



'A Slice of Life': Food Narratives and Menus from Mass-Observers in 1982 and 1945

by Sarah Nettleton and Emma Uprichard
University of York

Sociological Research Online, 16 (2) 5
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/2/5.html>>
10.5153/sro.2340

Received: 2 Feb 2011 Accepted: 1 Apr 2011 Published: 31 May 2011

Abstract

This paper reports on an analysis of hitherto unexamined documentary data on food held within the UK Mass Observation Archive (MOA). In particular it discusses responses to the 1982 Winter Directive which asked MOA correspondents about their experiences of food and eating, and the food diaries submitted by MOA panel members in 1945. What is striking about these data is the extent to which memories of food and eating are interwoven with recollections of the lifecourse; in particular social relations, family life, and work. It seems asking people about food generates insight into aspects of everyday life. In essence, memories of food provide a crucial and potentially overlooked medium for developing an appreciation of social change. We propose the concept 'food narratives' to capture the essence of these reflections because they reveal something more than personal stories; they are both individual and collective experiences in that personal food narratives draw upon shared cultural repertoires, generational memories, and tensions between age cohorts. Food narratives are embodied and embedded in social networks, socio-cultural contexts and socio-economic epochs. Thus the daily menus recorded in 1945 and memories scribed in 1982 do not simply communicate what people ate, liked and disliked but throw light on two contrasting moments of British history; the end of the second world war and an era of transition, reform, individualization, diversity which was taking place in the early 1980s.

Keywords: *Mass Observation Archive; Food and Eating; Qualitative; Personal Food Narratives; Secondary Analysis; Longitudinal*

Introduction

1.1 The aim of this paper is to report on hitherto unexamined documentary data on food held within the UK Mass Observation Archive (MOA). As far as we are aware these historical sources have not been subject to sociological scrutiny, although a number of social scientists have successfully analysed other data from the archive (e.g. Bhatti and Church, 2001; Busby 2000; Savage, 2007; 2008; Stanley, 1996). The focus of this paper is on changing eating practices in Britain in the post war years and although the data are in some senses partial, we argue that they give us a novel insight into the ways in which food matters reflect and absorb broader societal changes.

The Mass Observation Archive: Challenges and Opportunities

1.2 The Mass Observation Project was founded in 1937 by Charles Madge (poet, journalist and sociologist) and Tom Harrison (anthropologist and surrealist photographer) to undertake 'an anthropology of ourselves' (see MOA website <http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>; Hubble, 2005). Their work involved making films, recruiting ordinary men and women to keep diaries to record the minutia of their lives, and establishing a panel of people who were regularly sent open-ended self completion questionnaires on a range of topics such as, social class identities, 'growing older' 'birthdays', and of interest to us 'food.' Most of the data in the MOA have been gathered by way of 'directives'; that is, open-ended questionnaires sent to volunteer panel members three or four times a year. The responses are stored in situ at the University of Sussex (although more are now being digitised) and so researchers have to fund visits to the archive where the sources have to be read. The responses to the directives are handwritten (occasionally typed), on the respondents own paper, are variable in terms of length, organization, and structure with some correspondents being more forthcoming than others.

1.3 In many ways the documents are not easy data for sociologists to handle. The sample of participants is unrepresentative which from a qualitative perspective is not especially problematic, but it does mean that it can be difficult to be confident about who the volunteers are. The M-O correspondents are anonymous and background data is limited to: gender, age, occupation and town or county of residence. Any or all of these attributes may be missing in the older sources. Critics of the enterprise point out that older, middle class people are overrepresented while black and ethnic minority groups and those living in the north of England and Wales are underrepresented (Abrams, 1951). The data are gathered for a particular purpose which is invariably not guided by the secondary analysts' own research questions (Heaton, 2004). However, in this instance the questions asked of the respondents are in keeping with the aims of our inquiry which were to explore: what people ate, factors that influenced their food choices, and their recollections of food and eating throughout their lives.

1.4 Sheridan's (1993) informative analysis of the merits and demerits of the M-O project identifies five issues that warrant concern. First, 'there are perennial concerns about the accuracy of recall' (p.29); second, correspondents slip between two registers of 'subjective writing' and 'social reportage'; third, the writing is 'fragmentary' in terms of the timing of the responses and their partial content; fourth the 'provenance' of the writing is suspect because the directives may steer the authors; and finally the accounts may not be accurate representations of events. Such misgivings imply a positivistic stance and so it is important to locate any analysis of the data within an interpretivist paradigm. Certainly to pass over the opportunity to examine these data – what Sheridan (1993) refers to as a 'collective autobiography' - would be at best shortsighted and at worst a waste of a terrific resource.

