

**‘If the food looks dodgy I dinnae eat it’: Teenagers’ accounts of food and eating practices in socio-economically disadvantaged families**

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## **‘If the food looks dodgy I dinnae eat it’: Teenagers’ accounts of food and eating practices in socio-economically disadvantaged families**

### Abstract

This paper examines how young teenagers living in socio-economically disadvantaged families perceive everyday food and eating practices within the home. From in-depth interviews with 36 Scottish teenagers aged 13-14 years, we analysed teenagers’ accounts of contemporary ‘family meals’. We found that food and eating practices were negotiated amidst complex family arrangements with extended, resident and non-resident kin. Parents were often reported to provide food ‘on demand’, a flexible arrangement which seemed to reflect both teenagers’ and parents’ lifestyles and personal relationships. Teenagers often contested the consumption of particular foods which sometimes reflected and reinforced their relationship with a biological or non-biological parent. Teenagers could differentiate themselves from others through their food preferences and tastes and food consumption therefore helped shaped their identity. Many teenagers claimed that parents set rules regarding food and eating, thereby creating boundaries within which their consumption choices had to remain. We discuss whether and how these findings are a reflection of the socio-economic status of the participating families and conclude that exploring food and eating practices is a powerful lens for the examination of family life.

Key words: teenagers; food and eating practices; family meals; socio-economic disadvantage; consumption; family relationships.

## Introduction

Mealtime habits and routines have undergone a transformation in post-modern societies. There has been an increase in the number of meals and snacks eaten outside the home (Devine et al. 2006) and a proliferation of ready-meals and other foods that 'make it relatively easy for anyone, regardless of culinary skill, to get a meal' (Warde and Hetherington, 1994:772). Despite this shift, domestic provision of food remains a central element of household organisation. The meaning of food eaten by families (in whatever form they take) undoubtedly goes beyond its nutritional or functional sense. The preparation and serving of food in families has both social and cultural significance (Mintz and Du Bois 2002), creating social order (Caplan 1997) and bounded routines (similar foods served each week, for example) (Douglas 1975). This can act to strengthen family identity (Charles and Kerr 1988; Counihan 1988; Devault 1991; Warde and Hetherington 1994; Valentine 1999) by connecting individuals and reinforcing bonds (Wright-St Clair et al. 2005). 'Family food' can, then, signify belonging and, indeed, the metaphorical family table is often considered an important site for the creation of family identities (Valentine 1999). Personal identities are, however, also likely be shaped and reflected through the consumption of food (Mintz 1985; Wright-St Clair et al. 2005). The consumption of food within the family home may, therefore, draw attention to divisions and the nature of reflexive relationships (Williams and Williams 2005) between parents and their teenage children as the latter attempt to construct identities which are less dependent on family (food) norms and rituals.

Several studies have investigated kinship and the ways that food is negotiated and provided within families (Murcott 1982; Charles and Kerr 1988; Devault 1991; Lupton 1994). The children of adults involved in such studies tend to be fairly young, which means meal time processes connected with other family life course phases remain obscured (Beardsworth and Keil 1990). The young children of adults participating in such studies are often perceived as being the passive receivers of food, or food/eating practices are described in terms of, for example, socialising children to be well-mannered at the dinner table (Charles and Kerr 1988). A notable exception is Grieshaber's (Grieshaber 1997) Australian study. Participant children, some as young as 4 years old, were described as agents of resistance during family mealtimes, as they were *active* participants in the process of determining what was eaten (or contested) by the whole family. Carrigan also notes the agency of children in determining family food practices although the age of the children in the participating families is not reported (Carrigan 2006).

There has been some movement towards giving older children and young people a voice in research on food and eating. This has occurred, partly, because of new theoretical directions arising from the new social studies of childhood whereby children are seen as expert actors in their own social worlds (Christensen and James 2000; James and James 2004). It is worth noting, however, that in order for children to be studied as entities in their own right, their everyday worlds can only be made sense of when looked at in relation to 'others' – family or friends, for example (Eckert 2004).

