid becoming a figure of authority at all costs, resenting the adults who had placed me in what I envisioned to be ethically problematic situations. In the rare situations in which I successfully avoided becoming any kind of disciplinary figure, or accepted children’s sugar, younger children were left bewildered – sometimes inquiring if I was in fact an adult at all. The chapter weaves in these methodological insights to draw a richer account of how children use food to make sense of those around them, to engage affectively, and to hold influence over others.

### Being brothers, sisters, and adults

Soran has had his lunchbox opened by the class teacher, again. Mrs Murray holds up the two tangerines and chocolate bars inside. ‘Right, what would you like for lunch? Bubble fish, enchiladas, or baked potato?’ The seven-year old protests, in a loud American twang, but Mrs Murray insists: ‘You’re a growing boy, you’re having some lunch.’

Soran rolls his eyes, sighs dramatically and agrees to a baked potato, taking the yellow plastic token Mrs Murray is holding out, while the rest of the six and seven-year olds mill about on the faded blue classroom carpet, fetching plastic lunchboxes from trays, or huddling around Mrs Murray for a coloured lunch token. A yellow token for Ahmad, again? Mrs Murray asks the six-year old to instruct his mother to fill out the lunch form with a choice of menu, or the school will give him a baked potato by default. Ahmad nods and escapes this embarrassing conversation. He has been receiving yellow default tokens since the start of term.

I wonder if Soran is upset at having his lunchbox probed, but he laughs; this seems to have become a routine. But Mrs Murray is worried about Soran. This morning she interrupted the class activity to ask Soran to clarify if he was from Iraq or from Syria. The receptionist needed to know, urgently. Soran launched into a complicated story about how you get to Scotland: first on a boat, in a car, in a taxi... The bell for morning break interrupts the story and Edinburgh Council food smells waft up through the corridors. I queue up with Ahmad and the other children and follow them down the stairs in single file. And with no noise please.

I sit down next to Soran and Ahmad with my plastic tray of bubble fish and chocolate cake. The catering staff would prefer me to eat my lunch from a porcelain plate – ideally a larger portion with extra salad – but I insist on having the standard tray. Soran has pushed aside an untouched baked potato, and is unwrapping a chocolate bar. ‘Benimo!’. He waves the chocolate bar in my face. Do I know what a Benimo is? It’s from Kurdistan. ‘But guess what, you can buy it at the Turkish shop!’ Soran shouts, sharing his excitement at finding the prized Benimo bar here in Edinburgh. This draws the attention of a passing staff member, who frowns at the volume, and looks at me pointedly, waiting. Soran breaks off two chunks of Benimo – one for me, and one for Ahmad, a thin boy of few words with a shared taste for Benimo bars. The staff member watches me in disapproval, suddenly advising ‘I wouldn’t if I were you!’ before striding off to confront a girl who has brought a doll to lunch. Sharing snacks is formally disallowed – although this is hard to regulate in practice, for reasons that I describe later on.

Who does Soran usually sit with at lunch? Soran looks to his right, but Ahmad has vanished with the piece of Benimo. Soran hides Ahmad’s lunch tray under the table. Ahmad returns and Soran waits until Ahmad has become suitably distressed before returning the tray, crushing the boy’s small body in a bear hug. In guise of an explanation, Soran explains they are brothers, because he thinks their mothers are both from Kurdistan. Does Soran have other brothers and sisters? Mouth full of Benimo, Soran explains he has a home brother, Eylo. Ahmad is his school brother. Ahmad nods contentedly, letting Soran speak at double volume, for two. Soran suddenly hands me a tangerine to peel, and scoots off to another seat to continue lunch with Logan, who is throwing chips onto his neighbour’s plate.

Soran doesn’t reappear at school, and to our distress, neither Ahmad nor I hear from him again. In school, relationships between children are fragile and beyond their control – families can move homes, lose their legal status, and children change class and schools abruptly. The structures within which they can relate, engage affectively and form friendships are fragile. Ultimately there are few spaces over which Soran feels control; Benimos and baked potatoes are one. Sugar in the form of a Benimo bar offers enhanced possibilities for relating in the space of the dining hall, possibilities of producing a language of likeness, in the context of shifting and uncertain circumstances.

Shared place and belonging are also conjured into the lunch hall through the Benimo bar. Benimos can easily be divided up, and used to solidify ephemeral friendships, marking out the difference between those who have a knowledge and liking of a particular chocolate bar, and

those who do not. Sugar is a useful ingredient in a panoply of playful opportunities and props for thickening relationships, for marking who is included and excluded from social networks. And for marking who shares things at a higher level – not just through divisions created by the school through age categories and arbitrary allocations of children to classroom groups.

At school, eating represents a break in time: marking a time and space outside the classroom, and in a context of diminished adult control. In her ethnography of children in urban Poland, Boni refers to spaces of eating as ‘safe spaces’ (Boni, 2018a, p. 393) for children: settings which enable children to express opinions and feelings. My research shows that children’s eating spaces are ambiguous – allowing for increased expression of taste, but also always already constricted. For the school staff employed to work in the lunch hall, high noise levels are inappropriate, sharing food, ‘playing with your food’ and ‘running about the dining hall’ with bits of Benimo bar squarely infringe school rules – and are subsequently marked out as bad behaviour by frowning adults. For children like Logan, Soran and Ahmad, hiding lunch trays, throwing chips, and moving about to share food and loudly engage with a larger number of children equate instead with the complex processes of building and feeding friendships.

Later that day, I see Ahmad berated by the class teacher for gifting stickers to his friends while running the daily mile – an inappropriate exchange that should happen outside of school. Another day, I watch a girl pick the sparkles off her Alice band to distribute to her friends. Within the school gates, children do not have much material culture at their disposal with which to fuel their friendships and economies. Snacks and lunch box items emerge as valuable commodities in this respect, and which mark out children as different from one another. Standardised baked potatoes are not easily divisible, and do not offer much space for reinterpretation in the dining hall setting. Snacks are smaller and more mobile.

Literature on children shows the importance of sweets as a particular kind of cultural artefacts in children’s lives and social relationships (James, 2001; Loebenberg, 2012; Fletcher *et al.*, 2014) James’ ([1982] 2001) ethnographic study of ‘kets’ (children’s confectionery) in northern England for example shows how the consumption of this ‘rubbish’ food enables children to bond and construct a social world distinct from that of adults. Likewise, in an ethnographic study of schools, homes and toy shops in Vancouver, Loebenberg found that toys, foods and treats brought from home became a ‘source of wealth’ (Loebenberg, 2012, p. 16) for children in the playground, and that playful exchanges of these items helps children create and maintain relationships of obligation. With older children in secondary schools in England, sociologist



Adam Fletcher describes the thrills of exchanging banned food items like confectionery as a form of subversive behaviour and resistance to school authority – with the effect of marginalising already marginalised working class students (Fletcher *et al.*, 2014).

In Scotland, toys cannot be brought into primary school, and flows of treats from home are increasingly limited in bids to reduce deprivation and inequalities, as seen in Chapter Two. The remaining snacks or treats the children have at their disposal – combined with various rulesets formally forbidding children from sharing due to allergies – increase in value as objects of exchange. My ethnography shows that sugary things allow for increased playfulness, not least because they are often already marked out and held up as special by adults both at home and at school.

The next lunch I share with Ruby and Kim, aged seven, who wave me over to their table. ‘We’re sisters’, Ruby explains, amid floods of giggles, as I sit down. ‘We have the same lunch because we had a sleepover! My mum made it for us. And we were going to have a midnight feast, but we didn’t wake up.’ Do they have brothers and sisters? Ruby has a sixteen-year old sister, and Kim has a baby brother. ‘It’s like you’re a baby and I’m at Big Academy!’ The girls laugh together, and Ruby shyly offers me a piece of sesame biscuit, warning ‘It’s quite sticky’. I accept a tiny piece. Both girls’ eyes widen in astonishment. Ruby watches apprehensively as I eat it.

Ruby: ‘Do you like it?’

Imogen: ‘Yes. You’re right though, it’s very sticky, it’s all stuck in my teeth. Thank you.’

*Ruby blushes, looking delighted. A younger boy recognises me further down the table and runs over, half-eaten sandwich in hand, ready to engage in our usual game.*

Adrian: ‘Imogen! How old are you?’

Imogen: ‘Guess!’

Adrian: ‘Are you an adult? Are you seventeen? Are you eighteen? Are you a teenager? Guess my age!’

Imogen: 'Er... five? six?'

Ruby: 'Are you a teenager, or an adult?'

Adrian: 'She's milk age!'

Ruby: 'Do you have adult things in your bag?'

Imogen: 'Like what?'

Ruby: 'Like... Spreadsheets?'

Imogen: 'Nope!'

Ruby: 'Perfume?'

Imogen: 'Nope!'

Ruby: 'Adventure things?'

Imogen: 'What is milk age?'

*Ruby looks disappointed. Adrian tells me this means a giant banana will come and eat me, and runs off cackling, half-eaten sandwich in hand.*

For Soran and Ahmad, food is part of a shared experience of being Kurdish in North Edinburgh; eating food that makes you alike thickens friendship. Ruby and Kim on the other hand mark out their social closeness in a different manner – their social time spent together materialises into matching foods, rather than drawing on an explicit sense of shared belonging or background. Matching lunches display and illustrate to all that the two girls enjoy a distinct and privileged relationship that extends outside the institution. The solidity of the friendship is made legible through its manifest extension to, and facilitation by, related adults. Ruby's mother temporarily takes on feeding care responsibilities for Kim, continuing to extend the family home to Kim through the lunchbox and into the public space of school, with the packed lunchbox becoming a 'bridge' (Metcalf *et al.*, 2008, p. 409) between home and school.

The language of home also travels playfully into school space, where the girls can become siblings, enjoying the imaginative adventure of becoming a baby boy in the other's home, or slipping inside the local comprehensive as a moody teenager. At school, I learn that play with kinship forms, sesame bars and imagined giant bananas can all be useful ways of communicating our feelings for one another. Like Ahmad, Ruby extends a sticky piece of relationship towards me – and is both confounded and delighted that I would accept such a gift. This sticky thickening of an informal relationship goes against the official 'no sharing' rule of the dining hall and ambiguously implies potential misbehaviour. This creates a sense of complicity, even as it confirms for Ruby and Kim my overriding authority in choosing whether to accept the gift or to reprimand the children for disrespecting school codes. My ambiguous positionality, and my active listening to children's views makes me an object of curiosity, and a valuable ally – and not only when it comes to peeling a troublesome tangerine. A relationship worth thickening if one has the means to do so.

Ruby, Kim and Adrian disrupt the taken for granted category of adulthood. From the perspective of six and seven-year olds, it is unclear precisely what makes someone a teenager or an adult, but explicit questions of hierarchy, relationships to school rules, what and how we eat, all form part of it. Adulthood is marked by a wide range of practices inside school – including carrying things like spreadsheets and perfume, sitting on large chairs, eating from porcelain plates, wearing particular kinds of clothes, and sharing the responsibility for enforcing school rules and managing behaviour, including eating behaviour. Ruby and Kim thus compliment me on my attire of the day, a hoodie with Californian bears and leggings selected in order to look the least possible like a member of staff or parent. It is precisely the act of relinquishing adult privileges – particularly authority over children, which structurally prevents commensality – which throws my adult status into question for these interlocutors.

While Ahmad and Ruby can share and extend their influence, children from more affluent families often find themselves to have less cultural artefacts at their disposal. Sophia (11) for example sighs when she explains this to me – she doesn't get any food she can share with people. She only gets sweets if it is Easter or Christmas, or if she's visited her grandparents. Other children don't share their snacks because they find her 'annoying', although she tries her best not to be. She claims to be happy enough with her fruit though. Observing a nearby group of girls playing with sugared laces, Sophia explains that the no-sharing rule is contextual and somewhat negotiable. For example, it's fine if you share with the whole class – or formally in

class. Or in the playground, discreetly. Sometimes the playground staff just don't really seem to notice.

A five-year old in the lower playground explicates the school logic as she holds out a jelly worm in my direction. 'You're not allowed to share your snack, unless someone doesn't have a snack and they're hungry so you can share it with them. But I don't care, I share mine anyway. Sharing is nice'. I graciously accept the rubbery gift. 'There are just too many for me,' she observes, matter-of-factly. Chapter One showed how sugar makes a good fit with values of kindness – in the explicit reward of children's kindness by school staff through a decadent hot chocolate, or in the baking of a cake to express apology. The despised family bag of jelly sweets brought from home is often designed to be shared. The senior management team and parent council are unable to read sharing into these commodities, or this value is shifted to one side due to other priorities, like health inequalities. Socialisation through sharing ('sharing is nice') is a vital lesson imparted to children both at home and at school.

In the playground, the sharing of bad kinds of food can be read as an ambiguous form of good behaviour. School tries to instil in children practices of being attentive to others who may not be as fortunate as themselves. As good school citizens, children should share their snack with someone who does not have one, although they should also refrain from sharing in case that person has allergies. From the children's perspectives, sharing snacks expresses a form of attention, relation-building, and possibilities of play with other children. Some snacks are better adapted for such purposes. Strawberry laces seem ideal. Moving across the playground, I approach four girls aged eight or nine twirling these, swiping each other, knotting them at the end to wear as a crown, or a necklace – running off with sugar-tangled hair before I can approach. Laces can be broken into lots of tiny bits. Gummy worms are a fungible commodity. Small and/or easily divisible things are better than large ones. Affective values can amass in sugary snacks.

### Enjoying one's rights

Greenside Primary divides children into houses and a variety of pupil committees with the aim of promoting social skills and solidarity across age groups outside the classroom. Children are admitted into houses automatically on arrival in the school and for the duration of their primary school career, and into committees by annual classroom votes. Brothers and sisters are

automatically placed into the same house groups. During one house meeting following the series of Friday assemblies on human rights, discrimination and resilience, the house activity is to reflect on the concept of ‘Freedom’, and what freedom means to us. The children are given the printed outline of a paper dove, to be filled in with a word and/or drawing. The best doves will be displayed in the main hall. I walk between the classroom tables, crouching down beside chairs to ask the children about their ideas.

Some of the children are engaged in a debate with Lydia over whether they can illustrate Scottish Independence. Someone else is drawing ‘Emily’, who tried to jump under a horse. Rory aged ten, has written in all capitals ‘THE RIGHT TO WHAT FOOD WE WANT’. A pupil support assistant (PSA) walking past looks at the drawing, snorts and pretends not to have noticed. Rory makes the case loudly to me that children should be allowed to go to KFC when they want, that that is their right. He proceeds to colour his dove in the brand’s red and yellow tones. Rory’s dove doesn’t go up in the main hall. Children’s rights and pupil voice – such as Rory’s – posed a range of dilemmas for adults.

At school, children are continually engaged by adults in practices of understanding and deploying their rights, as well considering whether one’s behaviour might be infringing on the rights of others. The following section examines the senior management committee’s Fruity initiative (presented in Chapter Two) – whereby children are no longer authorised to eat their snacks in the playground, and are ‘strongly encouraged’ to eat fruit communally in the classroom instead. I revisit the initiative from the perspectives of the children involved. The reader will recall we sat around the table with the Health Group children in the talking room, preparing an educative spiel to deliver to the parents at school coffee morning. Lydia has hardly started when Sullivan interrupts:

‘Can we have coffee?’

Lydia: ‘No you most certainly cannot. Right. *Addressing the imaginary parents*

‘We want to talk about our Fruity initiative! After playtime everyone will be offered fresh fruit, it’s to encourage people to be healthier.’

*Tia jumped in immediately to interject:*

‘That’s easy for me, I eat fruit all the time.’

Lydia: ‘Oh, well done Tia that’s great. OK, Samuel will read out that bit. Now for the tech part.’

Sullivan: ‘Can I bring my phone?’

‘No! Has everyone signed in? Does everyone have a nickname?’

Sullivan: ‘Mine is ‘Probation’.’

Tia: ‘Mine is ‘Health’.’

Tia is keen to receive praise for showcasing good school behaviour: sitting nicely, listening closely, making suggestions – and above all showing she is making good choices and embodying values of health. In school space, being healthy overlaps with the school notion of ‘making good choices’. I’m struck by how closely Tia associates a good relationship with Lydia and desires to be a valued pupil with the notion of health – evidenced both in her choice of pseudonym and her taste for fresh fruit. Sullivan’s approach is instead characterised by outlandishness – demanding items considered unhealthy and somewhat inappropriate for children (coffee and mobile phones), to get a laugh from the other children. While Tia is often found at the Hot Chocolate ceremonies described in Chapter One, Sullivan is more often accosted in the playground and asked ‘are you making a good choice right now?’. Their chosen nicknames reflect two sides of the same coin. Health and probation, good and bad, law-abiding citizen and outlaw.

At break time I linger in the upper school playground, eager to find out how the Health Group children might be feeling about the new snack policy. I approach Gemma and Tia, whom I recognise from another school activity. Their friend Mason scowls at me. What do they think of Fruity, outside of the classroom?

Gemma: ‘It’s OK...’ She pulls a face of disgust.

Mason: ‘Who’s she?’

Gemma: ‘We made brownies with her.’

Tia, sighing: ‘We’re supposed to be healthy, so I suppose we can go one or two days without crisps...’ She pulls a sad face.

Imogen: ‘What do you usually get for a snack?’

Tia: ‘Crisps.’

Imogen: ‘Would you ever get a sweet snack?’

Tia: ‘No. I always get crisps for school, because I get enough sweets at home. I’m a sweet tooth at home and a crisp tooth at school.’

Tia is comfortable deploying the language of adults in school and at home – children are supposed to be healthy, to embody moderation, to not eat more sweets than is ‘enough’. Policy runs through children’s lives in Scotland, and Tia is not overly surprised to be asked honourably (reluctantly) to sacrifice her crisps for the greater good. Health is about control and discipline. As a representative of the Health Group, she understands herself to be first in line to role-model healthy eating to others. She had applied to be a member of this committee, and was voted in by her classmates. Tia understands this role comes with responsibilities. And Tia’s friend Gemma has already shows she feels resigned to cooperate.

Fruity is gradually implemented through the week. On Thursday, I encounter Tia again in the playground, this time eating her packed lunch with her two cousins Cindy and Leah. Today Tia isn’t discussing health, instead bragging about how many nuggets she had at MacDonald’s last weekend. Tia and Cindy pair to make fun of Leah’s packed lunch items. Cindy tells me how one time they pressured Leah into throwing away a sandwich which was ‘stinking’, revealing how food talk is used to reinforce hierarchies between older and younger sister, through alliance with an even younger cousin. Tia easily moves between registers – whether in the classroom or in the playground, in the presence of the senior development officer, friends, cousins, and hard-to-place researchers. Everyday experiences of kinship unfold at school, and Tia’s tastes for food move within different power relationships, friend/kin dynamics and age-based social hierarchies.

A week into the program, I check in again to see the policy in action in the classroom and playground. The enforcement of the new snack rule is a grey area, as explained in Chapter Two. In one classroom I visit, some six year-olds are biting into apples and pears; a few are not. One boy continues to eat heart-shaped sweets and chunks of Easter Egg from a Ziploc bag. When I ask why he is eating this snack rather than school fruit, he explains these are Easter gifts from his grandmother, and besides, ‘I need the energy to hold out until 1pm, because

we're going on our scooters at 12'. For some children, home-brought snacks embody particular kinship ties as well as messages from primary carers in a way that fruit does not.

Out in the playground, I notice Gemma and her peers in huddles, hands in the pockets of their overcoats, throwing suspicious glances behind their backs. There is a rustle of packets. Courtney (7) lurks on the steps hiding a packet in the crook of her arm, and catches my eye furtively to see if I will react. For Courtney, Fruity is clearly not experienced as a way of exerting her rights as a child. She challenges me angrily:

'I want to eat my crisps, but we're not allowed.'

Imogen: 'Are you not?'

Courtney 'No! But I'm *starving!* My mum said I'm allowed to eat my crisps.'

Imogen: 'What about fruit?'

Courtney: 'I don't like fruit! It was pears. I don't like pears at home.'

Imogen: 'Why?'

Courtney: 'They're disgusting.' *She pretends to vomit.*

Courtney is unsure how the snack situation will unfold – but she is hopeful that as an adult I might witness the situation and legitimate her argument for keeping her snack. On other days Courtney tries to get me to swap her school lunch order, or ask the staff for extra bread. Today Courtney has located several powerful arguments to underpin her rationale: hunger, her mother's authority, and personal disgust. Children have a right to food, Courtney is well aware, and are not allowed to be in a state of 'starving', as communicated in previous school assembly sessions. Zero Hunger is the school's official millennial goal. Parental authority over children's food consumption is a topic of debate at both the school and the national level. Disgust is a personal experience, but one Courtney understands can evoke compassion in adults, as children are understood to be consumers with individual tastes. If she does not like pears at home, how will she like them at school?

Somewhat satisfied with my non-intervention, Courtney moves away, eating her crisps one by one from inside a coat pocket. Like me, the surrounding playground staff avoid confronting the



children over their carefully hidden consumption. The playground becomes a kind of laboratory for the children too, where they try things out to see what works, finding ways to be in control of their consumption and relationships with others – shaping the latter through food play and food talk. Age-based hierarchies are imposed by the school itself, marking out who must eat under most scrutiny (younger children) and those who may eat outdoors, choose whom they eat with, and enjoy more privacy (older children). The children embody these hierarchies of young to old. Peers can be sought out as friends with strawberry laces, and generosity. A liking for ‘healthy foods’ or defiance displayed to adults is an attempt to create a special relationship. Moving away from school, the next section compares this with children’s sugar work at home and ‘out and about’.

### Sugar secrets and sugar police

I know Jan from school: A Polish ten-year old with a solemn manner, who enjoys drawing with great precision and detail. Jan is very serious in his interactions with me over lunch or in the playground. What do I collect? He collects coins, and also special stones. He has a treasure box at home, within which he accumulates and stores these things. If I could only eat one food for the rest of my life? I hesitate, and opt for pasta. His would be a specific type of Polish dumplings. Do I know what dumplings are?

I chat to Jan’s mum Lena outside in the school playground after morning drop-off. We sit on sunny benches by the gardening plot, the school yard suddenly silent and empty except for the occasional seagull. Lena stares out towards the playground, her quick dimpled smile suddenly gone. She worries about Jan – whether he is happy at school, whether he is getting bullied in class, and whether things will go well when they move house. Lena is between jobs and things aren’t simple, so she multiplies her small attentions. She knows Jan likes gold things. Lena is on a new diet at the moment, and thought Jan would enjoy the Ferrero Rochers she received for her birthday. They are gold balls of a kind. She put one in his lunch box this week. But they are all gifted to Emma. Jan is in love with Emma, a girl in his class – they’re going to get married, Lena tells me. Emma doesn’t know this yet. Lena found out yesterday. We both laugh in easy adult mockery. Isn’t that sweet?

One rainy November afternoon Jan and his six-year old sister Justyna spend the afternoon with me. We drink a cup of hot chocolate in an empty café after school (except for Justyna, who doesn’t like hot chocolate), and wait for Lena to pick them up. Jan has been given an extra

sandwich to take to school, Justyna, a Polish chocolate bar, to sweeten their mother's afterschool absence. On the café table, I've arranged an impromptu drawing activity with notepaper and biros. Jan draws the shop sign he sees out of the big glass window in dark ink, and Justyna, back to the window, draws Jan's drawing. It is boring here, but neither complains. Justyna plays with an individual packet of sugar found in a pot on the table, balancing it on her nose. Justyna hasn't uttered since we arrived, and abruptly breaks the silence:

'Can I eat this now?

Imogen: 'Er...'

Jan: 'No Justyna! See that?' *Jan picks up the empty Polish chocolate wrapper lying on the table.* 'You already had all of this sweet thing. Normally you would only get one piece of that. That is enough sugar.'

Justyna identifies me as the natural gatekeeper of sugar in this situation, but in seconds Jan confiscates and re-appropriates the role for himself. Jan summons the potent public health argument of sugar quotas and the necessary values of moderation and self-discipline to exert responsibility and authority over Justyna in Lena's absence. In his role as an older sibling, Jan transports and reproduces parental surveillance over what Justyna may or may not eat in a specific moment. While I feel reticent to become the sugar police, Jan is prompt to control Justyna's options with implicit charges of self-indulgence and greed – waving the empty wrapper as proof.

Jan berates Justyna, in their shared knowledge that children's foodwork – consuming sugar in a carefully measured fashion (sugar metrics), eating at mealtimes, and consenting to vegetables – falls squarely within regimes of being a good or badly behaved child at home. Jan isn't interested in Justyna's hunger levels, personal desires or present emotional state. Jan's policing relies on a knowledge of Justyna's authorised quota of Polish chocolate (one piece). We're outside in public, not at home, so Jan knows that the one-piece rule doesn't apply here. In the space of the café, and with adult friends of Lena like myself, rules can doubly slacken. But Justyna is pushing the already loosened rules by requesting superfluous sugar, Jan feels. This clearly equates to misbehaving. The vacuum in responsibility for Justyna's behaviour and sugar metrics can be quickly filled. Jan's enjoyment of regulating sugar intake, pulling rank over Justyna, and experiments in performing adulthood hangs in the air.

*Justyna continues to twirl the sugar packet around in her fingers. Jan immediately reaches out to select two identical packets from the sugar pot, which he places carefully in his coat pocket. Trying my best to appear nonchalant, I ask what this sugar is for. Jan educates me:*

‘I took two sugars for me and my BBF [Best friends forever]. Me and my BBF go to a special place to eat sugar. We’ve tried three types of sugar, the yellow one – that one was really sticky, I didn’t even want to eat it but my BBF said we should – the brown one, and the white one. The white one is the best one’.

Imogen: ‘What does your mum and your BBF’s mum say about that?’

Jan: ‘They don’t know. We go to a secret place.’

Imogen: ‘Aha!’

Jan: ‘Well there’s this wall, it’s looks like a wall, but it’s got a door hidden in it. Then no one can find us.’

Imogen: ‘At your BBF’s house?’

Jan: ‘No, at the park.’

Imogen: ‘Can I write about the secret place in my book?’

Jan: ‘I didn’t even tell you what park it is in. I don’t remember the name.’

The same sugar denied to Justyna – configured as corrupt consumption in the space of the café – is ideal to re-appropriate for the important and noble project of building friendships. Unlike Justyna, who already had a ‘whole sweet thing’, Jan isn’t being greedy. He isn’t eating them *now*. The boys both collect individual sachets of sugar, whenever they are legally and freely available: from cafés or take-away stands. Jan and his friend have established a common preference for the sugar that comes in white sachets, as opposed to that in brown or yellow sachets (known to adults as aspartame). Consuming sugar together, and agreeing on the best type, thickens Jan and Joseph’s fragile bond, forged not in school or through parent-to-parent friendships but through an afterschool club.

Individual sugar sachets have the potential to break the rules in other exciting ways. The secret illicit owning of sugar challenges parental control. Unlike adults, children are not understood to have exclusive ownership over their items, which are nearly subject to confiscation by adults. Equally exciting is the secrecy surrounding this sugar's edibility. The material form which in Jan plans to consume his sugar would be deemed raw or uncooked, culturally inappropriate for immediate consumption, practically inedible for adults (James, 2001). The dual naughtiness embedded in sugar as an object makes it ideal for secrecy.

Jan shrugs and agrees that I can write about the sugar secret in my book – after all, what can I give away if I can't even accurately locate the secret door? But should I tell Lena? These ongoing sugar conundrums spearhead core questions running through the thesis, and throughout my adult interlocutors' lives: Just how harmful is sugar? What collective responsibility, if any, do we have towards children in Scotland? Do children have the responsibility to make their own choices without adult intervention? By the time (and if) Lena reads this, Jan will be on his way to secondary school, where raw sugar will likely no longer hold status as a valuable currency, with the advent of pocket money and increased independence.

While adults have a wide array of substances they can draw on – drinks, meals, chocolates, and in some cases tobacco – to promote special forms of commensality with important others, children must make do with the scarce resources available to them. This means things provided within the framework of their kinship structures (a packet of Refreshers, a sesame bar) or educational structures (a bag of Easter eggs won at school), or things collected in commercial spaces (sugar sachets), and carefully stockpiled. The availability of sugary things for free, or at low prices, makes them ideal for autonomous projects. I'm left wondering if Emma has been seduced by the romantic power of Ferrero Rochers.

### Naughtiness and healthiness at home

At 3.15pm a bell rings, and Isla (9) and Evan (7) emerge from the main building in matching blazers, shirts and ties. Isla's hair is held back by an Alice band to match the school colours; Evan has already pulled his tie loose. Isla accepts a plum from his mother's handbag; Evan scrunches up his nose. As we walk past other families, Evan dragging behind, their mother Fiona exclaims 'Look at this! Wow, vegetarian sushi. Katherine always has very healthy snacks. And I thought I was doing well with my plums from Lidl!'. Katherine mutters in

embarrassment as she struggles to balance a tiny bottle of soya sauce, dropping her umbrella in the process. Is Fiona snickering? Evan and Isla regularly observe their mother delight in embarrassing other school parents.

After climbing into their mother's four by four, both children peer around at me from the backseat in curiosity. They are asked how school was. 'Boring!' Evan moans. Isla says people were talking about Brexit again, and wants to check that she has understood – promptly launching into an articulate analysis of current politics. I ask which snacks the children take to school. Sometimes she and Evan get 'healthy snacks', Isla observes. Other times it might be chocolate biscuits, which their mother refers to as a 'naughty' snack, from the front seat. These are prized at school. A girl in her class, Samantha, doesn't like her snack and always wants to share Isla's. The girl in question gets a 'baby snack' – a snack from the baby aisle in the supermarket. It's embarrassing, Isla explains. Isla feels sorry for Samantha and shares a bit of biscuit.

On other days at the school gate Evan and Isla might get half of a Lion or a Twix if their mother is running late – a 'nostalgic' snack which reminds her of her own childhood. Isla and Evan hear their mother refer to herself as 'a terrible mum sometimes.' And there was Stollen, another time, Isla prompts her mother, who picks up the story.

I'd given them Stollen for their snack, you know what Stollen is? It's got raisins and marzipan in – and it's a nut-free school. I had it in my bag at pick up time, and someone started questioning me about it, if they'd had it for morning snack at school. But Isla was amazing, and said 'Oh, no not at all, we had tangerines for our snack!'

Isla nods, serious as always. Isla has her mother's back, as well as Samantha's, and bathes in the glow of Fiona's pride. She is an expert in matters of loyalty, ingenuity and mastery of healthy narratives.

Once through the front door, Isla is first to pull out her homework, as usual. Meanwhile Evan has thrown his school bag on the floor, and is running laps around the table shouting 'I love Coke! I love Coke!' Fiona rolls her eyes. Isla rolls her eyes, adding:

'Evan is addicted to Coke.'

Imogen: 'How do you know he is addicted?'

Isla: ‘Because he really likes Coke and he wants Coke all the time.’

Evan: *Still running*. ‘Coke is the best! Coke is the best!’

Imogen: ‘What is so good about Coke, Evan?’

Isla: ‘It’s sweet. And he’s addicted. And because he writes ‘Coke is the best’ everywhere. He writes it on the floor in the playground.’

Evan’s desires for Coca Cola are not trivial. This is one sugary commodity clearly out of bounds, both at home and school, rather than a grey area. Coca Cola is marked out as publicly bad on this side of the neighbourhood, and bears particular class connotations. Evan gives a last shout of ‘Coke is the best!’ and grins, ignoring my question. Both take their iPads out of their school bags and Evan pretends to be doing homework, but the blare of a football match on YouTube doesn’t go unnoticed. Fiona declares it is homework time, and seizes Evan’s diary. Spelling. Evan takes out a crumpled yellow book, opens a lined page, and shouts ‘Finished!’ The doorbell rings – the next-door neighbour – and Fiona is distracted. I sit next to Evan, feeling vaguely responsible for the spelling activity and locate the first word: ‘Flag’. Evan takes a half-hearted attempt at writing F-L... Then rubs it out and writes ‘Coke is the best’ in printed letters. Fiona is back and leaning over the page. ‘Glad we’re paying private tuition for this!’ she remarks ironically to the neighbour and me.

With the neighbour and me present to witness this performance, the home becomes public. Requesting soda so insistently in front of other adults amounts to a public defiance of authority. Isla is quick to point out her intense dislike for Coca Cola and how it makes her ‘tummy feel funny’. Coca Cola doesn’t make Evan’s tummy feel funny – not that he gets many opportunities to drink it. He has received from his mother a plant supposed to smell like Coca Cola to reorient his attention towards the joys of gardening. During my visit, Evan takes me to the fridge to select a Curiosity Cola, something his mother buys as an occasional treat, hopefully less terrible than the global brand name. PhD students and other guests are useful people to Evan, as they offer possibilities for accessing sugary things. Evan’s visiting the fridge for Curiosity Coca, his spelling of Coca Cola in lieu of flags, or his climbing to find sugary snacks in the cupboard are regularly denounced by Isla (who sometimes records such activities with her iPad), and categorised as ‘naughty’ or ‘cheeky’ behaviour by his mother.

Evan's naughtiness continues through the evening – helping himself to a large helping of pudding, feeding pudding to the family dog, resuming to eat pudding, before dumping it in the sink. On other days it is selling sweets at school, or throwing a plum at someone his mother was trying to 'schmooze' with. Through the evening, Isla continues to engage in polite conversation with me, politely asks to watch a cartoon, and (less politely) reprimands her mother for drinking wine. When her mother puts out a chocolate biscuit on individual plate for us, Isla take a minute bite from her biscuit and holds it up to the light, looking wistful.