1.5 As a unique source we argue that the data are illuminating and in fact there may even be value in their idiosyncrasy and variability. Writing about the methodological considerations which arise from working with data from the MOA, Bloome and his colleagues suggest:

'Rather than conveying representation in terms of the individual, it is the slices of life that are viewed as representations of everyday life. Just as an anthropologist provides descriptions and pictures of the everyday life of a community group she or he is studying, the M-O correspondents can be seen similarly'. (Bloome et al 1993: no page no)

1.6 Our aim therefore is to treat our two sets of data on food as 'slices of life' that give us insights into everyday living. To this extent, we also follow Byrne's (2002) approach to quantitative variables as 'variate traces' which are akin to tracks in the sand left by the animal we are hunting. In effect, our position is similar to many who have used the MOA for social research; in particular we are swayed by Savage (2010) who demonstrates that these data provide an excellent qualitative resource through which to explore social change. Indeed, the data are intrinsically temporal, not simply because they do, as we suggest here, shed light on how the world has changed and how those changes manifest themselves at the individual level, but because these volunteers were actively writing for a present and future audience. In actively contributing to an archive, their stories are necessarily ones that the authors wanted others in the future to know about. Their stories matter, therefore, not just as traces that allow us to capture a slice of life in the past, but also in their intentional temporal dynamic that is intrinsic to every description (see Abbott, 2003). In short, they allow a story of social change to be gleaned and it is this aspect in particular that we have sought to harness and illustrate here. In what follows, we explore first the data generated via the Winter Directive sent to correspondents in 1982 before turning to the second set of food data which are daily food diaries recorded by panel members in 1945.

Memories of Food: Unique and Universal

2.1 The 'Winter Directive' is headed: 'The theme is food, including drink.' There are five sections: 'foods people chose not to eat'; 'food for special occasions'; 'food introduced to diets over the lifetime'; 'memories of food'; and finally 'questions for home growers only'. Here we focus on only the responses to the following questions.

'1a. First the things that you, your family, your relations and friends do not eat and why. Here are some of the reasons why you may not eat certain things: moral, health, political, religious and personal.'

'3a. New Foods: taking the food of your childhood as a baseline, what items of food have you introduced...?'

'4. Like Mother used to make...Memories please of food which you particularly enjoyed as a child, not necessarily treats or special occasions...'

Our sample of 32 and 50 responses was derived from a total of 71 and 254 returns from men and women respectively. They were copied verbatim during visits to the archive and subsequently read by both the authors of this paper in order to discuss any themes and salient issues. Our approach to sampling reflects the methods advocated by Savage (2010):

'when consulting the voluminous Mass-Observation archive, my approach has been to adopt a version of the 'theoretical sampling' strategy [...] where one continues reading additional cases until one feels that no new repertoires are being presented'. (p.19)

2.2 It is only on reading the returns that one can gain a sense of the character and content of the contributions. They are all unique and yet, as we hope to show, there are aspects of the responses which are shared. In order to demonstrate this, we present an entry at length, something we would normally caution against; but there is a rationale. If we were to provide only short extracts the autobiographical character would be lost, as would the variety of aspects of life that are seen in relation to food. Below is an

entry from a woman with the MOA Correspondent identifier 'B58F' in response to question 4. It is reproduced verbatim.

Like mother used to make...cannot mean much to me as I lived in 7 different places between 4 and 14. I don't remember ever having any treats or special food. I liked scraping the saucepans out though and used to be very pleased when we got broken cakes in the convent. My step grandmother used to keep a tin of ginger biscuits over the fireplace in her cottage and she always gave me one or two when I went to see her with my stepmother. I still love ginger biscuits. I hated the marrow that I had to eat and didn't care for carrots or parsnips. I don't hate any of them now as I fed my children on a mixture of vegetables but I don't marrows as I consider them to be insipid and mostly water. Most of the foods I really like have to be avoided as I got to be 11stone 4 lbs. shortly after I earned enough money to indulge myself a bit. It took me two years of restraint and eating to get down to 9 stone when I was 18 and I have remained between that and half a stone heavier since then – but only whilst I practice restraint. An inclination to put on weight comes from both sides of my family and the one side of my husband's family. My husband watches his weight and the only girl followed the same genetic and behaviour pattern as myself. She was very fat and 'blowsy' at 16 – 17 -18 and then firmly tackled the problem. She is now 24 and keeps her weight within the same bands as mine. The boys are very inactive and eat irregularly but they too inspect their waistlines critically.

