

MEALS AND FOOD CHOICE: MEALS IN THE RESEARCH AGENDA

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'..traditional food habits (the family gathering together at the dining table three times a day, for instance) are dying out and that, at the moment, nobody can foresee where this process is leading and what the consequences will be..' (Teuteberg 1992; p1)

One important dimension that seems to have been largely ignored in human food selection is the manner in which we organise our eating. At best meals are seen as a convenient 'lens' through which to examine other phenomena, be they historical, economic-political, cultural, social, psychological, physiological, sensory or occasionally nutritional. The aim of this paper is to offer a brief review the current status of research into meals and their influence on food choice.

Past mealtimes:

Burnett's (1979) history of English cuisine offers a fascinating insight into the nature and form of meals eaten by the rich and poor, the rural and the urban dweller. The dietary habits, and meals, of the rich are featured in Mennell's (1985) examination of French and British cuisine while Rowntree's study of urban poverty shows life at the other end of the social spectrum at the turn of the century (see also Booth 1889, Palmer 1952, Aron 1975, Szromba-Rysowa 1986). While the focus is often on consumption of individual foods (Wilson 1973, Tannahill 1973), historians recognise the importance of the meal in attempting to identify the dietary regime of past generations (Teuteberg 1992, 1986, Aron 1975)

The encouraging aspect of Teuteberg's (1992) edited collection of papers is the extent to which meals focus in the discussion of European food habits, be it meals in the workhouse, schools, or prison. One wonders, however, what sources historians will resort to in 200 years time as they look back at the European eating habits towards the end of the millennium. If, as has been suggested, the meal is in decline (Mintz 1982, 1992, Fischler 1979, Teuteberg 1992, Falk 1994) will the future chroniclers of the past be able to map its demise. I for one expect not, given the current lack of research into the nature, form and content of eating occasions.

Eating alone

Psychologists have examined the influence of meals on food intake, individual performance, mood, satiety (Aron et al 1995, Smith et al 1991), and studied parental influences on children's food preferences (Birch 1993, Koivisto et al 1994, Casey and Rozin 1989, Klesges et al. 1983, 1986). More recently meals have been the focus of attention in psychological research into 'social facilitation'¹, (de Castro 1988, de Castro and de Castro 1989). Clendenen and her colleagues (1994) argue that the presence of other people when eating does indeed result in greater food intake². (see also Klesges et al 1984, Herman and Polivy 1993), but claim that the mere presence of people is more important than the number of people (de Castro 1990). Furthermore, de Castro (1989), acknowledging the increasing trend towards eating outside the home, found people ate more at restaurants than at home or in other locations. Other

experimental work reveal that people tend to eat more when food is readily accessible, as in buffets, or cafeterias (Coll et al 1979, Meyers et al 1980).

Food choice in the laboratory is often restricted to particular foods, or certain meals, (which often suits the objectives of the research) but it tells us little about how individuals construct meals. In the field of psychometrics research into food combinations suggests a complex pattern of food compatibilities which has implications for menu planning and offers an insight into how individuals combine foods (Eindhoven and Peryam 1959, Moskowitz and Klarman, 1977). Furthermore, it appears that the entree plays an important role in the overall acceptability of the meal (Turner and Collinson 1992). The majority of studies, however, fail to consider what one researcher calls 'real people eating real foods in real eating situations' (see Meiselman 1992, p49). For a discussion of the meal we have to turn to anthropology and sociology.

Eating together

Douglas and Nicod's (1974) work on the meals of British working class households was instrumental in focusing attention on the meal. They examined the relationship between the strict patterning of meals and dishes, and social categories focusing on the meanings associated with different types of eating occasion. This organisation of eating into patterned activity includes the time at which the event takes place, the frequency of the event, what is eaten, the amount eaten and where it is eaten (see also Roos et al 1993).

Changes in the meal pattern has been recognised as an important indicator of social change and indicative of lifecourse, for example, the movement of the main meal from the middle of the day to early evening reflects changing work patterns (Roos et al 1992, 1993, Staffleu et al 1995). For Roos et al (1993) relatively stable aspects of the meal pattern relate to the number of meals eaten per day, the familiarity of foods and dishes, recognisable, preservation and preparation techniques and eating meals in the company of others. Main changes related to the timing of the main meal, the composition of the meals and terminology. The traditional pattern of three meals per day is on the decline, certainly in Finland, but with no detrimental effect on health (Roos and Prättälä 1995). Furthermore, research into the eating habits of adolescents in Glasgow, Scotland, showed snacking to be less prevalent than previously assumed. The adolescents ate an average of 2.7 meals per day and a high proportion were present at breakfast, lunch and main meal (Anderson et al. 1993). Despite the growth in snacking meals still account for the majority of daily nutrient intake (Gatenby et al 1995).