'Imogen, what is it they put in here that makes it so addictive?'

'I don't know Isla, what do you think?'

'I don't know either! I can just tell that I want to keep having more and more of it. I keep nibbling little bits off.' *Isla shakes her head, displaying concern.*

The addictiveness of sugar is of concern to Isla – in her relation to me in any case. Evan's unruly behaviour is already downgraded to 'addicted', unlike Isla who shows she wants to be reflexive and in control. Two years older than her brother, Isla is keen to embody forms of academic, dietary and behavioural superiority which distinguish her as the elder sibling. And like Jan, Isla speaks for her quieter younger sibling. From her experience, health talk is likely to impress adults. Isla goes on to tell me that she adores Iberico ham and has 'the most expensive tastes in this house.' Fiona also speaks publicly of Isla's refined tastes and liking for fish and meat. 'Tell Imogen about how you tried to get them to make Cullen skink at the school?' Isla tells me about her pupil council fish soup demand, turned down as too costly. Evan is more like her, Fiona reflects aloud. Carbs and stodge. Evan doesn't comment. But Isla hasn't finished yet – and promptly launches into a sugar-free version of Hansel and Gretel for my benefit. In proposing post-sugar narratives, Isla flouts her food knowledge, public goodness, discipline and self-control. Like Jan, she airs her adult-like concerns, and embodies notions of responsibility and good child citizenship. Isla of course is the strong and witty vegetable-eating protagonist in her revised Hansel and Gretel. I'm not sure if Evan is in the house too – or running around outside shouting about Coca Cola and being gobbled up by witches.

Among the adults in their house, it is her father Tim who is the expert cook, the disciplined eater, the one who keeps fit and exercised. Like Tim, Isla prefers meats. With her healthfulness and collection of academic achievements, Isla shares a form of likeness (common substance?)

with her father, and blends into the family's affluent neighbourhood and the private school community. Evan's naughty Coca Cola rhetoric on the other hand, and Fiona's naughty Twix, Lion bar or Stollen provision, engage both in forms of naughtiness that bind them closer, while distinguishing them from the posh people (like Katherine) at the private school with their vegetable sushi snacks and risible obsessions with health. While Isla and Tim show exertion of control, self-discipline and respect for rules, Evan and Fiona by contrast become wild cards, subject to flirtation relationships with 'addictive' drinks whether this be Coca Cola or red wine. Kinship is characterised by processes of differentiation as well as shared substance.

Children put time and effort into building social relationships. The siblings in this chapter often forge themselves in opposition to one another – forms of difference that can be nested in food likes and dislikes, and in the viscosity of eating itself. Recall the twins who drew pictures in Chapter Two, one of whom who eats 'everything', the other who eats 'nothing'. Sugar becomes a useful ingredient and rhetoric for forging both one's individuality in relation to others, and for forging the unique texture of mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, and brother-sister relationships. Individuality is the first fact of English kinship (Strathern, 1992a, p. 14). Sugar (and its absence) carves out space for children to forge individuality – a unique combination of tastes transmitted through kinship lineages (from the 'inside'), and things picked up from 'outside' the home and provocative through their stickiness with class connotations. Personal relations to Coca Cola or Iberico ham give texture to relationships with important others.

Different kinds of pleasures emerge through the enjoyments of (somewhat outrageous, yet broadly safe?) transgressions. Other kinds of pleasures emerge through the enjoyment of self-control and the esteem one might receive from others. Evan resists his mother's efforts to socialize him out of his taste for Coca Cola, and embeds the naughtiness of soda in their relationship for the meantime. Isla and Evan's engagements with sugar's pleasures (or their absence) in their interactions with Fiona reveal the complex ways in which children transform an autonomous adult into a mother – and a different version of mother to each child. Sugary foods and drinks become a way (or label) which help children fix people and relationships in place.

In Evan and Isla's house, naughtiness is a category to describe people, actions, and the circulation of things like chocolate biscuits. Naughtiness is a way of speaking about ambivalence, and the tensions between different norms and expectations. Evan and Isla



overhear Fiona call herself a naughty and even ‘terrible’ mother. Not only because she fails in her view to abide by school rules, serves sandwiches for dinner, and fails to role model healthy eating herself. Fiona portrays herself publicly as naughty because she is independent, works, goes for drinks with friends and does not foreground her children’s health as top priority in all settings. Isla and Evan receive the message that such forms of failure can also be a form of success. Being healthy is boring and pedantic. It is more fun to flirt with unhealthiness – risking dangling sugary treats under the noses of health-driven and more affluent others, because one is late after coming from a community project. In this way, Isla and Evan absorb Fiona’s role-modelling of other values: gendered forms of autonomy, implication in the community, and a form of wildness or resistance to rules and conformity.

## Conclusion

There is a widespread assumption in Scotland that children have a natural attraction to the taste of sugar. An ethnographic approach does not take children’s desires for sugar for granted, but explores the spaces sugar carves out in children’s social worlds, and the processes by which the substance becomes special to children. Children incorporate sugar into their building and shaping of relationships with other children (friendships, siblingship) and their relationships with adults, including parents, educational staff, and other adults whose hierarchical status is less clear – for example a researcher. Children’s consumption practices and narratives are also infused with public health and parental messages. I suggest that children’s uses of their sugar at home, school, and out and about, in the context of public health messages about sugar’s badness for health, reflects and produces the texture of these relationships in the making.

Sugar’s materiality enables it to easily slide into these different roles, and to gently transform people’s relationships. Certain forms of sugar (often sweets) can take on important roles as valuable possessions in school where children’s access to resources is limited, and other commodities like toys or stickers are unavailable for exchange. The extension of home into school through lunchboxes and morning snacks provides valuable opportunities. Strawberry laces can be torn and multiplied in the playground, engaging recipients in mutual contracts of loyalty while actively exclude others.

Different kinds of snacks emerge in the lives of children encountered in this chapter: the healthy snack, the unhealthy snack, the naughty snack, the addictive snack, the baby snack, the nostalgic snack, the school or after school snack. Outside of school, the secret (inedible?)

snack, or the midnight feast consumed beyond adults view, become exciting practices for children, participating in their formation of their own social words (James, 2001). Snacks consumed in school or out and about, reveal things about one's home, life outside of school, and intimate relationships. Foods brought from home can be laughed at by other children, causing embarrassment (in the case of 'baby' snacks), or envy (in the case of sugar laces). Potent meanings travel into school wrapped into snacks – which publicize trips to see grandparents, playdates, parents' childhoods, projects of generosity, and the notion of parental caring with energy to help children 'hold out'. Children are not passively fed, but shift between different registers of food talk and eating as they move between diversely structured spaces and kinds of social relationships, as illustrated by Tia.

Children are living with sugar too, as a 'condition of life' – but where sugar is potentially available yet structurally restricted in particular ways. Akin to toys or clothes, sugar consumption is a sphere usually mediated by adults, and where children feel different to others. One may never receive copious amounts of sweets (like Sophia). Sugar can become available through negotiation and persuasion, through good behaviour, by secretly raiding the kitchen cupboards, through special relationships with peers or grandparents, or just sporadically, representing something beyond one's control. Children might desire sugar because it is understood to be delicious, but also because it is special, and potentially transgressive. Sugar's semi-availability – always within limits, and often seemingly arbitrary parentally defined ones – makes it an object of importance. In a reverse trend, some children understand they can acquire a more adult status for themselves and forge privileged relationships with a parent, teacher or researcher by actively disliking (thus unchoosing) particular kinds of sugar, expressing tastes for foods categorised as healthy or refined, and adopting values of self-control and moderation. The stories in this chapter highlight the ambiguity and unclear boundary between naughtiness and treats, whereby treats are often associated with good rather than 'naughty' child behaviour, and where 'naughty' treats concern adult failures to parent 'for health'.

One important aspect of good child citizenship at school and at home is cooperating with adult practices of care – which signifies accepting to eat on terms other than one's own. Children's role in the home and within kinship is one of not knowing how to look after oneself, depending on related elders for food, shelter, protection, healthcare, affection, socialisation, education and financial resources. This care can be experienced as authoritative or even authoritarian – and in contradiction with other visions of children as consumers with rights and individual

preferences. Children find value in both eating as instructed, and trying to eat on their own terms, viewed as integral to processes of individualisation and personal character. Children shape their own processes of socialisation, growth, and the texture of their relationships. This chapter underlines the fragility of the structures within which children can relate, engage affectively and form friendships, arguing that children's affect must be taken seriously. Moreover, things that children view as valuable and conducive to building intimacy with peers – food pooling and exchange, play, engaged conversation, which align with values of kindness, generosity and closeness taught elsewhere at home and at school – are often reconceptualised by adults as noise or misbehaviour. Confusingly for children, this framing can change from one context to another.

At school, children learn that they have rights, and can make their own choices – with the ethical weight of good and bad ones falling on themselves only. 'Choices' relate to one's attitude towards and consideration for others (kindness, respect) and what one absorbs into the body (fruit instead of sweets or crisps). As we see with Tia and Isla, children are keenly aware that the morally right thing to do is to align with values of a balanced diet, and the practices of making 'healthy choices'. But school language of making good choices is confusing in that it conflates behaving well in one's relationships towards others, and consuming well for one's individual health. And while some commodities like Coca Cola are easily legible as a 'bad choice' and banned from school, many other products are more evasive in terms of the choice they represent. What kind of choice is a bag of gummy bears, brought from home with the purpose of sharing with those who might not be lucky enough to have a snack – in a context of a school initiative that feeds children fruit to compensate for parents' supposed bad choices?

Can good choices be made with sugar, and is there a place for sugar in the good diet? Chapter Four examines the way that adult women engage with moral experiences of feeding their children as well as themselves, focusing in particular on transmissions of food and substance between mother and child, in the context of wider social relationships.

## PART TWO: SUGAR ‘IN PRIVATE’

### Chapter Four: Sugar and mothering

#### Introduction

Rishita and her husband had moved from Jodhpur to Edinburgh four years previously. Dressed in loose grey cotton trousers, a Harry Potter t-shirt stretched across an eight-month pregnant belly, Rishita showed me into a dark living room. Perched upright on a rental sofa, she shushed a five-year old daughter in small Dalmatian slippers, colouring in at the table. Meanwhile her husband Sanjay proceeded to make us tea – his only role in the house in relation to food, like Rishita’s father before him. As we sipped on the sweet milky chai and nibbled on carefully sourced Parle-G glucose biscuits, she and her husband answered my questions about sugar through a cascade of fondly told stories. ‘We’re from North India, so we have sugar in the blood’, she smiled.

Rishita was referring to an expression used in her hometown – stipulating that people in the region start with dessert and end with dessert. Rishita’s husband certainly has no problem eating ice cream for breakfast. Rishita fondly tells me about the time in her parents’ home when her husband had a sudden desire for halva at 1am – which her mother proceeded to make. Here in Leith, Janvi receives treats from Rishita: sweets to take to school, or Krispy Kreme donut rewards for good behaviour or school achievements. Rishita spends hours cooking delicious savoury dishes during the day – curries, dhal, chapattis, to go with yoghurts and salads, feeding Janvi after school and her husband after work. But sugar sticks Rishita, Sanjay and Janvi together in funny ways too. Especially Janvi and her father, when in the evening they exchange looks and suddenly pronounce in unison: ‘We need something sweet!’. Rishita sees that Janvi takes after her husband for everything: eating habits, ways of talking, everything, all his behaviours. Father and daughter grin; Rishita shakes her head. They are terrible – if you ask either of them who they love most, it’s never Rishita. ‘So the match is already fixed!’

When Janvi was inside her, Rishita was always craving sweet things, which she ate, although she is normally more of a savoury person. With her second pregnancy, she is craving salty things instead. She hopes the next baby will turn out more like her, and they will have a bit more family balance! But they’ll have to wait and see how things turn out. A sweet tooth is

about where one comes from, who one takes after, and about one's personal character. Sugar can be 'in the blood' in several senses, linking together people from a particular region, or through family lineages – but also quickly leaking from the mother's diet into the womb, or absorbed through a donut reward. Sugar also divides, marking differences between kinds of people and sets of relationships, as seen in Chapter Three. Sugar crystallises the tensions and ambiguities between what is individual and unique, what is gendered, what is shared, collective or universal. Family narratives of the sweet tooth blur the boundaries between shared bodily substance and what is taught through processes of socialisation. Questions about sugar are also interpreted as questions about how to demarcate zones of responsibility for how children grow and eventually 'turn out'.

Rishita laughed about the elusive balance of kinship. This chapter moves into the carefully constructed privacy of the home in Scotland to explore sugar and all of the ambiguities that travel with it from the perspectives of mothers. Through these encounters I show that sugar offers an important lens onto ideas of balance and imbalance in kinship relations, and women's desires to create good childhoods and family lives – in which health, pleasure, care, control, discipline and comfort are correctly balanced. Or at least as well as possible.

What the five women we meet in this chapter reveal to us is a link between sugar and intimacy in Scotland. A relationship to sugar is read as unique – a living assemblage which can include biological predispositions, inheritances, gendered experiences, life as a foetus, childhood and teenage experiences, stress, mental health as an adult, one's individual capacity for self-control, one's parenting style, and relations with a partner as well as with an array of relatives. Rishita described the sugary substances shared between kin at home with endearment – the nostalgic glucose biscuit, the halva a husband pines for, the Krispy Kreme's of recognition – an embodied link to shared history and kinship ties in North India, and a marker of success in a new cycle in Scotland. But sugary things caused trips to the dentist for a filling too, Rishita knows. While Rishita celebrated having sugar in the blood, other mothers sometimes felt alarmed by such possibilities. This chapter describes a spectrum of experiences of instances of mothering in Leith that is revealed by ideas about sugar.

This chapter asks: What tensions arise in women's attempts to give a good childhood and enact forms of good motherhood, amid other sets of relationships? How are children fed and grown in the home, and how might sugar reveal the ways in which women experience relatedness?

What is passed on, from mother to child, and what is not shared? How can sugar be both needed and ‘unnecessary’?

Like Rishita, the majority of women I encountered in Leith felt disproportionately responsible for everyday food work within the home, for the health of the family, and for the ways in which children grow. My research underlines findings by sociologists of Britain that the distribution of childcare – including responsibility for and management of children’s eating and health – is gendered (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Beagan *et al.*, 2008). Social policy researchers in Britain have also critiqued the portrayal of parenting as ‘gender blind’ (Daly, 2013, p. 223) even as policy messages explicitly target women. Viewed through sugar, kinship relations in Scotland emerge as gendered, classed and as an ongoing process (Carsten, 1995, 1997; McKinnon, 2016), commencing in the womb. In this chapter, sugar is adhesive – becoming stuck to instances of being a good or bad mother, and succeeding (or failing) in raising a child in the best available way. Sugar becomes stuck to both ends of the spectrum: at once a way of nurturing children and respecting their desires, but is also often declared to be ‘unnecessary’, and a possible threat to some women’s sense of being a good mother.

I use the notion of bittersweet to explore how instances of pleasure in sugar become tainted by the perception of negative moral and physical consequences on bodies and relationships. This echoes Charles and Kerr’s observation that for women in Britain in the 1980s, food can be ‘a treacherous friend’ or ‘a comfort which had a sting in the tail’ (Charles and Kerr, 1988, p. 142), inscribing women’s eating in cycles of pleasure and denials of pleasure. But bittersweet captures more than this. It encapsulates the ways in which the public wrongness of sugar becomes an integral part of everyday eating and feeding practices – and of kinship practices. It also attends to the ways in which conflicting knowledge and public health messages about sugar’s harms can haunt women in everyday life, and the amplification of concerns about diet with the advent of motherhood. As in other chapters, sugar’s presence – its constant over-availability as something one could have, but which would be a less-than-best choice, as both potential pleasure and harm to oneself and to others – is not merely a part everyday life, but emerges as a very ‘condition of life’ (Han, 2017, p. 1)<sup>11</sup> which these women must work with.

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<sup>11</sup> The Introduction discusses the historical processes which have rendered sugar ubiquitous, and its dual legacy as harmless and harmful.

Chapter Two highlighted an important paradox in public health messages: that people must exert control over sugar, but they must not abstain. They must take pleasure in sugar *in moderation*, and enable their children to take pleasure. Sociologists Cairns and Johnson use the term ‘calibration’ (Cairns and Johnston, 2015, p. 32) to describe the fragile process through which women in the UK strive to engage with food in a way which demonstrates their care, but is not perceived as extreme or pathological. While the women in this chapter could be described as engaging in calibration, what many of them are concerned with is balance – a balance which is always already elusive. In a Scottish context, Katherine Dow explores another understanding of balance (although she does not refer to it as such) through the notion of ‘stable environments’ for those planning to have children in a Scottish village (Dow, 2016). Parental behaviours and relationships play a central role in these environments.

For mothers in north Edinburgh, this fragile balancing task of controlling sugar – while also permitting sugar ‘sometimes’ – is felt to be part of the work of creating good environments for children’s growth. Not achieving the desired (yet elusive) balance creates feelings of guilt, ambivalence, and failure in many women, as well as always more effort. Often these careful efforts are instantly thwarted by other well-meaning relatives. I argue that sugar raises the question of who is allowed pleasures, in what forms and to what extent, and within which sets of relationships. Using sugar as a window onto intimacy, this chapter offers a close up exploration of mothering practices, paying particular attention to the role of ambivalence in both diet and kinship, and the roles sugar plays in navigating emotional life and everyday ethics.

Children are understood to be forged firstly within and through nuclear home, but how they grow and eventually ‘turn out’ seems uncertain and fragile (hence the need for a ‘stable environment’), and ultimately beyond parental control. In these five stories, kinship has something unstoppable about it, as certain aspects pertaining to it (substance, bodies, dispositions, affective patterns) reproduce themselves across time. Why had Janvi turned out like her father, who has 1am desires for halva? What if Rishita had refused her cravings for sweet things, and eaten salty ones instead? The ethnography reveals a reading of mother-child relations as potentially fragile, even as they are read as more fusional or unbreakable than other kinds of relations. Sugar emerges as a substance of relatedness (Carsten, 1995, 1997), but one that is dangerous to bodies and relationships. Sugar reveals intimate relations as those charged with the most potential for harm and destruction (Geschiere, 1997). Faced with the potential harms of sugar’s effects on bodies, parents in this chapter find themselves experimenting with

their own diets and their children's – demarcating eating as one of many possible 'moral laboratories' (Mattingly, 2014) – in order to produce the best good life and balance for the family amid everyday risks and doubts.

### June: Out of control?

In June's experience, the taste of sugar is overhung by more than one kind of shadow. Even the most viscerally delightful instances of sugar became somehow ruined by dark ways of thinking, and the projection of particular consequences on bodies and relationships. Guilt is one way that sugar – and eating more generally – is regularly spoiled. Yet June is always pleased when I turn up with dark chocolate biscuits to share, and the knowledge that I sometimes eat too many biscuits too. Shared ambivalence around sugar can become socially pleasurable (see Introduction), a transgressive logic already encountered in Chapters One and Three. As we shall see, June's is a story of failure in the search for the elusive balanced diet. This is not only nutritional science's impossible dietary balance of calories in/calories out, which can only ever exist in abstraction, while eaters themselves value other kinds of balance (Yates-Doerr, 2016). In June's case, this concerns the elusive balance of giving children joy while restraining oneself, the balance of indulging and losing control from time to time, but without excess.

The kettle's just boiled, and June's pulled open a cupboard. What brew would I like? She has instant coffee, or Earl Grey tea, if I'm feeling posh. June lives up one flight of stone stairs, in one of the city's characteristic nineteenth century tenement buildings. We know one another from a local parents' group, one of June's many projects to build community in Leith. We'd exchanged a couple of text messages. Could we meet at the group, or did I need to 'peruse' June's larder? 'Peruse', I had joked back, feeling the weight of what this might mean.

For many interviewees and friends, the house remained out of bounds to me. June presents her house as more open than others, subject to impromptu visits from friends' children, or the minding of a neighbour's baby – a house reflecting her personality, openness and generosity. At my request, June pushes her mug of coffee aside to smooth a sheet of paper, and pens out a couple of quick marks, linking her most relevant relatives together. Mum and Dad with their respective birth towns, her sisters, their children. On the right-hand side, her own son (8) and daughter (11) branch out in the opposite direction, ages scribbled underneath. As we talk, the



question of food – sugary food in particular – channels the conversation towards intimate anxieties.

I first ask questions concerning June's childhood memories of food, but the conversation twists and turns following the connections June makes. June thinks aloud, in bold Scottish tones edged with humour. We are suddenly discussing her first pregnancy. When June became pregnant with Josie, and again with her younger son, Fraser, her appetite suddenly became uncontrollable. Pregnancy itself has been described as a loss of control (Upton and Han, 2003). Thinking back:

'I just couldn't control my appetite! Well, there have been lots of times where I can't control my appetite, but I was worried because I know that sugar goes from your blood stream into the baby's, and they can actually develop a sweet tooth – from you! And I thought, my God, my kids don't stand a chance. That really worried me.'

'Is that true? I didn't know that.'

'Well I read so much stuff when I was pregnant. I absorbed all of this stuff. They said that if you had so much sugar in your bloodstream, your baby can taste it. I don't know.'

'I'll have to read up on that.'

'Look it up in case I'm talking a load of crap. I just thought... My poor kids don't stand a chance.'

Shared experience through the womb emerged as a space for guilt, and occasion for anxiety. June worried that her sugar consumption was transforming her children's physical composition and future tastes. June's past 'absorption' of public health narratives about the nature of the feeding channel and the consequences of eating weighs her down, as her body becomes a receptacle of knowledge, guilt, food, as well as persons-in-the-making. Once absorbed, such knowledge about sugar cannot be un-known, and continues to shape June's understanding of the kind of person and mother she is.

In a horrified laugh, June recalls how she had already tainted Josie and Fraser's tiny lives through her unruly eating. Eating meant direct sharing with Josie and Fraser, an immediate and

irreversible channel through which they would be forged as people. June's concerns closely resonate with those of Jeanette Edwards' (2005) English interlocutors in Alltown with whom she discussed new reproductive technologies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As one participant put it, food that is shared through the womb – following a mother's inexplicable craving for a particular kind of sweets or crisps for example – is rife with emotional content, and participates in shaping the baby into a related person (Edwards, 2005, p. 78). Babies fed artificially might turn out to be clones. June's explanation also shares uncanny links with anthropological writing on substance and kinship. Strathern's (1988) work on shared substance in Melanesia, and Carsten's (1995, 1997) work on substances of relatedness emphasise the processes by which people become (and stay) related through the sharing of breastmilk, food, land. June's excessive eating of sugary things contributes to the quality and texture of relatedness by passing on her likeness.

But while sharing sweets appeared inherently valuable in terms of shaping a mother-child bond for Edwards' interviewees, and cooked rice tends to bond people tightly in Carsten's, June instead expresses concerns about this closeness of shared substance – highlighting the dangers of passing on unhealthy things, as well as her affective patterns in which sugar is enmeshed. Sugar spreads from foods into the blood, contaminating bodily substances as it streams through the body, becoming a form of pollution for ungrown children, and subtly altering their shapes as future people in the world. Meinert and Gron capture elements of June's thinking succinctly when they write that kinship '[...] is constituted by this particular configuration of the nourishing and the poisonous, which we cannot escape' (Meinert and Grøn, 2020, p. 7).

Josie and Fraser had both developed a very sweet tooth, as far as June could tell. Now the children are older, June still feels overwhelmingly responsible. She describes how constantly aware she feels of sugar and the place of it in their lives, but how she also feels acutely powerless to change this. Eleven-year-old Josie, in particular, is becoming increasingly independent and exposed to external (sugary) forces – school, friends, advertising, and their father. She is always nagging them: 'It's a poison', 'You get addicted to sugar'. But she can't seem to do anything about it. 'Oh, it's terrible.' We laugh, and eat another biscuit. The everyday terribleness of sugar becomes a good story to tell, to a (female) researcher, to a friend – indexing a shared gendered domain of knowledge and experience, as well as an area for transgressive pleasures and pains.

What June finds most anxiety-inducing, is that the children demonstrate a persistent taste for sugar even when they don't know it is there. The fight against hidden sugar is exhausting, and the constant monitoring seems impossible to maintain. They want ketchup with everything. But June must backtrack at this point; she cannot explain her eating or her children's without putting it back into historical webs of relationships, and not only those with the children's father. June left home – was put out suddenly – as a teenager, and didn't look after her diet or her teeth for the next seven years. She feels she is still paying the price for that period. After leaving home, June worked in a factory, and moved in with a boyfriend who didn't work, and who cooked 'crap frozen portion food stuff' from the freezer shop. They had no money, but it felt like an adventure. June feels she became 'fat' over this period – a time of drinking, eating kebabs, pizzas, and feeding her sweet cravings with biscuits – in the absence of affective kinship care and anyone to tell her to look after herself. For June, 'crap food', and within that, crap sugary food, chimes with abandonment by nuclear family and loss of control, exploratory romances, and the encounter with new ways of being in the world as an independent adult.

Sugar is now embedded in her life in complex and unstoppable ways. June has reflected and analysed her relationship with sweet things. Pathological or not? She isn't sure if she has an actual 'recognised' eating disorder. But she does binge sometimes, on biscuits, chocolate. June's experiences reflect those of many women I spoke to, whose intimate relationship with sugary things worried them, even as they remained undiagnosed – always spilling across the uncertain borders between normal and pathological. At the same time, June feels driven to allow her children the joys of sugar. Through sugar, I learn about her experience of growing up in a family of Jehovah's witnesses. June taps the family tree, tracing the journey of the sweet tooth and binging practices up and down the inky lines. We sit in silence, the only sound the clinking of a single clothes peg trapped inside the washing machine.

Her father is 81, and June recently discovered that he binges too. June laughs – she didn't realise this when she was a child, maybe this was hidden from her. But she does remember the arrival of the new microwave, and the discovery that you could bake cakes instantly with this novel technology. As a child she had enjoyed making millionaire shortbread and other treats, a personal skill celebrated and valued by her family. Nowadays, when her mother is away, her father raids any chocolatey or cake-like things he finds in the cupboard. June speculates that he is probably like her – if there's only a fraction of something left, best consume it. Hopefully this absence will prevent the sugary cycle repeating itself anew. The only thing her father can hold back from is his wife's chocolate. She has her own expensive chocolate, which he doesn't

touch, out of stinginess. June's older sister lives close to her mother and father in Scotland's central belt, and is 'gluttonous' too.

Tales of her sister's gluttony take June back to Nana's house, her maternal grandmother, in northern England, where she would go to stay as a child. The house was like Willy Wonka's factory, cupboards full of goodies. Nana would buy sweets and cakes from Marks and Spencer's, which June remembers as 'nice things, posh things'. Etched into June's mind is the permanent image of Nana sitting watching telly and eating mint humbugs from a large glass jar. Munching exclusively with her top teeth, as she had misplaced the lower set. June was allowed, encouraged even, to gorge herself in Nana's house, because that is what grandmothers do (see Chapter Six). Her paternal grandmother was another 'fiend for sweets'. When she died, and they emptied the house, they found it full of sweets. June remembers eating Granny's sweets for years after she'd died.

Her memories move from house to house – her parents', Nana's, Granny's, a flat with her boyfriend, the tenement in Edinburgh – each with their own sugary configurations, set-ups of cupboards and drawers with particular contents. Given this set of relations, the unstoppable transmission of sweet tooth from womb to womb and from house to house, June is terrified that Josie and Fraser 'do it' – gorge or binge on sugary things – or that they will come to. June describes them as having the 'capacity', illustrated through their ability to devour a Mars Bar without feeling sick. The cycles and downwards transmissions of sugary habits and substances show the uncertain and chancy transmissions of things between people. Did June's sugar-fuelled diet during pregnancy produce a sweet tooth? Was Rishita's baby already demanding sweet things in the womb? Is emotional eating passed down? June's stories of sugar have a bitter aftertaste. Moderation is a distant and always unachievable goal. Sugar in the present is tasty, but translates into body fat and bad teeth, and those of her children too, June worries.

The next time I visit, Josie (11) and the neighbour's daughter Jessie (12) are giggling from their bedroom, sharing out sweets into coloured plastic bowls for a midnight feast, with the seven pound coins Josie received from visiting her father that afternoon. It's take away pizza night, and Josie, Fraser, Jessie, her brother Craig (9), June and I snuggle up on the sofa to watch *The Simpsons*. When pizza boxes are empty, June serves pudding. Fraser settles for 'toffee cake', an individual sponge pudding heated in the microwave. Back on the sofa, Fraser eats one tiny teaspoon at a time, making pleasurable noises. Pudding-less, but sipping on wine, June and I exchange amused smiles over his head.

Fraser: 'This is yummy delish.'

June: 'Is it?'

Fraser: 'I left you the best bit.'

Imogen: 'Aw'.

June: 'Oh, thank you Fraser. Are you feeling a bit sick?' *Fraser nods.*

Imogen: 'Is Fraser full?'

June: 'Fraser is very good at knowing when he's full. I finish off everything in this house. I have no limits. Anything sweet.'

Fraser: 'You have to take a very thin slice and eat it like this, then it's the most delicious.' *Fraser demonstrates.*

June: 'What like this?' *Fraser closely inspects June's slice on the teaspoon, and nods.*

June: 'Yum!'

Ambivalence ebbs and flows. Sugar's multiple meanings continue to unfold in June's living room. Sugar constitutes a personal problem for June, yet it is also nice having puddings in the house, for an impromptu Friday night with guests. Watching Fraser eat his pudding – in a peculiar fashion unique to him – produces a surge of affection. The joys of watching children eat are further discussed in Chapter Six. Children are supposed to feed on such pleasures; adult women less so. June can read Fraser's interaction with a pudding based on common patterns, revealing the intimacy of everyday living together. She knows that feeling a bit sick and leaving her the best bit of pudding are part of a same gesture. Being fed these fragments of sugar so valuable to Fraser, is absorbed by June as the substance of mutual affection. An expression of a healthy mother-son relationship characterised by closeness.

Managing this ambivalence – working out when sugar is permissible and pleasurable or not, and in which forms and circumstances – is part of the (gendered) labour of household planning and responsibility for children. June resents her ex-husband for distributing coins easily

transformed into sweets, accruing her labour of control and surveillance, while he appears to do none. But June has to laugh when Josie makes her close her eyes and puts a gummy bear in her mouth. Sugar tastes like mixed emotions, and paradoxes. The sweets of a deceased grandparent still taste good, June recalls. Sugary things oscillate between being a ‘poison’ to know and nag about, and the substance of shared pleasure, affection and intimacy.

Sugar becomes such a potent substance because of the contextual emotional registers it sticks to, and appears to amplify. June worries that she has created the (potentially) sweet-toothed persons Fraser and Josie are becoming, yet some things are clearly beyond her control – the fact that Fraser ‘self-regulates’ around pudding, and displays childhood eating quirks at the opposite end of the spectrum to June’s eating practices. For June, it is important for children to ‘be children’. Dynamics of being children, being mothers, being daughters collide. The collective family body is hard to control, materially and morally. Sugary things are distrusted as substances that reveal something about the self, and even June is surprised at the depth our conversation has taken. She feels sugar both proves and amplifies her lack of moderation, and her potential inability to be a good mother. She is concerned that, through mother-child ties, the type of person she is may spread. This experience of motherhood – with its endless transmission between bodies, and the intense pressures towards regulation and moderation that becomes attached to it – easily attaches to and amplifies women’s existing feelings of guilt.

### Abigail: Too much control?

I know Abigail’s son Sam from school – a polite eleven-year-old with blue eyes and a radiant smile. When Sam catches my eye in the school cafeteria we exchange a secretive smile and a quick raise of the eyebrow to acknowledge our special relationship. Like her two sons, Abigail has a pale yet radiant complexion, casually cool in washed out jeans, duffle coat thrown over her slim frame. I first meet Abigail at a community cooking group. She doesn’t think she can help me with the study – she is worried she will get it wrong, that she doesn’t know enough about cooking. Abigail admires my connection with the university; she dropped out of college herself. I’m attracted to Abigail’s quiet, inquisitive, and nervous manner, and over time we forge a fragile and slow friendship. We discover some commonalities – curiosity, self-doubt and fraught family relationships – and solidify a relationship through coffees near school, or a vodka lemonade when the children are at their father’s.

We eventually set up a shopping interview, and browse in Lidl, pausing when a food item evokes a particular memory. Bananas are a household staple. Abigail reminisces about ‘hot banana’ – was that what she and Sam named the buttery mix she used to stir in the pan with cinnamon, sugar and orange juice? It had come out of a baby recipe book. Now and again he will still request it, as a ‘wee comfort type thing’. And here’s a fizzy juice, for Nathan’s birthday party. Should she pick up an extra one for Sam? Frustratingly for me, Abigail keeps returning my questions. What do I think? Do I worry about sugar too? What is my opinion on sugar versus sweeteners?