I have always eaten a lot of eggs. Maybe it has something to do with being left out when the rest of the family had eggs as a special treat when I was at home with my step- mother. But it is not just one thing I am sure. Eggs have always been value for money and very easily cooked and single girl living on her own and wanting a quick meal before going for the evening (skating usually) found omelettes [sic] to be the ideal answer... When sliming [sic] at 18 I had taken a book out of the library on diet so that I didn't damage myself as I couldn't afford to be ill and lose my job. (In the civil service on my two probationary years I got called up by the Director and tactfully told that I ought to take up 'less dangerous sports' if I wanted to become established. I sprained a wrist and pulled several muscles and wounded bottom with the end my skate trying to do jumps... I took the advice and stuck to dancing until my two years had been safely served ... So you might say that food has been governed mainly by my weight problems plus cost for me and not forgetting health needs. It has certainly never been 'a bit of what you fancy does you good'. (B58F)

2.3 What is perhaps remarkable in this snapshot or 'slice of life' generated in her response to the question, 'Like mother used to make?', is that we are furnished with a remarkably comprehensive life history: we know about her upbringing; her disrupted and mobile childhood; her family relationships with parents, grandparent; we know too that she married and had children; we know about her working life; we learn about her hobbies and her on-going concerns about her weight and her conviction that this is an affliction of inheritance passed on to her children. Nostalgia too figures in this account conveyed through the memories of the biscuit tin, the warmth of cottage fireside, and the ginger biscuits – a taste still enjoyed. Of course this tale is unique, but asking people about food it seems invokes not unadulterated descriptions of what people did or did not eat, but rather it appears to invoke reminiscences of social relations, experiences, emotions and feelings. It is this that is shared; the fact that food generates memories about events, relations and contexts rather than simply recollections of the food in and of itself is common to all the responses.

2.4 'Food biographies', is a term that has hitherto been used to describe the biographies of particular foods, for example Mintz's (1985) social history of sugar, or Harvey et al's (2002) study of the tomato, but it seems it could also be a fitting term that might capture these accounts of the life course. However, because the term has come to be associated with that genre of food writing we propose the term 'food narrative' instead. A consistent feature of the responses to the Winter Directive on food is their seemingly arbitrary and frankly, at the risk of sounding condescending, bizarre nature. B58F's account has a chaotic, erratic quality and this is a feature that characterizes of most of the returns. These food narratives are personal in that they report on exclusively individual lives, and yet they are also collective in the sense that the illustrative memories tap into symbolic and cultural resources that those from similar ages and backgrounds can share and respond to.

2.5 We can see this in the success of Nigel Slater's (2003) autobiography *Toast* in which the UK celebrity chef documents a sensory chronology of his childhood and teenage years through food. Brought up in a middle class household – "there were only three of us at school whose house wasn't joined to the one next door" (p.20) - the food bought by his parents and meals made by his mother (his father occasionally helped but only when they were trying something new) were congruent with their social position. It neatly echoes Bourdieusian notions of taste and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Arctic Roll, Bird's Custard and certainly Cadbury's Mini Roll most likely today, would be relegated from a contemporary equivalent to the Slater, upper middle class household, but during the 1960s they were up-to-the-minute, relatively exclusive and expensive. Other products even then he writes were however:

'quite unmentionable, even in hushed tones. Babysam, sandwich spread, tomato ketchup, bubble gum, HP sauce, Branston Pickle could never be discussed let alone eaten. Those chocolate marshmallows with biscuit and jam in the middle that came in red and silver foil (and which I could cheerfully have killed for) would never have been allowed past the front door.' (p.55)

The appeal of the book is the reader can relate to the foodstuffs because they chime with the readers' own experiences and memories; there is also an element of nostalgia, defined by Turner (1995: 251) as 'the yearning for a particular body in its youthful habitus'. Slater's memories are personal, unique and

idiosyncratic, yet of course tap into collective experiences of the baby boomer generation; they are common to those who remember the 1950s-1980s. Beyond his own interpretation of his class location we know few details about his social background (e.g. nothing on father's occupation). However, structured as a series of vignettes – each entitled with a food - his food autobiography provides a window on to social lives and social change of middle class England.

2.6 Nigel Slater and B58F's accounts may not be the product of robust methodologies, and may not be true and accurate representations of the past, but as accounts of food practices they function, as the anthropologist Carole Counihan puts it, as a 'prism which absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena' (Counihan 1999: 6). John Law (2004) argues in his book *'After Method'* that everyday life, to use his term is 'messy'; the data from the Mass-Observation archive, and the long extract we have presented from B58F certainly is that. Furthermore Law, like some feminist scholars (see Smart, 2009), urge sociologists to capture and re-present the 'mess' and caution against imposing logic and coherence. Whilst this does not necessarily simply mean reproducing long quotations (as we have done here) they encourage sociologists to pay close attention to the fullness of personal narratives as it is only by so doing that we can begin to understand their changing context and vice versa. These food narratives may therefore be instructive for appreciating social change. And certainly, within these data we can see indications of this because the accounts themselves are infused by the broader social context. These personal food stories deploy a shared grammar of change; the personal is invariably permeated by the social. This is captured by Lawler's definition of narrative when she writes:

'I am not using 'narrative' here to indicate a 'story' that simply 'carries' a set of 'facts'. Rather, I see narratives as social products produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations. They are related to the experience that people have of their lives, but they are not transparent carriers of that experience. Rather, they are interpretive devices, through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others. Further, narratives do not originate with the individual: rather, they circulate culturally to provide a repertoire (though not an infinite one) from which people can produce their own stories.' (Lawler 2002: 242)

If we accept Lawler's premise, any misgivings that the M-O data are subjective and fictional become redundant. To be sure it is possible that the accounts are misrepresentations of the past, but they do convey an insight into the salience of food as it is woven through the lifecourse, and in combination we can discern common strands that run through the 'collective autobiography'. This is clear when we explore the responses to Question 1a that asks about factors that influenced food choices.