This praxis is reflected in several British studies of domestic food and eating practices. These have included older children and teenagers and offer a valuable insight into families at a later period of the life course, when the process of providing 'family food' is likely to be different, when compared to families with younger children (Devine et al 2006). Valentine's research (Valentine 1999) involved case study families in order to examine identity formation through the spatial dynamics of cooking and eating, whereas Brannen et al. (Brannen et al. 1994) interviewed 15-17 year olds and their parents to explore the role of the family in the production of everyday behaviours. Eldridge and Murcott (Eldridge and Murcott 2000) report findings from two case study families to explore parental influence in the family dietary arena; they note that not only were family lives extremely complex, but so too were the negotiations and contestations of food between parents and young teenagers. As Eldridge and Murcott acknowledged, however, they were only able to touch on the previously uncharted area of teenagers' perceptions of family food and eating practices and it is this issue that we examine in greater depth in this paper.

Giddens (Giddens 1991) has argued that contemporary families are characterised by a sense of democratisation, whereby parental authority and childhood autonomy in the family setting are regularly (re)negotiated and (re)constructed over time, rather than parents relying on 'traditional', perhaps authoritarian, values whereby children 'do as they are told'. Others have pointed out that although children, inevitably, have an unequal relationship with their parents (Jamieson 1999), power within families has to be reassessed during the period when children become teenagers, in order for them to feel that parents acknowledge their growing need for autonomy and their changing self-identity (Solomon et al. 2002). Williams and Williams (2005) refer to this as

'reflexive monitoring' within families. Many parents may be willing to renegotiate the boundaries set for children, to make them more appropriate for a particular life course stage (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004) and children often interpret rules and boundaries as evidence of a parent's care and support (Allatt 1996; Solomon et al. 2002). They are therefore often likely to accept parental rules, as long as they are considered appropriate and not 'out of date' (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004). However, despite young peoples' ability to negotiate autonomy within the family, Allatt has argued that parents remain the 'archivists of identity' (Allatt 1996:135) because teenagers are only able to contest or define their autonomy to the extent that parents will allow.

One factor that seems to underpin food provision in families is socio-economic status. Studies have found that socio-economically disadvantaged families eat a less 'healthy' diet than their peers from middle class families (Shaw et al. 2000; Sproston and Primatesta 2003) with family income (Dowler and Calvert 1995; Grieshaber 1997) and parental employment (Devine et al 2006) influencing what food is consumed in these homes. Some studies have suggested, however, that children from lower social class groups do not perceive that their lives are affected by a lack of material resources (Backett-Milburn et al. 2003) and some low income parents have a desire to provide a 'good quality' or healthy diet for their children (Dowler and Calvert, 1995) despite their lack of available wealth. A straightforward polarisation of healthy/unhealthy food choices by different social groups therefore masks the everyday reality of what it means to live in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances.

This paper draws on some of the findings from a 2 year qualitative study involving young teenagers (aged 13-14 years) and their parents living in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances. Our broad aim was to explore young teenagers' dietary worlds, looking at the social influences that emerged from participants' narratives about everyday food and eating practices and some of these findings have already been reported (Wills et al. 2005; Backett-Milburn et al. 2006; Wills et al. 2006). We found that the family home was a common site of food consumption, therefore we concentrate here on exploring teenagers' accounts of contemporary 'family meals'; the contesting of family relationships through eating/refusing food; and young teenagers' perceptions of parental control of their food practices within the home.

#### The research project

We explored young teenagers' perceptions of their dietary worlds using a qualitative approach. In-depth, narrative interviews were used to enable participants to give a full account of their everyday lives and to present their own meanings and understandings about food and eating. This approach also meant that data analysis and interpretation were guided by the experiences of the study participants (Britten et al. 1995).

The decision to focus on young teenagers from socio-economically disadvantaged families was taken because they continue to be the focus of many policy targets for reducing inequalities in health (Scottish Executive 2004; Department of Health 2005). These inequalities can partly be accounted for by the consumption of an 'unhealthy' diet (Shaw et al. 2000; Sproston and Primatesta 2003) and yet very little is known about how socio-economic disadvantage is experienced by young teenagers, in terms