Like most mothers I interviewed, Abigail returns to the past to evaluate her experience of motherhood, and reflects on what she might have done better. Her eldest, Nathan, is now sixteen, and at the time, Abigail didn’t feel prepared for motherhood. At eighteen, she still felt a child herself. When she became pregnant with Sam six years later, she felt more informed, more conscious of the need to manage her body:

[With the second baby] I was being careful. I think I was more... I found out when I was a wee bit further along with Nathan, so it was more like I panicked, he was a surprise baby... *laughing*. The prenatal vitamins and that. But I don’t think I overly thought about what I was eating. I know I probably should have. I know that so many people do. With Sam, I definitely ate more fruit and stuff, but I think that’s because that was what I wanted? My body just... And the only time I’ve eaten omelette in my life was when I was pregnant with Sam. So maybe I did try a little bit more, I don’t know.

Like June, Abigail muses on how past relationships in the womb became foundational to Nathan and Sam’s ongoing relationships with her. Abigail recalls her cravings were different when she was pregnant with Sam. She had wanted and eaten a lot more fruit, including a sudden love for mangoes and omelette. Abigail laughs: nowadays Sam can be funny about some foods, but he is a complete ‘fruit bat’ – his favourite fruit is mango – and he loves omelettes and scrambled eggs. Is that just a coincidence?

In these stories, women cherished the uncanny links between their child’s life in the womb, and their own dietary modifications. Many mentioned the excitement of following the urges stemming from sudden bodily requirements for growing a foetus, and/or the needs expressed by a new life form. Like June Abigail felt her appetite had also been altered during, and by, pregnancy itself. Anne Murcott (1988) describes pregnancy as a profoundly ambiguous state.

Like June, the women in her study felt that their pregnancy cravings had constituted a grey area – they were possibly not real – and may have just been their underlying desires to self-indulge (Murcott, 1988, p. 750). Pregnancy itself is experienced as a loss of control in other anthropological research (Upton and Han, 2003). For Abigail this was quite the opposite with Sam; she had felt attracted to more wholesome foods.

Abigail envisions pregnancy as a time when she felt control over which and what quantity of foods she ate and gave to her sons. When Nathan and Sam were born, Abigail was subjected to new pressures as the boys entered into particular webs of social relations. We reach the till; Abigail looks over her shoulder, visibly embarrassed. She doesn't want to be bad-mouthing her relatives or appearing 'judgy'. Abigail hasn't bought much. If Sam were here, she'd have shopped differently. He would be asking for a cinnamon bun or a donut, she smiles. But no, she already has cakes at home. 'Probably too many'. She probably gives them too many things like that, she muses.

As we walk out of the shop, I press Abigail to continue telling me about feeding the new-borns. When the boys were very little, Abigail was much more 'conscious' about what they ingested. Despite Nathan being a surprise baby, Abigail had quickly taken up 'watching' the amount of salt and sugar. Maybe even too much. Then she had Sam, and 'when you have your second...' Had she been different with Sam?

[Sam] has tried little sweeties and things like that sooner than Nathan. Like sweets, or things like... Sam had a McDonalds long before Nathan had his first McDonalds. Then Nathan was bigger, and I felt like Sam saw these things. But possibly more relaxed. I wasn't like some... I always felt guilty because I wasn't like, making my own baby food, and all this stuff, I tried that, I did a bit, but I always felt a bit... I must have read stuff when I was pregnant and thought, 'Oh no, I've got to watch the salt in that, I've got to watch the sugar', it was all about that. And I took it all a bit too...

It had gone too far. With Nathan, Abigail thinks it was in fact post-natal depression, but it wasn't diagnosed until months and months later. When Abigail had heard people talking about post-natal depression, it was about not wanting to be with your baby. Instead, she had 'felt very guilty, just inadequate, not doing a good job' and was overly protective. But how to tell what was a normal level of maternal guilt? In this space, and based on her own research, sugar was identified as a danger to monitor, and a source of anxiety. In the womb, feeding had been an



exclusive relationship between her and Nathan. Now there were ‘outsiders’ wanting to intervene and mediate feeding. By outsiders, Abigail is largely referring to her in-laws. Chapter Six discusses the paradox of grandparents as both insiders and outsiders in kinship.

Before Nathan’s first ever meal, so much had already happened in terms of feeding relationships. Sixteen years later, Abigail still feels guilty. She had read everywhere that ‘breast is better’, and at the hospital they had encouraged her to breastfeed. It had turned out to be a five-month daily struggle – a struggle to get him to latch on, a struggle to swim against a tide of unsupportive in-laws who wanted to give him ‘processed stuff’, a struggle against the health visitor who complained he wasn’t gaining enough weight. At eighteen, Abigail had felt embarrassed about breastfeeding in front of her mother-in-law. In the present, the fact of giving up and turning to formula still felt like an ongoing failure in good motherhood. When starting solids, Abigail had bought the Annabel Carmel books and tried to do meal planners for weaning. She felt drowned in expectations: How an earth were you meant to make home-cooked meals three times a day, and offer variety? Maybe this is why Nathan and Sam are fussy nowadays, because she didn’t offer them enough choices when they were wee, she sighs.

In Abigail’s account, sugar blurs the line between health and pathology. Was her incessant worrying about salt and sugar monitoring good and careful mothering, or post-natal depression? What is the right level of control? Being in control emerges as a form of labour. Establishing the right level of control emerges as a second kind of labour. Abigail describes the joint pressures to provide nutrition, nurturance and comfort (of which breastmilk and ‘hot banana’ are the epitome), amid opposite-flowing pressures from parents-in-law. She simultaneously desires to give the boys cinnamon buns, but also to withhold giving these. In her house, ambivalence continues to be an everyday resident, and moderation an always impossible goal. Abigail’s accounts reflects findings by anthropologists and sociologists on the association between breastfeeding and good motherhood, where infant feeding becomes a space where women are subject to pressures from the state, markets, and their surrounding kin (Maher, 1992; Murphy, 1999; Lee, 2007; Faircloth, 2013). Breastfeeding in Britain thus becomes a marker of success or moral failure for women (Faircloth, 2013; Lee, 2014).

Although Abigail and June couldn’t be more different in terms of personality or religious background, for both sugar emerged as bittersweet, wrapped up in guilt and responsibility, lurking in the grey zone between normality and disordered mental health. Sugar was a symptom of something else, even as it provided real possibilities for short term comfort (a biscuit binge

for June, hot banana for Sam). Invariably, questions about sugar evoked responses about whether Abigail and June were good or bad mothers, in control, or not. Sugar amplifies questions of control, and feelings of being out of control. June and Abigail's different accounts of pregnancy cravings and their effects into the present reveal something about control and pleasure. The public goodness of pregnancy cravings – by their very exceptionality, and their orientation towards the growth of a child rather than oneself – reveal an understanding that women should not normally engage in craving or seek pleasure in food. I further suggest that associations between sugary things and notions of comfort, emotional responses, and a failure to exert control, may play a role in producing sugar as somehow feminised.

### Leah: The work of a balanced diet

It was something about him being, like, new, and, I don't know... Just his little body...

We're curled up on the sofa with mugs of herbal tea, talking in low voices, the children in bed. The house is like a dark jungle. Patterned shadows fall behind the indoor plants from soft yellow lamplight. Leah and her partner rent a small flat in a 1990s style residence – she would like to buy a three-bedroom house, but cannot afford one in Leith. I've only just met Leah, but suddenly we're speaking on intimate terms – discussing the ins and outs of her childhood in boarding school, our respective amorous relationships, Leah's sons.

Food is a topic close to Leah's heart. Last week she checked her bank statement, and realised she spends most of her money on food: Tesco, Realfoods, Lidl. When her first son was born, she desperately wanted everything to be 'not processed'. And of course no sugar, which was just 'so unnecessary'. In Leah's experience, foods are closely tied to the kinds of bodies we live in. Leah laughs as she tries to describe her perception of Aaron as a new-born:

It was something about him being, like, new, and, I don't know, just his little body, I wanted it to be good foods, and I pureed all the vegetables, and gave him, like, a balanced diet, and... He was really good actually, he wasn't fussy, he would eat most things. He loved salmon, and like at a really young age.

In this golden age, when Aaron was 'new' and perfect, all the variables could be controlled, parameters applied. Aaron's body was uncontaminated by the foods of other people, suspended

from the logic of the market. His delightful absorption of salmon and a range of vegetables directly reflected Leah's status as a successful mother. Aaron's baby years could be archived, remembered as a successful project.

But the younger one is a bit more difficult. He just seems to like processed food a lot. And now I have two children, and a job, and college, so sometimes I just...

Leah throws her hands up in despair. Like Abigail, she feels the pressure of homemade baby foods, and the impossibility of combining this with a career. In some ways, Leah would like to be exclusively in charge. But the choice not to undertake paid work in the marketplace would also be wrong. Redistributing childcare labour means relinquishing control and reducing consistency due to the involvement of, and possible sugary contaminations from, potentially less caring others. In Leah's thinking, a balanced diet is the perfect gift from mother to child. Yet in practice this gift is not so easily received, nor does it sit comfortably within the rest of the practices and emotional infrastructures of everyday life. Sugar seems to illuminate what is going on in new ways, often getting stuck at the centre, skewing the balance of what in theory should be a harmonious state of affairs. In her world, sugar emerges as an ongoing concern, encapsulating myriad problems, both between people, and within individual bodies.

After stories of organic vegetables and salmon, Leah launches into a new type of story – 'stealing' chocolate from her child. We both laugh uncontrollably. One night she'd needed chocolate so badly she had eaten a Kinder Easter bunny gifted to her elder son. She had been trying to purchase a replacement 'on the sly', when her son exclaimed brightly 'I already have one of those mummy!'. Caught-red handed in the supermarket, she'd had to confess. 'You actually don't!' I'm really, really sorry. Mummy really needed some chocolate, and there was none in the house, and I couldn't leave, because you were in bed...' Leah sighs. 'I just felt too bad and couldn't lie about it.'

I reassure her I have heard this story dozens of times, and we giggle some more, enjoying a sudden sense of complicity. Leah feels appalled by her own behaviour, yet it also becomes a hilarious anecdote to exchange, prompting me to tell one of my own. These stories of failure, of yielding to sugar, change the atmosphere in the room and produce deepened intimacy by recasting researcher and interviewee as a pair of chocolate fiends. Sugar produces both emotional and physical effects. Like June, Leah is dismayed by what she sees as her uncontrolled eating, revealing a profound incapacity for self-discipline. Sugar offers so many

opportunities for failure. She sighs: she just ‘doesn’t have an off button’ for sugary cakes, sweets and chocolate.

I struggle to give my body good, healthy, nutritious food all the time, well not all the time, but you know, consistently. So, like, back and forth. And I guess the kinds of messages you’re given about food, and your state of mind, there’s like guilt as well. Like if you eat something, or too much of something you shouldn’t have had, you feel really guilty, and you beat yourself up, and you feel ashamed that you ate a whole pack of biscuits. And it’s just like a cycle.

Like June, Leah speaks in cycles: cycles of sugar, cycles of guilt and shame. A ‘sugar problem’. If only she could desire to eat healthy foods. Or if only she could eat sugar with no consequences. Like June, the comfort of biscuits is short-lived, ‘comfort with a sting in the tail’ (Charles and Kerr, 1988, p. 142), and cravings for sugary things blur the line between health and ill-health. They come periodically, with menstruation, and spontaneously, with low mood or just an opportune occasion in which to reward oneself. Leah feels constantly bloated, and experiences gut issues – which she has self-diagnosed as ‘definitely linked to eating too much sugar’. These things lead her to experiment, removing different things from the diet: dairy, gluten. Logically, sugar should be gone altogether. In her mind, she is either ‘being healthy’ or ‘being unhealthy’, two different types of living, with alternate effects on the body and relationships.

When I was eating loads of sugar I was really irritable with them, really snappy, and just not being a good mum at all. When I was being healthy, I noticed I was much more patient with them, and can find more creative solutions to things. [...] when I’m eating healthy I’m definitely so much stricter on my children, and then when I’m... it’s like double standards! When I’m not eating healthy then I’m a bit more relaxed about what they’re eating.

Sugar is mapped directly onto good parenthood and bad parenthood, good mood and bad, moral uprightness and guilt, coherency and incoherency, control and abandon. But eating ‘good health nutritious food’ is hard work. Not only does it mean cooking two lots of food, or facing the awkwardness of explaining why you are eating from a Tupperware box at a party. Eating healthy (virtuously) evidently has its pay-offs: the experience of being a good, patient and creative mother, feeling comfortable rather than bloated or fat, less mood swings, and a broad

feeling of being in control – a form of discipline which is stretched across the family as a collective body. Balance is both moral and visceral.

The problem is that this way of being in the world does not feel sustainable. Leah sometimes feels hypocritical, even cruel, for withholding sweets from her children. One time, she found empty wrappers of oat biscuits under her son's bed. Had he been needing something sweet that badly? Was she in fact depriving him? Leah's story draws on different forms of knowledge – that sugar is 'unnecessary', and that at certain times people find themselves in 'need' of sweet things. This removes sugar consumption from a binary logic of choice. The term 'deprivation' surfaced among other families too, to draw attention to concerns that children would misunderstand why parents would withhold pleasurable things from them, and fears that they might feel unloved or uncared for as a result. Leah's story shows how care and control are in friction with one another.

Planning and controlling the sugar consumption of multiple bodies is difficult work, alongside a stressful professional job and college. Sugary routines of care on the other hand are very easily slipped back into. After running from A to B in the morning, it is lovely to reward yourself with a vegan brownie from the café next door. The unhealthy cycle starts afresh. Leah struggles with her duty to feed her children, and the project of forging healthy (i.e. sugarless) connections between herself and her children. She is adamant that this 'sugar problem' must not be passed down, and takes great pains to avoid 'rewarding' her sons with sugar. This often feels like swimming against the current. Particularly when she finds her mother-in-law offering chocolate as a reward for going on the potty, or her partner casually feeding a digestive biscuit to the baby. Leah's ploys to express love, care, and to reward children's good behaviour *without* sugar are constantly under threat from more desirable sugary offers.

In her model, children emerge as an accumulation of parental actions – from 'new' or a kind of blank slate, to a creature marked by unhealthy emotional patterns and habits. Diet is constantly available for evaluation. In theory, there is a chance to get it all right, and it is this that causes the pain. Guilt stems from Leah's feeling wholly responsible for the children, in a way that her partner does not. But at least there is a silver lining to look forward to within this logic. With the advent of nursery, then primary school, external factors multiply, while control and responsibility gradually diminishes. The result of parental actions can only be measured further down the line. 'We'll have to wait and see how they turn out', Leah concludes.

I can't help seeing these eating projects as somehow redemptive. The morality of sugar is inescapable. Sugar is 'bad' in private as well as in public – for the gut, for emotional patterns, for growth – but it remains a topic of laughter and gendered complicity, and offers bittersweet opportunities for self-care. In Leah's environment, it is disappointing to fail, to negatively transform a 'new' body or her own, but in the end things probably 'balance out', as long as you have as many 'healthy' weeks too. Through copious amounts of hard work, Leah eventually achieves forms of moderation, balancing out her admin job and college with home cooking, correcting her partner and in-laws' biscuit-feeding habits by sheer volume of fresh vegetables, or using the momentum of a decadent tipping point to cut down on sugar again. Leah's feelings of guilt, doubt and self-questioning produce real effects, leading to this or that change in the diet – thus aligning in the end with her sense of good motherhood. But the whole endeavour is exhausting, not least because, structurally, sugar consumption feels more like the default – while framed as a straightforward choice to make.

### Jane: Giving 110%

'If you did it again, would you do anything differently?' I immediately want to take the words back. A leading question, popped up out of nowhere, certainly not in my interview guide, and subtly linked to the tropes of guilt and never-quite-good-enough motherhood I'd been trying to avoid. It's my last session with Jane, and we're sitting across from one another on the long wooden tables of Craigie's farm. We've just done an egg run with the boys, and I'd asked questions about pregnancy and breastfeeding. Jane's expression is unreadable. In retrospect, I think I felt confused about her moral stance, anxious that I hadn't reached the core of things. Or perhaps I'd become accustomed to the endless confessions of things mothers felt they should and shouldn't have done. Maybe the echoes of my own childhood too, my mother regretting this or that, her observations that I'd turned out this or that way as a result. I regretted sounding like one more person ready to judge.

After eight months of visiting the family's cosy brick house every fortnight, I'm not sure what more I was expecting Jane to say. That she would have noticed sooner that Thomas hadn't latched on? That she wouldn't have given Alexander the 'giraffe milk' – a soy drink for lactose-intolerant toddlers, causing dental cavities? That she would have weaned the babies differently? Jane and her husband had patiently explained to me the ways in which food allergies could be potentially linked to exposure and weaning practices. Surely there was something Jane felt

ambivalent about, unsurfaced as yet. Her response surprised me. She looked upwards and away for a second, thinking. ‘With babies? I don’t know that I would actually.’

Jane actively refused the trope of bad motherhood, preferring to project caring and dedicated mother-child feeding relations. She had breastfed both for twenty-two months, making her boss enact the entire protocol – separate room, separate fridge. ‘Hardly know anyone who does that anymore’, she winks. Jane sets herself apart in her long period of breastfeeding, giving the impression that she would not sacrifice anything for her children (least of all work), intent on having nothing to regret. Neither she nor Chris had any relatives nearby to help. Chris had always worked long hours as a civil servant but they had managed to ‘muddle through’.

‘Other people probably hide their sweets when you come around, don’t they?’ Jane suggests on my first visit, as I moan about my struggles to do home ethnographies. On my next visit, Thomas (10) and Alexander (8) sit down to a personalised plate of sweets for pudding – chosen from a selection of sweets, chocolates, homemade chocolate brownie, and cut watermelon. The same week, I had barely stepped over the threshold of Lisa’s home, a mother with children in the private school a few streets down, when she threw open her cupboard to show me a multi-pack of biscuits. ‘Isn’t it terrible?’ Lisa had groaned, pointing to the ‘unhealthy’ foods in her cupboard (a single packet of biscuits). This was her only downfall! What were these performances of bad motherhood really for, or about? Why didn’t women like Jane and Rishita partake in them, or hide their sweets if they imagined others to do so?

‘You need to get one of your own’, Jane once remarked in answer to my incessant queries, to my acute embarrassment. Jane did not refer to ‘in theory’ as Abigail or Leah did, and had something else to communicate. That she was striving to make the best decisions in all given contexts, never drifting from the moral compass – her drive to give Thomas and Alexander the best possible childhoods. As a dedicated healthcare worker and fellow University alumna, she felt a moral duty to participate in research, to be transparent and offer information generously on every front. ‘He’s heavier than you’ she would comment every time Thomas lifted me off my feet to say goodbye.

Jane didn’t tell me that was she is a ‘good’ mother either, but illustrated this through stories and actions, many of which related to food and feeding. ‘See how much I love my kids?’ Jane would remark, tongue in cheek, as she tipped seafood noodles into a pot on another visit. ‘Disgusting’. Jane is allergic to seafood, but seafood pasta is a classic dinner dish: making the children happy comes first. Other varieties of actions included laughingly framing her husband

as an irresponsible and incapable parent, in large part through his lack of culinary skills, as discussed in Chapter Five. Jane's comments about Chris's behaviour invariably frame her parenting skills as superior – skilfully managing to juggle part-time work tending to patients, afterschool activities, parent council work, volunteering and baking wonderful things. In Chapter Seven, I address baking as an aspect of ideal mother-child relations in more depth.

Jane communicates good motherhood (and the role of sugar within it) in different ways. She and Chris were never hugged as children – they hug their children, to make sure they know they are loved. Jane never had swimming lessons as a child as swimming lessons are private and relatively costly, but the boys do. Jane never knows which days or shifts she'll be working, so the boys are registered for afterschool club every day. But Jane picks them up whenever she's not working, handbag full of homemade rocky road and grapes to distribute, and they greet afterschool club friends through the gate. Perhaps equally importantly, she manages their school experience from the outside by concerting with other mothers. Stickers for finishing your plate? That doesn't sound right. Jane's influence through the channel of the parent council is considerable. Her participation enables the workings of a school library, school trips, school fairs and lunchtime eating arrangements to improve the school environment and her sons' place within it. Jane deploys some of this influence through her renowned baking skills.

Jane prides herself on her extended forms and registers of knowledge: medical and scientific knowledge of nutrition and allergy research, knowledge of what goes on at school, knowledge of what 'children will eat' versus what her children will eat, knowledge of when and how to feed to avoid a meltdown. Her children were always set apart in these equations, or put on par with adults. 'Have you ever met a child who will eat 70% dark chocolate?' Jane shared my interest in discovering how children think about food. Food has always been a central topic in the Krasinski household, particularly since Alexander's allergies became apparent at five or six months old. Nowadays he is still intolerant to kiwifruit, eggs, and dairy products, but Jane does the very best to ensure he always feels included. While other things in her son's lives are closely monitored – bedtimes, screen times, homework – sugary events often fall into the category of something that just 'happens'. Sugary foods, memories and cycles can have their own momentum. A trip to Decathlon on the way back from Craigie's farm becomes associated with stopping at what Alexander calls 'The God Shop'. This means parking at Krispy Kreme's to eat a donut and watch the doughy production process through the glass. It is not a tradition, Jane corrects me, just something that 'happens'. Not that Jane would ever eat there. Children



exert particular pressures over the forms that their happy childhoods take. Didn't they get a donut last time?

Sugar is linked to particular emotional registers and cycles between home and school. One week Thomas's learning grid requested the homework task 'Do an activity to take a moment'. Jane translated for me. 'It's [the school's] whole new approach with emotions, they mean do something you find therapeutic. We made chocolate mousse for this one.' This option makes sense. Baking is often a form of relaxation for Jane, doubtless enhanced by the auspicious future possibilities for baking outputs. Not unlike Tita's cooking in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, Jane's cakes tend to make things happen. They lure parents to council meetings and future involvement. They can be translated into school funds through the bake sale process. She cements relationships with neighbours by transforming the fruit from their trees into chutney and cake. Offers of cake can seduce Jane's boss into losing control, in spite of her diabetes. These are smug facts, and Jane is adamant: whether sugary things are bad for you depends on whether or not you *eat* them.

I'm invited to the next chocolate mousse, this time for an afterschool club badge. The instructions reframe cooking a meal for the family and tidying up (a parental task shared with Chris) as a child's 'challenge' to complete. I'm to be a guinea pig, and place my order of homemade pizza followed by mousse (Alexander) and fruit salad (Thomas). I'm aproned by Jane to observe the process.

Alexander jumps up and down in the kitchen, peering into the bain-marie of chocolate and Nutella: 'Chocky! Chocky melting!' Jane first made chocolate mousse when she threw dinner parties at University. She didn't include sugar or cream – a dark and strangely textured dessert. If she were making it for adults, she would tip in a bit of hazelnut liqueur. She probably wouldn't have Alexander shouting that the egg whites look like car wash, or the yoke like alien glue. Baking with Alexander or Thomas is quite another kind of activity.

Jane: 'Special honour to lick the bowl, because you made it.'

Alexander: 'It's a shiny ball!'

Jane: 'No it's a ladle. You disgusting boy!'

Alexander: *Looking down at the chocolate mousse on his shirt.* 'I like being messy!'

Jane: ‘Imogen, look at that. You absolute minger! I let them lick the bowl – I remember doing that as a kid when my mum was baking. I can’t stand raw cake mixture anymore though. Ugh.’

Imogen: ‘So has his allergy gone then?’

Jane: ‘No. He breaks out in eczema. But he likes it so much, I give it to him. It takes three to four weeks for it to go away. See on his lips? I made this for him four weeks ago. And that’s just going away now...’

While Jane’s feeding of mousse to Alexander could be construed by others as a lack of optimal medical care, within the confines of the Krasinski house this becomes an expression of maternal love. Far from being forgotten or overlooked, Alexander’s allergy is brought to the forefront and experimented with, within the boundaries of the nuclear family home. The home offers a place of relative safety in which to conduct ‘experiments in how to live’ and attempts to provide Alexander with a ‘best good life’ (Mattingly, 2014). Alexander loves 70% chocolate *because* of his allergies. This form of care places eating pleasures and mother-child relationships above physical reactions on the skin’s surface. The ingestion of chocolate mousse allows something more important to happen inside Alexander, and deepens the affective bond between Alexander and his mother. Jane is vocal about these experiments and trade-offs with me – making sure I am able to see her moral laboratory and am not mistaking her actions as lacking in care.

Jane later sends me a snapshot of the finished worksheet and photos of Alexander. One shows Alexander contentedly licking the ladle, bearing the caption ‘Chef’s Perks’. Licking the bowl is a positively charged memory from Jane’s own childhood to replicate and extend, as Jane’s baking skills surpass those of previous generations. The worksheet also includes a list of kitchen dangers and an Eatwell plate with a drawing of chocolate squares in the ‘High Fat/Sugar’ section. Different types of health are made visible in the baking process – dermatological, nutritional, and the health of family relations. In Jane and Alexander’s understanding, ingesting and covering yourself in mousse is part of having a good childhood. As are visiting the ‘God Shop’ on a whim, designing your own birthday cakes, or just generally ‘being disgusting’ for amusement’s sake.

Jane isn’t immune to the kinds of pressures felt by the other mothers in this chapter. After all, the boys’ school morning snack is one piece of fruit and one piece of ‘badness’ (which might be a Nutella breadstick or other chocolatey item). When I ask about Christmas advent

calendars, the boys have wooden ones ('They get enough chocolate already!'). Like other mothers, Jane seems stretched between the common-sense knowledge that you shouldn't mystify sweet treats or put them out of bounds, but that some limits are required. But she is also proud that, unlike other children, her boys are 'eaters'. Instead of being fussy or refusing to eat – an important problem for many parents at school – her sons have refined tastes and elementary cooking skills. She is proud they are responsible (Alexander knowing and managing what he can and cannot eat), educated and independently-minded – wielding the language of food critics to discuss dinner at home, lunch out, or the texture of a cake from the school bake sale.

Baking creates divides in the school community as a valued, gendered skill, marking Jane out publicly as a good mother. Jane overrides the divides between working/non-working mothers, and those who participate or fail to participate in school community. Her delicious cakes are always there on time, leftovers for afternoon snack, distributed around the nurses in the ward, or taken to work in Chris's lunchbox, publicizing a successful marriage and family life. On the way back from Craigie's Farm, Decathlon, and Krispy Kreme's, Jane remembers she needs to pay the car mechanic. 'Are we going to pay him in cake?' Thomas asks. Although we all chuckle at this suggestion, Thomas succinctly captures the value of Jane's baking and the webs of relationships in which they are embedded.

## Conclusion

'I don't want [my daughter] not to have *anything* sweet, I just want it to be under control', one mother resumed. Questions about sugar are questions about the right level of discipline and kind of control over children (as well as oneself) and questions about what it means to be a good and caring mother in Scotland today. It emerges as somehow monstrous or inhuman to 'deprive' children of sweets – understood by most interlocutors to form a natural part of childhood when taken in small amounts, and a key material practice of love and affection (Charles and Kerr, 1988). Moreover, it is highly pleasurable to watch and partake in children's enjoyment of sweet foods, particularly ones that have special meaning within kinship relations and histories. Sugary things – in moderation or in excess – are understood to shape the way that children grow and 'turn out', as citizens and future emotional beings. Sugar reveals the multiple temporalities of kinship care across past present and future, and the ambivalence about caring in the right way across these temporalities.

Women absorb public health messages urging them to reduce sugar levels and simply consume ‘in moderation’. In practice, establishing and arbitrating when sugar is permissible, and in which forms and circumstances, is often experienced as burdensome. Balances in diet, balances in power, and balance in kinship relations conceal a great deal of ill-distributed time and effort on the part of women. Balance is fragile, and some kinds of balance are seemingly impossible to achieve and/or maintain. Mothers like Leah understood themselves to be uniquely responsible for the growth forms of their young children – whose bodies represent an accumulation of past parental actions, commencing in the womb. But balance is elusive. It crumbles when sugar and other unhealthy habits pour in from the outside of households, through the dreaded mother-in-law, who might intimidate you into not breastfeeding (Abigail) or reward children with chocolate (Leah). Moderation is instantly ruined when a father hands the baby a biscuit (Leah), or money for sweets (June), or when you give into sugar yourself.

Sugar consumption carries the threat of excess. Binging on sugary things, or preventing others from consuming them, both emerge as harmful, possibly pathological. Sugar consumption oscillates between being a symptom, a cause, and an effect of being/feeling unhealthy. Sugar is bittersweet: both a poison and a comforting sticking plaster to glaze over the discomforts of everyday life. Sugar becomes such a potent substance because of the ways it moves between people – in blood, breastmilk, biscuits or cake – and because of the emotional registers it sticks to and amplifies. Sugar becomes entangled with situations and people, tracing the interconnections between guilt, pleasure, love, control and abandon. In some cases, experimentations with diet offer a kind of ‘moral laboratory’ in Mattingly’s sense (2014), as women experiment in creating the best possible collective family relations under the circumstances – the best balance between health and pleasure, affection and discipline, both for oneself and in relationships with others.

Sugar consumption was rarely experienced as a conscious choice – it was more often something trivial that just ‘happened’ (Jane), at once ‘needed’ and ‘unnecessary (Leah)’. For these women, sugar worked as a moral reference point – but one that kept shifting, teeming with contradictions. Underlying these constant negotiations and seemingly arbitrary decision-making around sugar is the core concern that children might feel unloved in the absence of sugar. Sugar consumption is not a choice but a condition of life for those trying to produce good childhoods in north Edinburgh.

Since good motherhood feels doomed in advance, 'bad motherhood' emerges as a useful idiom for some of the women in this chapter. 'Bad motherhood' encapsulates personal vices and aspects of one's identity as an adult woman which do not comfortably fit with the gendered demands of parenthood. It evokes failures to live up to impossible ideals, and women's feelings in the face of conflicting values and pressures from kin, public health bodies, school, and offspring themselves, the pressures they face to exert control and discipline over food, and contradictory pressures not to be too controlling or puritanical. Bad motherhood includes a situated letting-go of nutritional guidelines and succumbing to pleasures, letting your children eat too much chocolate and go to bed late, and feeling guilty of this indiscipline a result. Bad motherhood expresses self-deprecation and self-doubt. But as Leah's story shows, reflecting on one's guilt about failing to live up to good motherhood ultimately emerges as an attribute of good motherhood.

## Chapter Five: Sugar and fathering

### Introduction

‘It tends to be Mum [Peter’s wife] who does the food shop anyway, which I realise sounds very traditional, and antiquated... But I work more!’ Peter squirms in his chair.

‘You read what I said about my not judging.’ I lean forward on the wingback armchair to tweak the audio-recorder out from behind the plates of Peter’s mother’s lemon drizzle cake.<sup>12</sup>

Peter laughs. ‘I judge myself! I sound like I’m some sort of mid-twentieth century dinosaur. Oh God. Go to my room and weep now. I didn’t expect life to turn out like this.’ Peter waves a hand dismissively. ‘Where were we before I digressed?’

Before Peter had ‘digressed’, I had been asking who did the food shopping and cooking in their house – a beautiful stone building hidden behind an arch and nested into a lawn bordered with fruit trees. An articulate Englishman in his fifties with a receding hairline and a green woollen jumper, Peter was one of the rare men to invite me spontaneously into their home to speak about sugar. He was excited to show me old maps of north Edinburgh, to discuss local history, and to introduce his children Chiara (10) and Simon (7) as ‘guinea pigs’. But when it came to his own food work, Peter changed the subject. Boiling the kettle and arranging delicate china teacups on a tray, he apologises in his quick characteristic satire, ‘I don’t generally do this kind of thing, but I still do have *some* life skills!’

Peter was one of many fathers to express embarrassment when confronted with his (relative lack of) contribution to the ‘domestic’ realm, but who was equally embarrassed by the prospect of being seen to have too much of an interest in ‘this kind of thing’ – i.e. in matters of sugary foods, drink and domesticity. What might such scenes tell us about the relationship between sugar, kinship, and masculinities? This chapter offers reflections based on four fathers’

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<sup>12</sup> Stated in the consent form. But of course I was judging, as the rest of this chapter shows.

relationships with sugar and their management of children's eating in north Edinburgh. Through these stories, I explore men's efforts to make family, good childhoods, and their desires to transmit things to kin, including a sense of belonging and place. In doing so, I distinguish fathering from parenting, and attend to father-child relations in the context of a wider web of social relationships. This chapter asks: How is sugar's value produced within different sets of social relationships, and how might sugar reveal something about what men pass on? How to understand men's presences and absences from conversations and decisions about food, and the links between masculinity, domestic kinship and privacy? How does sugar consumption shed light on the difference between fathering and other practices of care for children? What place for pleasure?

Partway through my fieldwork, I observed that my adult interlocutor group was almost exclusively formed of women. On the rare occasions in which I was invited home by fathers, they anticipated my desire to speak to their partners, and proceeded to arrange this often without my asking. As we nibbled on moist lemon cake in Peter's living room, we were also biding time, waiting for his wife Anastasia to arrive and offer the full version of the story (as well as dinner). The reverse was not true. Women relayed that their husband did not want to speak to me, as this was simply 'not his thing'. What was not his thing? Cooking? Parenting? Being judged on his role in the household? When I did speak to men in the home, they frequently wandered off halfway through the conversation. They had friends to meet at the pub, matches to watch on TV, a cross-fit class to attend. While sugar raised questions about self-control and good motherhood for women, questions about sugar were more often interpreted by men as evaluations of whether they were doing enough labour in the home.