Q1a What Did People Not Eat and Why in 1982?

3.1 The answers to Question 1a on the Winter Directive are to some extent steered by the probes written on the Directive itself which asks whether 'moral, health, political, religious and personal factors' deterred the respondents from eating particular foods. The selection of these factors within this question by the authors of the directive are telling, in that they are a reflection of food related concerns and debates that were circulating in the early 1980s. While some correspondents organized their responses under these headings for the most part they tended to write in more general ways. For example, A23F organises her responses under subheadings using some of the prompts in the question, and under the subhead 'moral' influences she writes:

I am not a real fad when it comes to food, I will eat what I like. I cannot eat eggs (although I like them) because they upset my gallbladder, I do get fresh laid eggs for my husband. I do not buy many foods which contain preservatives because I much prefer fresh food. This I suppose goes back to my upbringing but I do believe fresh food is best.

But this same respondent does not offer a 'health' subheading. This is typical and is methodologically significant in that it indicates that people wrote what was important to them rather being led by the directive itself.

3.2 Few correspondents labelled sections of their responses with the subhead 'morality' however, a close reading of the data revealed implicit evidence of what Paul Atkinson (1983) writing at time, called 'eating virtue'. He defines eating virtue as the idea that food practices carry a moral load indicated by: the avoidance of convenience foods; sourcing local, fresh and seasonal produce; the merits of home cooking and healthy foods. The Winter Directive returns were replete with such comments. Correspondents also commonly stated that they were not 'fussy' or 'faddy' eaters – a further indication of 'eating virtue'; a reasonable and responsible individual would be catholic in her tastes and not hard to please.

3.3 Health too emerges as an important factor reported to influence food choice. Although healthy eating advice has been issued by governments since the early 19th century, there was certainly a step change from the late 1970s as successive governments attempted to re-orientate health policies towards prevention and funded campaigns such as, the 'Look After Yourself' initiative launched by the Health Education Council in England in 1978. For example, this woman's comments mirror the language and advice used in the advertising materials of the campaign.

Avoidance of animal fats (apart from small quantity of butter purchased for occasional use eg on jacket or new potatoes!) Mass produced white bread, sugary "products" (eg canned fruit in syrup, sweets, shop "cakes") salt in anything but small quantities used in food preparation, sugar coated breakfast cereals. (B70F Teacher)

Here again we see that narratives are as Lawler (2002) points out, composed of cultural repertoires that were circulating at that time in relation to health. It is evident too in the correspondents' comments in

relation to political issues associated with food production. There are numerous references to additives, high production yields, and transportation. There is much discussion too of the merits of local, and the demerits of global food production, loss of seasonality and animal cruelty. The correspondents were engaging with these nascent discourses even though the responses were ambivalent. As can be seen in the following entry from a 45 year old woman:

We like to know what we're eating. On the other hand, we are not food fanatics and few qualms about battery hens and their eggs or factory farm produce. However, we do not eat veal in any shape or form, for the simple reason that the usual conditions under which the animals are kept prior to slaughter (which we witnessed when we stayed on a dairy farm in Devon some years ago) are so horrific from moderately intelligent mammals that we were put off for life. I know that meat and poultry are sometimes treated with hormones to plump the animals before slaughter and salt are used to retain water and enhance flavour, but I prefer to ignore that aspect, on the reasoning that without high production yields the producers will not be able to feed everyone. We dislike cut, wrapped bread, taste like damp sponge usually have Hovis, Vitbe or crisp French type bread. (B74F)

As Fischler (1980; 1988) has pointed out in the late 1970s and 1980s these concerns with the expansion of the agro-industry and intensification of food production were giving rise to anxieties and food insecurities and it is certainly evidenced in the data. International relations and politics were also evident in food choices – with many correspondents expressly avoiding – or expressly opting not to boycott - products from South Africa, apples from France, butter from Ireland and beef from Argentina (the Falklands war was of course being waged at the time of the directive).