of what factors influence their food and eating practices. We contacted schools and youth groups in areas of Eastern Scotland classified by the Breadline Britain Index as being socio-economically disadvantaged (Gordon and Forrest 1995). The research protocol was sent to each local education authority and ethical approval was received prior to members of the research team visiting three secondary schools. Double consent was sought, whereby parents were asked to notify the school if they did not wish their child to participate, and each young person was asked to give their own written consent before taking part in the study. The research team spent time explaining the research to each class and participants were reassured they could withdraw from the research at any stage; this was especially important given the pressure sometimes exerted by peers and also teachers when research is conducted in the school setting. A brief screening questionnaire was administered (Wills et al. 2005) to second and third year pupils at each school, the majority of whom were aged 13 or 14 years. Questionnaires were also administered via three youth groups. As it was not appropriate to obtain parental consent in this setting, ethical issues were discussed with each group leader before the study commenced and the research team spoke to young people about the research before obtaining their written consent to participate.

Thirty-six young teenagers were selected for interview – 18 boys and 18 girls. All participants were white Scottish, reflecting the ethnic make-up of the schools we visited. The socio-demographic information provided on the questionnaire was used to select participants (we chose individuals living in the most deprived postcode sectors; we also considered household composition; parental occupation/s and whether the family had use of a car). Individual interviews were carried out in

participants' homes. Although a parent, guardian or older sibling was usually in the house when interviews took place, all interviews were conducted in private. Participants were asked to talk about the previous day, if this was a week-day or the last time they went to school, if it was not. They were also asked to talk about Saturdays, Sundays and other non-school days (e.g. holidays). Each participant was prompted to recall, in as much detail as possible, what they did on a daily basis, including all food consumption and food-related practices. They were asked who they were with when eating and where they were at the time. Throughout the interviews young people were encouraged to reflect on their own food/eating practices in relation to the tastes, habits and practices of their family and friends. Interviews lasted approximately 1-hour and were tape-recorded with participants' consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

All members of the research team had a role in analysing the data. Throughout the analysis, selected transcripts were read by each member, along with field notes and interview summaries written by the interviewer. Emerging general and thematic concepts were noted independently. Regular team meetings were held to discuss the recurrent themes and any accounts that did not fit with the emerging thematic framework (Boyatzis 1998). The analysis proceeded until the team felt that each broad theme had been fully considered and defined, with continual reference to the original transcripts. Analysis then focused on each broad theme that had emerged, with each team member independently considering finer, sub-themes. These were discussed as a team until consensus was reached. QSR NUD\*IST, a qualitative data-indexing package was used for data coding and retrieval. Names used throughout the paper are pseudonyms. Interview extracts are included here without any 'editing out'

of young people's Scottish dialects, to ensure that participant's accounts are accurately reproduced, as told to the (English) interviewer.

### Findings

The young teenagers sometimes had complex home lives, reflecting family trends as a whole in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2005). Half the teenagers were living with both their biological parents; a quarter was living in a stepfamily (and most of these individuals did not have contact with their non-resident parent). Of the remaining teenagers, 3 lived with their mother, whilst 6 lived with their grandparents (in one of these households, the boy's mother also lived there). Family breakdown or estrangement, the death of a parent, teenage health problems and overcrowding were all reported as preceding residence with grandparents. Overall, about half of young people not living with their father had some contact with him. Sometimes these fathers had re-partnered and had further children. We discuss the nature and structure of these young people's families throughout the paper as this related to and had an impact on their daily food and eating practices. Most fathers or stepfathers who were living with, or in contact with, our participants were working. About two thirds of mothers were also in some kind of paid (usually low-paid) employment.

### Contemporary 'family meals'

Given the complexity of family arrangements that young people described, it is perhaps not surprising that food eaten within the family home was bounded by, and negotiated around, everyday living arrangements and the timetables of parent/s, siblings, grandparents and other family members. However, about half the participating teenagers reported that they always, or nearly always, ate at the same

time, and in the same room, as the rest of their family. Warde (Warde 1997) reported a similar finding from households containing teenagers thereby challenging the myth that the family meal is in decline. In our study, communal meals were eaten at a table by many of the participants, although not all families were described as owning or using a table which could accommodate all family members. Although television was often watched whilst food was eaten communally, a minority of families, like Amanda's, used the time to catch up. She explained that: '[we talk about] holidays and what we are going to be doing, like not to make plans for certain days because we are going [out]'.