The definition of the meal itself is centred on the idea of a structured event with strict regulations regarding permitted food combinations and sequences of dishes (Douglas and Nicod 1974, Douglas 1976, Goode et al 1984). In many cultures an eating occasion can only be described as a meal if a staple is present³ (Farb and Armelagos 1980, Katona-Apte 1975, Koçtürk, 1995). Ideas about what constitutes a meal is subject to cross-cultural variability, although Mintz, proposes a variation on this structural theme which he claims is portable across cultures and focuses on a 'core, fringe, legume' pattern which he claims allows us to make cross cuisine comparisons.

Mintz, however, believes that this pattern is breaking down, and this is not a lone voice (Fischler 1979, Falk 1994). The meal is undoubtedly undergoing a transformation in relation to broader social and demographic changes but it may be fast from dead (Marshall 1995).

A 'proper meal' means a 'hot cooked dinner, comprising meat, potatoes and vegetables which is eaten at the table, not in front of the television, served on plates and appropriate knives, forks, spoons, glasses and napkins' (Murcott 1983, 1995). What is interesting is the extent to which the 'meat and two vegetable' model remains the dominant ideology in British households, or at least in 'traditional' family of mum, dad and 2.2 kids (Charles and Kerr 1988, British Nutritional Foundation 1985). Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey in 1989 showed that more than half the respondents believed that a proper meal should contain meat and vegetables (British Social Attitudes 1989, Shoebridge 1992). Anderson (1994) identified seven 'meals' in her examination of Scottish eating habits which included 'partly cooked meal', 'Scottish type meal', 'convenience type meal', 'home prepared meal', 'home prepared soup', 'savoury snack', and 'sandwich'. In another study Dobson identified three types of meal, the 'traditional', (meat, potatoes and vegetables); the 'European' (spaghetti, quiche and salad, pasta); and the 'cheap' meals (chips, potatoes, burgers) (Dobson et al, cited in Anderson 1995). There is some evidence to suggest that the meals eaten by younger people may not necessarily follow the conventional 'meat and two vegetable' format (Kemmer et al 1995).

More recently Mäkelä and colleagues (1995) have used the following definition which captures the magnitude of the concept

'a meal is characterised as a structured event where attention is paid to preparation, variety, quantity and quality of food. Besides the material-technical construction, the social aspects of eating are considered to be central' (Mäkelä et al 1995, p272).

The sociological investigation into eating occasions and meal patterns is motivated by a desire to understand the complex of social relations which are reflected in this 'grammar of eating' (Douglas 1972, 1976, Bourdieu 1979, Murcott 1986, Charles and Kerr 1988, Mäkelä 1990, Roos et al 1995, see Falk 1994 on Simmel). This patterning and structuring of meals is culturally specific, but undoubtedly shaped by historical, environmental, demographic, technological and politico-economic factors (Harris 1987). As well as satisfying physiological nutritional needs 'this arrangement of foods 'reasserts, reflects and continually reconstitutes our social identity' (Marshall 1995).

Accepting that meals are essentially social and cultural artefacts, what constitutes a 'proper' meal, the components, food combinations, participants, number of dishes, order of presentation, and so on undoubtedly vary across national and regional boundaries but the notion of a 'meal' remains an important aspect of our daily eating habits. While regional, and to a lesser extent social class, differences in meal patterns are less apparent as a consequence of commercial food marketing and advertising (Oddy and Burnett 1992) differences still do exist between working and middle class food purchases are still apparent today (Tomlinson and Warde 1993, Scottish Home

Office 1994). However, we know little about differences in the meal patterns across socio-economic groups.

There is little by way of empirical investigation into meals for their own sake (Beardsworth and Keil 1990, Marshall 1993, King 1985). While the National Food Survey offers an invaluable record of family food purchases it tells us nothing about meals or meal patterns. Crawford's (Warren 1958) survey of eating habits revealed the composition and timing of seven eating occasions spread across the day⁴. More recent market research evidence, from the Taylor Nelson Family Food Panel, examines food use across four 'meal' occasions, breakfast, lunch, tea, evening meal, and snacks. This market research suggests that the meal is alive and well, with snacking accounting for only 20% of domestic eating occasions (Taylor Nelson 1990, Mintel 1993). The trend towards informality is apparent in the move towards 'lighter' meals (Taylor Nelson 1993), but what is less clear is what is happening to the meal structure, food combinations, and where the changes are taking place.