Being observed at home seemed even more uncomfortable for fathers than it did for other participants. While women spontaneously pointed out pitfalls to avoid when I became a mother myself and proffered advice on establishing contracts of shared responsibility with my partner, I did not have access to an area of shared experience, or such a range of (anxious?) questions to ask fathers. Since we did not understand ourselves to share a common biology or future social role, other kinds of relationships solidified, and the questions I asked raised tensions. When I visited Peter's household for a second time, he jests: How many marriages have I broken up?

Peter's quip spells out a core research finding: that sugar consumption is understood as a lens onto intimacy and an idiom for discussing kinship relations – a sphere understood to be highly private. This chapter reads men's ties with their children and spouses through sugar, acknowledging this to be an alarming prospect for many men. So why did a handful of fathers agree to embed me in their lives, even as – like Peter – some might apologise for being 'mid-twentieth century dinosaurs'? I attend to men's experiences of relatedness through their calls for me to witness something particular within their households, and their experiments in being a good parent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scotland. Sugary relations are explored in the home and out and about, providing a spectrum of experiences of fathering and kinds of masculinity. Sugar reveals parenting as gendered and classed, and a balance of care and control, public and private.

Men's narratives of failure at home hint at the underlying ambivalence of many interlocutors, who struggle to find the right balance in an era of changing and competing values around masculinity and men's role in the home – while at the same time feeling that trivial matters pertaining to domesticity ought not to be overthought. For the women in Chapter Four, questions about sugar evoke issues of household planning and decisions, control over children, and balances to be established between health and pleasure. For men, questions about sugar often shine an uncomfortably bright light on situations which they are conscious may be viewed as publicly unsatisfactory or misbalanced in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – yet situations which they may privately experience as suitably balanced. I show how men's narratives of both good and failed parenting – with and through food – participate in the formation of good kinship from their perspective, and their desires to (publicly) display their embodiment of particular (post-patriarchal?) values. I demonstrate that shared practices of ridiculing men's 'failures' through food ultimately emerge as conducive to affective kinship and closeness.

While mothers felt overly responsible for children, and described pregnancy as a visceral bond (including shared food substances) unmediated by other kin, men I spoke to were more likely to feel their father-child relationship to be influenced (or directly mediated) by other sets of relationships – those with a partner, ex-partner, or children from previous marriages. Father-child ties are read as more fragile and in danger of breakage. Sugar consumption in different forms enables both breakage and repair. It enables certain things to be passed on, and particular kinds of care for kin to unfold, where being a good father emerges as being a good husband, and a good son. But sugar's association with maternal care and memory, comfort and indulgence, made many men keen to assert that they did not require sugar, did not think much



about sugar, and were not even attracted to it. Questions about sugar threatened to render men vulnerable – something some men embraced in interviews while others did not.

North American scholars reveal that womanhood and motherhood have been treated as a singular identity since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Arendell, 2000) – something which has never been the case for men. Like the characters in the previous chapters, men here are also establishing ‘moral laboratories’ (Mattingly, 2014) around food and relationships. Many fathers also grapple with the structural availability of sugar as a ‘condition of life’ (Han, 2017, p. 1), something they did not always feel in control of in their relations with children. As in other chapters, sugar poses ethical problems. The topic of leisure emerges ethnographically as something important to fathers, and a way in which the ethical problems sugar causes can be resolved. Sugar is acceptable within leisure – and sugar marks times and spaces out as leisure. Leisure allows men to express care for family ‘in public’. This in turn reveals that many working fathers imagine a clear divide between the public and the private, work and home (as a space for leisure) – a narrative that historian John Tosh (1999). traces to Victorian values in the face of rising industrialisation This stands in contrast to Chapters One and Two which reveal the home as highly porous for those parents (almost exclusively mothers) most involved in school life and children’s medical care.

### Paul: Becoming family

It’s been a busy Sunday. Paul, his two sons and I have spent the afternoon at the Meadows Festival, listening to live music, watching a dog show, doing arts and crafts, eating sandwiches and chocolate bars from a Tupperware tub they transport everywhere, and searching for ice cream. We’ve driven to Tesco to pick up ingredients for stew, in addition to miniature cookies and packed lunch items for the week. Earlier this morning, Paul watched Joshua play football with a horde of muddy five-year olds while his wife enjoyed time with Jack (10). Paul believes in getting the boys out of the house. We collapse onto the sofa back in their top floor tenement flat.

Paul is my very first research participant. We meet at a local ‘Messy Church’, on my quest to understand where people with young children go in Leith. Paul’s son Joshua (5) is standing at a long table decorating digestive biscuit faces with sugar-coated strawberry laces for smiles, and chocolate buttons for eyes. Two faces to represent the bible story of the day: ‘Jesus healing the bleeding woman’. I explain my new project to Paul, my interest in family life and in

decorated biscuits (which he laughs at). Paul tells me about his children, and asks about my family. We find common ground – Nimes, where I grew up, and where he spent time as a youth. We rapidly encounter more commonalities: my complex relation with my older half-siblings and father, Paul’s remarriage, and relation with his adult children.

I’m introduced to Paul’s wife, Ally, also in social work, and I start observing the household once a fortnight. When the family leave on holiday, I receive postcards, magnets, and sweets from familiar places. I am invited to partake in moments of fatherly pride in the children’s achievements: Jack holding sports trophies, or his performance in a band; Joshua learning to read and wobbling on his first bicycle. I watch Joshua move from nursery to primary school, Jack develop an interest in baking, and see his Victoria Sponge awarded top feedback for a Victorian history project at school. On birthdays, we exchange cards and gifts. I’m quickly entangled in a variety of family-making practices, and become the explicit vessel of family values. A few months in, to my surprise and confusion, Paul casually drops that I’m ‘part of the family now’. I realise I’m seeing the Andersons face-to-face and demanding updates on the minutest details of their lives at a rate probably beyond that of any of their blood relations – or indeed my own.

My role in the Anderson household is unclear and unfinished. Sometimes I’m served a bowl of carefully sliced fruit in front of an episode of Peter Rabbit, as part of a heap of exhausted children. More often, I’m a dinner guest of sorts. But at all times, I’m a student, a learner, and a chronicler of family life, rather than an incorporated daughter (see Carsten 1997). My very presence in the home throws boundaries between private and public into disarray – at once rendering the nuclear home public, and restoring privacy by building close relations with family members. This peculiar situation shapes Paul into a guide to Anderson habits and traditions, to Edinburgh, and to Scottishness. Paul takes to the role. But he does not particularly want to show me grocery shopping, or trips to church, as per my requests. He wants to show me ‘family activities’.

The boys come to associate my presence with trips and time outdoors. Sportsmanship and quality time together outdoors are some of Paul’s core values in his striving to be a good father, which include constant hydration, feeding care (snacks, meals) and instances of affection – family activities which predominantly fall outside the home and ideas of domesticity. Sometimes he and Ally question the presence of competition, when it occurs within the home rather than outdoors. Activities like tooth-brushing and putting on pyjamas can easily take on

a competitive nature for the boys. Yet it is an effective way of getting things done quickly, and learning to be a ‘good loser’, another important value to inculcate.

When we return from this particular day out, Paul offers drinks and insists I have something to eat. I can’t be just drinking tea ‘on its own’. If we were at his Grandma’s house – long passed away – I certainly wouldn’t be allowed to. ‘It’s unthinkable!’ Maybe a Scottish thing? Paul speculates. He rummages in a draw for a knife to cut a piece of millionaire shortbread in half. I try to refuse, to no avail.

‘And it has to be on a plate. Sorry.’

‘OK!’

‘What did you think of the Millionaire shortbread?’

‘Good, the biscuit wasn’t too dry...’

‘This is a particularly good one. I know because we bought two pieces, and I had one of them yesterday. See the toffee?’ Paul pokes the toffee spilling out of the biscuit edge with the tip of the knife. ‘The toffee shouldn’t be too brown. The biscuit wants to be white shortbread, not brown shortbread.’ Paul catches himself, and abruptly changes the topic. ‘What am I sounding like.’

As elsewhere in this thesis, there seems to be something frivolous or embarrassing about being seen to indulge, or express excessive interest in sweet things, even as (in this case) they are required for hospitality, for being an Anderson, for Scottishness. Not to mention for certain moments of family life: birthdays and other annual festivities – women should be ‘lavished’ with chocolates by male family members on Valentine’s Day, as should the children at Easter – or just to ‘keep energy levels up’ if we’re out and about, Paul explains. On later days, I have tea without cake. It is important to Paul to show me an honouring of traditions passed on down the maternal lineage. His mother was a home economics teacher, and he grew up with lovely home baking. Paul oscillates between celebrating generations of millionaire shortbread-making, and dismissing the topic as trivial, or unsuitable for overly detailed discussion. When I inquire as to whether it is because of the dangerous link between baking, femininity and housewifery, Paul disagrees: Maybe in the past, but this is no longer the case. Chris’ story in the next sub-section discusses changing versions and values of masculinity further.

My relationship with Paul and Ally centres on hospitality with ambiguous overtones of kinship. For Paul, guests, and even better, semi-foreign guests without local family, can become a mirror against which to forge and shape what it means to be family. The Andersons are neighbours, and sometimes small Tupperware tubs appear on my doormat. A piece of Mars Rice Krispy cake baked by Jack for the school fair. A slice of Paul's birthday fruitcake baked by Jack and Joshua along with a bottle of white wine, to thank me for a cycling trip. 'I think it's important to show appreciation, and that's something I try to teach the kids,' he explains. A trip to my apartment block is an exercise in socialisation and part of the Anderson education programme. A dinner guest is an opportunity to test values and relationships. 'Are you going to let Imogen try some of your special ice cream? No? Well, up to you, you don't have to.' Ice cream helps navigate everyday ethics – gently discovering what one could (but is not forced to) do to be the best person in a given circumstance – here extending the private joys of ice cream to another, learning to be a good host, caring in overlapping spaces between private and public.

But what does family mean to Paul? And why am I said to have become part of it? Paul unpacks via WhatsApp exchange: 'some friends become 'family' even though not related. [...] It's hard to explain.' I probe – maybe it has to do with frequency of seeing them, being fed, or to do with the children? Paul can't find a better word. It is to do with being an Anderson. He instead summons a practical example to summarise the relationship: 'You would get some Black Bun at New Year for example!'



*Figure 5: Black Bun, photograph sent by Paul*

Come January, Paul offers to share Black Bun, and invites me to meet his older children, John and Arianna. They live together around the corner, when Arianna isn't working abroad. Paul presents Black Bun as 'traditional Scottish': something he cherishes giving to his mother, family and friends, every year. After leaving raisins soaking overnight in brandy, it takes two hours and a half to make – prepare pastry, combine raisins, currants, mixed peel, sugar, flour, roll out pastry, crimp edges, put design on top, skewer holes, wet with milk – and leave to mature in foil in the cupboard for a few weeks. 'He knows how to make a Black Bun and that is it,' his mother teases, when I meet her in her home up North.

Paul is keen to glean my opinion, and plates me up a slice. 'Now I've built it up so much, maybe you'll just find it vile. But nice to taste it without having the children there saying it's awful.' The children appear, and I request opinions. Joshua pretends to vomit, eyes rolling up inside his head. Jack says, 'It was, not that great'. 'You aren't capable of appreciating!' Paul complains, very satisfied with how the Black Bun turned out. Jack laughs, taking out his freshly inherited first mobile. 'I'll take a photo of it on my phone, it will be hilarious.'

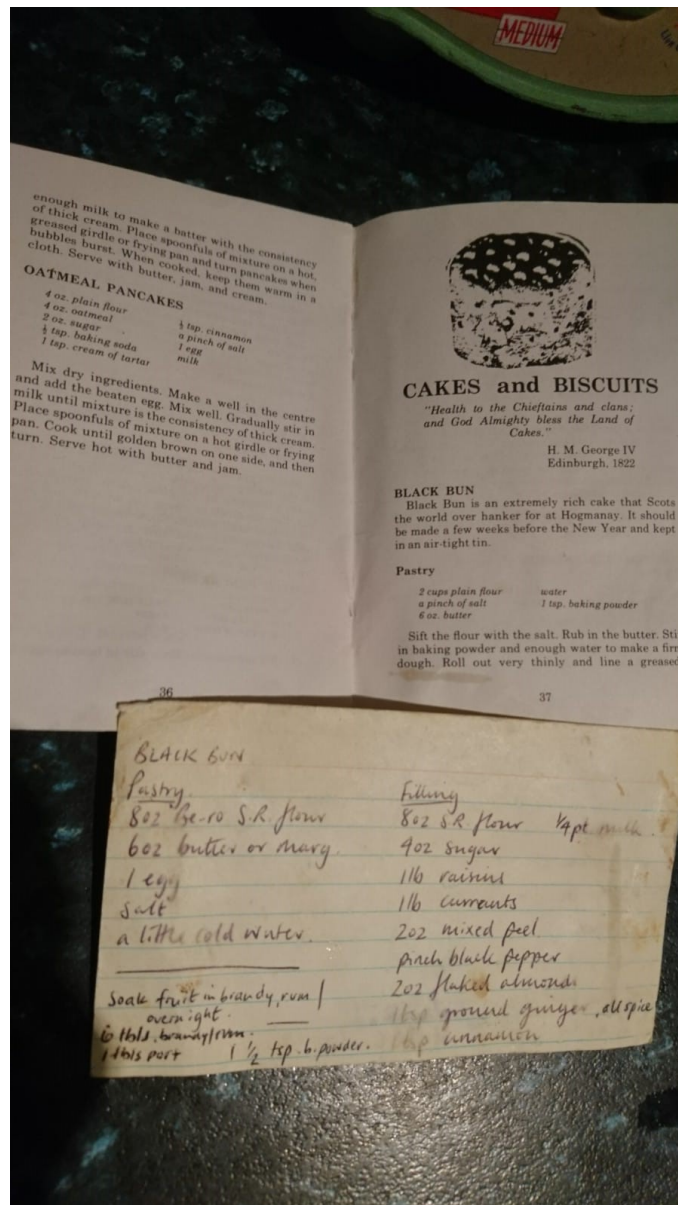


Figure 6: Recipe for Black Bun

I question Paul about how to make Black Bun, and he is only too happy to relay my interest to the onlookers. 'But I had a piece!' Ally protests, laughing as she passes the kitchen.

'The Black Bun, well I'm the only person in the family who makes it anymore. My mum used to make it. I'm the only one to carry on the family tradition. Look at this.' Paul unearths a tiny worn Margaret Fairlie recipe book, dated 1972, from the kitchen drawer. A hand-written card drops out. Some instructions have been partially washed away.

‘Don’t your brother or sister make it?’

‘God no. It’s a bit of a hudderie-dudderie thing to do.’

Paul’s eldest son, John, suddenly hollers from the living room, ‘It’s brutal!’

‘What about your family heritage?’ Paul booms back.

‘Don’t you like Black Bun?’ I inquire.

‘I don’t not like any Black Bun, I don’t like your Black Bun. It’s bad’, John answers. ‘That’s why you were talking about it all quietly and hiding in the kitchen.’ Pretending not to hear his son, Paul explains loudly how he adapts the recipe to include port. Then turns to me.

‘So?’

I take a mouthful. ‘It’s nice, but... quite dense’. I decline a second helping, to the mirth of the boys. Paul throws his hands in the air dramatically. No one is capable of appreciating Black Bun’s true value. What is the meaning of Black Bun, and why bake a cake every year only to have those closest to you complain that it is disgusting? The cake appears to embody many things for Paul, even as it exists as a potential object of derision. John’s humorous critique is after all a poignant one: a recognition that (unlike Jack), Paul has failed to win an (imaginary) cake competition.

It is important for Paul to repeat family traditions year after year: heritage work. There is Black Bun, but there is also rolling eggs down the hill at granny’s house at Easter, hiding chocolate eggs in the garden, first with Arianna and John, then with Jack and Joshua. Making cards and chocolates for Valentines, Father’s Day, Mother’s day to celebrate relationships. Going away every year to stay in a cottage, where Jack and Joshua pick up the morning newspaper, and buy a chocolate Creme Egg or other treat with the change. Like Arianna and John before them.

While Ally does most of the everyday foodwork, Paul’s cooking stands out as a set of cyclical events – a Sunday night chicken stew marking the end of the weekend, a Black Bun marking the turn of a new year. Paul bonds with his children by creating small new traditions and cycles wherever they go. On their last holiday, Joshua and Paul took the habit of filling their pockets with fruit sweets from the bowl at the reception desk, when no one was looking. Until they had

too many. What to do with them? Joshua tells the story again, grinning in fresh complicity with his father, who fills in gaps in the narrative. Some went to the man at the car rental, he was delighted. One for John, one for Nana, one for Granny. One for Imogen.

Families tell stories about themselves, to produce their complex group of relations as a united and bounded whole (Gillis, 1997). Gillis' historical account emphasises the role of women as storytellers of the family, remembering birthdays and marking times of family. But Black Bun is a substance that allows Paul to tell stories on multiple scales. Black Bun is a symbol of Scottishness, recalling an era in the 1930s-1940s when Scotland stood apart from England by celebrating Hogmanay and refusing to have a public holiday on Christmas Day. He reminisces about the Christmas tea he would have growing up – sandwiches, shortbread, Christmas cake – a very Scottish thing. But now his wife's turn to laugh, and disrupt the narrative. 'That's just a class thing. We never had that.' Black Bun is a story about togetherness rather than class difference, a patchwork of stories about 'best' family and 'best' fatherhood, and Paul's successful incorporation of things transmitted through female ancestors into the nuclear family – which smooths over other available narratives. We also see different versions of what it means to be Scottish within a single family.

I read Black Bun as a story of Paul's work to create and maintain balance in kinship through time. Made with care and attention, the Black Bun gift contributes to this work by marking the closeness and care of relationships year in year out. In Black Bun, Paul is delighted to play against his sons, and to lose a (fantasy) competition. When Jack and Joshua gang up with their half-brother to laugh at their father, this is a small victory – marking success and continuity in a context of equilibrium. John's encouraging of Joshua to eat up his vegetables are part of his relationship with Paul as an adult son. Strong kinship relations are those which endure and evolve through time, and those able to weather possible instances of friction. After this meeting for dinner and Black Bun, Paul messages me to discover what I had observed. Did Jack and Joshua behave differently when John was there?

John's annual ridiculing of the Black Bun is precious. Like sugar, humour emerges as a way to speak about, and shape, father-son and son-son relationships. Laughing at the expense of others, and to willingly submit oneself to derision is a marker of closeness and affection. In the Paul-Jack-Joshua dynamic, my eating habits are also a shared object of ridicule – and a way to grow affection. My presence exposes the children to other cultural food practices, thus solidifying family preferences and unity by opposition, even as I am also drawn into webs of



affective kinship and commensality. But my inclusion in the family ultimately says more about the kind of open and welcoming family the Andersons are, than merely about the relation they might have with a researcher. While generosity, and an appreciation for wry humour are important values transmitted vertically through kinship generations, the formation of close emotional father-child ties so central to Paul's conception of good fathering is not, emerging instead as new ways of being family at each generation.

Black Bun somehow epitomises Paul's particular way of being family to those around him. Couched in terms of failure and success, the cyclical Black Bun soaks up stories of Anderson heritage and reproduction of family values across generations, maintaining links with imagined Scottish communities of times past (Anderson, 2006). Tightly packed in with the sultanas are ideas about social class, masculine forms of kinship care, and seeds waiting to sprout into precious forms of sarcasm, irony and togetherness. The Black Bun's characteristics – dense, sticky, holding together well, shared – seem to mirror Paul's ideals regarding relations with family. But baking is also about making this care public: Black Bun care moves outside of nuclear family relations to encapsulate wider family and friends, as it journeys beyond the home.

Paul's baking practices differ subtly from Ally's. When Ally bakes 'Oaty biscuits' with Joshua and me, the focus is on reading the recipe together and spooning butter in very carefully, Ally taking over the bowl to whisk when brisker action is needed. We watch the clock together (where is the big hand?) to find out when the biscuits will be ready, and eat them together in relaxed complicity. Black Bun displays kinship in public; oaty biscuits are part of quiet everyday care and nurture, and do not require evaluation. Paul's Black Bun is (laughingly) disputed as 'the best' (by Paul), while Jack receives 'top marks' at school for his Victoria Sponge with Paul proudly writing 'Great British Bake Off-style feedback' for the teacher. Shared achievements also extend outwards, encompassing people of varying social proximity. Has my partner entered any local tennis competitions? Do I have any hill races planned, and what is my aim? Successes (whether in baking, music, school education, or sports) become co-owned endeavours, whereby competition emerges as one of the many possible faces of affection, and participates in producing closeness.

When I contact Paul to ask him follow-up questions about fatherhood, he quips in his usual sarcasm that I have found a good example – one of the top ten! In this humorous framing, fathering emerges as something one can succeed or fail at. In Paul's case, fathering is also

about managing the overlap between different sets of relations, or ‘kin work’ (Di Leonardo, 1987). In the Anderson household, sugar weaves in and out of leisure, education, achievements and experiences of everyday cohabitation as well as distance. Sugar represents opportunities to teach children to be an Anderson, to be Scottish, to show appreciation and generosity, to manage energy levels, as well as an invitation to acknowledge good parenthood. Sugar is baked into the making of strong kinship ties which endure through time and changing households, repeating the sugary cycles and rituals that work, replicating fathering expertise from one set of children to another. In between banter, Paul also voices concern about the absences and collapses in my own kinship network – regularly asking whether I have spoken to my father recently. In saving me a slice of Black Bun or Victoria Sponge, Paul extends his inclusive network, offering a tentative slice of kinship care – as well as an opportunity to acknowledge the Andersons’ intergenerational baking skills, heritage and family unity.

### Chris: Frozen food fathering

The street is lit with a hundred lights as we step outside. Thomas (10) runs ahead with Alexander (8) in a skeleton costume and dog’s tail. A freezing gust of wind swishes Chris’s black cape as he pulls the door closed. He laughs and helps me adjust a headband that makes it look like an axe is traversing my head. Behind us, his wife Jane has draped the Krasinski’s front door with webs. Just inside, hangs a life-sized skeleton and a box of ‘Frankenstein mini rolls’ to distribute, dipped in coloured chocolate by Jane. ‘Disgusting’, she comments. Balanced on top of the dustbins are Thomas’s, Alexander’s and Chris’s pumpkins. Chris was berated by Jane for making his too bright – stealing the attention from the children’s. ‘I can’t help mine being the best!’ Chris had grinned back.

The junction ahead is thick with small ghouls, zombies and a solitary unicorn carrying pumpkin-print buckets. I keep an eye out for Paul and Joshua, guising<sup>13</sup> in a Batman outfit. Chris loves this stuff. If they were to do it the traditional Polish way, they ought to be cleaning gravestones though rather than collecting sweets. Chris is always complaining that the boys get too many sweets – but now it’s Halloween he’s fine with it, he reflects cynically. As the boys run ahead down the narrow pavement, Chris continues to analyse the experience. Look, a

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<sup>13</sup> Known as ‘Trick or Treat’ in England. In Scotland, guising involves ‘earning’ sweets by performing or reciting a joke.

pumpkin, a signifier! He points out, relishing the anthropological jargon. Shall we try this house, boys? A woman in her forties opens the door.

‘Why did the zombie go to the dentist? He needed to check his bite!’ Alexander reels off in one breath.

The mother at the door smiles as Alexander throws himself at the sweet bowl.  
‘Oh dear, we’ll probably all need to go to the dentist after this.’

‘I know, I thought of that when we were choosing the joke’, Chris smiles.

‘No we didn’t, we found it on the internet!’ Alexander corrects.

‘Alexander, don’t ruin the charm! Say thank you to the lady.’

‘Thank you!’

In the next garden, a skeletal hand is protruding from a flowerbed. ‘Brilliant.’ Chris narrates. He tuts merrily at a house with the lights out. ‘I *know* they have children!’ As Thomas and Alexander disappear around street corners according to a pre-established itinerary, Chris provides running commentary. Look at the wallpaper in there. Very seventies. What a system for storing bicycles! Very handy. We chat to other parents about the best streets for ‘loot’, and the living arrangements glimpsed through open doors. Chris lowers his voice: ‘I don’t know any of these people! I love this. This hardly ever happens around here. It is funny though, how they don’t really know the neighbours. ‘I’m not very good at that’. Chris sighs melancholically. ‘Jane’s much better at that.’

Chris is good at taking the boys out for Halloween, but Jane is ‘better’ at lots of things – in fact the majority of activities that involve the children, the house, feeding, healthcare, and any neighbourhood sociality. This evening for example, Chris isn’t actually sure if the boys have eaten dinner. Back at home after guising, there is almost a drama when some of the sweets get mixed up on the sofa. The boys run for Jane. ‘Now’s the time to have one if you want one,’ Chris winks at me, picking up a squashed marshmallow. ‘I’m such a bad parent.’

I’m surprised at Chris’ enthusiasm at participating in the project. Chris is passionate about eating and discussing delicious food and wine, and reflecting on food cultures. When Jane first invites me to their home, her husband offers to take me on a tour of local cake shops, and

convinces me to share an artisan bread delivery. I accompany him to eat in at his workplace, followed by a semi-gastronomic donut. Chris and his older brother Jakub share a favourite expression: they live to eat, not eat to live. Chris loves being cooked for. His sons love food too. Eating at home, or eating out, they all delight in employing the language of food critic – a love and language for food that Chris passes on to his sons.

‘Food is love in our family. We were always cooked for, weren’t we?’ Jakub, who is up visiting for the weekend, nods and agrees. ‘We didn’t get hugged. But we were always cooked for’. Until the age of five, Chris grew up in London in a Polish community – no different to growing up in Warsaw, he imagines. His parents divorced when he was seven and Jakub fourteen. With their mother working long hours as a doctor, Chris remembers mostly being brought up by his grandmother – who didn’t hug, but cooked. Jakub recalls that growing up they never ate together as a family, but that now with his own children, he insists on them all eating dinner together and ‘communicating’. Jakub is now going through a divorce himself, and Chris worries that people around them keep getting divorced. Sometimes this puts Chris in low spirits.

Chris explains that since living with Jane, he has been ‘deskilled’. ‘Oh Chris’, Jane says in her usual sigh and headshake. ‘You weren’t skilled in the first place. You can’t hold a knife.’ Chris explains that he lets Jane do all the cooking, because she enjoys it. That is ‘her thing’. He does the cleaning, which he enjoys. Although he is a bit embarrassed to admit that he is a bit of a ‘frozen food Dad’.

Food is Jane’s thing. This is going to sound really sexist, but she loves the kitchen, that is just her thing. She really loves that stuff. I like doing things I’m good at, and I’ve never really been good at cooking. And if I try something, well Jane can be very harsh, on what she thinks is good or not. I’m ashamed to say this but when I have to cook for the boys I’m a bit of a fried food dad, sorry no I mean a frozen food dad. I just cook things from frozen – I’m not proud of it.

Chris tells me he is very lucky to have a wife who is such a good mother, and a good cook, particularly since ‘food is love’. Jane works part-time but on days home she spends large amounts of time alone in the kitchen – an area of the house she designed and decides where everything goes. Chris recalls visiting Jane’s parents’ home when they were first dating. The kitchen and the dining hall were all in one room, like an open kitchen. ‘Very seventies’. Jane’s mum was cooking in the kitchen part, while her dad was reading the newspaper in the other

part. ‘It was like they both had their own spaces.’ Jane frowns as Chris describes this, but agrees – well, it was the seventies. She explains, ‘The kitchen was [my mother’s] space. I think she found cooking therapeutic. I’m the same, I hide away in the kitchen. The kids know not to come into the kitchen.’



Figure 7: Licking the bowl

When I bake with Jane, sometimes Chris wanders into the kitchen, to request to lick the beaters. ‘Food is love!’ He declares again, taking the bowl into the living room. Jane shakes her head: ‘This is when Chris says ‘I’ve got diabetes coming on’. But that is incorrect. You can eat as much sugar as you want, that is not going to *give* you diabetes’. Chris sits at the table with the bowl, playing checkers with Thomas. Jane peers around the doorframe, part concern, part sarcasm.

‘You’ll make yourself sick.’

‘No I won’t.’

‘Yes you will.’

‘I’m in my happy place.’

‘Like last time. Don’t you remember? It made you, what was your word, ‘biley’?’

Chris laughs.

‘What is biley?’ I ask.

‘When you’ve eaten something really fatty, and your stomach is thinking ‘How can I digest this?’ It’s your gallbladder...’

Jane rolls her eyes. ‘In a normal household it would be the child licking the bowl, not the adult.’

Feeling horribly ‘biley’ is pleasurable to Chris, after ingesting a half bowl of buttery love and affection. In a similar way to ‘bittersweet’ (Chapter Four), ‘biley’ pleasures encapsulate contradictions. They denote comfort and feelings of love, memories of being mothered, and potential harms to the body through excess. A moaning, overtaxed gallbladder embodies a healthy relationship – not one about to succumb to divorce and collapse, like others surrounding them. Love and family togetherness can be measured in volumes of baking, among others. Chris’ joking insinuation that Jane’s love and care could accumulate into a root cause of diabetes foregrounds a certain relinquishing of control and responsibility. In reverting to bowl licking, Chris allows himself to be characterised as ambiguously child-like, and positions himself as distinct from patriarchal tropes of controlling behaviour within kinship.

My encounters with fathers being largely mediated by women, Chris’ appearance in this chapter is partly shaped by Jane’s accounts. Certain head-shaking stories resurface in the kitchen. Like one time that Chris took baby Thomas for a walk around Arthur’s Seat in the middle of winter – without a hat! Chris becomes a ridiculous and endearing character in these story plots, but not a *bad father* per se. Such instances of tension are reformulated into light-hearted stories which communicate what kind of family the Krasinskis are (Gillis, 1997). But through Jane’s storytelling, her expert baking and delicious cooking, Chris’ parenthood is somehow diminished, as he becomes a non-expert and possibly irresponsible character. He is worse than the boys, with his iPad time! Jane adds.

What does ‘food is love’ mean, if you are unable to cook food for others? Unlike Paul, Chris doesn’t appear to possess recipes for cyclical things to cook, for which he might receive recognition for his kinship care, or be ‘the best’. Chris’ ‘frozen food’ fathering causes him embarrassment, since it conflicts with changing ideals about what it means to be a good husband and father in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scotland. The pleasures Chris asserts he takes in cleaning and bowl-licking repair this balance, featuring him at the heart of domesticity, even as he is more often absent from the home and neighbourhood due to the schedules of full-time paid labour. His fathering is often mediated by Jane, and passes through being a good husband – cleaning, celebrating his wife’s cooking and childcare, marking special moments like birthdays and anniversaries, providing financially.

Chris’ place firmly outside the spatial limits of the kitchen leave him unequipped to feed and to make decisions around consumption. Chris uses my presence to voice a ‘disagreement’ with giving the children sweets, in theory at least. Sweets should only be eaten sometimes, to mark something special. Chris grew up without sweets, he claims, due to life in a Polish family who had experienced the war. Jane counters Chris’ recurring riff, suggesting that he has ‘forgotten’ the puddings he was cooked by his grandmother, challenging such narratives of austerity. Chris, Jane, Thomas and Alexander have balance in these relationships, but this balance means that what Chris might think about sweets in the everyday is not actionable. He imagines the future conversations he might have with sons when they are a bit older: explaining the links between diet and exercise, doing more role modelling himself. Jane’s love and feeding care fill Chris up, but in doing so preclude him from embodying particular roles and types of authority.

Many men feel under public scrutiny when a researcher enters the home to ask questions about matters considered domestic. Yet neither his ‘de-skilledness’ nor his concern that the children eat too many sweets is expressed as guilt for Chris, more of an observation. Any failures are compensated for by Jane’s excellent parenting; resignation and dependence on Jane become a shared celebration of good motherhood. Tomori’s (2009) ethnography of breastfeeding practices shows how the actions of couples in the US are shaped by structural inequalities that make it more difficult and unlikely for women to maintain full-time work with the advent of motherhood, even if they should wish to do so. Miller’s (2017) research in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain finds that paid work remains a central factor shaping men’s practices of care and responsibility for children. In working long hours in town, Chris’ engagement with the home and the neighbourhood feels less visceral than Jane’s – who doesn’t need an occasion like Halloween to discover the seventies wallpaper of her neighbours, and who has a wealth of exclusive

knowledge about feeding her sons, from the womb, to breastfeeding, and into the present (see Chapter Four).

Like Paul, Chris shows me the cyclical or special times out and about with the boys, or the playful competition of carving pumpkins – kinship care in public. Chris’s story shows how parenting emerges as gendered, mapped onto the space of the house and the time spent within it. While cooking failures and successes are part of Paul’s striving to achieve balance – part of his way of becoming a good or ‘best’ father – Chris’s failures are more burlesque, framing him as a potentially inadequate one. These performances of failed parenting hint to the underlying ambivalence among research participants, who are faced with contradictory pressures and multiple values of masculinity. The pleasures of sugar and excess attention to food were experienced as embarrassing and a possible threat to masculinity for Paul or Peter. In contrast, Chris’ biley pleasures and need for ‘happy places’ are expressed as aspects of being a modern man with emotions and engaged in affective kinship, as well as a celebration of the nuclear family home as a safe haven from the outside world (Tosh, 1999). I argue that men’s ritual performances of failing to cook, failing to provide adequate care, or their overindulgence plays another role – that of opening up men’s practice to ridicule within relations recognised as intimate, and producing them as affective fathers who, paradoxically, really do care.