Half the participating teenagers said they never, or rarely, ate a meal with the rest of their family. Their accounts suggested this was a reflection of both their own lifestyles and those of their parent(s). A minority of young teenagers said they ate alone, or with siblings, because one or both parents were at work when they had a meal after school. Adam, for example, who was supervised by his grandmother after school (though she did not eat with him), said that: 'my Mum leaves me out stuff in the morning and my Gran cooks it, because my Mum and Dad is working'. These parents would then eat together later on. As Lewis explained: 'my Mum usually makes our [dinner], then she makes hers while we're eatin' oors'.

A number of teenagers said they ate the food that parents prepared, but not in the same room as other family members. They ate in their bedroom when they wanted some 'peace to myself' (Vicky) or, more typically, because they had a friend visiting or were 'doing something', for example:

Jeremy: 'em, usually we eat at the table on Sundays, the rest of the time well, just here [in the living room]...It depends, you know, if I'm doing something in my room I'll just have my tea up there but if I'm down here anyway, I just have my tea...well, down here'

Interviewer: 'how often do you think you have your tea with your Mum and Dad?'

Jeremy: 'about, oh, definitely twice a week and then the rest of the time is varied.'

Robyn split her time between staying with her mother and with her father and she reported a different mealtime arrangement in each of her family homes. When at home with her mother, younger siblings and her mother's boyfriend she managed to eat different food, at different times and in a different room to the rest of the family. When with her father, stepmother and stepsiblings, however, she said she was expected to sit at the table and eat with other family members, who used this time together to talk and catch up, much to Robyn's annoyance:

'I dinnae usually talk, I just eat, there is no need for talking when you're eating...if they ask me questions, I give them one word answers'.

Many teenagers described how parents provided meals 'on demand' to fit around their social activities (for example, because they had arranged to meet up with friends or were attending a youth club) and to cater for their particular food preferences. Parents were usually reported as being willing to react, at short notice when necessary, to a teenager's request for food. Moreover, in some families, teenagers said that several

meals were prepared to cater for different tastes and preferences (a view corroborated by parents, who were interviewed in a companion study (Backett-Milburn et al. 2006). If a meal was cooked which young people did not like, parents were sometimes willing to cook something different for them, and also for their siblings. In families with several children, this sometimes amounted to a different meal for each family member. 'Traditional' meals (for example, homemade soups or meals with 'tatties' or potatoes) were often the type of meals rejected by teenagers. Whether this flexibility in mealtime arrangements is a function of the socio-economically disadvantaged status of our participating families is analysed further in the discussion section of the paper.

It was noticeable that the third of participants who stated they ate regularly with their grandparents (not just those who were resident with grandparents) ate whatever food was provided (including 'traditional' meals) and at whatever time it was cooked. Several teenagers who regularly ate with their grandparents said they followed their grandparents' routine of eating breakfast whereas they would never eat this meal when in the parental home. From these participants' accounts, it appeared that a change in overall routine was responsible for the different food practices reported. These young teenagers had more time to eat breakfast when visiting grandparents because they were not rushing to meet up with friends. Todd, for example, said he never ate breakfast at home, but, when staying with his grandparents (one or two nights each week) he always ate this meal. He said:

‘When I’m at their [house], I don’t really go outside a lot but when I’m here [at home] I do and like I’d want to get out quick, because everybody’s out. And at ma Gran’s I don’t know when they’re out, so I don’t bother.’

These teenagers were also more willing, however, to accept that their grandparents expected them to eat breakfast and were happy to go along with being ‘told’ what to eat, in a way they often found unacceptable when in the parental home. We return to this theme in the discussion section.

There were some instances when young people were directly involved in the preparation of food and this gave them the opportunity to prepare the food that they preferred. Half the participants ate differently to their family by preparing food for themselves on some occasions. In families where parents were separated, visiting non-resident fathers offered some teenagers opportunities not available in their ‘other’ home, such as cooking and experimenting with food, trying a wider range of food and eating out in restaurants. Most of the teenagers who prepared their own meals, though, appeared to value this less because of enjoyment of cooking and more because they were not being tied to set family meals or meal times. These participants routinely made sandwiches, heated up tinned food or microwave meals, or prepared instant-noodles or ‘cheesy pasta’ (a particularly common dish eaten by these teenagers), so that they could go out to see friends or take part in other activities, as the following exchange illustrates:

Interviewer: ‘And what do you normally have for your tea?’