CHANGING FOOD HABITS

social and demographic changes

Changes relating to work patterns, the increasing number of women in employment (outside the home), more single person households, rising divorce rates, the decline of the traditional nuclear family and the emergence of new household units, an increased focus on leisure (CSO 1995) are all having a major impact on what and how we eat. These social and demographic trends, however, cannot be divorced from major changes in the food supply and distribution as the food industry continues to take on more responsibility for, what were formerly domestic tasks of, food preparation and cooking in the name of increased convenience, added value and, of course, better profit margins. All this assumes a willingness and ability, of consumers, to pay more for the convenience of not having to spend valuable time on food preparation and takes us back to women in employment and new values placed on (women's) time (Gofton 1995). One wonders what might have happened to the liberation of women (from the kitchen sink) without the advent of mass production.

health and convenience

The twin trends of 'health' and 'convenience' (Gofton and Ness 1991, Ritson and Hutchins 1991) seem to be driving much of the commercial new product development as the food industry seeks added value, and higher margins. Many of the new products launched in the UK carry health claims due to the removal of harmful fats and sugars, or the addition of beneficial fibre and vitamins (Hughes 1992). If, however, the USA is any guide the problem is not simply one of providing 'healthier' products but encouraging consumers to eat less, as the 'workout-pigout' mentality persists (Senauer et al 1991). Some believe the price we pay for this convenience is increased consumption of processed sugars and fats (Mintz 1992, Senauer 1992).

The commitment by industry is as likely to be driven by profitability as any lasting commitment to health. Indeed some of the so called healthy options show little advantage over the non-healthy and may add to the consumer confusion regarding

what is healthy. Faced with established beliefs, folklore and commercial messages the health educators communication task is a difficult one (Marshall et al 1995)

shifting responsibility

Responsibility for food preparation is shifting from the domestic to the commercial sector. This is reflected in the increase in prepared products, ready meals eaten at home, and 'bought in' food e.g. pizza, Chinese, Asian food. As a consequence many decisions on choice are in the **hands of the manufacturers**. (Mintz 1992, Iggers 1987, Taylor Nelson 1990). Consumers are not only being exposed to new flavours and ingredients but sampling an increasing range of new ready meals which are very different in their form to the traditional 'meat and two veg'. Related to this is the growth of sales of cooking sauces, many of which involve new cooking methods such as stir-fry and a range of different 'ethnic' ingredients and flavours which reflects something of an internationalisation of cuisine. Despite the success of these products little is known about where they are used in the meal system or who is using them.

The recent launch of retailer's store magazines which include a range of meal plans and recipe ideas, and the trial of a computerised menu planner in selected retail stores, is further evidence of the increasing influence of the retail sector on our food choice. Consumers seem willing to divest responsibility to the commercial sector for new ideas. Add to this the increased number of cookery programmes and associated publications and one can begin to see a renewed interest in food, and meals for entertaining.

eating out

The increase in eating outside the home provides an opportunity to sample new, unusual, non-indigenous, exotic foods and is likely to have an impact on what is eaten at home⁵ (Paulson -Box 1994). Indeed, sales of ethnic foods are showing strong growth, estimated at £400 m in 1994 fuelled by a growth in international travel (Mintel 1994). This increase in eating out allows one to choose from menus⁶, but the composition of the foods are in the **hands of the chef**⁷ (Mintz 1992).

Meal patterns are changing in response to new working patterns. The number of meals per day in the UK is down on that recorded in Crawford's 1958 survey (Warren 1958), lunch, for example, is more likely to be eaten away from home today. Meals are becoming polarised at either end of the working day and the main meal moved to the end of the working day. It has been suggested three meals per day pattern is breaking down, and there has been an increase in 'interval eating' (Mintz 1992), but the evidence is inconclusive and mixed (Taylor Nelson 1993). Mintz claims that families eat together less and less often, with all the members of the family present and the family meal is in decline. These views are reflected elsewhere (Fischler 1979, Teuteberg 1992), yet families still appear to be eating together, whether they are eating the same thing is another matter (Taylor Nelson 1993).

healthful advice

Most attempts to change our food habits rely on the provision of 'healthful' advice and the ultimate responsibility lies with the individual. Recommendations, however, to reduce intakes saturated fat, sugar and salt, need to be translated into language that consumers can understand and be achievable given the existing constraints, particularly among the most vulnerable groups (Leather 1992). One problem is putting much of this advice into practise and while the health messages appear to have been well received behavioural change has been much slower (Marshall et al 1994).

A recent government report (DOH 1994) on nutrition and cardiovascular disease made reference to specific foods to illustrate how dietary change might be achieved. Most of the attempts to change diet have resorted to educational programmes with the provision of 'healthful' information so we, the public, can help ourselves to a healthier diet (MAFF 1992, DHSS 1978). Encouragement to change to a more healthful diet has consistently failed to consider where the changes are most likely to take place, two examples serve to illustrate this.