3.4 Arguably 1982 does represent an interesting time in terms of shifting eating practices in Britain not least because of the broader socio-economic transformations that were taking place at that time. Not only was it the year of the Falkland's war, the year that the number of people unemployed in Britain exceeded 3 million, the year that Thatcher was in her third year in office, and the year satellite TV was sanctioned, it was also when a right wing Government was accelerating the processes of welfare restructuring and retrenchment. Individualism, consumerism and deregulation were ushered in and old style paternalism, collective consumption and uniformity were eschewed. One had a hazy almost incredulous awareness of the socio-political and cultural shifts that were taking place. A watershed between collectivism and individualism, Fordism and post-Fordism: the advent of variety and choice.

'New Foods' in 1982

4.1 Question 3a on the Winter Directive asks: 'New Foods: taking your childhood as a baseline, what items of food have been introduced since, either regularly or occasionally.' This yielded lengthy answers often with lists of foods and recurrent references to: 'variety' and 'foreign foods.'

New few foods include: avocados, pate, veal, courgettes, peppers, bean sprouts, bamboo shoots, celeriac, yoghurts, waldorf salads etc from Delicatessens, brown bread, crisp breads, muesli, bran, sweetcorn, ratatouille, French cheeses and other foreign cheeses. Vegetable fats, vegetable oils, low calorie soups, sauce mixes. (A27F)

There was mention too of changing demands of food preparation within the domestic domain, as commented on by these two women:

On discussing food within friends. [sic] The general trend appears to be that the females are relatively adventurous in enjoying 'foreign' foods such as curry (a favourite in our family) while their partners want 'plain English cooking'. Creativity in the kitchen of female friends is lacking as a result often leaving them frustrated and bored with a process of making meals. (B70F Teacher)

I find it a pleasure to be able to buy foreign foods now like a good selection of curry sauces, various pastas and spaghetti. Rice dishes are something we have now that my mother would have never have dreamed of seeing except as a pudding. I appreciate packet sauce mixes. (G230F)

The incorporation of foreign dishes was also evident in Nigel Slater's (2003) autobiography discussed above. His graphic account of the first and the last time his family prepared spaghetti Bolognese for dinner is significant (p17). As we have seen, the Slater family was aspirational and in the 1960s this would involve engaging with that which was foreign. 'Foreign food' like foreign holidays had hitherto been the province of the very rich and so a meal of spaghetti Bolognese in the 1960s was a marker of class and distinction. But the transition was not an easy one. Slater describes the tension generated when his father cooked the meal; the Bolognese sauce was from a tin, his father (who would be involved in this experimental and exotic cooking) had trouble getting the spaghetti 'to fit' into the pan, the nervous anticipation felt by Nigel himself and expressed by his aged aunt who was distressed at the prospect of this unfamiliar food was compounded by Nigel's mother who insisted that they should all 'give it a try'. It is a neat vignette, and as an event at the cusp of change it captures the advent of new foods and patterns and eating in Britain. The tensions and ambivalences associated with these transformations are commented on by Warde (1997) in his analysis of magazines undertaken as part of his explorations of changing food habits in the UK.

'So new dishes are exciting interesting, perhaps fashionable, stylish, and so forth; but they may be awkward to resource, difficult to cook, hard to appreciate, perhaps even distasteful. Customary dishes are a source of security, certainty and are often represented as emotionally gratifying'. (Warde, 1997: 67-68)

Spaghetti Bolognese was never made nor mentioned in the Slater household again.

4.2 But of course pasta is now a mainstay for many households in the UK and the availability of wide varieties of foods are facilitated by distribution systems which have transformed global supply chains, 'incorporating previously exotic foods into the everyday diets of an increasingly wide spectrum of British households' (Wrigley, 1998: 112). Such choice gives rise to what Fischler (1980) describes as (circa Durkheim) 'gastro-anomy'; the loss of surety about food along with a loss of confidence in food skills. But there was help at hand and although TV chefs were not new the scale of interest in them was. In 1982 Delia Smith published her *Complete Cookery Course* (which has sold over 21 million copies) and Madhur Jaffrey her book *Indian Cooking*. Both became household names, with Delia (who has an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary) providing supportive guidance for those wanting to cook traditional meals, and Jaffrey's books capturing a moment of transition in terms of the popularity of Indian food. British food was on the cusp of a transition from the familiar to the 'fusion'. Quite a contrast to the structured and routine meals that characterised the daily diets of men and women living in the UK at the end of the second world war.

From Memories to Menus – The 1945 Food Diaries

5.1 A second source of food data kept by MOA are records of food eaten for two weeks; one week in the winter of 1944 and one week in the spring of 1945. The content of these food diaries would indicate that B58F's recollections were not unusual. Breakfast would likely be tea, bread and margarine, or tea and toast and/or cereal and occasionally fruit. Eleven's would be a hot drink. Dinner (not lunch) was most likely to be meat or fish accompanied by vegetables and followed by a hot pudding. Tea and cake would be had in the afternoon. A supper of toast, warmed up food, cold meat or simply a biscuit with a hot drink would be taken in the evening. Below are two extracts from winter and spring food diaries reproduced verbatim.