Caroline: 'em it just depends what's in the fridge eh? So it's usually a snack 'cause I'm quite a snacker eh. I dinnae really like big teas'

Interviewer: 'yeah? So what sort of thing?

Caroline: 'em like a sausage roll, ken [tinned] spaghetti or something, just something like that, I might have a sausage roll or a piece [sandwich] eh, before I went out.'

A minority of young teenagers had no choice about preparing their food independently of their family as their parents were not at home or were not prepared to cook for them. These findings suggest that young teenagers' domestic food and eating practices acted as a mirror, within which modern families' lives were reflected. Further exploration of the data revealed that inter-familial relationships were also reflected and reinforced in the contested consumption of particular foods.

#### Contested food and negotiated identities

The sociological literature has suggested that younger children contest some foods offered in the family setting (Charles and Kerr 1988; Grieshaber 1997) and our findings suggest that this continues into adolescence. Younger children's refusal of some foods is often explained by 'fussiness' and difficulty in accepting novel foods (Birch 1980) and a minority of teenagers explicitly reported their dislike of trying new foods items. Some foodstuffs appeared to be the subject of argument between parents and young teenagers more than others. For example, most teenagers contested eating vegetables - whilst parents frequently tried to encourage them to eat vegetables and salad, very few young teenagers said they were willing to accept the challenge to 'eat

their greens'. Neil, for example, who said peas were the only vegetable he liked (but only 'small ones'), qualified his narrative about vegetable eating as follows:

Neil: 'If the food looks dodgy, I dinnae eat it... [Mum] tries to make me sometimes, if she's haeing [having] green beans or that. She'll put a couple on my plate'

Interviewer: 'Do you eat them?'

Neil: 'Nah'

All the teenagers in the study were aware of the similarities and differences between their own and their parents' or siblings' food preferences. Declaring different or similar food tastes allowed young people to define themselves in relation to other family members; food consumption offered a way for young people to 'try out' different identities (Wills, 2005). Food preferences also sometimes reflected specific relationships within the family, bonds with non-biological parents or step siblings versus bonds with a resident or biological parent, for example. The following cases illustrate these points.

Joanna lived with her mother and stepfather and described a close relationship with both of them, frequently calling her stepfather 'Dad' during her interview. This triadic bond was disturbed, however, when her stepfather's two young daughters visited every second weekend, disrupting mealtime routines. When her stepsiblings were not visiting, Joanna either ate alone in her bedroom or at the dining table, with her parents. When her stepsisters were present she was expected to eat with the younger girls – either at the dining table or in her bedroom. Her parents ate alone, later in the

evening on these occasions, though this was partly because of a lack of space for five people to eat together ('cause we'd need an extra seat or they're on the floor'). The family routine was upset further because, whilst Joanna's mother usually cooked most of the family's meals, her husband took responsibility for cooking when the two younger children were staying. He usually cooked a dish referred to in the family as 'Dad's pasta' which Joanna did not like, though she would eat pasta when prepared by her mother, when her stepsiblings were not present. Visits by the two younger girls disturbed Joanna's life as an 'only child' but this also led her to reflect on her own food tastes (as the older sister), in relation to theirs (as the younger siblings), as the following exchange illustrates:

Interviewer: Apart from... your Dad's pasta, is there anything that Shona and Fiona like that you... you know, do they eat sort of similarly to you?

Joanna: Nuh, they... they dinny seem to like any'hin', every'hin'... like I like quite a lot compared to what they like, 'cause it's like when my Mum is makin' some'hin' "Fiona, Shona, do you like this? Do you like this? Do you like this?" 'cause they've got different views. [...]

Interviewer: Right, so they're fussier than you?

Joanna: Mmhmm, they just... before when I was younger I was a bit picky and I just used to eat a quarter o' my plate...but over the last couple o' months I've been eatin' every'hin'.