### Kieran: Full-time fathering

Kieran is the first and only father to contact me through the leaflets I have been leaving all over the neighbourhood. He explains his reasons for participating: a desire for vegetarians’ perspectives to be represented. Kieran was brought up by two vegetarian parents, ‘practically unheard of’ as a teenager in the 1980s, a family foodscape that set him apart. Food and eating were always carved out as a space of ethics, as well as a site for tensions, judgments and negative pressures from others. Kieran has grim memories of the village school cafeteria: being served shepherds’ pie with the meat scraped off, looked at as if he had three heads, or asked how he could possibly be healthy. Kieran’s mother and sister are both now vegan, and Kieran’s food practices lie somewhere in between.

I visit the family in their small angular flat hidden down a cobbled side street. It is a strange evening. Kieran brews me a cup of tea with oat-milk, and I stand alongside as he chops potato, carrot and red peppers for a lentil soup. The kitchen sideboard is piled with cans of baked beans, soy sausages and tinned tomatoes, in preparation for Brexit. Kieran’s wife Emily and his five-



year old daughter, Moira, do not emerge from the bedroom. It's a change for Kieran, having someone observe while he cooks, he notes. 'Quite nice actually.' Moreover, I'm producing positive noises about smells rising from the stove, whereas Kieran usually feels 'frustrated making a dinner that no one's happy about'. The conversation is fluid, and I jot down Kieran's nonchalant remarks on feeding as a full-time father. Stirring the pot, he reflects:

I find myself cooking different things for each family member. Moira likes pizza, Emily doesn't want pizza. Moira is really difficult at dinner time. I think she has identified dinner time as a time to cause trouble. If she doesn't get to watch a video while she eats, then she screams and shouts the house down. Preferably on Emily's phone. But the problem is if she's watching a video she forgets to eat, and if she's hungry and tired... This is why I bought her this. *He shows me an iPad*. But she's not using it. She's probably on Emily's phone right now watching YouTube. But Emily apparently is fine with that.

Kieran always enjoyed eating, but has stopped enjoying dinner. The whole thing is 'demoralising'. Kieran understands that Moira is using food – and in particular sugary food – to weigh on the power dynamics within the family. When Kieran puts a plate of food down in front of Moira, she deliberately leaves at least ten percent of its contents, and whines, 'What is for dessert?'. Kieran interprets this as an issue of 'disrespect'. He feels at a loss. He has read the research, and knows there is no point forcing children to eat. He doesn't want Moira to end up like his own father, who doesn't enjoy food as a result of a generation of 'eat what's put down in front of you' parenting. Kieran's father says that if he didn't have to eat, he wouldn't: food is a chore. Kieran doesn't want that for Moira, and always asks what she would like for dinner. He supposes it could be worse; you hear of children who only eat one food.

Kieran seems to be doing research into his own family – maybe an outside observer will be able to see something new or offer expert advice. His problem is the following: Moira appears to only appreciate unhealthy foods. A few nights ago, after her dinner, Moira asked 'Daddy, is there something unhealthy I can have?' Kieran is disturbed by the fact that Moira has somehow come to associate unhealthiness and sweetness. Whatever Kieran offers, she always wants something sweet instead. Kieran has quite a sweet tooth too, but he likes healthy foods that fill you up. 'Basically, I would prefer food that makes me feel healthy rather than food that is bogged down in sugar or fat.' Kieran and Moira are polar opposites in some ways, and Moira's

refusal to eat food cooked with love and care in favour of something cheap and processed is upsetting.

Kieran's concerns closely resonate with those of parents in Bob Simpson's (1998) research into changing families in Britain – for whom food, screen time, football, or children's haircuts easily become arenas of conflict. Simpson relates the story of a chef whose son will only eat burgers, chips and sweets, and the fear of loss of influence and closeness with his son this implies. Simpson points out that this story is more often narrated the other way around, with mothers complaining that fathers are failing to restrict children's pleasures (in unhealthy foods, in television) (Simpson, 1998). Unlike the chef, Kieran's problem stems not from distance, but from closeness within the same household, and the kinds of attachments being played out.

Kieran's partner Emily floats between the two, complicating the foodscape. Emily might give Moira sweets. 'But don't tell Daddy!'. This really annoys Kieran. If you want to spoil her, OK. But don't pretend to hide it from me. Emily has an incredibly sweet tooth too, Kieran explains. She works freelance; he is unemployed and looks after Moira full-time – although now he has 'been told I should find a job'. Perhaps he should take a weekend job? He isn't needed here at the weekend, he muses. Unlike the other households I visit, it seems I have been invited into the conflict by a family member, and invited to document the dispute. I feel like I should leave. Suddenly I notice Moira observing us. Just over three feet high and hair in a messy ponytail, Moira peers around the door. 'Hello. Who are you?'

A tinkling laugh announces Emily coming down the corridor, draped in a thick woollen blanket. I join Emily on the sofa until Moira tugs her down onto the carpet. Emily laughs, and they cuddle. She believes in attachment parenting, she explains. Moira suddenly interrupts the conversation. 'I would do anything for sweets'. Emily throws her a loving look. 'What is your favourite sweet?' 'Lollipop! It's Mum's favourite too!'. Emily pretends to look aghast. 'No it isn't! You know what Mum's favourite is.' 'Chocolate!' Moira squeals. 'I would do anything for sweets, and *you* would do anything for chocolate!' Emily laughs her tinkling laugh again. 'I *would* do anything for chocolate.' Kieran grumbles from the kitchen sink, 'You would do anything for sweets? Hmm. Really.'

Moira and Emily enter into a game of touching each other's noses, and I'm left forgotten on the sofa. Moira and Emily's relationship can feel exclusionary. Kieran notes that Moira can feel anxious around others, even her grandmother. Kieran seems to resent the way that sugary talk and sugary preferences offer Emily and Moira a shared intimate space from which he is

excluded, Emily's role in orchestrating and fuelling this dynamic, and the challenge this represents his parental authority.

Kieran serves up three plates of soup and half a small Lidl pizza for Moira, and settles down across the room from us in the computer chair. He sets up sets up the scene for me to judge, waving at the desk behind him. 'So usually we would have this screen on. At least then it's a hand-free screen and Moira isn't holding it, and can actually eat her food.' Emily doesn't answer. Moira peers into my bowl of soup, intrigued, then announces,

'I've had enough!'

'Are you already thinking about your dessert?' Emily coos.

Kieran glowers. 'Thanks Emily.'

'What's for dessert?' Moira disappears into the kitchen, and returns with three digestive biscuits. Moira bites the pile of digestives, scattering cascades of crumbs. I politely decline the piece of biscuit Moira is holding in my face.

'What sort of thing do you usually have for dessert?'

'Will you play with me?'

'I'll play with you, and Daddy will answer the questions, he knows more about this.'

'Daddy knows more about this' was an unusual answer. In twelve months, Emily was the only mother I met who wandered off during the interview to let her husband answer the questions. A common complaint among mothers I met was the way in which other kin members (fathers, grandparents, parents-in law) garnered affection with their children by giving them sugary things, while the mothers 'had their backs', and had to assume responsibility for the aftermath – a matter already reported by British sociologists in the 1980s (Charles and Kerr 1988). Emily didn't take responsibility for everyday food provision and preparation. 'The other day she put three frozen sausages in the microwave, and was proud of herself for cooking,' Kieran scoffs. Like Paul, Kieran is clearly calling on me to witness something. When Kieran speaks to me, some comments appear to be addressed directly at Emily. I'm surprised Kieran is happy to

meet me again, and to be accompanied grocery shopping. Kieran usually takes Moira along – sometimes walking all the way down to Asda and back pulling trolley bags bulging with thrifty deals – but nowadays she is at school. Emily is abroad, he explains over coffee at Greggs. As a child who ate everything, Kieran struggles to empathise with Moira, and is intrigued by her development: the changes in tastes, ideas, and meaningful relationships. He recalls her adorable expression of ‘total surprise’ the first time she tried chocolate. But sugar has now come to form a wedge in the family. Kieran speaks candidly about the ‘constant clash’ between parenting styles. Part of the problem is deciding and remembering to actually ‘be’ a parent.

We know this one family [...]. They have a rota system, and whoever’s in charge, is in charge, and of course if the other one is there, then they can *be* a parent as well, but it’s whoever’s turn it is on that day, it’s him/her who is making the decisions. That would be a great system to have but it doesn’t seem to work with Emily and I. But I think it’s getting better, because Moira understands that we have different parenting styles and it isn’t just a case of her trying to get whatever she can out of whoever it is she thinks she’s got the best chance with.

Kieran likes the idea of taking turns, because at the moment, in his view, Emily is not taking her turn at parenting – as illustrated through her permissibility regarding Moira’s sugar consumption. Chapter Six takes uses sugar to discuss permissibility in grandparent-grandchild relations, and the work sugar does to mark out these relationships as non-parental and non-authoritative. ‘Different parenting styles’ encapsulates the problem of authority and control.

But I don’t think Emily would agree with that. My mum has observed that when I’m not there, Emily adopts a parenting style much more similar to mine, but when I am there, probably on some subconscious level, Emily doesn’t see herself in a parenting role when I’m there. Which is ironic, because when she is there, Moira looks to *her* for decision making. From Moira’s point of view, Emily is in charge, but Emily has never accepted that that is what’s happening.

Kieran frames parenting not just as an expertise, but as a way of behaving, which one can turn on or off at will – a view in contrast with the visceral and affective experiences of mothering in Chapter Four. Kieran initially felt concerned these opposite parenting styles might be harming Moira. While fatherly permissiveness was critiqued by mothers in Chapter Four, why

does the same complaints in mother-child relations come as a surprise? Why does Emily's disinterest in domesticity in favour of paid work, become a source of danger?

For Kieran, sugar consumption without limits is read as a symptom of deep imbalance in kinship relations, a family out of control. Emily's absence from decision-making, and now her physical absence enables Kieran to trial a new initiative, one of many of his prolonged trials with food as an ongoing moral laboratory (Mattingly, 2014) – to try to find balance, to make a happy but also healthy childhood for Moira. The new experiment is not bringing Moira a snack after school to encourage her to eat school lunch. While this feels cruel, it works, and feels like a small victory in restoring some control and balance in diet and relations.

Kieran's case is interesting as it highlights that this is not simply a reversal of caring roles; parenthood is more than a distribution of responsibility. Moira's sugar-fuelled diet is indeed a failure of sorts – but not his, nor does this make Kieran express this situation in terms of responsibility, guilt, or bad fatherhood – it is a problem to be fixed. This stands in contrast to other positive aspects of her diet, such as his daughter's shared enthusiasm for vegetarianism, as both an ethical disposition and a form of heritage passed down through generations. On further reflection, Kieran suggests that Moira's exposure to such 'complicated dynamics' is not necessarily negative, but will help her understand people, and better prepare her for the rest of her life.

### Jeff: Sports sugar

Jeff is working from the living room today, and has just been varnishing the floors. He was happy for his wife to arrange an interview. I can keep my shoes on – this is a skateboard and bicycle zone. Emily (5) and Logan (6) are 'very active'. Jeff grew up on a rough council estate. As a child, as an adult, as a father, he has 'never eaten a lot of sugar, ever, really.' Jeff claims he doesn't like the taste of sweetness anymore. If he eats milk chocolate, he 'can't eat the whole bar. It's too sweet for me.' As he has grown older, he has come to prefer bitter tastes: coffee, red wine, dark chocolate. He points at a barely touched dark chocolate Easter egg gathering dust on the living room's central shelf – material evidence of the kind of person he is. 'But there's been no one moment where I can say, actually, I've stopped my sugar intake. It hasn't been a conscious thought, like I want to take less, it's just naturally evolved.' There are contradictions in Jeff's account however, which he notices. As we speak he has taken a

spoonful of sugar in his coffee, just for the taste. But like Paul, he is definitely not overthinking or craving for sugar. He portrays himself as effortlessly in control.

Of course, in the past, sweets peppered Jeff's life course – he remembers with nostalgia the small treats from his parents, or cash transformed into ten pence mix. Or the two wrapped sweets on top of his newspaper when he did the 6.30am newspaper round. And his liking for Coke, the caffeine-free version his parents used to buy in the gold wrapper. But he doesn't really drink Coke anymore – except in combination with Jack Daniels on his nights out, or in bubble-free form, when racing. When Jeff was first served flat Coke at a race, it was a bizarre but brilliant discovery. Now, on a 50km race, and Jeff might 'take Coke' at a 34km aid station, some of his only moments of sugar consumption.

[...] at times when I need sugar, I will go for it. So if I'm racing, there's times when I really need something sweet, I really need that... that sugar hit. And it works. But I go to sugar when I need it, if that makes sense.

In Jeff's narrative, sugar becomes an efficient substance, only to be taken when needed, and preferably in its most productive forms. As a silver bullet of energy, sugar enables exceptional sporting achievement. I'm struck by Jeff's use of 'take' rather than eat or drink. Sugary transformations are appropriate in exceptional circumstances.

When I run and I haven't got enough energy, I get very grumpy. Last race, I had a period of 6km where I was very grumpy. Really negative self-talk. Questioning why I was running, despite the fact I love running. 'Why the bloody hell am I doing this? What am I doing this for?' and then, once I had some Coke, I went 'Aha, this is brilliant!' And you can actually, if you look at my split times across the 59km, for the vast majority I was within 5-10seconds per km, all the way through. Except when I had a down bit, you could see my times dropped massively. Then you can see the point where I put the sugar back into my body? That made me happier, but also gave me the energy to keep going, so aid station at 34km, I had two cups of Coke, and I was fine again.

Coke as race sugar contributes to the production of optimal performance times. Coke becomes imbued with the capacity to summon motivation, to access underlying sources of energy and belief in the self, to shift from 'miserable' into 'happy' states. A different Coke from his childhood, this flat full-sugar Coke offers extended possibilities for self-fulfilment. Jeff designs

a precise dietary timeline for his races, and his eating and drinking episodes are tightly regulated, including days leading up to the race. Jeff once deviated from his strict protocol to accept a home-baked brownie held out by a kind volunteer on the side lines. His race performance was ruined as result. Jeff is on a constant quest for the perfect race snack for his individual body, and the correct combination of foods for an always varying amount of distance and ascent. Jeff's house is littered with technological sugars in different forms: energy gels, super-nutrition bars, jelly blocks, nougat bars, drink powders sachets. This quest and its trial and error experiments, combining internet and magazine research, exchanges of knowledge and race snacks with friends, form an interesting and enjoyable hobby.



*Figure 8: Trial nougat bars*

In the world of long distance running, everyday sugars are transformed into technological products. As one race organiser informs me, jelly babies are a staple race food because of their high glycaemic index, ease of chewing, ease of transportation for the runner and guaranteed sugar hit, as well as their low cost. While family size bags of jelly babies are in the process of being weeded out of Jeff's son's school by the parent council – read as a key manifestation and

symbol of parents' lack of knowledge (see Chapter Two) – Jeff's running communities recreate these possibly childish sweets as prized sports items, the hallmark of a well-organised, well-marshalled race. In joining this community, he relishes the time and space this project carves out for work on the self, outside of the home and family sphere.

Men's eating pleasures are fragile. Oliver, another father I met in this community scoffed at such practices, claiming he didn't have time for fads of 'high tech scientific food' like energy bars and gels, preferring 'proper food' – a sandwich, a banana. Or just a standard chocolate bar. Like Paul, Oliver was keen to communicate that he did not think excessively about food. While his wife was dieting – selecting the optimal foods to absorb to burn fat and transform the body – he demarcated himself from this, even as he was busy producing personal metrics on calorie output, and considering the best form of protein after a spin session. Invariably, the long hours training for long-distance races on top of full time work necessarily curtails time at home and attention directed towards children's bodies and diets.

For Jeff and Oliver, in everyday life, sugar 'hits' are not an appropriate way for the adult or child bodies to receive energy or to produce happiness; at home Coke does not ever map onto experiences of improved mood. Sugar is always situational, and 'sugar hits' fit snugly with some roles but not others. Sugar is frivolous because it is not enduring or sustaining. Mintz (1986) shows that sugar was considered a lighter food and associated with femininity at certain points in history, while Counihan (1989) and Lupton (1996) suggest that food itself is implicitly coded as feminine. But it is precisely sugar's frivolous and un-sustaining dimensions which are valued, as enablers of performance. These men's stories highlight an ongoing tension between an idea of sugar's lightness, quickness, in-betweenness, with ideas about sugar's density, heaviness to process, producing fatness, lethargy, risking permanent storage as fat. While jelly babies or Coke help men transform, such products must also undergo particular transformations to be appropriate products for middle-aged Scottish fathers.

Jeff's relationship with sugar changes shape as he moves between home, office and Scottish hills. At his workplace Jeff distributes tubs of brownies and flapjacks to be a good colleague, even as he eyes them with distaste. At home with family, Jeff demonstrates his eating of a 'carbs-heavy' diet – rice, pasta, bread – for long release energy. The night before, he explains, he came home from work to serve a large bowl of macaroni cheese to his children. Along with the pasta, the children gulped down ideas of carbs as 'endurance-producing fuel' with their father. But Jeff is careful not to demonize sugar in his talk and how he acts towards his children.



While Jeff-as-outdoor-runner embraces sugar's exceptionality, Jeff-as-father tries not to put sugar on a pedestal. He subtly tries to develop the children's awareness, and shape their embodied experiences. Of course you can have a lemonade. But did you feel what the lemonade did to you? What happens with all that sugar? Jeff's fathering work in the home includes socialising children into feeling the (publicly bad) sensory and emotional impacts of sugar, and carving out their understanding of sugar's effects as contextual. In this case, good fathering takes the form of subtle education and availability as a positive role model.

## Conclusion

Sugar presents possible challenges – to father-child and husband-wife dynamics, to certain forms of masculinity, to notions of individual and shared control. Simultaneously, sugar – when blended into lemon drizzle cake or Black Bun – offers fertile opportunities to produce togetherness and unity through time, to celebrate the uniqueness of particular sets of relationships and the way these intersect with others. Sugar underlies many established cyclical family traditions and moments of leisure. Sugar enables new ones to emerge, which men crystallise into stories of family – kinship care with a public dimension.

This chapter provides a largely heterosexual, heteronormative account of fathering, and does not encompass the experiences of all men across north Edinburgh. The stories told in this chapter are affected by a methodological approach – meeting men within the context of their family, even when an interview was constructed as one-to-one – which caused interlocutors to portray family in a particular way or to feel under scrutiny. Conversations with men about cakes were often truncated – a sudden embarrassed silence, a too quick joke, a change of topic. Even suspicion. 'So what is it you want to know exactly?' Sugary indulgences, emotions, and intimacy proved to be an uncomfortable topic with a younger female researcher.

This is because sugar is bittersweet. Sugary foods can drive a wedge into the heart of kinship relations – offering a spotlight onto the intimate frictions of kinship, as in Kieran's plating up of dinner, or Chris's inability to act on sweets consumed at home. Sugar consumption evokes the absorbing or exuding of power and responsibility over the younger generation. Chris's own indulgence in cake batter and rhythms of labour preclude him from becoming a responsible feeder, while for Kieran sugar-fuelled dinners feel symptomatic of the control he has lost over the situation.

Sugary things can embody love and tension simultaneously; creating closeness by excluding others. Paul's Black Bun works in the opposite direction, excluding himself to glue potentially fragile relationships together (including half-siblings and new family friends). Black Bun also works to knit together generations of (female, classed) Andersons and Scottish heritage. Good fatherhood includes transmitting values and heritage, reproducing an imagined unity and sense of belonging across time. But while a cake may enable this, the sugar within its structure can challenge particular forms of masculinity, stickily linking itself to childhood and femininity in dangerous ways. Men like Jeff often find themselves doing particular work on sugar to transform it – to disentangle things like Jelly Babies from connections with childhood and femininity. In some men's suggestions that cakes and sugar are not feminised, we can read a desire to show one's positioning in a landscape of multiple values of masculinity.

Some men feel that they have to display effortless control with regards to sugar – not overthinking or craving it, which could be mistaken for potentially feminised practices of dieting, mothering, indulgence, or loss of control and vulnerability. Sugar is often rendered morally distasteful, even as it is a valuable substance for pruning relationships with kin. The display of an uneaten Easter Egg on a shelf is an example of the socialisation work fathers do to influence children and grow them into good people. Leisure and sport are key arenas where sugar can be transformed and rendered safely desirable – sweets can be devoured at a race, precisely because they represent intentional and controlled consumption. Chris however, exhibits precisely the opposite desires for comfort and nurture in his ambition to be a modern man with affect; practices which in turn risk portraying him as childlike, irresponsible and unable to properly parent.

Men's performances of failed feeding and inadequate care render them available for ridicule, and in doing so contribute to the affirmation of affective bonds. The framing of fatherhood in terms of failure and success contrasts with the previous chapter's findings on motherhood, where guilt was a central theme. While guilt surfaced in Ally's version of parenthood, in Paul's world, fathering itself can become a playful competition, with success or failure as outcomes. Baking with a father can become a matter of excelling or winning, while baking with a mother becomes an opportunity for numerical learning. Competition is present with Chris, who can't resist beating his sons at pumpkin crafting. Yet his remark that he is a 'bad parent' has a light-hearted tonality to it, as compared with mothers in Chapter Four. Kieran's voice in this respect was unusual. His frustration about taking responsibility for all the feeding, sugar surveillance and domestic labour, with no recognition of his active withdrawal from the labour market,

resonated with mothers' accounts. Yet in Kieran's version, failures involving sugar were connected to frustration and issues of problem-solving rather than guilt. Sugar reveals affective experiences of parental responsibilities as gendered.

## Chapter Six: Grandparents

### Introduction

Clara had just discovered that her parents had taken her daughter Hannah to McDonalds the previous week after Hannah (5) 'begged' for it – something Clara and her husband had so far resisted on principle. Clara discovered this through a drawing I had requested at her child's after school club on children's memories of sweet things.<sup>14</sup> The drawing (which had travelled home) depicted a gargantuan bottle of Coca Cola, and Hannah looking 'happy' then 'silly' after a Happy Meal with her grandparents. When we debrief about this in Clara's kitchen, Clara laughs, and imitates her mother: 'I love being a grandma, I don't have to worry about these things anymore, I can just do whatever she [Hannah] wants. I'll just give her anything she likes'. And I'm like, 'Thanks Mum!'

Complaining about the sugary excesses that occur in relation to grandparental care was a recurring trope among parents in Edinburgh, yet mothers often felt resigned: it is 'what grandparents do'. Most grandparents in this fieldwork expressed great pleasure in giving children sugary things – often framed as a form of naughtiness, or secrecy – even as they sometimes felt ambivalent about their role and responsibilities towards these children. Clara explains why her parents do this kind of thing: so that Hannah finds them 'exciting', and wants to spend time with them. Other parents complained that grandparents didn't do enough spoiling, weren't interested, or failed to participate in everyday childcare and feeding. In both cases, this reveals parents' view that grandparent-grandchild bonds are not given, but processual, and people who can or cannot be selected from the wider pool of connections. Many configurations of these bonds can be brought into being.

In attending to the role of otherness and distance in the formation of kinship (Stasch, 2009), I explore grandparents' ambiguous position as insiders and outsiders in kinship, the processes of separating these relatives from the nuclear family home, and the cultivation of grandparent-grandchild bonds. What does it mean to be a (good) grandparent in contemporary North

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<sup>14</sup> While parents were the most prominent figures to feature in these memories, a few grandparents also made appearances in drawings – at McDonalds or the sweet shop. Research methods are described in the Introduction.

Edinburgh? What kinds of sugar consumption unfold within relations between grandparents and grandchildren, and how might sugar shed light on the texture and characteristics of these bonds? How is the relationship understood by grandparents and other relatives (including in gendered terms), and how do grandparents' houses shape themselves into spaces of health and restriction, or indulgence?

This chapter focuses on vertical kinship relations, and diagonal ones: parents and their adult children or children-in-law, and grandparent-grandchild relations. We meet some of the mothers of interlocutors in Chapters Four and Five, in conversation with their children and children-in-law. The chapter focuses largely on grandmothers' perspectives, as few grandfathers were involved in the study. Through stories with four families, I show how grandparents use sugar to 'thicken' their relationships (Carsten, 2013, p. 247) with grandchildren and to construct times and spaces subtly opposed to those of the nuclear family home. I attend to the reconfigurations and compromises which emerge when grandparents move closer to the nuclear home – either geographically or through the intensification of care and time spent with children. Sugar's presences and absences within homes and relationships helps understand the ways in which 'Spatial proximity may map onto emotional proximity' (Edwards and Strathern, 2000, p. 160) in British kinship.

Sugar illuminates the complex work of finding balance in relationships between grandparents, parents and their children, and throws light on dichotomies in kinship relations: absence/presence, interference/non-interference, everyday/special, labour/pleasure, control/indulgence. My interlocutors shared concerns expressed by anthropologists of Britain – a sense that blood ties are not sufficient and connections must be actively made, with lack of time together or lack of interest resulting in severed ties (Carsten, 2000; Edwards and Strathern, 2000). Indulgence and restrictions of sugar in grandparent-grandchild relations are two sides of the same coin – part of the care and interest extended towards grandchildren to create active connections and promote proximity. Sugar helps define and label the nature of these relationships.

In attending to the exchanges of sugar within grandparental homes and relations, and the trope of grandparental 'interference', I reveal the predominant framing of the nuclear family home as the ideal site of children's (successful) upbringing in Scotland – even as parents often rely on unpaid assistance from grandparents and/or other women's paid labour to bring up their children. Ethnographies in other research settings show how children's mobility and rearing

across multiple households creates important ties between sets of people. Children in the Andes move between households via informal arrangements, within and across class boundaries (Leinaweaver, 2008), and children in an African-American Chicago neighbourhood circulate to solidify support networks in conditions of poverty (Stack, 1974). In Britain, the idea of children circulating across multiple households is read as potentially threatening to good kinship and to children's wellbeing. My research confirms findings by sociologist Pamela Cotterill, who argues that in England the upbringing and discipline of children is seen as exclusively within the purview of parents, with grandparental authority considered 'almost always inappropriate.' (Cotterill, 1994, p. 55). Sugar consumption illuminates grandparents' ambivalence and experiments in finding the right level of discipline, and the right level of intimacy with grandchildren, and the tensions this can generate.

From a historical perspective, grandparenthood has only entered popular imaginaries in a significant way in recent times. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, grandfathers occupied a minor space in popular imaginaries (Gillis, 1997). Gillis traces a new place for the grandparent (and in particular the grandmother) in the family imaginary in tandem with the rising value of children throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (see also Zelizer, 1994), and as emerging from other reconfigurations of family life – new distinctions between family and household, emerging idioms of parenthood grounded in body and blood, and the gradual displacement of the patriarchal figure. Historical accounts of life in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England highlight the distribution of responsibility for children's upbringing across the 'long family', with older female siblings playing an authoritative role (Davidoff, 2012). This chapter examines grandparents' exploration with this ambiguous new layer of relatedness, and what it might entail.

Concerns about grandparents' 'spoiling' and/or 'interference' negatively define any form of grandparental influence, revealing the precarity and fragility of a grandparental relation structurally dependent on relations with parents as mediators. Too much control on the part of grandparents (grandmothers) is risky – and threatens leaking into mothering, and into the nuclear family. Sugar consumption reveals differences in relationships. While the child's maternal grandmother was expected to have a certain degree of intimacy and responsibility, influence from the paternal grandmother was viewed as potentially problematic – mirroring tensions reported in previous anthropological research (perhaps most famously Radcliffe-Brown, (1940)). Grandparents must be held at a certain distance.

Given these expectations of distance, grandparents are left to establish affective and meaningful bonds, and to find ways to mark these out as non-parental. As in other chapters, we see sugar doing boundary-work. As an emotional currency, sugar's promise of innocent yet mildly transgressive pleasures helps grandparents mark out a different kind of relationship which does not threaten to replace parent-child bonds. But this balance is fragile. Sugar consumption is easily attached to excess, which is also risky, as discussed in Chapter Two. For mothers in Chapter Four, conflict with grandparents (and grandmothers more particularly) over feeding stemmed from their responsibility for establishing moderation in children's diet and health. Spoiling and overindulgence by another woman can threaten mothers' control over their children.

Oftentimes, grandparents marked a distinction between 'childcare' and the creation of a special bond. Grandmothers keenly felt the need to distinguish their role from that of other (unrelated, usually female) persons who could be paid to carry out similar forms of labour. As elsewhere in this thesis, I show how sugar is used to index closeness, intimacy and distance. Grandparents in Edinburgh were concerned not just about a good relationship with a grandchild – but one which is unique. This reflects Strathern's point that 'we might consider *the individuality of persons as the first fact of English kinship*' (Strathern, 1992a, p. 14). I juxtapose the role of sugar in marking out a unique relationship between two individuals, and the role of sugar in stories which forge continuity and collective family (Gillis, 1997). I thus attend to the ways in which grandparents emerge as storytellers of relatedness (Astuti, 2000), of social class, or of 'knowing where you've come from' (Carsten, 2000). Although my participants did not use the term class, instead referring to 'growing up poor' for example, I use the term 'class' to draw attention to experiences of class as a relational category, which demarcates participants from other kinds of persons and their practices in contemporary Scotland. I argue that sugar further reveals how family changes over time, and how influence flows in the reverse direction, from children upwards.

### Eileen and Sheena: Coco Pops and Squirty Cream

'We can tell we're at Grandma's house when you can do whatever you want in the freezer.' Hazel (8) observes, as she shows me rainbow slime coagulating alongside coloured ice lollies and candy floss – some real, some imaginary. It's 5pm, and I'm observing tea at Eileen's (Hazel's grandmother) on a school night. Nicola, Angus and their three daughters are currently

living with Nicola's mother Eileen, while their house is being renovated. 'This is our world,' Hazel concludes of the freezer compartment. Hazel and her sisters are well aware of differences between their grandmother's home and their own, and the practices they might adopt in these different settings and relationships.

Squeezed into Eileen's tenement flat kitchen, we chat while Nicola makes shepherd's pie with a generous side of greens. 'Do you see your grandmother much?' I ask. Nicola and Hazel respond simultaneously, each referring to a different person and relationship. Being a grandmother is a relational role – an additional layer of relatedness understood to derive directly from a (successful) parenthood. It is also read as a consequence of the work of bonding with the related child through the life course, and of playing a role in family narratives. For Eileen, this role includes regular patterns of childcare and instances of feeding. When the children were very young, Eileen worked busy shifts which meant that childcare was also taken up by Eileen's mother Sheena, who had long retired from her work as a shop assistant.

Nicola is proud to have multiple generations of 'strong' (and employed) women to introduce me to: four generations, including her children. Nicola and her brothers are the first of the family to go to university. Stirring energetically at the pot, she explains that sugar and treats are an important topic for her, an object of everyday work in her relation with her daughters. And with her mother, and grandmother, as we shall see. Eileen has been quiet so far, murmuring echoes of approval from the doorway, but suddenly announces, 'When I was young in the sixties, we had sugar in everything. Our cornflakes were covered in sugar.' We fall silent to listen. Nicola probes, 'Tell Imogen what your brother used to eat!'. Eileen is suddenly an expert on times past: bread and margarine with sugar sprinkled on top, sugar-covered grapefruit pieces. She concludes soberly, 'I think by the time I had *my* children, we were much more aware of the damage sugar was doing.' Nicola laughs and promptly disqualifies this piece of information: 'But I told Imogen we had loads of sugar. Don't you remember every night after tea we had those individual portioned ice creams, out of the freezer?'

Over the clatter of spoons and pans, Eileen and Nicola carefully piece together a harmonious narrative for the audio recorder on top of the microwave. Eileen sighs, guiltily acknowledging. 'Aye, probably that's right. That would just be the norm, for us to eat that every night.' In Eileen's storytelling, her own childhood was sugar-dense, in contrast to a motherhood characterised by mindful attention to sugar. In these narratives, sugar awareness augments generation by generation, in a downward cascade of increasingly healthful mothering –

thwarted only by Nicola's remembrance of more recent sugared pasts. Eileen cheerfully contrasts Nicola's mothering practices to her own. 'And cereal, like Sugar Puffs and Frosties, they [Hazel, Rosie and Sarah] would never be allowed to eat that.'

Rosie, Nicola's youngest daughter jumps in, gleefully sensing an opportunity to fuel a slight discord:

'Do you know what Jessie did once?' The five-year old pauses for dramatic effect. 'She got Coco Pops, and she got squirty cream, and she squirted it on her Coco Pops!'

'Oh god! When was this?' Nicola inquires.

Eileen: 'Oh that was terrible...'

Angus looks amused. 'You can guess who was looking after them when that happened.'

'She did!' Rosie points a finger gleefully at her grandmother, who looks suitably shocked.

Eileen sighs, an embarrassed smile escaping her lips. As in the opening vignette, a researcher in conversation with children attracts the disclosure of small secrets between grandchildren and grandparents – occluding the more authoritative generation. Food can become an arena to share quiet rejections of parental authority, around which particular intimacies can be forged. Eileen shakes her head, recalling the scene:

'And *I* said, what are you doing with that cream that was in the fridge? And [Emma] said '[Hazel]'s having some, so I'm having some'.'

'And you said, 'that's fine'?' Nicola asks, incredulous.

'I'm in trouble now!' Eileen laughs.