Sunday 25th Feb 1945 (hol.1) F
Breakfast: Cereal, scrambled (dried) egg. Bread & butter, stewed apple
Dinner: Roast leg mutton, Yorkshire pudding, cauliflower, roast potatoes, Apple pastry
Tea: Tea and cake
Supper: cheese pastry, Oxo, Hot milk

Wednesday 28th February
Breakfast: Cereal with hot milk, fried sausages & bread, toast, butter & marmalade
Dinner: Stew & boiled potatoes. Jam tart
Tea: Bread & butter and cheese. Cake
Supper: Roll, butter & grated carrot. Oxo to drink

Sunday 15th April 1945 (hol.1) F
Breakfast: Sausages, toast & marmalade stewed gooseberries & cornflakes
Dinner: Roast mutton, Yorkshire pudding, cauliflower, roast potatoes, Lemon curd tart.
Coffee
Tea: Tea and cakes
Supper: Sausage rolls, buns Oxo, Hot milk

Wednesday 18th April
Breakfast: Cornflakes, (dry) Fried bread and dried egg & bacon. Bread, toast, butter & marmalade. Stewed prunes
Dinner: Stewed mutton, parsnips, leek, & boiled potatoes. Stewed prune custard
Tea: Bread & butter and cheese. Cake
Supper: Sausage roll, buns. Oxo to drink Hot milk

5.2 These data record a series of 'proper meals' - savory main course and pudding –as described by Murcott (1982) and Kerr and Charles (1988) in their studies of food and families undertaken in the early 1980s. The regular and structured patterning corresponds to Mary Douglas' (1975) thesis set out in her famous paper 'Deciphering a Meal'. There are echoes too of Howard Newby's classic observational study of a rural family in Suffolk in the 1970s.

'Variations in this diet were minimal. The types and cuts of meat obviously varied from day to day; potatoes might be boiled, mashed or fried, toppings and fillings altered. But there was no ethnic food – no pizzas, pastas, boiled rice, curries etc and no changes in culinary style. [...] Indeed it was a regimen that was entirely familiar to me from my own upbringing in a Midlands city during the 1950s'. (Newby, 1983: 33)

Structure and regularity were clearly important. If we return to B58F's account we find further evidence of this.

The food of my childhood was four slices of bread and marg. or bread and jam without the marg. for both breakfast and tea. At lunchtime we had (it was called dinner) a main meal. We had a roast on Sunday, cold meat on Monday, mince on Tuesday, sausages on Wed, mutton stew on Thursdays, boiled beef occasionally, the odd rabbit bought straight from a poacher at about 1/6d which my step mother had to skin. We lived in a rural area and I don't recall ever having much fish. Eggs were rare and I never got one anyway... Vegetables were of the kind that my dad grew in the garden. Cabbage, carrots, brussel sprouts, and marrow (which I hated but had to eat anyway) I don't remember having cauliflower but we certainly grew our own lettuces and radishes and tomatoes, gooseberries and blackcurrants [sic] and rhubarb. Potatoes too. I don't recall anyone ever buying any vegetables. Puddings were bread and butter, trifle, suet duff and stewed fruit. Tins hardly ever put in an appearance but we did have

sardines, rice, and the occasional tin of salmon for special occasions. We didn't supper though my father often ate his dinner late in the evening as he was a bus driver and did shifts.

5.3 Perhaps most striking, given this was a time of austerity and rationing, was how well the diarists seemed to eat; roast dinners and on subsequent days cold meats and almost invariably puddings, cakes and hot drinks. The middle class are, as we have noted above, over represented in the Mass Observation Project and so what we have here is an insight into the eating practices of the comfortably off. Nevertheless the daily menus of 1945 and memories recorded in 1982 do not simply communicate what people ate, liked and disliked but, as we argue above they reveal something about two contrasting moments of British history; the end of the second world war and an era of transition, reform, individualization, diversity which was taking place in the early 1980s.

Concluding Discussion

6.1 We have explored two sets of data from two historical junctures - 1982 and 1945. These food narratives serve as interpretive devices whereby people reveal things about themselves, their beliefs, ambitions, hopes, and so on. The accounts, although personal, mesh with the public; taken together these data comprise a component of a historically embedded collective biography (Mills, 1959:6). Writing on memory and the body, Bryan Turner (1995) crafts the argument that personal memories are inherently collective. He writes:

The issue, from a sociological perspective, is that time is a social and collective experience. My memory of my past depends on a social network of shared experiences which are reinforced, changed or lost through the process of interaction with my own and other generations. (Turner, 1995: 253)

6.2 The somatic aspect of our topic may well be important. What is common to the material we have here is that it speaks on food, something which Simmel (1997 [1910]) famously pointed out is utterly individual precisely because of its 'universal nature'. Although we may have limited contextual data on the correspondents' lives we do know that each and every one of them shares a commonality; they all eat. According to Simmel herein lies the powerful sociological significance of eating and drinking, as he wrote in his famous essay - 'Sociology of the Meal' - 'in a remarkable way, is the most egotistical thing, indeed the one most absolutely and immediately confined to the individual,' and yet, paradoxically for this very reason it becomes a practice that is also common to everyone.