Jodie also described a close relationship with her mother during her interview, but she appeared to suggest that her stepfather, even though he had been in their lives since she was much younger, was still an 'outsider' to their dyadic relationship. This was

illustrated when Jodie said her stepfather ate ‘disgusting concoctions’ of food whilst her mother ‘had taste’ because she liked the same foods as Jodie did. She gave several examples of foods she and her mother would never eat (see interview extract, below) but which her stepfather liked, and said about herself and her mother, ‘we have a lot in common together’.

Jodie: ‘So if my mum bought what she wanted George [Jodie’s stepfather] wouldnae be happy because he eats like mussels and crab [makes choking noise]...’ [...]

Interviewer: ‘So your mum doesn’t eat those things either?’

Jodie: ‘Oh no. She thinks it’s [makes choking noise].’

Occasionally a participant expressed a tense relationship with a biological parent through refusing to eat something they had cooked. Rebecca, for example, described both of her parents as being ‘different’ to her friend’s parents, because they held strict views about acceptable teenage behaviour. Rebecca said she liked her mother, however, with whom she shared a love of horse riding. She did not, she maintained, ‘know’ her father. She claimed to have a ‘Dad, can I have money’ relationship with him. This more distant bond between father and daughter seemed to be reflected in Rebecca’s dislike of the food her father cooked, compared with food cooked by her mother, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘Well ma mum, when she’s not working she usually cooks something but then when ma dad...he doesn’t cook what I like but he says that I’m a fussy eater but I’m not. Just what he makes I don’t like, like curries and chicken. I like

chicken but not the chicken he makes. I don't eat what he cooks. I just have a [baked] potato or a sandwich.'

Although young teenagers were sometimes able to manipulate the food they wanted to eat in the family home, teenagers' accounts of their daily dietary worlds also showed the limits of their own agency. We turn now to a discussion of the findings showing that young teenagers were not always able to take control over their own food choices because of parental rules and expectations.

#### Parental control of young teenagers' food choices

All young teenagers reported some instances of parental control of their food choices through rules and expectations or 'standards' of food and eating behaviour. The discussion that follows illustrates how these socio-economically disadvantaged parents kept control of their children's intakes of particular foods; but just as teenagers' identities were partly constructed and reflected in their food and eating practices, parents' relationships with their children often seemed to be reflected and reinforced through the food rules they set.

Rules were often illustrative of the unequal power relations between teenagers and parents, with children expected (and often happy) to adhere to the rules set by parents, regardless of whether they understood the basis for them. Few of the teenagers said that the rules regarding their consumption of specific foods had changed as they got older and younger siblings were described as having to respect the same rules about food as the teenagers. Most food rules within these socio-economically disadvantaged families were considered by the teenagers to be devised by parents to stop individuals

eating more than their 'fair share' of particular foods (often so that food lasted until the next food shopping trip). Carbonated drinks, sweets, crisps and biscuits were typically said to be restricted but a number of parents also placed restrictions on teenagers' consumption of milk, yogurt and fruit juice. A quarter of participants said they were not allowed to eat particular food or drink items because they were reserved for other members of the family. Vicky was typical of these participants when she talked about her Grandmother (with whom she lived):

Interviewer: 'So you don't get into trouble over anything, food wise?'

Vicky: 'Unless, if it's hers then and I take it then she'll give me a row'

Interviewer: 'What, does she have different food or...?'

Vicky: 'Sometimes she's got crisps or something, something hidden so that I canny get it or that'

Interviewer: 'Right. Does she do that very much, hiding stuff?'

Vicky: 'Sometimes, like if she's got [fizzy] juice or that and she wants to keep it for herself, then she'll make sure you don't take any of it.'

Notwithstanding young peoples' accounts suggesting that parents were willing to provide food 'on demand', none of the young teenagers in the study reported that parents regularly consulted them in advance about what food (or drink) they would like to consume. Many, however, volunteered information to parents about food items or brands they would like them to buy. These requests were sometimes ignored; thereby allowing parents to maintain overall control over the food brought into the house, though a variety of reasons for the food not being bought were proffered by young people, including cost and parents' forgetfulness:

‘I try an’ get them to like get pizzas or some’hin’, ken the [ones] I like, or these chicken burger ‘hings - my Dad an’ Leona [stepmother] really like chicken, so they get like chicken burgers... So I asked them ‘y get them but they can’t see them they said.’