Consumption of fish had been falling since 1945, despite convincing argument surrounding the health benefits of this food in an era of increasing public concern surrounding diet. Problems with the fresh product related to it's availability, and difficulties with buying and preparing the products but it had a very restricted place in the meal repertoire of consumers. Relegated to a starter, a risky entree, and a food that did not combine well with other products fish had limited appeal to the British consumer, despite the health label. New products while acceptable in sensory tests found they had a very limited appeal and were restricted to particular types of meal (Gofton and Marshall 1992, Marshall 1993).

Our research into Scottish consumers attitudes towards fruit and vegetables revealed no doubt about the health benefits of eating these product but raised serious doubts about where individuals might accommodate any increase in consumption, an extra portion on the side of the plate? larger quantities? vegetarian meals? Many of the decisions surrounding increased vegetable consumption were considered in the context of the meal. Vegetables were most certainly confined to the edge of the plate. Fruit was seen as less problematic as it was associated with snacking and not tied to specific times of the day, or occasions (Anderson et al 1993, Marshall et al 1995).

PRIORITY RESEARCH AREAS

Despite the move towards more informality in our eating (Falk 1994) meals continue to play an important role in shaping our food choice, and they remain an under researched area. Areas for further investigation might

1. build on the existing research into 'proper' meals and extend the meals classification to include a range of new formats, identifying main patterns of change.
2. examine food compatibility and the ways in which foods are combined.
3. investigate the relationship between food choice and occasion (appropriateness).

4. determine where new food products are being introduced into the meal pattern and who is purchasing them.
5. evaluate the ease of accommodating nutritional recommendations within existing meal patterns and formats.
6. make more use of data on meals collected in nutritional studies.
7. consider ways of working with retailers and manufacturers to encourage healthier eating.

finally

Some manufacturers are waking up to the importance of context in choice and the implications for product acceptability and performance (Barzilay and Verhallen 1994). Certain food retailers have recognised the need to consider how food products are combined and used this as the basis for special promotions which offer a discount if certain combinations of products were purchased together, e.g., Safeways 'Linksave'. There has been some interest in the sensory sciences in appropriateness and the influence of situation on choice (Schutz 1994, Marshall and Bell 1995). Nutritionists are starting to consider the role of meals in nutritional education (Anderson 1995, Department of Health 1994), while they may have little relevance in determining an individual's nutritional status they do have a role to play in changing behaviour.

Meals require time, skills, access to cooking facilities and usually other diners to share it with, be it at home or in the restaurant. Teuteberg alerts us to the importance of considering meals as a valid unit of analysis and draws attention to the need to consider not only the content, but changes in preparation and cooking which arise from technological advances, a new range of domestic appliances, and exposure to a new range of recipes (Teuteberg 1992). The nature and form of the manufactured food product has a lot to do with how and where it is used in the domestic meal and we need to consider not only the type of food but its preparation, degree of processing as well as the manner in which it is expected to be cooked (Marshall 1993, 1995).

Meals embody both the symbolic and the functional, the aesthetic and the material, the social and the sensory, they are about acceptability and preferences but also about appropriateness, perhaps it is time to think about the context of eating and get around the table to consider the ways in which the meal might unite some of the disciplines in a search for an improved understanding of why we eat what we do.

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¹This is centred on the idea that the more people present the more food is eaten independent of the time of the occasion, the place, or whether the occasion involved a snack or meal (de Castro 1991).

²They lend some support to De Castro's 'time extension model', i.e. the presence of others extends the duration of the meal, without increasing their rate of intake, but while people in larger groups eat at a slower rate, they spend longer at the table, eat for a longer period and ultimately consume more when eating with other people (de Castro 1990b)

³Snacking as we know it in the West, is not practised in Indian, and the name for foods eaten between meals have a special name 'tiffin', but these are consumed at specific times of the day, or when visitors turn up (Katona-Apte 1975).

⁴ The occasions were identified as 'early morning tea', 'British breakfast', 'mid-morning break', 'mid-day meal', 'mid-afternoon break', 'principal evening meal' and 'late supper' (Warren 1958)

⁵ Alan Warde, University of Lancaster, is currently researching this issue under 'Eating out-Eating in'. This is one of the projects currently funded under the 1992-1998 Economic and Social Research Council's UK Research Programme 'The Nation's Diet: The Social Science of Food Choice'.

⁶ It will be interesting to see the impact of this on the ideas about the 'proper meals', but in the UK there is a predominance of 'English restaurants' serving a fairly traditional menu.

⁷ Meals, which constitute the majority of eating occasions outside the home are more likely to follow and re-iterate the 'proper' meal structure, be it the 'proper' English meal, or 'Proper' curry, or proper 'Chinese', Marketing people call it authenticity. Eating a meal outside the home allows an expression of individuality not permissible in the daily domestic context with others' tastes to cater for. Eating out is fun because we actually get to choose what we want, only certain meals such as birthdays offer such freedom of choice but ultimately that is imposed on all the participants in the celebration.