'Yet because this primitive physiological fact is an absolutely general one, it does indeed become the substance of common actions. The sociological structure of the meal emerges, which links precisely the exclusive selfishness of eating with a frequency of being together, with a habit of being gathered together such as is seldom attainable on occasions of a higher intellectual order. Persons who in no way share any special interest can gather together at the common meal – in this possibility, associated with the primitiveness and hence universal nature of material interest, there lies the immeasurable sociological significance of the meal.' (Simmel, 1997 [1910]: 130)

6.3 Arguably given the commonality of eating the 'slices of life' taken from the MOA disclose how food and eating appears to be inextricably interwoven into the texture of people's social relations, life course and social positions. The fulsome responses are perhaps hardly surprising given older people are overrepresented in the cohort and they may welcome the opportunity to reminisce about food, but the accounts do furnish us with data that is of 'universal interest' and there are some themes which emerge from the responses overall which, to use Counihan's phrase again, 'absorb' and reflect attitudes, beliefs and practices about food in 1982 and the social relations that accompany them.

6.4 It is for this reason that we posit that the MOA data have a sociological and conceptual validity; it may be 'messy' by contemporary research standards but precisely for this reason it captures the mess (Law, 2004). In this paper we have examined data written in hand on scraps of paper, on pages of exercise books, or typed on A4 sheets. Today other technologies are available to canvas people's views for example, participants could be encouraged to correspond via email (see Burns, (2010) for a fuller discussion). Our data comprises ordinary men and women's reflections on food and we also draw on the food memories of the celebrity chef Nigel Slater because of the way his autobiography reveals something of the social context of his childhood and because it captures the public's imagination. As Savage (2010) has argued in his excellent treatise on the history of the social sciences in the UK, there has been a tendency for social science to demarcate from the humanities and this is to the detriment of an adequate appreciation of the nature of change at the mundane level of everyday life.

6.5 We suggest therefore that food provides a crucial and potentially overlooked medium for developing an appreciation of social change. Personal food narratives provide ideal opportunities for generating data on collective experiences, cultural repertoires, generational memories, and tensions between cohorts. Food narratives are embodied and embedded in social networks, socio-cultural contexts and socio-economic epochs. The daily menus of 1945 and memories recorded in 1982 do not simply communicate what people ate, liked and disliked, but are markers of two contrasting moments of British history; the end of the Second World War and an era of transition, reform, individualization, diversity which was taking place in the early 1980s.

6.6 This suggests that an exploration of the food narratives of people from more diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, geographical and social mobility could have the potential to illuminate features of social change. The extant literature on food and social change is relatively small, and has perhaps not received the attention it warrants, but what there is does appear to confirm our thesis. At the

outset of this paper we cited Counihan (1999) who argued that food serves as 'prism' in that it both soaks up and mirrors socio-cultural contexts. This she concluded from her anthropological study based on interviews with 15 Florentine women from one extended family, their ages ranging from 12-66 during the early 1980s. Her findings reveal that the younger women's positioning as paid workers conflicted with their traditional control over the provisioning of food and all that symbolically accompanies the feeding of a family. Women, she found, were losing the manipulative power of food; cooking meals and providing good food was critical to their identity and yet it was not practicable when combining paid work and childcare. What is important for our argument here is that the organization of food and eating is both shaped by the shifting nature of social relations, and is also imbued with meanings which are rooted in the practices and perhaps more powerfully, in the imaginings of, the past. Furthermore, as Counihan (1999: 48) points out: 'Because food is such a gripping need day in and day out, it takes on an additional social and symbolic significance.' 'Good food' was also something that the two generations of women interviewed by Blaxter and Paterson (1983) felt was important for sustaining their families. For the older generation this usually meant meat and soups, however for the younger interviewees it was associated with milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables. For the older generation 'good food' was what they had eaten in their childhood – which as the authors point out is ironic given they grew up in an era of austerity, although as our data indicates meals of that era were not insubstantial. But of course memories of food eating are invariably nostalgic reminiscences.

6.7 Nostalgia can have implications of a yearning for remembrances of an idealized past. Furthermore personal food narratives may be infused with contemporary social representations of a mythical past. Surely this is not what the robust social scientist seeks to uncover. But this would be to miss the point. We contend that reminiscences of food invariably summon accounts of familial and social relationships, experiences of home, work, and leisure and invoke emotions and sensorial recollections. Personal food narratives are permeated by these social dimensions and however personal, unique and partial they provide valuable insights into social change.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [RES-061-25-0307]. Thank you also to Sarah Shrive-Morrison for her help with the data processing.