Hazel and Rosie would not think to help themselves to the fridge at home. But grandparental homes offer other possibilities. In the purchase of squirty cream and Coco Pops, and her knowledge that the girls are not normally allowed such things, Eileen marks out her home, not



far from theirs in Edinburgh, as different from the nuclear family home. The delinquent luxury somehow indexes Eileen's affection with the girls – and the healthiness of their relationship, rather than a failure to provide good care. The occurrence is excusable. Nicola expresses dual desires: to rectify such behaviours, and to let them pass as 'just a grandparent thing'. Nicola is still marked by the memory of her maternal grandmother (Eileen's mother) Sheena trying to give Hazel a lick of ice cream when she was four months old. How did she think it was 'an OK thing to do, to let a *baby* lick an ice cream?' Nicola exclaims.

I tentatively bring up the Coco Pops scandal when I meet Eileen and Sheena for an interview over a cup of tea and a Tunnocks Teacake. Eileen laughs and agrees that the children 'do get away with more, in general, in my house. It's chaos sometimes'. Nicola and Angus sometimes complain she lets them get away with too much.

But when you're a grandparent it's so different from having your own children. You feel overly responsible for them, because you're taking care of your children's children. But at the same time I think there's a relaxed feeling. If they're taking all the cushions off the sofa and things, if they want to make something, make sandwiches, go a bit mad in the kitchen and things, that's fine. Because Nicola is quite strict, I wouldn't just say, 'Oh you can have ten bars of chocolate'. It's not like that.

For Eileen, this relinquishing of discipline – in which access to sugar and cushions are kindred aspects – is a natural and desirable dimension of the grandparent relationship. But this grandparental disposition is hard to disentangle from Eileen's own personality as a distinct individual. She tries to remember whether she had many rules with her own children. Did she smack them, for example? Perhaps she was never very disciplinary, even as a mother. Eileen's relatedness as a grandparent becomes more about the kind of person she is – her individuality (Strathern, 1992a).

But things are changing for Eileen with the increase in physical contact and hours spent looking after the children – and particularly since the family has come to live temporarily under the same roof. Indulgences have come under scrutiny, and she feels increasingly responsible. Eileen has put a large ceramic fruit bowl on display, which she is careful to refill to the brim. With Sheena (Eileen's mother), this is a different story and relational pattern. Sheena does not live in the same home, nor is she Nicola's mother. Sheena used to bring a packet of biscuits and three fruit juices when she visited Nicola's house – apple or orange, remembering which

each child wanted for next time. Small attentions. Eileen remembers them both being lightly instructed, ‘Dinnae bother with the biscuits’. But biscuits are enjoyable things, the three of us reminisce, as Sheena unwraps her teacake. Sheena interjects,

Well that’s it! I’ve brought a packet of Oreos in the cupboard. Because Emma loved licking them and separating them, she sits with this biscuit for ages, eh. She does it with all these wee things. What’s the other one, the other biscuit I used to give her...? Jaffa cakes. Rosie and Hazel eat their Jaffa cake. Emma, she sits and takes all the chocolate off it.

Sheena and Eileen reminisce, basking in the adorable biscuit-eating quirks of Nicola’s middle child. Watching Emma eat a Jaffa cake in the unusual style of a six-year old procures great pleasure. Sheena and Eileen take pleasure in gazing downwards at their line of descendants – not unlike Dadilahy, the old man described in Astuti’s (2000) ethnography of the Vezo of Madagascar, who feels fully realised in all his glorious generativity when gazing downwards at his array of (potential) descendants. Sugar facilitates the kinds of gazing one can do. Sheena might forget other things, but she knows precisely which varieties of biscuits Emma will do ‘all these wee things’ to. Indulging in grandchildren emerges as important pleasure – but also one which one has deserved.

Intimate knowledge of biscuit-eating, as an example of something which marks out a child as special, is evidence of a good relationship, of good (great)grand-mothering. But with the rationing of sugar in Hazel, Rosie and Emma’s lives by Nicola, in line with school Eatwell Plates, the pleasures of feeding children sugar must also be rationed – and re-divided equitably among family members. Eileen is the usual recipient of Nicola’s instructions regarding food: the girls are not to have any sweets. Harman and colleagues (2021) observes that the model of intensive motherhood is gradually extending into women’s narratives of grandmothering, in terms of their role as protectors and educators of children. Eileen, for one, has become notably more interested in the children’s diet and health.

Eileen had watching a programme on television, and learnt that feeding a child one sweet was as a bad as feeding them a whole bag – it will remain on their teeth. For example, the Tic Tacs in Sheena’s handbag, distributed to the girls through a small routine. Eileen’s sense of responsibility extends her role that of mediator between Sheena and Nicola; she had taken her mother aside over the Tic Tac issue. They didn’t ‘fall out over it’, Sheena clarifies, but she was not pleased about having the private contents her handbag restricted. She was merely puzzled

that it was no longer considered harmless to give one tiny sweet to a child. She hasn't purchased Tic-tac's since.

Eileen and Sheena narrate changes over time. Sheena layers on her own memories of grandparental care. She tells me about the war, and living in the caravan in the countryside. Sheena and Eileen's childhoods are both stories of austerity, poverty, and happiness. Stories of outdoor toilets, hardly any sugar – just rare gifts of broken biscuits – and waiting at the bus stop for money to buy a fish supper. Good kinship where people cared for one another in situations of scarce financial resources. 'We didn't have sugar', Sheena glosses, 'People didn't want sugary stuff back then.' Eileen staunchly agrees. My questions lead Sheena and Eileen to proudly elaborate on the absence of sugar – which appears to participate in the crafting of the collective family into the moral unit they are now. The family narrative has suddenly evolved again. Now they are a family who never really ate much sugar. A 'trip down memory lane' becomes a useful device for Eileen and Sheena to speak about class, but also about the continuity of good forms of female kinship, of moderation and balance in a downwards flow.

Yet narratives around sugar change and evolve, even within a single conversation, as things are remembered and reimagined. Sheena and Eileen can pinpoint precise changes. 1972, when Sheena came home and declared the end of sugar in tea, although no one remembers why. When Nicola was at school there were campaigns about tobacco and sugar, with dentists visiting schools. Nicola had come home and stuck up a 'No Smoking' poster in the living room. Just last week, Hazel came home with a 'Beat the Veggies'<sup>15</sup> poster to pin up in Eileen's house. In Eileen and Sheena's accounts, health knowledge and eating habits also flow upwards through generations via contact with children and grandchildren, and the spaces they inhabit. Messages from the state flow into their homes through grandchildren. We saw these flows take a different shape in Chapter Two, as educational staff drew children into message-making processes within the school.

Transmission is often conceived as a downward flow of knowledge and objects. Eileen and Sheena remain vaguely puzzled by the fact that Nicola and her two brothers have become so passionate about food and cooking, when from Sheena's mother onwards, everyone has been a hopeless cook. Eileen has taken to batch cooking, after seeing her son Max do it, and borrows Nicola's recipes. In Eileen and Sheena's accounts, Nicola and her children emerge as forces of change. Time spent with them in Nicola's or their own homes incurs an unsettling of everyday

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<sup>15</sup> 'Eat them to beat them', UK public health campaign 2019 to encourage children to eat more vegetables.

habits. This is amplified in the context of cohabitation, before Nicola's family moves to a new home. To incorporate Nicola's offspring, Eileen's house must reshape itself into a place of health and limited sugar supplies.

Eileen concludes the interview by telling me a last story. Sheena was on grandparental duty, when she received a phone call concerning a diagnosis of leukaemia. Sheena answered, 'I can't, I've got to give the boys their tea.' Sheena was so busy grand-parenting that she didn't have time for chronic illness. The story brings tears to Eileen's eyes. Sheena's behaviour towards her family represents model grandmotherhood – making the grandchildren's wellbeing her first priority, including over her own health. For the family, Sheena's presence is living proof of successful vertical (female) kinship. Sheena's only real 'vice' is that she eats a KitKat, she offers up, guiltily. She'd like to cut it out of her routine. Eileen draws me in to counter this. 'Imogen tell her!' Eileen justifies: 'It's nice! And I think, if you get to eighty-one, if you want a KitKat, have one.' After a long life of doing things for others – cutting down on sugar in tea and monitoring everyone's health – Sheena has deserved some self-indulgence, of which sugar is an appropriate ingredient. In Chapter One we saw how sugar becomes a reward and form of compensation. For Eileen, Sheena's body acts as physical and moral evidence of her 'good' (classed) life, an accumulation of controlled behaviour – an ideal body of moderation, with no history of excess. Other bodies communicate different pasts, as we shall see in the next section.

Sheena and Eileen sense the control and pressures of Nicola on the relations they may have with Nicola's daughters. Eileen takes it upon herself to exert control and mediate Sheena's relationship with Nicola and the great-grandchildren. While Nicola disapproves of children having biscuits or Tic-Tacs, it is excusable in the context of a (great)grandparent-grandchild relation. In the context of the school, Nicola is involved in attempts to reduce unhealthy biscuits, sweets and other parental snacks. Nicola's changes in diet and upwards drift across class lines affects the kinds of people Sheena and Eileen become, and what they might eat, in an upwards flow. Sugar emerges as a point of contention, interlaced with dynamics of social mobility and generational change.

Sugar offers multiple facets for storytelling: about the endurance of family likeness and togetherness, and of change and differences in personality, socioeconomic resources, Scottishness, parenting styles, and epoch. Sugar consumption also describes the breaks in transmission. Moving away from definitions of kinship as mutuality (Sahlins, 2011), anthropological research on siblingship explores unlikeness in kinship by examining the

gendered and hierarchical differences (Davidoff, 2012), or the frictions and emotional distance that characterise sibling ties (Gulløv, Palludan and Winther, 2015). Writing on adoption in Japan, Goldfarb (2016) describes the processes by which '[...] kinship is materialized and dematerialized, as people negotiate both similarity and difference in daily life' (Goldfarb and Schuster, 2016, p. 9). Like Goldfarb, I draw on Stasch's (2009) observations on otherness as a quality of kinship in Papua New Guinea, where being separate and different is necessary in order to create intimacy between certain kinds of kin. Sugar is one way in which sameness and difference, togetherness and separation, are materialized in Scotland.

### Ian and Pat: What Grampys Do

The aging leather sofa creaks as Ian sits up, white whiskers twitching and sudden twinkle in his eye as we discuss the grandchildren's joint birthday party at the trampolining venue. He and Pat had hunted carefully for good party bag items to slip in alongside a wedge of jam-filled sponge. John's wife Pat completes his sentences in a melodious Glaswegian flow. Pat had found wee purses, which they'd zipped a five pence coin into, and stick-on glittery earrings. And some sweets of course. Refreshers, the tiny wee packets. 'But it's just something to get them hyped up on sugar and hand them back to their parents. Hooo!' Ian smacks his hand to his mouth in mock dismay as a big grin leaks out. 'Grandads and grandmas are good at that!' Ian basks in the stereotype of the grandparental indulging of children without responsibility for the consequences, before taking on a more serious air. 'No. That's a misconception.'

Sugar is an element of Pat and Ian's rapidly evolving relationship with Iona, Finlay and Blake, as practices of grand-parenting and parenting spill into each other. The three children moved in with their grandparents three years ago. Nick's pale figure sometimes drifts through the corridors; sometimes the children's father's resides elsewhere. The children's mother is absent, but her sporadic presence can be read through residual material traces – a toy, or prawn crisps from a Chinese takeaway in Finlay's room, objects charged with tensions and affect. Ian and Pat have signed on as primary carers. Pat apologises for the state of the house, which is still creaking under the weight of three new people inhabiting it. The house squeezes and expands elastically with the changing balances of pleasure and labour, health and nurture, the forging of new borders between care, control and indulgence. Pat and Ian's bedroom has morphed into a sitting room, while the room's purpose has been reassembled upstairs – but who knows for how long given Pat's difficulty in getting up there. The rooms have been re-divided,

reassembled to reflect a metamorphosing kinship structure and redistribution of responsibilities.

Ian and Pat's house embodies relational difficulties. The house's new configuration – and the overflowing of competing forms of school life, care, and professional work across living room, bedroom and kitchen – reflect the shift from grandparenthood into more hybrid forms of relatedness. This bears witness to Pat and Ian's quest to give the best possible childhood to three boisterous children, implicitly recalling their son Nick's failure to deliver normative parental care, and troubling Ian and Pat's conception of their own good parenthood. Given the sensibility of the lived space, the emotional charge in the furniture, the tension in piles of paperwork and laundry to be sorted, these rooms feel too intimate to reveal to a stranger. On my first visit, we remain in the sitting room.

I'm surprised at Ian's generous offer to help with my study after I meet his grandson at an activity group. Pat and the children are initially surprised but quickly seem to take to my strange presence. Pat tells me about her life, incredulous that I would be interested to listen. They notice meaning in the details of my behaviour – taking off my shoes in the entrance, bringing small gifts of flowers or baked cupcakes – unlike the regular employees of the State or dubious friends of Nick's who transit through the house. After this first visit, Pat and Ian gradually incorporate me into their lives, including visits to help Finlay with his writing and a day trip to their favourite holiday park. I'm moved by their quiet kindness.

Pat slowly invites me into the rest of the house, nervously anticipating my reactions. This is the main room decorated with family photos, the table she was talking about, which she hopes to clear one day so they all might sit and eat together. That is Ian's corner, where he works on his computer and takes his meals. Pat and Ian deem it important for each child to experience ownership over a space which others may not enter without permission. The children can eat in their bedrooms, if it makes them feel comfortable. The liminal conservatory space at the edge of the house is Pat's, where she gets away from it all to have a cigarette. The small square kitchen is everyone's space, where they and the children enter to prepare each person's meal, or to pour themselves some fruit juice (or until recently, Irm Bru).

Ian calls me 'toots', the same terms of affection addressed to the grandchildren. Eventually, Pat declares me to have been 'inaugurated' – 'part of the family now'. But the nature of our relation remains uncertain, volatile. Misbalanced. I have been witness to their most intimate spaces, but have shared none of my own vulnerabilities. My own home, with its array of secret-

spilling mess and objects, remains three floors up on a different street, inaccessible to people whose health doesn't permit them to get upstairs. Unlike Sheena, Pat lives with diabetes, and thus not considered by those around her to have deserved a KitKat, or to embody physical or moral proof of a past good life of moderation. Pat sighs as she refuses my cupcakes and invitation to my flat, and gifts me a pot of jam she is unable to eat.

But on this first day, I don't know about any of this, so simply smile back at Ian from the other side of the sofa and bounce back his comment on sweetie distribution. 'Grandads and grandmas are good at that?' Our first conversation has started with generalities, but Ian quickly reorients the conversation once Iona (9) and Finlay (10) have momentarily disappeared. Ian wants me to be on the same page, and shifts from banter to a concern which crinkles the lines on his forehead. Ian and Pat are affected by my project because of their inherent concern with the children's eating. Ian requalifies his previously light-hearted comment,

That's a misconception. On the other side – Finlay, I think we need to watch his sugar intake. We're getting to the point, where... When they came across to begin with, you wouldn't know you had three kids, they sat there in the room on the bed with the lights out all huddled together. That was three years ago. I'm happy that they're turning about like nuts, because that's what a kid is. Maybe we're a wee bit lax with their feed because they were all wafers.

For Ian, the initial priority was to make sure the children were eating at all. To transform them from silent 'wafers' into real children. From a lack of care to nourished and carefree beings, projecting liveliness and enjoyment of childhood – as measured through noise levels, eating and play. Distance needed to be marked from previous parental relations which had affected their bodies, voices and characters. Paradoxically the best way to provide care (or some form of compensation?) in this time and situation consists in 'laxness'. Laxness includes drinking Irn Bru or snacking on biscuits, but also cartwheeling in the house, or playing Xbox – the equivalent of cushion-throwing in Eileen's home. Pat and Ian's first priority and moral duty is to produce Iona and Finlay's subjective 'feeling like children', spearheaded by sensations of freedom and happiness. It is clear to Ian and Pat that imposing a regimented diet of health does not offer such possibilities.

As in Chapter Four, we can read these experimentations with diet as a form of 'moral laboratory' (Mattingly, 2014), in which Ian and Pat experiment in creating the best possible childhood under the circumstances, the best collective family relations, the best balance

between health and pleasure. Such experiments in care are achieved through practices of ‘tinkering’ (Mol, 2010). As I observed during my visits, grandparental feeding was carried out with painstaking attention to offer things children enjoyed, according to each’s preferences, whenever they felt sensations of hunger. I saw less feeding of Blake, who, as a teenager, was considered more independent, and spent increasing amounts of time in his room or out with friends. Pat ensured Blake was plied with a bowl of rice pudding – a new favourite – on his way down the stairs in the morning before heading to school. With Iona in particular, Pat and Ian gently check the bowl size, so she feels comfortable, not overwhelmed by too great a quantity of food at a time (Pat knows the feeling), then offering a second helping. Ian voices pleasure and relief in observing them successfully eating macaroni cheese, haggis or a burger, playing, at last ‘turning about like nuts’ and generally ‘being kids’. Iona especially. Ian continues,

She’s always going to be thin. She’s followed like her mum. Her mum always was and is quite thin. I think she’s got her dad’s height and her mother’s physique, for lack of a better word. But it’s nice seeing them out and being kids. We’re trying to expand the scope of grub. If they try them we’re quite happy, but if they don’t we don’t... It’s not always the same that’s is shovelled out, we try and expand it. Fruit. There’ll be haggis out tonight – as long as they make an attempt at it, I’ll be a happy bun-bun.

Iona’s physique is dually tied to insufficient parental care, and to genetic dispositions carefully uncoupled from his own and Pat’s. Their daughter-in-law represents a complicated figure, who flits in and out of their lives, leaving relational debris. In Ian’s language, the three children ‘follow like their parents’ in differing ways. In some ways the grandparents are incapable of turning Iona into a visibly well-fed child, of transforming her body into an index of good kinship care. They persist, trial-buying Kinder bars and other treats, in the idea of enticing Iona to develop a taste for eating, and to gradually accumulate weight. But Finlay’s room is adjacent to the kitchen, Pat explains. Kinder bars and other treats are inevitably consumed by Finlay, who tends to help himself to the kitchen – and whom the grandparents inversely understand to be putting on weight. A difficult problem to resolve.

Moral laboratories are characterised by dilemmas and ambivalence. As primary carers Ian and Pat now feel the full weight of responsibility for the children’s health, as well as a nurturing and educational role, including the expansion of children’s food horizons. Their views align:



the children ‘need fed’, and if and when possible, a balanced diet including fruit and vegetables, as constantly communicated through messages from school. But in practice, this is difficult to orchestrate. Iona remains wafer-like, while Finlay accumulates. Both can forget to eat at all when consumed by an Xbox. For Ian and Pat, eating and desires to eat must stem from the children themselves. Imposing a standardised nutritionally calculated diet does not create possibilities for happiness (as Pat well knows through living with diabetes), or the happiness of the feeders. To be a ‘happy bun-bun’, Ian only needs to see them try.

Grandparental laxness – with its values of freedom and choice – aligns with widespread messages about children as consumers and rights-holders. Within this logic, children can be empowered by becoming individual consumers, gaining pleasure from eating as and when they choose, from a wide variety of options, rather than existing as passive recipients of adult-imposed meals. This approach, like that of parents in Chapter Two (those who were critical of the universal fruit initiative), contrasts with Eileen and Nicola’s understanding of good kinship care, where there is no choice but to sit down together for the same meal. In Ian and Pat’s context, a one-meal-fits-all approach in their current situation would be unthoughtful and uncaring. Forced commensality for the sake of health is undesirable, indicating possible neglect and inattention to children’s individuality.

Paradoxically, Pat simultaneously aspires to (or feels the pressures to produce) Eileen’s model of the family meal. If only she could get the table in the living room cleared! But Pat likely knows that the romanticised family meal is impossible within their walls, since it requires exerting forms and levels of discipline Pat and Ian do not feel comfortable with – preferring to coax the children away from the Xbox with a tasty morsel. Exhaustion stemming from full-time care for three energetic beings, on top of Ian running a one-man business from home also shapes what is possible in a given moral laboratory.

While Ian and Pat are primary carers to Iona, Finlay and Blake, they remain in a uniquely grandparental relation to the children of their second son, Brian, which blurs things, particularly when Pat and Ian are in charge of all grandchildren concurrently. When I ask questions about ‘the grandchildren’, Ian moves seamlessly between his and Pat’s two parallel sets of grandchildren (Nick’s, Brian’s). Does sugar have particular effects on them? Ian’s face lights up again:

When Brian’s ones were younger, we used to go around on a Friday night, and that was a Grampy’s night there, and we would take them wee sweeties,

etcetera. And then when I came down I would read them a story. And when I came down you would see Brian's face looking at me, and shaking his head. 'Don't give them sweets!'; 'Me?' Ian's eyes open wide with comical surprise. And they've got big sweet stains every place on their face, they'll be sitting wiping their faces, trying to hide it. But they'd be leaping about the bed like spring lambs.' Bubbles of mirth erupt from either side of the living room.

Pat nods from the armchair, 'A sugar burst!'

'Caroline [Brian's wife] was not happy at Grampy!' Ian turns to Pat, 'But that's what Grampies do don't they?'

'Grampy's nights' were a special time outside of the normal times of the nuclear family home. 'What Grampies do' frames sweet distribution as a natural dimension of grandparental disposition. This mirrors the previously-evoked notion that children have a natural right to some sweets (Charles and Kerr, 1988), and that a sugar-free childhood would be one lacking in happiness, evidencing the cruelty of the caregiver. Ian evokes the secret pleasures unfolding between grandfather and grandchildren, the reciprocal pleasures of receiving and watching. As in Chapter Three, sugar is made to chime with secrecy. The co-produced secret writes out Brian and his wife, and defies the parental rule that 'Bedtime is Not a Time for Sugar'. The futile attempts to dissimulate the evidence are also pleasurable – material remnants of sugar on faces acting as evidence of a special relationship. Sugar transforms an ordinary bedtime story into a special moment of naughtiness, a lapse in everyday regulation and surveillance of feeding. The 'half mad half hour' indicates the effect of the sugar, but also the temporality of grandparental influence.

The laxness played out in Brian's house differs from laxness in Ian and Pat's home. 'Grampy's nights' are nonsensical with Iona, Finlay and Blake – due to the closeness that has grown through cohabitation and new forms of responsibility for them. A tightening of a relationship, a re-moulding into the everyday, often means diminished access to the pleasures promised by sugar, as illustrated with Eileen. When I met Ian and Pat later, the balance had tipped from laxness to tentative interventions on Finlay's body mass and overall health. Unlimited access had been tweaked, fridge contents changed, and a new regime of surveillance implemented. No longer having Irn Bru on offer was an experiment underway in the moral laboratory.

When the grandparental home merges ambiguously with the nuclear home, new responsibilities emerge, where encouraging children to eat healthily (in quantity or quality), and restricting their access to sugar emerge as core features. The following sections explore other forms of grandparental presences and absences through the tropes of interference and independence.

### Jocelyn: Non-interfering

I meet Jocelyn – Ally’s mother, Jack and Joshua’s maternal grandmother – at Joshua’s fifth birthday party, held in a large room rented out by the local church. Jocelyn is late; Ally wonders if her mother has gone to the wrong church. When Jocelyn arrives, Ally doesn’t order her to help put the cake in paper napkins, or to help her husband’s older son decide who has won party games. She invites her mother to have a cup of tea and a biscuit with the other mothers and myself at the back. We linger in the doorway watching the child-dinosaurs race on all fours, hoping to win a chocolate coin. Jocelyn reads my mind. ‘I’m non-interfering, if you see what I mean... I’m not an interfering grandmother.’ ‘What do you mean?’ I ask. ‘Well, I don’t feel entitled, some people feel entitled, I don’t feel that way. They’re Paul and Ally’s children and I respect that.’

Jocelyn codes non-interference as a virtue. She stresses that she helps out with slots of childcare and specific activities whenever Paul and Ally request this. She tries not to ply them with her opinion on how to bring the boys up, or do things her own way. Some of her friends and acquaintances try to exert too much control, and generally contribute too much, she thinks. Jocelyn appreciated her own mother-in-law’s lack of interference: ‘she was there if you needed her, but kept her nose out and let us get on’. The interfering grandmother was a common stereotype invoked within discussions with other grandmothers in this thesis, a trope against which women placed themselves, highlighting their efforts to avoid trespassing or colliding. Several grandmothers in the study highlighted the structural impossibility of interference – knowing a friend or acquaintance for whom, ‘if they didn’t provide childcare, wouldn’t ever get to see their grandchildren’, as another grandmother put it.

The notion of interfering, or being reduced to childcare, paints grandparents(mothers) as outsiders – rather than parents’ parents, and potential rights-holders with regards to grandchildren; and as forming an obstacle to good parenting (mothering). Why might Jocelyn, and other grandparents in this study, understand matters involving their children’s children to be other people’s business – a separate domain in which one’s participation is cast as

interference, or undue entitlement? Interference emerges as one of many negatively valued behaviours associated with female kin. In order to interfere, a person influences something with regards to which they have no official power or role. In stressing Paul's fatherhood, Jocelyn foregrounds her layered position as both grandmother and mother-in-law, and the inherent tensions underpinning this cultural status in Britain (Cotterill, 1994) and beyond (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). Astuti shows that, among the Vevo of Madagascar, parents-in-law firmly remain 'different' (not one's kin), until the event of childbirth, where they become related to the grandparent in an upwards flow (Astuti, 2000). Jack and Joshua by their very birth, have reshuffled and re-knotted ties of relatedness – creating potential new pressure points.

Jocelyn deftly moves away from topics of potential malaise to define good grand-parenthood as non-proprietary, non-entitled, as availability on demand. Yet she does not allude to the fact she has arrived conspicuously late at the party. Available yes, but not at the centre of logistical labour (room booking, cake-cutting, party-bag filling) or of disciplinary labour (maintaining ten wild five-year-olds within the space for an hour, controlling noise levels, resolving tensions between children) on this day. Paul's elder son has already volunteered for this role. In this way, Jocelyn demonstrates that her life is not reduced to grandparenthood. Independence as a key virtue of older age is addressed further in the final section (Mrs Edwards).

Ally felt worried about burdening her mother with childcare and generally expecting too much – an important aspect of being a good mother herself. She would love her mother to teach the boys to cook her famous scones, but doesn't press her. She takes care to organise coffees with her mother, not only childcare, as well as times for her to just 'see the boys'. In carving out these special spaces, Ally indexes the difference between non-kin based, potentially paid, substitutable childcare, and the special relation of grandparenting.

Jocelyn prefers to look after her grandchildren at Ally's house, and is unlikely to have the boys over spontaneously for tea. Usually Ally would leave her instructions: 'Give the boys a big glass of water and a savoury snack when they get in the door, before they can have something sweeter.' She knows her mother would likely accept their refusal of a savoury snack. But Ally knows that if the boys get too hungry, this would provoke bad moods and arguing, and wishes to spare everyone this. I suggest that 'Interfering' encapsulates women's attempts to refuse, challenge, overlap with, or engage in potentially competing forms of mothering. In many ways, Jocelyn appears to embody ideal grandmotherhood in her availability, her adherence to

maternal instructions, and general lack of threat towards maternal authority – an important attribute she recognised in her own mother-in-law.

I interpret Jocelyn's story as revealing subtle differences in the expected behaviour of the figure of the mother-in-law and that of the maternal grandmother in contemporary Britain, a matter Wolfram (1987) traces to historical ideas about differences in relationships understood as deriving from affinity or consanguinity. While the interference of mothers-in-law was a common complaint and obstacle to be overcome for mothers in Chapter Four, maternal grandmothers were more often expected to express influence, and for there to be conflicts to resolve. Terms like 'interference' indicate the subtle exclusion of grandparents from the closeness of nuclear kinship, and decision-making associated with kinship roles. While Jocelyn celebrated non-interference, other grandmothers described their approach as 'involved', and often wished to be on the inside, at the heart of kinship structures. Such 'involvement' can cause tensions, due to the fragile boundary between parental and non-parental relations – a boundary which, unlike other grandparents in this chapter, Jocelyn steers clear of. Frictions notably arose when grandparents expressed wishes for these relationships to unfold on their own terms. Moreover, many older women also felt they deserved to 'retire' from motherhood after successfully raising a previous generation.

Another grandmother, Rachel, expressed her discontent with being encouraged to enter a potentially authoritative relationship with grandchildren. Rachel acts strategically upon the architecture and furnishings of her house to enforce the structural absence, or impossibility of, mothering. Her son has three children, but she and her husband have intentionally installed a single bed in the spare bedroom. Relatively little is known by Rachel about her son and daughter-in-law's home and parenting styles, understood as a separate entity.

Ideals of good grand-parenting, including their gendered dimensions, differ between families and within them. Jocelyn's model of availability without trespass differs from Eileen and Sheena's, where good grand-parenting translates into the ubiquitous prioritization of grandchildren including before personal health, or Ian's, where grand-parenting can crystallize around the incorrigible bestowing of secret treats without regard for the consequences. The grandparents in this chapter however all align in the knowledge that these kinship relations are processual and mediated, most often by daughters and daughters-in-law, and that this layer of relatedness is fragile and could potentially fall away. Maintaining the right level of intimacy and distance is a challenge.

In the case of Jocelyn, her position is complicated by another dimension with which it is enmeshed – her status as a ‘busy’ person, who, although retired, enjoys her own occupations and leisure activities. Jocelyn has rendered herself structurally unable to interfere due to her own timetable. Her world has not been subsumed by, or reduced to, being a grandmother – a potentially undesirable outcome, which may be reframed as lacking independence. From Jocelyn’s perspective, Mrs Edwards, Peter’s mother, would likely be seen as an interference. Mrs Edwards, on the other hand, would qualify this relationship as ‘involved’ and ‘plenty of contact’, mediated by her own independence and motivation to ‘keep busy’. The last section further explores the role of grandparenting in a ‘busy’ schedule, and its relation to other kinds of care carried out by older women.

### Mrs Edwards: Independent

After the passing of her husband’s mother and sister, to whom she had been providing care since the advent of widowhood, Mrs Edwards no longer had any ‘connection’ keeping her in southern England. This sudden void of relatives – combined with new opportunities for relatedness in the form of her daughter-in-law’s pregnancy – pushed her to move hundreds of kilometres, to live near her only son’s home in Scotland. Mrs Edwards remains vague on whether the move happened *for* the birth of her first grandchild. It all happened around the same time, yes. There was never really a plan, things just unfolded: picking baby Chiara up from crèche, doing the handover with Anastasia, participating in feeding, setting up the spare room with twin beds, having them to stay, cooking dinners and cakes several times a week to deliver to the family house.

Mrs Edwards gestures affectionately towards an overturned toy truck and books jumbled between the armchairs in an otherwise spotless living room. She smiles as she describes ‘a room they call their bedroom’ filled with ‘their things’, ‘their clothes’. Mrs Edwards enjoys the material relics of Chiara (10) and Simon’s (8) visits – not only strewn toys, but carefully displayed drawings and hand-made cards testifying to the intimacy of the relationship. She takes down a placard pinned to the door to show me. ‘Grandma you have the best cakes in the world. Well done for winning the baking contest’. She’s ‘very artistic’, Mrs Edwards smiles, turning the drawing around in her hands in admiration.

Chiara and Simon’s talents and drawings are fortunate compensations, since other things were lost on the way. Her garden for example, cultivated over the best part of a lifetime. An old-

fashioned griddle of her mother's, on which she used to make Scottish pancakes, which had to be discarded. Her active long-term membership in the local church. The material and emotional attachments that made everyday life meaningful were truncated in the decision to become a close part of Peter and Anastasia's family life. Thickening these relationships meant shedding others.

Chiara and Simon are developing a nascent interest in cooking and baking. But Mrs Edwards doesn't want to discuss cakes just yet. There are more important points. Mrs Edwards cherishes and nourishes – 'encourages' – Chiara and Simon's involvement in the arts. Her son, Peter, had played music at young age. A taste for walking and 'enjoying scenery' is passed on too, down the family line. But who knows where Simon got his sportiness from, Mrs Edwards muses. Her son never did any sports. Mrs Edwards played hockey at school, 'so I suppose it has come from me'. The speculation, uncertainty around these things offer imaginaries for shared identity and the forging of uniqueness. Unlike Eileen and Sheena, Ian or Pat, Mrs Edwards sees herself firstly in an educational role, developing her grandchildren's talent and taste. Feeding them 'good' food emerges as an important part of this work. Understandings of grandparenthood involvement emerge as classed.

I struggle to keep Mrs Edwards on the subject of sugar. She explains instead that Chiara had stayed on Tuesday night, and been helped with her science homework. Another day Chiara was feeling unwell and missed school – Mrs Edwards had to rearrange her plans. Oh, and she had taken them to the dentist. She subtly foregrounds the holistic nature of her care and educational labour, which encapsulate and precede her role as feeder. Yet Mrs Edwards exerts a strong influence over what is eaten within the confines of Peter and Anastasia's home, including on weeknights, and professes strong opinions over what is healthy and unhealthy. In particular, her cakes are always healthier versions, aren't they? (Peter would nod). Her chocolate cakes contain yoghurt. Sponges are carrot or apple-filled. Mrs Edwards bakes all the family birthday cakes (Anastasia nods apologetically).