Parents’ control of their young teenagers’ food and eating practices was reported as extending, in several cases, to trying to insist that certain foods/meals be eaten or that the television was turned off during meals. According to some teenagers, parents dictated where food could or could not be eaten; several participants said they were not allowed to eat in their bedroom, in front of the television or on the sofa, even if other family members (siblings and parents/grandparents) were allowed to do so. This was often reported to be because they were ‘too messy’ to be allowed these ‘privileges’. A minority of teenagers reported that they had to ask their parents before taking or preparing any food or drink at home. Jodie said, for example: ‘my mum disnae trust me. Even when I make a cup o’ tea, it’s like ‘watch that water!’’. Many teenagers also said parents would not allow them to eat before/after certain times in the day or to eat snacks before meals. Lorraine, for example, who was not allowed to eat sweets before 10am, was also not permitted to take snacks outside the house. She said:

‘We’re no meant ti take things like sweeties or that outside because, they [won’t] know how much we’re eating. Like my wee brother yesterday. I’m going ti get the biscuits, 2 biscuits out the biscuit box. And I went through the kitchen after him. He had 2 in his hand and one in his mouth. And he did it

earlier on today as well, but he was allowed the biscuits though [because] he was eating it in the kitchen.’

Iain was one of a number of teenagers who reported different ‘rules’ when he was spending time with a non-resident parent. Whilst his mother never bought take-away meals, his father did, though what Iain received was based on his father’s judgement of his behaviour:

‘There’s a Chinese takeaway just round the road from [my Dad’s] so...every second month I get one of them and every third month, which is the month after that, I get a fish supper but if I’ve done anything wrong I’ll lose it and I’ll sort of get something less like a bag of chips or just fried rice.’

### Discussion

Food preparation and eating are, often, mundane aspects of family life tied to the general family habitus (Williams 1995). As such, they provide a useful lens through which to view everyday practices of family life, from, in this instance, the perspective of young teenagers living in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances. As others before us have noted, what we like and what we eat are phenomena closely tied to the construction and negotiation of identity – individually and collectively within families (Murcott 1982; Mintz 1985; Counihan 1988; Devault 1991; Lupton 1994; Valentine 1999; Wright-St Clair et al. 2005). All the young teenagers in this study were recruited because of their socio-economically disadvantaged status; we have suggested that this may have had some impact on the negotiation of food in the home, not least by parents requesting that particular foods last until the next grocery

shopping trip or there not being a table available to accommodate family meals. Socio-economic status or, more specifically, the social class of parents perhaps underpinned parents' apparent willingness to accommodate their teenager's demands for 'different' food and also the type of foods available to teenagers at home. The unconscious logic which helped determine what food was consumed in families is an illustration of what Bourdieu refers to as distinctions of taste (Bourdieu 1984). These parental practices may, therefore, reflect the implicit values of 'being' of lower socio-economic status (Bottero and Irwin 2003). Whilst having a lower income influenced some of the choices made when buying food, it was the tacit, everyday values or habitus which shaped and (re)constructed practices and beliefs, so that distinctions of taste became embedded within everyday life. Allowing teenagers some autonomy over when, where and what they eat, whilst reflecting parental/child relationships, as we discuss later in this section, may also indicate that lower social class parents do not feel a need to rigidly shape their child's mealtimes, particularly as they become adolescents. These parenting practices may, again, illustrate some of the implicit values of *what it means* to be lower social class. Comparative evidence from less disadvantaged families would allow us to further shape these theoretical directions.

It was notable that many of the non-resident fathers were reported by their teenagers as providing a wider variety of food and meals outside the home, than their resident mothers or grandmothers. Young people have been found to make judgements about how family life changed after parents separate or divorce based on the economic changes that they perceive occurring (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). A change in parental wealth could account for our findings. However, the different food and eating

practices that young people reported post-divorce or family break-up provided an important 'way in' for exploring children's lives, to get at the emotional core (Neale and Flowerdew 2007) of family relationships after a period of change or instability rather than simply focusing on the structural changes families experienced. Fathers who only have to provide infrequent meals for their children may spend proportionately more money on such occasions, despite having a low income. Fathers who leave may also be making a determined effort to change the eating environment they provide for their children to differentiate their 'old' life from their new one (regardless of stability in, or change to, their socio-economic status) thereby constructing a different family identity through the creation of new food practices. This may depend somewhat on fathers' abilities to prepare and cook food.