References

- ABBOTT, A. (2003) 'La Description Face a la Temporalité', in G. Blundo and J-P Olivier de Sardan (eds), *Enquete: Pratiques de la Description*, Editions de l'EHESS: Paris, pp. 41-53.
- BYRNE, D. (2002) *Interpreting Quantitative Data*, London: Sage.
- ABRAMS, M. (1951) *Social Surveys and Social Action*, London: Heinemann.
- ATKINSON, P. (1983) 'Eating Virtue', in A. Murcott (ed.) *The Sociology of Food and Eating. Essays on the Sociological Significance of Food*, Aldershot: Gower.
- BHATTI, M. and Church, A. (2001) Cultivating Natures: Homes and Gardens in Late Modernity , *Sociology* .
- BLAXTER, M. and Patterson, E. (1983) 'The goodness is out of it' in A. Murcott (ed) *The Sociology of Food and Eating*, Aldershot: Gower Press.
- BLOOME, B. Sheridan, D. and Street, B. (1993) Reading Mass-Observation Writing: theoretical and methodological issues in researching the mass-observation archive, *Mass-Observation Archive Occasional Paper* No. 1, University of Sussex Library.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* , London: Routledge.
- BURNS, E. (2010) Developing Email Interview Practices in Qualitative Research *Sociological Research Online* 15 (4) 8
- BUSBY, H. (2000) 'Writing about Health and Sickness: An Analysis of Contemporary Autobiographical Writing from the British Mass-Observation Archive' *Sociological Research Online*, 5, 2. [doi:10.5153/sro.480]
- CHARLES, N. and Kerr, M (1988) *Women, Food and Families*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- COUNIHAN, C. (1999) *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, London: Routledge.
- DOUGLAS, M. (1975) Deciphering a Meal in M. Douglas (ed) *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, London, Routledge.
- FISCHLER, C. (1980) Food habits, social change and the nature/culture dilemma *Social Science Information*, 19 (6) 937- 53. [doi:10.1177/053901848001900603]
- FISCHLER, C. (1988) Food, Self and Identity *Social Science Information*, 27 (2) 275-92.

- HARVEY, M., S. Quilley and H. Beynon (2002) *Exploring the Tomato, Transformations of Nature, Society and Economy*, Edward Elgar.
- HEATON, J. (2004) *Reworking Qualitative Data*, London: Sage.
- HUBBLE, N. (2005) *Mass Observation and Everyday Life: Theory, Culture, History*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. [doi:10.1057/9780230503144]
- LAW, J. (2004) *After Method: Mess in social science research*, London: Routledge.
- LAWLER, S. (2002) 'Narrative in Social Research'. In T. May (Ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Sage. pp. 242-258.
- MILLS, C. W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press: London.
- MINTZ, S. W. (1985) *Sweetness and Power: The place of sugar in modern history* New York: Penguin
- MURCOTT, A. (1982) On the Social Significance of the "cooked dinner" in South Wales *Social Science Information*, 21 677-696
- NEWBY, H. (1983) Living from Hand to Mouth: The farmworker, food and agribusiness in A. Murcott (ed) *The Sociology of Food and Eating*, Aldershot: Gower Press.
- SAVAGE, M. (2007) Changing Social Class Identities in Post-war Britain: Perspectives from mass observation *Sociological Research Online* , 12 (3)
- SAVAGE, M. (2008) Affluence and Social Change in the Marking of Technocratic Middle-class Identities: Britain 1939-55 *Contemporary British History*, 22 (4) 457- 476 [doi:10.1080/13619460802439366]
- SAVAGE, M. (2010) *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- SHERIDAN, D. (1993) Writing to the Archive: Mass observation as autobiography *Sociology*, 27 1 27-40
- SIMMEL, G. (1997 [1910]) Sociology of the Meal in D. Frisby and M/ Featherstone (Eds) *Simmel on Culture*, London: Sage.
- SLATER, N. (2003) *Toast: The story of a boy's hunger*, London: Haper Perennial
- SMART, C. (2009) Shifting Horizons: Reflections on qualitative methods *Feminist Theory*, 10 (3) 295-308 [doi:10.1177/1464700109343253]
- STANLEY, L. (1996) Mass-Observations's 'Little Kinsey' and the British sex survey tradition in J. Weeks and J. Holland (Editors) *Sexual Cultures*, London: Macmillan.
- TURNER, B. S. (1995) Aging and Identity: Some reflections on the somatization of the self in M. Featherstone and A. Wernick (eds) *Images of Aging: Cultural representations of later life*, London: Routledge.
- WARDE, A. (1997) *Consumption Food and Taste*, London: Sage
- WRIGLEY, N. (1998) How British retailers have shaped food choice in A. Murcott (eds) *The Nation's Diet: The social science of food choice*, London: Longman