On my first visit to Mrs Edwards' flat, on a family expedition to prepare Christmas pudding, I observe Anastasia frequently corrected, subtly chided. Currants and raisins are extremely different things, even if it happens to be one singular term in Russian, Mrs Edwards points out. She keeps a close watch on the children if they approach the dinner buffet. Peering around the door, Anastasia apologises for Simon finding some old (parentally-sourced) Easter eggs under his bed just before dinner. 'And he shared one with me. Probably shouldn't have said that!'

Anastasia covers her mouth to dissimulate a laugh. Mrs Edwards's lips pinch into a disapproving line. Unlike Jocelyn, Mrs Edwards' practices leak dangerously into mothering practices (e.g. preparing birthday cakes, monitoring the children's sugar intake) – from which Anastasia momentarily withdraws. Anastasia reveals herself as an expert on British kinship, knowing where and in what forms to relinquish authority, and how to build a good relationship with a mother-in-law.

In acting out the Christmas pudding tradition, and describing her grand-parenting, Mrs Edwards tells a story about the kind of person she is, and her role in mediating life in the nuclear family home. But she also carefully constructs herself as an outsider, like Jocelyn, independent, and non-interfering. When she first moved, Mrs Edwards quickly involved herself in the activities in the local church, women's initiatives, music groups – bringing into being new relations. These new social worlds subtly tie into (and produce space for) effective grand-mothering. She takes the children to Easter mass and other events. She marks the suitability of their activities with her attendance – admirably present for artistic performances, absent from sports matches. Because the rest of Mrs Edwards's routines are grounded in unpaid volunteer labour in the community – marked out as separate from kinship – such responsibilities can easily be backgrounded and muted. Mrs Edwards tells me for a second time that she had needed to withdraw from her volunteering to look after a sick Chiara. In caring for their grandchildren, grandparents also amplify their care for their own adult children.

In highlighting her scone-baking and educational work for the community, Mrs Edwards demonstrates that she does not need to rely on new kinship ties and layers of relatedness. Like Jocelyn, independence is highlighted as a key value which is essential for good kinship. Mrs Edwards juggles multiple types of care simultaneously – for kinship, for the church, for the arts – emerging as a (morally) busy and successful person firmly embedded in the community and in kinship structures. Such claims to a busy life recall the views of retired participants in Muehlebach's (2012) north Italy ethnography, who engaged in volunteering as a virtuous way to revalue the ageing self amid wider processes of devaluation, and pressures from the state. In north England, Degnen (2012) likewise found that older people were othered and denigrated, and framed as a pull on national resources. The ethnographic encounters described in this chapter suggest that (good) grandparenthood offers a sense of purpose, both within kinship structures and broader societal ones, and an important way to revalue an aging self.



## Conclusion

Grandparents are sometimes portrayed by frustrated parents in Edinburgh as fixed in their old ways – insisting on plying children with sweets, as if this practice somehow belonged to a distinct era of experience. Yet in this chapter we have witnessed the malleability of grandparental practices and relationships, as embodied through food and the house. We have encountered migratory grandparents (Mrs Edwards) traversing great distances to partake in kinship – abandoning affective materials, memories and living social connections in their wake. We have seen grandparents apply radical change not only to their food supplies but to architectures and domestic objects to incorporate grandchildren temporarily (Eileen) or into the unforeseeable future (Ian and Pat). Freshly blue-tacked vegetable posters (from Eileen’s grandchildren) show how grandparents’ houses open themselves to messages from the state around good kinship and feeding. Viewed through the lens of grandparents’ homes, the nuclear family home emerges as porous rather than airtight. The ongoing effort put into erecting and maintaining these boundaries becomes visible.

Sugar consumption reveals grandparents’ ambiguous position as both insiders and outsiders in kinship, qualified by sameness and otherness. Sugar throws light on the tensions between ideals of the bounded nuclear home and parent-child nexus as the ideal site of children’s successful upbringing, even as parents rely on the time and efforts of others to bring up their children. The relation between grandmother and grandchild is also a relation between daughter and her mother, or her mother-in-law, with different expectations stemming from each set of relationships (see Wolfram, 1987). An important aspect of this relation is establishing the right levels of closeness and distance, the right levels of authority or lack thereof. Mundane disagreements around sweets encapsulate this. Grandmothers try to tighten their affective bonds with grandchildren without overstepping into mothering, or rendering their care substitutable by paid professionals, while the mothers encountered here see grandparental care and feeding as part of their own work of managing children’s health, moods and relationships. Potential threats to mother-child relations come from within kinship (Geschiere, 2003).

In this chapter, we see things passed up and down the generations, both along, and across, class lines. Recipes, baking skills, ideas and practices of health, sportiness, and moral qualities such as strength, restraint and selflessness as well as kinship roles themselves – with Ian and Pat becoming legal recipients of the lost parenthood of their son Nick. In common across the stories related in this chapter is the notion that sugar helps people to distribute time and authority.

Different uses of sugar in relationships with children index the kind of ties being fleshed out, something that happens in specifically classed ways. With Ian and Pat, we see a move from the transgressive sugar of grandparental indulgences to careful experiments with sugar (and its absence), in order to nurture amid new dynamics of responsibility, where the balance between health and pleasure must be recalibrated. Eileen's ambivalence and morphing roles are similarly solidified in the sudden ceramic presence of a fruit bowl in the place of sugared biscuits. To thicken her care, Mrs Edwards delivers 'healthier' cakes to the nuclear home, part of her work of making everyday nutritional decisions (or interfering?) and demonstrating her presence as a central figure in the kinship structure. In contrast, Jocelyn's lack of naughtiness and interference is a potential source of concern. Taken together, these stories suggest subtle differences in the expectations of maternal grandmothers and paternal ones, reflecting the tensions expected in wife/mother-in-law relationships, and the expectations of influence on childrearing from a mother's mother.

As in other chapters, sugar is used to tell stories about the meaning of family and its endurance through time. Sugar aids in shaping the particular kind of moral person one is – as proven by presences or absences of sugar through a lifetime, and by what one has is passed down to the next generation(s). After a childhood of austerity and the production of three generations of strong women, Sheena is encouraged to indulge in another KitKat; Pat on the other hand, had better not. Past austerity justifies current sugary indulgences. This suggests that moral notions of a balanced diet can stretch across a lifetime (rather than within an individual meal) with austerity and indulgence offsetting one another. With Eileen and Sheena, we observe how grandparental narratives of austerity produce accounts of collective family in the present, binding disparate persons across time into a morally cohesive and shifting whole.

## Chapter Seven: Birthday cakes

### Introduction: Every child deserves a birthday cake

‘Why do children need a birthday cake?’

‘Sorry?’

I repeat my question. The social worker examines me through narrow eyes as though evaluating whether I may or may not be a sociopath. We’re wedged awkwardly in the doorway of one of north Edinburgh’s Early Years’ Centres. He is holding a large white box containing a Paw Patrol birthday cake for a three-year-old named Zoe. After grudgingly accommodating Louisa’s request to see the child, and show her the cake – a somewhat unusual procedure – he is now keen to show us out. Louisa, who has baked the cake for this unknown child on the children’s protection register, smiles on demurely. He hesitates, considering my question, and answers slowly. ‘It’s about making them feel special isn’t it? Knowing that they’re as good as everyone else?’

The social worker thanks Louisa profusely for her great work and closes the door. Outside, Louisa turns to me expectantly: ‘What did you think?’ I’m silent. ‘*Now* you understand why I do it!’ I shake my head. I don’t. This is what I’m aiming to find out. Louisa throws me the same scathing look as the social worker. ‘Wasn’t that so lovely? Didn’t you see wee Zoe’s face? Oh!’ Sometimes delivering a cake moves Louisa to tears.

When I mentioned to friends, colleagues or other interlocutors that I was observing a group of women who baked birthday cakes for local children who ‘might not otherwise get one’, their response was unanimous. ‘How lovely!’ Lovelier than donating sums of money, lovelier than volunteering at a community cooking group or food bank. The idea that some children might not get a birthday cake was faintly horrifying to many, and seemed to carry its own distinct power – enough to mobilise groups of women in almost every city in the UK to ‘do something about it’.<sup>16</sup> In this chapter I suggest that is no coincidence that time and effort are important attributes of British kinship (Carsten, 2000; Edwards, 2000) – which can be carefully coated in sugar and whisked up into cake.

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<sup>16</sup> Yet baking care does not substitute other forms of care (financial, community work) as this chapter goes on to show.

Through an ethnographic exploration of the time, effort, care, love, unpaid labour (and sometimes ‘grief’<sup>17</sup>) that are poured into birthday cakes, this chapter asks how the birthday cake comes to symbolise – or stand in for – kinship. This final chapter uses birthday cakes to explore ideas about good kinship in Edinburgh through notions of individuality (Strathern, 1992a), and gendered ways of loving and caring for children – and the precautions to take when caring for the children of others. After this opening vignette, we move into other homes to discover the work of a network of women who bake birthday cakes for children who ‘might not otherwise get one’, interweaving the stories of five women and their deliveries of caring and intimate forms of sugar to non-kin in north Edinburgh.

These baking practices offers a spectrum of care – spread across many lives and relationships. Baking and decorating emerge as intimate ways of doing friendship, motherhood, siblingship, neighbouring, earning a living (or not), relating to unrelated others in the city and ultimately of doing ‘good’ in the world. In juxtaposing women’s not-quite-anonymised donations of ‘free cake’ with anthropological literature on organ and blood donation, I show how feeding and nurturing the individuality of strangers produces good relatedness at multiple levels. Unlike the recipients of organ donation, recipients of cake are not nameless, but imaginable and potentially tangible. Bakers are traceable.

Individuality and irreproducibility are important in the context of children’s cakes, precisely because these are important facts of British kinship (Strathern, 1992a). Sugar paste becomes a medium to develop and nurture the individualisation of strangers to improve their childhood and future wellbeing, and in turn offers opportunities to reinforce the baker’s own kinship ties – all of this achieved through the baker’s individuality, materialised through her irreproducible cakes. In the context of perceived societal and parental failures in care, I explore the fleeting forms of (gendered) family-making and childhoods these women hope to engender by carrying birthday cake from one home to another. What can sugar paste tell us about kinship? How does not only sweetness (Zivkovic *et al.*, 2015), but the materiality of baked sugar become a strategy of care, and how is cake understood to enter economies of affect? Why, in the UK, is the absence of birthday cake a threat and a powerful moral driver for change?

Historians report that, prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only the elite in British and American societies were entitled to know their age and birthdays (Gillis, 1997). The gradual change in children’s

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<sup>17</sup> To be understood in its informal meaning in a Scottish context – as in the expression ‘to give yourself grief ‘over something’, i.e., trouble, a hard time.

social value, from a workforce to a priceless possession (Zelizer, 1994), the rise of the middle class gift economy, temporal standardization, and new idioms of parenthood linked to flesh and blood, all pave the way for the growing celebration of children's birthdays (Gillis, 1997). The cultural history of the birthday cake in Britain is inextricably linked to the rise of the wedding cake and its uptake by the middle classes from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards (Charsley, 1992). The bespoke novelty cakes I observed in Edinburgh during my fieldwork can be traced to the commercialisation of sugar paste from the 1950s, the growing influence of the British Sugarcraft Guild, and growing desires for personalized wedding cakes in the 1980s (Charsley, 1992).

Birthdays were welcome moments in my research. These were moments of respite from discussions of sugar and health, and times where family life was voluntarily showcased. Parents in my field-site led busy lives, and were often hard to meet. Yet on birthdays, they spontaneously sent WhatsApp images of children's cakes, or invited me to birthday parties animated with curious games. Although birthdays took place in the privacy of homes, parties were seen as a time when family life could become more public, and parents sometimes erected a careful porthole window onto their (imagined) family life. Home baking pervaded most aspects of my fieldwork, as discussed in Chapters One, Four and Five. I met volunteers in community cafés and churches of many affiliations, who were proud to offer home baking for food bank users, addicts, and other 'vulnerable' populations – to make them feel 'at home', or in some way cared for and recognised as people. Across the social stratum and from a very young age, children are taught that baking as 'project' can be a valuable way of doing good in the world. One family in my fieldwork even gifted me a 'circle of love' cake – a banana bread on a plate destined to be circulated to another person, in a never-ending circle of friendship and baking which would spread across the city, and beyond.

In an East German context, Wesser (2021) shows that homemade cakes – as the embodiment of women's labour of love – hold together ties between the family home and particular versions of the homeland. In Edinburgh, homemade cakes continually emerged as an appropriate way to gently intervene in other people's lives, and to nurture social relationships with almost anyone in the city. Cake's ephemeral nature, guaranteed to disappear without turning to clutter, of a monetary value low enough to avoid producing social unease, made it an uncontroversial and respectful gift. Cakes were flexible, offering varying amounts of social distance. Desperate to enter into social relationships myself, I finally ended up trying to bake a little – for teachers, for families, and sometimes for groups I wished to integrate. This worked. Cakes stated my

appreciation for people and my desire to prolong the relationship. Here, I hone in on one particular sort of home baked cake: the birthday cake. To discuss birthday cakes, I first require help from Susan, the head of a baking network. We return to Louisa and the Paw Patrol cake later on in the chapter, to understand the kinds of relationship women may (or may not) have with the child of a stranger.

## Susan

I first hear about the birthday cake network<sup>18</sup> while attending a community cooking group held at an agency in Leith, where I notice the delivery of a large professional-looking cake box to the reception desk. There are flyers pinned to the agency's noticeboard depicting the group's brightly coloured logo of a cake, partially obscured by an invitation to a healthy eating picnic, and a summer outing for under-fives. My contact at the agency is gushing with admiration for Susan, the head of the Edinburgh branch, who also runs cupcake decorating workshops for their more 'vulnerable' families. I email Susan, and a message appears minutes later suggesting a meeting time and place.

A woman in a marine striped T-shirt and grey hair in a pixie cut greets me with a firm handshake and a laugh. Over a cappuccino and a biscuit in Leith's shopping mall, Susan tells me how she found out about the network, and how the Edinburgh branch operates. It started as a group in England, which Susan came across in *Woman and Home* magazine. Retired from her work in catering services, and working part-time to support students with autism, Susan recruited a friend from work, a friend from swimming, and a friend of a friend. 'You have boys – you must have baked a football pitch or two in your time?' The Edinburgh branch of the network was thus inaugurated. The group bake a four-egg Victoria sponge cake or chocolate cake, adapting to dairy-free, gluten-free or egg-free recipes in consistence with allergies. They have never been asked for a sugar-free cake. To Susan, the very idea seems faintly preposterous.

Reading through the group's online guide for the UK, I learn that each branch works independently, has no physical site beyond individual members' kitchens, and is not registered as a charity. The guide frames the activity as a 'movement' of local people coming together as a 'caring community'. In Edinburgh, the group spans multiple generations, weighted towards

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<sup>18</sup> Not the network's real name. Bakers' names are pseudonyms, but they are aware that the network will be recognisable.

fifties and sixties, with the youngest member currently aged 17. Susan is a natural storyteller, and a mischievous twinkle periodically appears in her eye. My curiosity is piqued. I would like to meet Susan's 17-year-old goddaughter, who makes her own birthday cakes replicating pet guinea pigs with frothy mottled buttercream fur. I'm curious to encounter women like Juliette, who can make a round cake, out of which emerges a flower with delicate petals, and perched on one of these an exquisite butterfly. I'd like to speak to the friends who helped set up the network. Especially Charlotte. Charlotte is the head of something called the 'British Sugarcraft Guild', and reportedly creates botanically correct flowers out of sugar. I'm hooked.

The first bakers were found by word of mouth, and now Susan is frequently contacted through the group's social media page by new candidates desiring to volunteer. In their early forties and fifties, the network's new generation is younger and more professionally oriented than its founders, often with histories of running a cake business from home. Susan checks for photographic evidence that prospective bakers can produce a cake 'of a certain standard', or that they've at least attended a cake decorating course. The group currently stands at 27 members, with a long waiting list. I ask if they are all women. There was a man on the waiting list once.

Susan currently engages with 15 local charities and institutions, who can refer a child for a cake free of charge. These include charities for young carers or single parents, local schools, and Edinburgh's prison. Children can be referred for a cake up to the age of 21, meaning that some of the 'children' receiving cake are also mothers. The referral, containing the child's name, age and preferred theme is then circulated via a mailing list, and bakers can opt in to 'snap up' a desirable cake. Unicorn cakes are in vogue at the moment. Handbag cakes are a classic. Susan sometimes sends out SOS cakes too – maybe a plain 'Happy Birthday', or a football theme, on a quick turnaround. They've never not delivered a birthday cake to a referred child. Imagine a child not getting a cake on their birthday? Neither Susan nor I have children.

The network's core values are stated in the guideline introduction: 'Every child deserves a birthday cake'. This sentiment was echoed by the people I met, who mostly hadn't read the document in question. It was common sense, and not something that required unpacking prior to the arrival of an anthropologist. To understand what drove these women to spend four to five hours preparing a three-dimensional birthday cake for a stranger, then drive across the city to deliver it, I asked Susan if I might visit her and other women at home to learn more. 'You



wouldn't want to come near my kitchen!' Susan laughs raucously. 'The air goes blue!' She gives in, if it will help me with my project. 'Well, as long as you don't mind the swearing...'

After a few visits to bakers, I realise Susan was signalling that cake decorating is normally done alone. When I visit these kitchens, I feel my unusual presence breaking the deep silence of concentration (or swearing) required for making a splendid and special masterpiece out of fondant. The individual nature of cake decorating means that most of the women in the group do not know one another closely, only meeting at the occasional training workshop or annual hybrid social gathering fundraiser event. When we meet for the second time for a masterclass at another baker's house, Susan gives me one of the group's signature aprons. 'You're one of the team now.'



*Figure 9: Susan preparing a super hero cake in her kitchen*

## Charlotte

In south Edinburgh, a Saturday morning in June, rain slaps the pavement as we reach Charlotte's street and run to the door with multiple cakes wrapped in aluminium foil. When I climb into the back seat of Susan's Red Fiat hovering outside my house, Susan is in deep conversation with her swimming friend and group member Rebecca. It is Rebecca's son's wedding in a couple of weeks' time. The top tier of the cake sits in Rebecca's lap – a carrot



cake lathered in cream cheese frosting. Charlotte is going to be demonstrating on a football cake, but Rebecca preferred to bring this to practice on. It's going to be a three-tiered sweetie cake, with dolly mixtures levitating above the cake on wires. Her son's childhood favourite. With an adaptation to sweeties her future daughter-in-law likes. How will you get the sweeties on? Susan inquires. On the car floor at my feet, an extra cake, thoughtfully baked and wrapped in foil for me, so I might take part in the activity.

Charlotte's house is tucked in between others on a curving street of freshly trimmed hedges and polite gardens. Eight bakers are attending for a demonstration of the proper way to lay fondant icing on a cake. The network has a couple of new members, and, well, Susan winks roguishly, the cakes do need to be up to a certain standard. We perch on armchairs and sofas in a front room with a small piano and framed manuscript, and admire Charlotte's back garden out of the large bay window. Charlotte walks to and from the kitchen serving cups of tea and delicate homemade squares of raisin flapjack and gingerbread cake. Her presence seems to awe the room, and there are ripples and murmurs as she casually delivers golden nuggets on the production of successful wedding cakes, and scoffs at amateur disasters of collapsing buttercream. A couple of people gasp to learn that the top tiers of wedding cakes can be polystyrene dummies, and that a 'kitchen cheat' can be delivered directly to the venue's kitchen staff to prevent any mishaps.

Charlotte moves us to the long table, and stands tall behind the cake stand. She wears her hair in a long bob, and stands shoulders straight, arms at an angle. Years of demonstrating in college have shaped her gestures to a polished finish. When she speaks, it is in clear, soft Scottish tones, a voice accustomed to being listened to. You can hear a pin drop. She shows how to massage the fondant, roll out it out and measure it with a ribbon, how to lift and drape the unwieldy substance, and smooth over the surface with the heel of your hand. She shows us her recipe for apricot glaze to spread under the buttercream coating, to avoid crumbs. How to use a needle to remove an obstinate crumb embedded in the smooth fondant surface. Like Susan, Charlotte carries around a box of stories which can be taken out and aired, at an opportune moment, to drive a (moral) point home. There are stories about a woman who wanted to royal ice her own wedding cake, and an ungrateful client who regretted choosing fondant over royal icing to save money. There are jokes about stretch marks on cakes. We're under the spell.



*Figure 10: Charlotte applies apricot glaze during a master class*



*Figure 11: Charlotte lays and smooths fondant over cake during a master class*

I meet Charlotte again a few months later to deliver a Winnie the Pooh cake for a one-year – old child’s birthday. Charlotte glances at the surname on the referral form, and hopes they are Indian, because in India the first birthday is an important one. Over a soup lunch, I ask how she got into cake decorating. This time Charlotte launches into a story of family. She describes her mother baking out of necessity as a housewife, while her father worked as a policeman. Despite being ‘poor’ or maybe because of it, her mother had become a very good baker, and had passed skills and recipes down to her.

In the 1970s, Charlotte’s teachers pushed her to study Geography at university, but she preferred to go to college and take Home Economics – which at the time was thought to be ‘a waste of a good mind’. Charlotte went on to teach at college, and to open a cake shop with colleagues. According to Charlotte, this was Edinburgh’s only cake shop to tailor cakes to personalised novelty themes in 1986. Charlotte reminisces about the weird and wonderful cake orders they’d taken and displayed in the shop window: a hairy armpit, a naked female torso, a man sitting on a toilet. Charlotte attended a flower-making course, and fell in love with pastillage. Through the course, she learnt of the existence of the British Sugarcraft Guild, in England. The group was designed to connect people passionate about sugarcraft, with the aim of sharing ideas, hosting workshops and demonstrations, and organising competitions. Through its life course under Charlotte’s management, the guild has also evolved into a support mechanism for bakers, providing insurance to protect bakers operating in the context of rising cultures of litigation.

Charlotte married a man who worked on the oil rigs and gave birth to a son, making her cakes in the evening to keep herself amused and busy while her husband worked away for weeks at a time. Now retired and widowed, Charlotte has fewer outlets for cakes and sugarcraft creations. She is glad when new opportunities crop up. Charlotte’s adult son is vegan and runs his own business, which may or maybe not require her future involvement in the form of regular welcome cupcakes emblazoned with the company logo. The same son who once picked all of her sugar roses off a client’s wedding cake now lives miles from Edinburgh. When a friend got in touch about baking birthday cakes for deprived children in Edinburgh, this seemed an obvious decision for Charlotte. It was simply such ‘a lovely thing to do’. Charlotte was brought up to believe that women should never have ‘idle hands’, and is happy to keep busy with a newfound passion for competing in the guild competitions and baking for children.

With the birthday cake network, Charlotte gets to decide and take ownership over the real value of her cake. Although Charlotte enjoyed cake decorating for a living, it was frustrating that clients systematically refused to pay the proper cost of a cake, always trying to drive the price down, even at a time when they were the first and only business to offer that service. If you worked it out, she and the other women were only paying themselves at a rate of five pounds per hour. Charlotte would ask the client what they last paid the car mechanic, or the plumber. Why should her expert labour be any less valuable?

In Charlotte's day-to-day life, sugar seems to bridge gaps, and helps forge new social relationships and community in a context where kinship relationships have changed with geographic distance and the loss of the closest tie of affinity. Future kinship relations are by nature uncertain – Charlotte looks forward to grandchildren being born, but when (and if) that will happen is beyond her control. Baking for other children gives a sense of purpose. A 'moral compass', Louisa, our previous baker, calls it. Charlotte believes that different people are suited to different media to express themselves – to express both their own individuality and the individuality of others, as this chapter goes on to show. Charlotte's medium is sugar. When she focuses on shaping and perfecting sugar flowers, that level of concentration and focus makes everything else disappear.

Birthday cakes emerge as an affective material in broader – and constantly shifting – webs of work and care, linking Charlotte to different people across the city. Charlotte's baking and sugar craft blur the lines between home and work, leisure, care and economy – including in ways Charlotte may prefer to resist. In retirement, Charlotte's expertise is redeployed towards better recipients of cake and sugar craft: in one direction, the children themselves; in the other, expert evaluators at the British Sugar Guild competition, who will recognise her work at its highest value. In these contexts, Charlotte can leave behind client's squabbles over the price of cake – and the implicit undervaluing of labour associated with women and the home which travel with them – stories which have haunted her since her school days.

These exchanges of expertise in the privacy of Charlotte's home enable strangers' children elsewhere to receive better, more professional looking cakes – a high standard inversely proportionate to their (economic or emotional) standard of living. Yet Charlotte's seamless shifts between birthday and wedding cakes are also an offer to help other women improve their sugarcraft skills for their own kin – the chance to be the best mother and mother-in-law, as we saw with Rebecca's sweetie cake. Through the individualising medium of sugar paste, these

women can accrue their value as caring and expert members of kin. Yet some conflicts may arise in the process of baking and decorating to participate in economies of affection and care for kin. Lucy's story explores this further.

## Lucy

Lucy's home is a ten-minute walk from mine, and nestled into a cluster of brick houses largely owned by families with children attending the local school. Lucy has invited me for the preparation of a 'flamingo cake' (figure 12). The bright pink cake is sitting on the side, swathed in pink buttercream. Flamingo heads and textured wings lie flat on baking trays waiting to be assembled. Lucy loves an experiment, seeing each new cake as a project. A miniature research plan, involving extensive internet searching and YouTube tutorials. She explains she was particularly pleased to take on the flamingo referral, since Lucy's younger sister also loves flamingos and this is good practice for a future birthday.

Like many other bakers in the network, Lucy is accustomed to baking for friends of friends, or varying degrees of strangers. When faced with cakes to produce for the network, most bakers I spoke with seemed to approach these referrals as commissions. The fact that these children seemed to be in need of compensation – for their substandard living conditions, or for missing love and affect – made them excellent clients, but also potentially difficult ones. This could sometimes produce anxiety. Were their cakes good enough? Would the children like them? Lucy usually cooks up fantastic creations. But she cringes as she recalls a troll's face baked for a father in prison. Some of the older members of the network felt anxious about competing with new members in this strange economy. How would a child feel if they received a butterfly, perched on a leaf, perched on a cake, one year, and their own plainer attempt the following?

When I arrive, Lucy's trainers are askew on the doormat. Rushing out of the shower after her run, she is happy to sit down for a cup of tea before we move onto the finishing touches of the cake. Besides, it's very hard to concentrate on a delicate task while chatting. Her everyday work is in public health, analysing data, which doesn't allow space for much artistic outlet. She lives with her cat in a one-person household, and works from home, which facilitates baking and decorating. She doesn't have family to bake for in Edinburgh – and it would feel wrong to bake for herself. As echoed by many other women, the cake network offered a way to bake 'without having to eat cake'. For Lucy, baking is good when gifted and shared. Having leftover cake in the house is a looming menace, as it might end up being wholly consumed (see Chapter

Four on sugar inviting loss of control) or going to waste – both disastrous outcomes. Lucy bakes her cakes ‘with love’. Baked inside the home, these cakes are outwards-facing, intended to leave on a journey into relationships, into economies of affection. To eat this love-filled cake on your own would be a moral failure.

Before joining the network, Lucy enjoyed experimental kinds of baking and would distribute trial cake to neighbouring families. Lucy also bakes cakes to take into work – experimenting with sugar-free or low glycaemic index cakes for colleagues. This tailored care contrasts with Jane’s in Chapter Four, who gleefully fed high-sugar cake to her diabetic line manager. Lucy also has a history of taking commissions from friends, including an upcoming wedding cake for close friends from the triathlon club. Lucy never bills these recipients for these cakes beyond the initial cost of ingredients, since she sees this as a creative learning experience and instance of generosity rather than a form of work. As for many other bakers in the group, Lucy found the line between friends and clients to be sometimes blurred and ambiguous, often leading to tensions when negotiating the cost (if any) for a bespoke cake.

The network is a good compromise for Lucy. These projects offer spaces of artistic challenge and experimentation without consequences. There is no monetary exchange or friendship at stake, aside the minimal cost of a few eggs. And Lucy still gets to scrape out the bowl for remaining cake mixture, a cherished practice indulged in since her childhood. I’m secretly delighted to have found a public health representative who bakes and licks out bowls, and try to formulate a question that will face her with what I (initially) see as profound contradictions. Lucy knows exactly what I’m searching for, sighs, and brings the conflicts to the table.

From the dreamy language of memories of childhood, she switches to stark public health terms to express this ambivalence. Of course she feels conflicted about her active participation in ‘providing more sugary sweet and saturated fat-laden products for kids’ in an environment where children are already exposed to too many calories from cake. Lucy spends her working day analysing data on childhood obesity, smoking and the like, and translating these into legible trends. But Lucy’s ambivalence is quickly postponed, and overruled by the power of the birthday ritual. In Lucy’s logic, if she doesn’t provide a birthday cake, ‘somebody else will’, so she has decided to ‘shelve that for a bit’. Lucy engages in what she calls ‘parenting at a distance’ in other ways. This involves filtering requests, subverting ‘girly’ cake orders, and refusing to reproduce any video game, tablet or phones in sugar paste. Not that this will

necessarily make any difference; if she doesn't, somebody else will. But you have to do what feels right.

There are more pressing ethical conundrums involved in baking. Lucy is a vegetarian and sometimes a vegan, and competing values can be hard to harmonize or rank. It is important to use ingredients which are organic, Fairtrade and avoid animal welfare issues, but it is also desirable to make cakes for strangers fall within a low cost bracket, if it is already going to be given for free. Margarine is a good dairy-free option, but fails ethically since its primary ingredient is palm oil. It is better to choose natural ingredients over synthetic ones, but if you want to model flamingo heads, miniature bicycles, or unicorn faces, you need fondant. Fondant is nasty stuff, Lucy remarks, turning the packet over in her hand. 'Palm oil, Carboxine milar cellulose, whatever that is'. Lucy finds it exciting and fulfilling to experiment with novel products too, like Candy Melts, but these bright pink buttons from Hobby Craft are 'utterly artificial things'. Baking and decorating can give you a headache. Ambivalence and unsolvable dilemmas form an integral and everyday aspect of Lucy's baking.

We continue the conversation in the open kitchen. The conversation is slow, and interspersed with long silences as Lucy embeds the fragile Candy Melt flamingo wings into the buttercream body, spinning the cake to check they are evenly distributed. Is the flamingo's neck craning out at the right angle? Is it deep enough in? Where should the name go? The final result is spectacular. Lucy is unusually pleased. I wait a bit, and press her on the question of baking with love, which she had mentioned earlier. Is there love inside this flamingo? I want to know. She nods thoughtfully. There is. 'It's quite a general kind of love. Or just a care, wanting to care for somebody who's needier than I am. I clearly don't love the persons I'm making it for. I don't know them!' Lucy tries to explain further; There is some sort of affection, something that goes into it, but she can't put her finger on it.

For whom is this affection? While the UK baker network statement foregrounds children as the deserving recipients of birthday cake, Lucy now shifts the lens to the parental act of producing a birthday cake. Lucy goes on to explain that the gift is not just the cake as an object, but the gift of an experience. Lucy has fond memories of being baked for and baking fairy cakes with her mother as a child, and puts herself in her mother's shoes. Lucy's mother would have a fit if she knew she'd ever bought a cake from a supermarket! She just wasn't brought up that way. Providing home-baking for your children seems like something you should be able to offer as



an adult. In Lucy's life, she reflects for the first time, a cake should mean something in terms of time and love. There is just no point in eating shop-bought cake.

Other bakers also declared that love went into these cakes, but there wasn't much more to say on the matter. The time, labour, and intention made these cakes valuable, but it was more than that, something harder to put into words, almost as if something of their person was absorbed into the cake mixture. Susan's friend Rebecca helps us by describing this something as 'grief'. 'If you don't have grief over it then it won't be your best, you know what I mean? It makes it more real I suppose. If it was easy, then you're not giving as much of yourself.' Rebecca often worries about whether her cakes will be good enough. This laborious pouring of yourself into cake feels good, even whilst the process is sometimes painful and replete with dilemmas.

Lucy's cakes produce strange connections – linking Lucy's mother to unrelated children in Edinburgh, backwards to Lucy's childhood, and forwards into the children's lives as they grow older, with and through birthday cake. Baking emerges as a kind of kinship work in several ways. The overlap between Lucy and her mother's recipes and memories keeps relationships alive and in good health, thus maintaining connections (Cannell, 2011). Baking encapsulates memories of being mothered, something these children in deprivation are thought to be lacking. Lucy's baking skills and empathy are a gift to men and women of the same generation who are unable to care and nurture due to precarious circumstances. At the same time these gifts for strangers are also a trial, a process allowing Lucy's cakes to accrue value. The process of baking as caring, and sugar craft as evolving expertise are future-oriented – enabling the best flamingo cake to be made (or imagined) for a sister, the best wedding cake for close friend, and for others who will become important in the future.

Lucy and Rebecca knows that people's lives are complex, with overlapping interrelated problems, none of which a one-off sugar-laden, love-filled cake will solve. It won't make structural inequalities go away. But it is still a nice thing to do, alongside other activities. The bakers I encountered often participated in multiple forms of engagement – financial forms of aid, community work or professional vocation. Cake and kindness are stickily linked, as we discovered in Chapter One. Maybe the magic of baking will still help in some way. An imported object, which will allow valuable family-making rituals to take place, and engender the creation and storing of future memories. Something which can act as a signpost in later life? And while cake isn't good for physical health, it is definitely 'good for the soul', Lucy concludes.