Teenagers in the study reported here had gained some control over what they ate, where they ate it, the timing of food practices and who their companions were, but at the same time, parents, siblings and other members of the extended family helped shape those food and eating experiences, partly through their own attempts at negotiation and (family) identity construction. These experiences reflect intra- and inter-familial relationships, illustrating that contemporary families' lives are complex and built on the need for dynamic interactions between resident and non-resident kin. Whilst individuals are bound by the family habitus – the unconscious logic of practice which underpins everyday routines and behaviours (Bourdieu 1984) - young teenagers will attempt to differentiate their tastes from other family members in order to forge distinct identities. Allatt may be correct, however, when she asserts that parents are archivists of young peoples' identities (Allatt 1996) as our findings suggest teenagers can only create differentiated food and eating practices to the extent that parental

structures and norms within the family home allow them to. It seems, though, that rigid relationships, whether with a resident, non-resident, biological or step parent are sometimes reflected through young people's difficulties when exercising choice over the food that they eat (Wills et al. 2005; Neale and Flowerdew 2007). This may help to explain our finding that teenagers were more likely to accept the food served to them by their grandparents than by their parents, as grandparent/child relationships may be less rigid than parent/child relations. This warrants further exploration in future studies to ascertain what it is about eating with a grandparent that leads them to feel less inclined to make autonomous decisions about food on these occasions, and how respect for older family members interacts with their actions.

There is evidence to suggest that older teenagers (16+) and young adults negotiate their identities through the consumption or contestation of food provided at home (and elsewhere) (Wills 2005) but work with younger children has tended to focus on parental perspectives (Charles and Kerr 1988; Devault 1991). It is not possible, therefore, to determine whether food and eating practices act as a medium through which identity can be negotiated from an early age, or whether this process begins during adolescence – the period of the life course typically associated with a desire for greater autonomy (Miles et al. 1998). Older teenagers report considerable, explicit, negotiation with parents when trying to consume food which differentiates them from their younger self or from the eating practices of other family members (Wills 2005). The young teenagers in our study did not report 'bargaining' with parents over their food choices. Younger teenagers, then, may 'try out' attempts at re-defining their food and eating practices, becoming more practised at asserting their opinions as they move through adolescence. Parents, also, may be more willing to listen to, but also

question, young people as they move closer to being or ‘becoming’ an adult (James and James 2004).

Whilst some parental food rules were described by our teenage participants, these mainly related to what food could/could not be consumed (and where and when) and no different rules were voiced with regard to older or younger siblings. This is surprising given that other studies have highlighted that younger children are subject to an array of rules regarding food-related behaviour (Grieshaber 1997) and older and younger siblings have age-appropriate rules applied relating to a variety of everyday behaviours (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004). This may perhaps illustrate that food and eating are, generally, seen as relatively mundane behaviours and, as such, most rules relating to them are an implicit, taken-for-granted aspect of the family habitus. This therefore renders it difficult for young teenagers to articulate or acknowledge that the rules had changed as they got older. Given the age of our participants, it is also likely that other aspects of teenage behaviour concerned parents more than what food was being consumed at home. Food and eating practices could, therefore, be considered ‘safe’ or stable and not requiring monitoring (Backett-Milburn et al. 2006).

### Conclusion

What young teenagers eat or refuse to eat and their desire to eat alone or with others is the outcome of ongoing negotiation with parents, grandparents and siblings and also the pragmatics of modern family living. Teenager’s food ‘choices’ helped to construct and create their identities, reflecting and reinforcing relationships with other family members. Our qualitative approach, whilst focusing solely on teenagers’ accounts,

meant that the meanings which young people attached to everyday food and eating practices in the family setting could be adequately explored. By exploring food and eating practices we found a lens through which everyday family life and emotional kinship relations could be examined and explored. There is considerable scope for further exploration of, for example, different family forms and children's relationships with their grandparents, through research which asks the question 'what do you eat?' Bourdieu's concept of habitus remains useful in that it frames the analysis of young teenagers within the context of an accumulated family history, providing the 'structuring structure' for further analysis of our own and others' data.

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