*Figure 12: Lucy's flamingo cake*

## Louisa

The Paw Patrol cake for little Zoe at the early years centre is Louisa's and my second joint Paw Patrol cake (figure 13). Louisa is pleased I can see the delivery this time. When I arrive, she has donned a light pink apron and a complementary shade of lipstick, a warm smile. A neighbour is mowing the lawn to pristine golf course stripes. I'm curious to talk further to Louisa, since her motivations for taking part seem different to those of the other bakers, something she has noticed herself. Louisa works part-time as an early years practitioner, and enjoys the delivery part of the process most. She thinks she is probably not as interested in baking and decorating as most of the other women. If the coloured ribbon edges are not quite aligned, if one sugar dog paw is a bit 'on the wonk', will it really matter to a three-year-old?

Louisa explains that she bakes to see the 'marks of joy' on a child's face. She couldn't imagine her own child not having a birthday cake. Louisa feels a type of closeness or affection with all children, not just her own. For her, the value of the cake resides in the simple fact that it is

baked for that particular child. She likes to reproduce the same set of cakes – generally Paw Patrols and footballs. Football shirts have just entered the portfolio. Louisa isn't interested in making Game of Throne cakes with liquid sugar blood cascading off the top tier for friends (like Lucy), Mad Hatter tea parties replete with miniature teacups and sandwiches for younger siblings (like Katharina, in the next section) or three-dimensional portraits of her mother sitting on a solid sugar sofa for her own parents (like Sarah). Louisa is more interested in the children.

There is something Louisa wants to point out to me on the way home from the early years centre. The car swerves down a few more streets, and we're moving along Fettes avenue – playing fields on one side and the prep school's elegant spires still visible in the rear view mirror. Louisa usually makes this journey alone, and she wants to share her melancholy. She still has that happy image of Zoe's smiling face, yet now she's driving through all this wealth in the same square mile, how is that possible? Louisa describes delivering cakes as her way to remember poverty, to notice privilege. Keeping the 'moral compass' at work, as she puts it. Some of her friends don't believe there is poverty in Edinburgh. She has seen it.

Some cake deliveries are devastating. On one occasion, knocking on the top floor of a tower block in Leith with a cake for a one-year old, Louisa had a double take, wondering 'How is everyone related?' She had assumed the young woman who opened the door was the mother, but wasn't the mother in fact the girl on the sofa, younger than Louisa's own daughter, a 16-year-old girl? Not only the living conditions, but the very kinship of others can be shocking. She feels very lucky to have been given a nurturing childhood far from the cycle of poverty. She doesn't remember her own mother baking, and only entered into the world of baking after giving birth to her twins.

A particular memory stands out: a play date with another 'twinny mum' who fed them all tiny cupcakes, absolutely lovely. Louisa felt the desire to make this part of her own mothering practice. She rummages on the shelf to find a book gifted to her by husband almost twenty years ago, and others she purchased with the plan to make the twins' birthday cakes herself. She fondly recalls the achievement of a pussycat face in buttercream, and a woolly buttercream sheep. An important aspect of parenting twins was to provide a different cake for each, because they are two distinct people. Louisa doesn't like them being referred to as 'the twins'. Birthday cakes should participate in singularising children, and through the choice of themes, bring to the fore their identity as unique persons. Colourful and malleable, sugar paste emerges as a good medium for achieving this – for her own children, or for these other children with whom

she feels a certain affinity. In the case of strangers, intimacy must be mediated through the artificial creation of distance.

After charging a cake with care and affection for a child – imagined through name, age, and favourite themes – the bakers must follow bureaucratic protocols to produce distance between themselves and the child. The cake must be placed in a standard white box, along with a form, both provided by the network. Although cakes are sometimes delivered to a home address, the transfer of cake is often delegated to an agency, school, or early years centre. This rupture is experienced as a challenge for some bakers – not least because of the risk of damage to such a fragile piece of sugarcraft during its journey across multiple spaces, and the potentially inadequate care of those transferring the cake. At one meeting with Louisa and the other bakers, Susan tells the story of a father closing the lid on a delicate pair of Batman ears, to everyone's dismay. We can read here curious parallels here. The breakability of sugarcraft seems proportionate to the fragility of the situation: the perceived fragility of kinship in situations of deprivation, the fragility of trying to intervene in another person (a child) and family's life, and the fragility of the connections and rupture between baker and partially known recipient.

This process of time, effort and love put into a cake for an individual child risks germinating the seeds of a relationship with that child, which should be truncated in order for cake to have the intended effect. This is not easy – recall Louisa's desires to 'see' the child. In the case of kidney transplants in the US, Sharp (2001) observes people's wishes for the name of the donor to be visible, to honour the individual and their gift. Much can be learnt about sugar and cake by juxtaposing it with a very different kind of gift: the donation of bodily fluids and parts. Blood, body parts and sugar are powerful substances; exchanging them threatens to produce social connections. Writing against Titmuss, anthropologists dispute the fact that bodily donations can ever be free gifts, and document the time and effort that goes into separating donors and recipients – namely through procedures of anonymization, division and multiplication – to thwart the cycle of gift and debt (see Copeman, 2005). Konrad's (2005) research on ova donation shows that nameless strangers can also be kin, meaning that kinship can also be made with strangers. For the bakers, the exchange is mediated through agencies, institutions, and/or the parents themselves.

The baker's practices emerge as almost the exact reverse of blood or organ donation processes. Unlike blood or organs, cake is not extracted. The baker's process involves drawing together mass-produced and anonymous commodities: sugar, flour, eggs, margarine, packaged fondant,

and turning these into something highly meaningful through an accumulation of time and transformation, to de-commoditise ingredients and draw them into a meaningful whole. Birthday cakes only work when received whole and intact by the recipient. Like blood, sugarcraft is precious – in terms of the labour that has gone into it, and the magical effect produced. But unlike blood, sugar isn't precious per se – it is the caring labour (of women) to transform sugar in multiple ways (blending, baking, moulding) that renders the gift precious. Although created through processes of individuality, cakes are destined to be divided, circulated and shared among multiple others, in order for it to be acceptable for more cakes to be made. While blood should reside in the body, cakes should not accumulate in the home.

Copeman argues that blood when gifted can transform time – becoming a ‘material analogue of a dimension (temporality)’ (Copeman, 2005, p. 475). According to the recruiters of donors in his multi-country study, blood donation allows a ‘conversion of temporalities’ (Copeman, 2005, p. 473) to take place, whereby the time of one person (the donor) is invested to extend the time of another (the recipient). Translating Copeman’s argument to the context of birthday cake, it is the care and labour of one person which is converted into the care of another. Sugar becomes a material analogue of care, and allows a conversion of care to unfold across space and time in a seemingly magical way. This involves memories of care from a previous generation of mothers, converted into women’s expertise in the present, and extended towards strangers residing elsewhere in the city so they might be able to better care for their own children. Through these transformative processes of women’s time and labour, and the hopes pinned to bespoke cakes, sugar acquires value. The last section focuses on the magical potential of cake.





*Figure 13: Making a Paw Patrol cake with Louisa*

## Katharina

Katharina has a son and daughter of similar ages to Louisa's twins, but these women rarely encounter one another despite their mutual interest in baking and decorating. Katharina leads a very different life on the other side of the city, working full time in finance. But just like Louisa, she stresses the importance of marking her children's singularity with cake. However, for Katharina, it is the perfection of that cake and attention to miniscule details – the contents of tiny finger sandwiches at the Mad Hatter tea party, the clubs and spades on the miniature pack of cards – rather than a cake's home-baked quality, that produce meaning. She flicks chronologically through an album on her phone labelled 'Cakes' to illustrate her point.

She deploys her expert skill not only to make her sister's and children's birthday cakes, but to express the importance attached to other social relationships too. She shows me a cake made for a close friend's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday: his red Lotus Elan car, recreated in cake. He refused to cut the cake. The cake was so meaningful that he placed it in his display cabinet, and it was never eaten. The friend passed away a few years later. She never found out what happened to the

cake. In stories like these, the baker seems to hold up a mirror to the relationship, and amplify the affection within it. Cakes like Katharina's, or Charlotte's are also illusions. When they are not miniature replications of reality, they might instead be mistaken for a beautiful purse, a make-up bag, a child's toy. A demonstrator at the British Sugarcraft Guild tells such a story of someone trying to pick up a handbag – only to be left with a handful of icing and crumbs.

In Katharina's story, the power of home baking and decorating – of these fantastic illusions – is its 'specificity to the person'. The value of individuality and uniqueness for British kinship (Strathern, 1992a) was explored in Chapter Six through conversations about the amounts of sugar appropriate to grandparent-grandchild relationships and their levels of proximity. For Katharina, it is the impossibility of purchasing something this personal. This leads to a discussion of cake and money. Couldn't the charity buy many more birthday cakes and distribute them instead, I ask? Couldn't they support the families financially? Katharina argues that the cost of a cake, 'dribs and drabs of five pounds, eight pounds', wouldn't be of much use to families or charities. Baking is different. 'A bigger gesture I think, than the cost of a cake', she argues. It isn't merely a question of cooking money into something edible. While the women I spoke to usually donated to multiple charities, money appears in some way raw, faceless, anonymous, when compared with cake. What Katharina describes doing through the medium of cake resembles something quite different, a work of translation, coding the child's individuality and special nature into a something tangible, beautiful, and surprisingly ephemeral.

As other bakers pointed out, the intensity of bespoke cakes mean that there are in fact only so many people among friends and family that you can gift these to, 'without it being weird'. People might return the gift in their refusal to consume it, or honour you in turn by reframing the gift as a sculpture in a display cabinet, a lasting item to be questioned and managed beyond death. There are relationships you don't want to risk unbalancing with a kilogram of sugar paste. The intensity of the cake paradoxically seems to lie in its ephemerality. The level of care and attention poured that into a masterpiece, designed to be merely chewed and digested by its recipient.

In Louisa's life, baking was foregrounded as an essential dimension of good motherhood. She just 'didn't understand' other women who didn't bake, when baking is so easy, and visibly means so much to people. Underpinning their baking and decorating expertise, women saw their skill to solidify care in intense ways, thus crystallising the importance of particular social relationships. Could this sticking and solidifying of social relationships be exported to families

who might be falling apart, financially or emotionally? Could the cracks of societal neglect be iced up with such a gesture?

A recent moment when the bakers had the chance to mull this over, was an organised visit to Edinburgh prison's visitor centre. This happened before I met the group, but had clearly been a very memorable experience for the bakers who attended. When I asked women's motivations for delivering birthday cakes, the prison story was used as tangible evidence of the potential impact of a cake. The prison representative had sat them down and given a short speech about the work they do to 'keep families together' when somebody (the father) is in prison. For Katharina, this showed that the gift isn't just a cake, but something bigger:

...they've said that when we do a cake for them, and the children will go to visit, and they will get the cake given to them by the father. That is a whole experience. Children are experiencing the father still being part of the family? I do like that whole idea. And the mother wouldn't be able to take a cake into the prison, but we are, we are able to. So the children experience some family get-together. A family thing that most other families would experience every year, they maybe don't. So it seems like a good thing.

Hopefully, after passing intact through the prison scanner, the spectacular cake would become an enabler of good forms of kinship – which the child's mother is unable to fully provide in the father's absence. In the prison story, the cake becomes a vehicle for kinship care and love by proxy, a charged material form that will generate intense forms of social bonding. It will bring 'sparkle' to the birthday experience, as one baker commented. Is the appeal of prison cakes the perfect illusion they produce? In some ways the birthday cake might be a perfect gift. If the baker successfully erases herself from the picture, the cake can be parachuted in with an impressive landing, brimming over with loving home-baked qualities. The backstory of the cake's production is obscured from the child, who isn't to know how the parent acquired the gift. Then the child can have a 'normal' birthday like everyone else, Louisa contends.

Bespoke cakes point to concerns about the temporality of kinship. Coincidentally, it is precisely the example of a child's birthday cake which Copeman (2005) employs in his research on blood donation. In Copeman's analysis, the birthday cake stands in for an accumulation of time lived – thanks to a stranger's blood donation. In Britain, birthdays are read as an important ritual event, marked out as different from everyday time, and as Copeman notes, a marker of time spent together as a family. Carsten observes that rituals like the birthday require a certain

backdrop: a previous ‘steady accumulation of everyday and unmarked exchanges of kinship’ (Carsten, 2000, p. 696) It is this steady accumulation which is absent in the case of the prison story, and which the bespoke birthday cake attempts to make up for.

The magical ‘sparkle’ of a cake delivered by the imprisoned father stands in for (or blinds one to?) his absence and inability to steadily accumulate the time together that creates kinship. The cake does the special work of marking out this time accumulated as family *as if* this time (or sense of permanence) had really been there. Extending Copeman’s line of thinking further, cake – like blood – can become a technology that almost magically transforms time (from the blood recruiters’ perspective at least), allowing children, as future adults, to construct childhood and sense of family in the past. Blood becomes a ‘temporal investment’ (Copeman, 2005, p. 475) and substance whose donation challenges the imagined division between commodity and gift. The same can be said of cake and the sugar it contains – with the time-consuming labour of bakers aiming to transform the temporality of the child’s kinship. The juxtaposition of time-intensive labour with the ephemeral consumption of the gift highlights women’s desires to give another kind of gift: that of the durability of kinship through time, using sugarcraft to amplify the specialness of the ritual and thus compensate for the mediocrity or inadequacy of everyday kinship.

Charlotte tells a story of a different type of perfect delivery. The mother at the door looked inside the box, and gasped. ‘Ah hen, that’s better than you’d get down at the Greggs!’ I’ve heard Charlotte tell this story multiple times, followed by mirthful laughter by everyone. ‘Doesn’t that say it all?’ Charlotte smiles. The point of these cakes is that they are infinitely superior to other children’s shop bought or non-expertly baked cakes – even as the true quality of the cake may not be fully grasped by parents. The high-standard sparkling cake is invested with redeeming qualities.

## Conclusion

What can the sugar of birthday cake tell us about kinship? What can we learn from these women’s attempts to apply sticky cakes and smoothing sugar paste to ‘falling apart’ kinship forms? Can the exceptionality of the bespoke cake compensate the child for parental and societal gaps in financial and/or emotional forms of care? In the UK, the idea of child not receiving a birthday cake is a powerful moral driver, mobilising groups of women in almost every city to bake, decorate and drive across the city to deliver personalised cakes. I had



initially imagined these women as baking for ‘strangers’, but this wasn’t the way it was framed. In our conversations, the bakers moved seamlessly between cakes baked for the network and cakes baked for an array of other people – adult children, workplace colleagues, friends, friend’s children, people from triathlon clubs, addicts, church attendees, paying clients, and sometimes several of the above – and distributed through a variety of channels. There was a general consensus in my fieldwork that sugar is good when prepared and transformed in the home through someone’s (most often a woman’s) time and labour. I have argued that through this sugar, love and care (which are often abstract or intangible) are materialized, becoming visible and solid.

Baking narratives weave together stories of motherhood and siblingship, but also stories of gaps in family, due to the absence of offspring, or the advent of widowhood. Baking for underprivileged children gave new purpose and meaning to lives – merging ‘doing good’ with personal pleasure. Bakers are also ‘living with sugar’ as a condition of life. In an era of public health messaging about diet and health, women need a valid reason to bake cake, and legitimate opportunity to indulge in cake batter, as Lucy’s story shows. Baking emerges as a ‘good’ in opposition to sloth, but cakes themselves can be uncertain objects to manage, often teetering on the edge of vice and excess. A birthday gives the activity of baking meaning, and baking ‘for free’ (i.e. with charitable purpose) amplifies this meaning. Baking ‘for free’ not only implies philanthropy, it simultaneously implies kinship – a zone from which payment for care and labour is normally excluded.

The extravagance of these cakes – cooked in unicorn moulds, topped with fondant-crafted figures, or dusted with edible glitter – points to a concern that children in Edinburgh should not live diminished lives, and that many children are not being properly mothered (i.e. with appropriate forms of care and attention). In this context, home baked sugar emerges as an antidote to lives that financial and/or emotional forms of neglect might engender. The birthday cake is imagined (or hoped) to briefly plaster over the cracks in dysfunctional family-making. By bringing magic ‘sparkle’, it is hoped to generate a brief lived experience of good kinship, not just for the child but for the family as a whole – and to make up for insufficient accumulations of everyday kinship (see Carsten, 2000).

Baking is also a personal act of acknowledging and remembering the existence of deprivation – too easily invisible and forgotten in contemporary insular lives. Aware of the wide scale inequalities affecting the city, the bakers see themselves trying to ice moments of happiness

into other people's lives, as an individual action they can undertake. This can be done at their own scale, without political structures, from the privacy and intimacy of their own kitchens. Baking is a one-person activity. Yet engaging with sugars draw in memories or ghosts: previous generations of mothers, one's own adult children, siblings, or friends for whom highly similar cakes might have been (or are yet to be) baked for.

While Zivkovic and colleagues (2015) note that sweetness can become a strategy of care in circumstances of economic deprivation, in this chapter I emphasise the importance of materialisation in strategies of care and kinship. Sugar offers these opportunities for materialisation. Different forms of sugar – caster sugar, icing sugar, sugar paste, candy melts and others – are drawn on as tools in the production of intimacy and individuality. Icing sugar acts on sugar paste, making it the right texture and easy to work with. Caster sugar blends into the cake mixture, producing fluffiness in combination with eggs, in a journeying Victoria sponge recipe continues to honour the good mothering of female ancestors. There are also experimental forms of sugar, like Candy Melts, purchased online, and softened in microwaves for new creative possibilities, new forms of expressing one's individuality in a project of creating individuality and better kinship for someone else.

The previous six chapters of this thesis have shown how sugar causes ethical problems for people in Scotland, and how they try to resolve these. The sugar of birthday cake is bittersweet – involving both joy and struggles for the best (ethical, affordable, expert) ingredients, potential 'grief' during the process, anxieties that the cake won't be good enough, and the knowledge that deprivation runs deeper. Baking at special times becomes one way to resolve the ethical problems and paradoxes involved in living with sugar. The tripartite context of the birthday, charity, and artistic expertise, momentarily suspends the negative link between sugar and health. Home baking with sugar becomes a technology of conversion of care across space (one house to another) and time (helping produce good memories of childhood, which will carry into the future). Blood and organ donation illuminate the temporality of sugar as a substance of kinship, and the ways it reaches into both past and future. When sugar is tied into ethical projects of doing good – here, aiming to create the permanence of kinship ties in a world where kinship rupture is a constant threat – its brighter sides shine.

## Conclusion

What does an ethnography of sugar consumption reveal about kinship? What does an ethnography of kinship relations reveal about sugar? This thesis began with an alternative telling of the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale *Hansel and Gretel* by ten-year-old Isla in a kitchen in north Edinburgh. In the usual version of the tale, it is the sweet pleasures of sugar which lead to the capture and demise of two innocent and woebegone children. Like many evil fairy-tale characters, the witch lures people in with tasty foods and essentially renders herself kin-like and caring to appear harmless and attractive – leading the protagonists to trap themselves of their own accord. Essentially, the witch creates the illusion of a wonderfully sweet home (literally) promising care, nurture, and all things maternal. The gingerbread house stands in for the wealth and care these children cannot access in the woodcutter's cottage. Similar patterns unfurl in other tales (recall the Turkish delights offered to the youngest son in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* resulting in the betrayal of his entire sibling set). The sugar of such tales turns out to be particularly bitter, reminding children to resist carnal pleasures, to avoid entering the homes of unrelated others, and to mistrust their sticky webs of care and attention.

In Isla's rendering of the story (see Introduction), the witch's house is made entirely of fruit and vegetables, without a single jelly baby in sight. Instead of fattening them up, the witch accidentally empowers the children, who grow strong and healthy enough to escape. But what kind of children are attracted to fruit and vegetable houses in the first place – if any? Is today's woodcutter's house made out of Mars Bars and Irn Bru? Is the state a witch? Whichever the version, Hansel and Gretel is a story about kinship and care. This thesis has moved through school, home, and neighbourhood in an exploration of the changing social contexts and relationships which give rise to such tales, to show how sugar consumption becomes part of people's ethical lives and storytelling of their own kinship ties.

The power of sugar – or its absence – in fairy tales and children's stories told in Leith refracts the powerful effects the substance is understood to hold in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scotland. Sugar has peculiar, dangerous and often magical effects in these stories, when exchanged between characters.<sup>19</sup> A key argument of this thesis is that in everyday life too, exchanges of sugar

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<sup>19</sup> Or for a more recent iteration, the Disney film *Brave* portrays a (much friendlier) witch helping a child to bewitch her mother through cake – a sugary recipe which transforms her into a bear.

connect both children and adults, ensnaring them into relationships and transforming the moods and bodies of those who absorb it. Sugar consumption is read as risky in everyday life too, and carries with it the threat of future chronic disease and bodily decay, as well as the threat of damage to relationships. Through this ethnography I have demonstrated that sugar quickly becomes attached to values of care and home (something witches have noticed also) and that consuming this sugar is understood to create intimacy between people. This is particularly the case for sugar that has been transformed by a person's work and efforts, cake being the most obvious example. As an extension of this, I have argued that the sugar exchanged between people acts as a marker of closeness, and indexes the kind of relationship at play. This occurs because sugar consumption is understood to be detrimental to health – a paradox I will return to.

Of course, fairy-tales portray worlds that are by definition unreal. It would be logistically difficult to live in a gingerbread house, and alternate universes are not easily accessed through the furniture. Isla's is a fairy-tale precisely because eating at home cannot be so easily carved into black and white zones – a house of fruit and vegetables, a house of sugar. Houses are grey, and the architectures of sugar consumption never fully disappear. In this thesis, I have argued that sugar is structurally always already available to adults, and potentially available to children through their relationships with adults and other children. Architectures of sugar consumption always lurk in the background (or foreground) as an available site to visit, and where one might be tempted into losing control and eating the doors and windows. Unlike Isla's story, fruit and vegetables are not experienced as the path of least resistance for most parents. Usually there are several options to choose from, and pressures from multiple directions both to resist sugar – and to eat it.

I have described this situation as 'living with sugar' – where sugar feels overly available, and often foisted upon one or one's kin, yet marked out publicly as a suboptimal individual choice. Each chapter offered different versions of what 'living with sugar' may look like as a condition of life for different protagonists at home, at school, and out and about, in the context of their social relationships. Sugar becomes a condition of life because its value is not static but highly malleable and multifaceted, showing bright sides and dark sides – most often several sides at once – according to the social context.

Sugar is sticky, and easily binds together multiple scales, connecting people through family history and history of the nation. I have explored the peculiar parallels between the value

attributed to sugar's sensory and material properties: its sweetness, fluidity, ability to dissolve, to crystallise, to glue things together, and endure through time (with the space for playfulness its different forms and changeability carve out), and the ways in which sugar takes on political, economic, moral, and affective meanings – becoming a useful tool for learning, socialisation and for generating complicity. I now draw these arguments together and pull out the threads that run through this thesis.

### Sugar: a substance of relatedness

An ethnography of sugar consumption reveals concerns with achieving the right texture of kinship ties. Many people in this ethnography felt that sugar consumption could act as a yardstick against which relationships could be measured and evaluated. Some sugar stories were about conflict and misbalance, while others evoked love, nurture and nostalgia for kin and times past. Parents were acutely aware that eating is an important aspect of affective kinship, and contributes to children's happiness, (future) physical health, and growth into balanced individuals. Sugar consumption revealed people's desires for balance – both in diet and kinship relations – and their ambivalence about the best ways to eat and to care for one another. Sugar shines a spotlight on contradictions inherent to kinship in Scotland, including people's concerns that children and their growing processes are fragile, that close kinship ties are brittle and easily damaged, even as they are read as the most solid kind of social relationship. Worryingly, harm to kin can be repaired but not undone. The way relations are made in the present affects the strength and success of kinship relations into the future, including relationships with future generations.

Sugar reveals once more the primacy of nuclear family ties and the value of individuality in British kinship. In an era of 'intensive parenthood', where children must be protected from risk (see Hays, 1996; Faircloth and Lee, 2010), sugar becomes central to the work of maintaining good and active kinship connections (Carsten, 2000; Edwards, 2000). Controlling sugar consumption – while permitting it occasionally – emerges as an important way in which the state, charities, parents, grandparents and children themselves tried to enact good and healthy forms of kinship. Sometimes this work is done on behalf of others to improve nuclear kinship ties from a distance. Sugar consumption reveals the temporality of kinship, and the ways things travel between people, producing sameness and difference. Beyond blood and biogenetic substance (Strathern, 1992a; Franklin, 2013), we see many kinds of things flow downwards

from parents to children, from (great)grandparents to grandchildren: cake recipes, bowl-licking practices, food likes and dislikes, as well as dispositions for bingeing or emotional attachments to foods and broader ideas about what it means to be connected as family.

I have shown how sugar-as-substance reveals kinship as flowing in other directions too – upwards as children shape their parents’ relations to food, and alter their grandparents’ diets via state messages carried home from school. Sugar consumption reveals how some kinship ties mediate others. Grandparents-grandchild relations are structurally dependent on parent-adult child relations, while father-child relations can be mediated by the texture of relations with an ex-partner, or by relations across sibling sets from different marriages. In analysing people’s stories through the lens of substance, I examined how people feel about (and attempt to control) what gets transmitted through family ties, and how they try to produce closeness as a valued texture of kinship ties.

In contrasting sugar to blood and organs, I have shown multiple cohabiting models of what it means to be related in Scotland. Like blood and organs, sugar is potent. Sugar, like blood, is at once highly available for meaning making, and strikingly material and tangible (see Weston, 2013; Carsten, 2019). While the value of blood and organs is related to its embeddedness in the body, and the complicated processes through which the substance can be extracted (see for example Copeman, 2005; Konrad, 2005), the value of sugar is created through the material and emotional labour of transforming it, feeding and restricting it – in other words making it fit with wider concerns about what it means to care for others. In practice, this means considering how sugar in a given moment affects balance in a child’s diet and health, emotional wellbeing, dynamics of love and control, and how it may affect the balance of other kinship ties. While blood is perhaps the most paradigmatic substance of kinship in Britain, sugar is less noticed yet highly important substance due to its stickiness with notions of kinship care, pleasure and harm. Sugar’s potency also derives from meaning making about its negative value, and through positive associations made by the state and medical institutions between low-sugar (balanced) diets and good kinship. Sugar reveals balance as an important value of Scottish kinship.

### Everyday ethics and socialisation

Because of the ambivalence generated by the collision between public health framings of sugar as bad but not evil, and conflicting contextual knowledge that sugar is necessary, unavoidable or trivial (as well as structurally everywhere), sugar consumption becomes an arena for

teaching children about ethics and decision-making. I have argued that sugar consumption emerges as an important area for navigating moral life, precisely because it is an uncertain moral reference point. Through descriptions of everyday life in the classroom, playground, and at home, I have shown that adults teach children different things about how to engage with the (potentially dangerous) pleasures of sugar, and embrace sugar as a tool for children's socialisation. Adults use sugar to impart other values: those of sharing, caring, being kind and fair, showing recognition, celebrating family, celebrating the nation, as well as values of moderation: being in control of one's desires and pleasures – to grow children into good family members and citizens.

An ethnography of sugar consumption reveals kinship as a crucially ethical domain (Faubion, 2001). Mattingly uses the term 'moral laboratory' to describe the ways in which African American parents raising children with special needs navigate different moral spaces (clinic, churches, or parks, for example) in which different versions of children's wellbeing are promoted, and the dilemmas parents face while trying to create a best good life (Mattingly, 2014). This thesis offered a rereading of Mattingly's 'moral laboratory' through food practices. It is the pressures many parents feel to eat and feed 'for health' (Metzl, 2010), combined with pressures to give children a nurturing and happy childhood where they feel loved – something also enshrined as their right – which makes sugar consumption a salient arena for experiments in how to live. We see multiple moral frameworks bump up and push against one another. Attention to one or the other favours diverse types of future persons: those physically capable and devoid of illness, or nurtured, happy, confident individuals. The ideal is moderation – a (impossible?) balance of everything at once.

I show how the concept of the 'treat' enables people to bridge some of these paradoxes, and resolve ethical dilemmas. Building on Mattingly's work, I demonstrate how food is used to teach children about leniency and indiscipline, including visions of health and discipline as things to strive and work towards – but from which one can take time off. In practice, moderation has many possible faces, and includes respite from practices of strict choosing in favour of other kinds of activities (Mol, 2008). Building on Mayblin (2017)'s work on technologies of lenience in the context of Catholicism, I suggest that state guidelines and educative messages about sugar create spaces for indiscipline, and in doing so accrue the possibilities for pleasure in sugar. Sugar's 'naughtiness', and the permissible breaking of rules it represents, paradoxically carve out potential spaces for self-care, indulgence, and abandon. An important aspect of living with sugar is working out when (and whether) one is entitled to

these. Processes of socialisation involve learning to understand the times, places and forms within which sugar can be safely consumed; and thus provide useful lessons about when, where and in which forms pleasure is permissible.

Sugar elucidates the tensions and experiments in how to distribute responsibilities for children's growth and wellbeing. I expand Mattingly's work in other directions by attending to the moral laboratories brought into being by school staff. In Scotland, feeding practices reveal clashes between ideals of children's self-determination and an adult ethics of care (Punch, McIntosh and Emond, 2012). The teaching of children's rights principles in school is key to this – setting up children as citizens and consumers with rights to health, nurture, choice and agency. But many questions are left unanswered. Can children choose (or 'unchoose') sugar? School staff incorporate sugar into lessons about the nature of choosing and democracy, about how to make good judgments in the face of unclear boundaries, how to work on the quality of their social relationships, and try to convince the children to make 'good' choices and to promote values and practices of moderation – of their own volition.

In the mundane and quotidian process of eating, feeding and looking after children, adults work carefully to manage the ambivalence inherent to both sugar and kinship and in doing so articulate themselves as ethical subjects. This illuminates the scope of sugar for broader cultural work.

### Privacy, intimacy, affect

A focus on sugar reveals a nexus between notions of intimacy, privacy, and interiority – all understood to be important attributes of British kinship (Strathern, 1992a). Conversations about sugar reveal people's enjoyment in food to be profoundly private and intimate, and unsuitable for airing in public – even as children's pleasures are continually made public. It is this privacy of eating, the privacy of home, the privacy and variability of affect and sets of attachments that is understood to shape people into individuals – a concern stressed by my interlocutors, and a finding also reported by Edwards (2005). Like Edwards' participants, people in Leith viewed their kinship (as well as their diet) as unique and quite unlike anyone else's. Sugar spearheads tensions between the ways in which kinship and self-formation are perceived as private, and the ways in which children's lives are continually made public.



Berlant (2000) famously argued that intimacy is never only private (also see Alexy, 2019). Following Berlant's logic, it goes that what is public is never only public. Scholars have long critiqued the public/private dichotomy which carves up people's experiences along gendered lines. In this thesis, we see the public values of sugar enacted at home, and home virtues of sugar made public. This research shows that far from being a separate realm, kinship is rooted throughout society and weaves through all spaces (Yanagisako and Collier, 1987; McKinnon and Cannell, 2013), and that boundary between state and kinship is not given but continually made (Thelen, Thiemann and Roth, 2014). The state is not 'out there' but inside people's homes, diets and social relationships. Sugar reveals (and participates in) the work that goes into rendering things public and private, with primary school baking and lunchboxes being obvious examples of this.

By the very act of becoming pregnant with a child, many parents feel pushed into the public arena – particularly women – with their bodies and practices under increased public scrutiny. The care for children understood to fall within kinship and the domestic sphere (preparing morning snacks, toothbrushing, or providing emotional labour) is partly outsourced to the state, which aims to compensate for the poor quality of children's kinship care 'in private'. But this outsourcing relies on the capacity of staff to embody private values of care and home – and thus reveals particular things about gender. The multifaceted care work brought into being by sugar consumption (as a problem to resolve) reveals the ways in which gender is made at home and at school. Responsibilities for children are shifted from kinship to state, and but also from women to women.

What is Scottish about this ethnography? Many families living in Leith presented themselves as English, Polish or Indian, and did not necessarily identify themselves or their practices as 'Scottish'. Even those born and raised in Leith saw themselves as 'not a typical Scottish family'. We also saw different versions of what it means to be Scottish within a single family. Scotland and England may at first glance appear starkly demarcated, along clear geographical boundaries and legal lines. Food can be imagined as a clear marker of difference with Englishness (Knight 2016, Fraser 2011), and in the case of this thesis, icons like the Tunnocks Teacake or the bottle of Irn Bru were embraced in local Scottish primary schools. In the home, we saw the baking of the Black Bun across generations to foster a sense of kinship and belonging. But in practice, food and Scottishness are enmeshed with other forms of identity – gendered, raced, classed – which complicate this picture. Similarly, people were not always precisely aware of which policies were Scotland-specific or UK-wide in a recently devolved

nation – with the soda levy or rules on advertising being one such example. At the time of writing, a push for a second Scottish independence referendum was underway. While this research is ethnographically situated in Edinburgh, deciphering what Scotland ‘is’ falls beyond the scope of this PhD thesis.

Overall, this thesis makes ethnographic and theoretical contributions to the anthropology of kinship by building on theories of substance, the anthropology of ethics by incorporating a focus on pleasures and practices of leniency, and to the anthropology of drug use through by a new focus on kinship which reveals how things are transmitted. Throughout this thesis I have argued that sugar requires contextualising – a message that I address to public health practitioners wishing to influence people’s diets.

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