Changing Families, Changing Food

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Children's Lunchbox Practices

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Alan Metcalfe – Men, Children and food Project

Abstract

In this presentation we will outline some thoughts, ideas and perhaps present some early findings of a new project being undertaken at the University of Sheffield as part of the Changing Families, Changing Food programme, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The project as a whole seeks to examine the relationship between men, children and food, exploring how men are involved (or not) in food practices within the household and in relation to children. This presentation will discuss one particular aspect of this research: the children's lunchbox.

For this we aim to examine older primary school aged children's understandings of and practices in relation to food. This will be done by talking with and observing those that take a lunchbox during school lunchtime and combine this with arts activities with children. By examining the food (and anything else) placed inside by parents, how children understand that food and what they do with it (eat it, chuck it, trade it) we can how the lunchbox is a container into which the private and public, the home and school are packed. How, for example, do parents seek to look after/ manage their children in a space over which they have little effective control? How do children seek to influence what goes in the lunchbox in order to realise relations and identities outside the home? And how do children use the box and its contents to engender and organise relations at schools?

<u>Paper</u>

Introduction

In this paper we want to tell two stories. The first is the one we originally proposed, about school lunchboxes, that is the packed lunch that many children take to school, examining this as the interplay between parent, school and child, focusing in particular upon children's food practices in relation to the lunchbox and how the lunchbox is a means by which children can manage relationships and identities, how they constitute subjectivities. The second story concerns the fact that this research has not yet been done due to the intervention of an ethics committee. What connects these stories is the issue of imagined children's subjectivities, imagined both by ourselves as researchers and by the ethics committee. We examine here how these connect to and impact upon the capacity for undertaking ethical research.

The Research

This particular research on the school lunchbox is just one aspect of a broader project examining 'Men, Children and Food', which in itself is part of a large programme of research entitled 'Changing Families, Changing Food' funded by the Leverhulme Trust and situated at the University of Sheffield with colleagues at Royal Holloway. In our particular project we intend to explore on the one hand men (mainly fathers, but this will hopefully include other significant male figures) and their food practices, and on the other hand, children and their food practices, with the aim of exploring how the two interconnect.

As part of the research with children, we decided to go to schools as this was a place through which we would be able to observe and talk to a relatively large number and diverse range of children, and hopefully convince some of the parents/ fathers to take part too. But conducting research in schools was more than just practicalities of reaching potential participants. It is also interesting because it is a place where children exist in a realm beyond the home, separate from their parents; it is a place where they must forge friendships and relationships independent of the family. And because we were interested in food and food practices, we were interested in the place of food in the creation of these relationships and indeed, how parents sought to influence and support them. Hence the lunchbox came to be for us an interesting artefact that drew together home and school, family and friends, parents and teachers.

Of course food exists in school in more than the lunchbox, but it is the lunchbox we are primarily interested in, at least initially. This is because like the school dinner prepared and sold on the premises, and unlike breaks and foods bought on the way to and from school the packed lunch is part of what might be termed the standard structured meal system in British society (c.f. Murcott, Douglas), as such is it usually seen to be important for the maintenance of a healthy mind and body. Indeed, while snacks are more likely to be sweet things (whether biscuits, confectionary or fruit) the lunch or dinner is more likely to have a savoury element at its heart. These differences though are not simply matters of nutrition, they are important cultural artefacts, elements of an accepted social order or social structure, an order which is reinforced representationally and practically through the provision and consumption of appropriate foods at appropriate times. The extent to which such orders are

constituted in practice is of course open to resistance and negotiation, and is as much a matter of food practices rather than some underlying social and cultural system.

The lunchbox though differs from the school meal in a number of important ways. The lunchbox is created at home by parents (of course, all of these statements are based upon the general notions and will be open to examination during the fieldwork), whereas the school meal is prepared by the school (or a sub-contractor) and is bought by the child with money given to them by their parents. The lunchbox is less open to choice as the child must eat whatever has been placed in there, while the child that eats school dinners can choose from the range of foods on the menu. Packed lunches are often eaten in a different space to school dinners, even if this is just a different table in the same room. And there is often less of a rush about it, as dinners are done in sittings and engender some form of conveyor belt system. Finally, because dinners are purchased so there is room for the child to use that money for other purposes. Interestingly, this is articulated in academic writing; searching for school dinners/ meals on Google Scholar reveals a concern over the misappropriation of dinner money, as half a dozen of the first twenty articles retrieved examine how this money is used for gambling. Indeed, this was the same number of references that examine issues of health and nutrition in the school dinner. This demonstrates two parallel anxieties, the first over giving children too much freedom, and secondly over the nutritional quality (or otherwise) of the school meal.

Thinking about the peculiarities of the lunchbox, we can see how it constitutes four particular spatialities. Something it would be remiss of us to fail to note at a geography conference. First of all, it provides a bridge that spans the apparent gap between home and school, the private and the public realms. Secondly, there is the space of the lunchbox itself, contained within which are foods packed if not prepared at home. Because the food is prepared at home and brought to the school by the child this is qualitatively different from money given to the child to purchase a meal while at school. The lunchbox is not just a matter of food, it is also a matter of care and love, and, we contend, a matter of parental anxiety. Finally, there is the physical space of the dining area, often distinct from those eating the school meal there is less control by 'dinner ladies', or other attendants. They may note the contents of lunchboxes to report back to the head teacher, but their main concern is with those eating school meals to get the children to 'eat up' all their food (c.f. Burgess 1999). The point is that these three spatialities fold together, and so a fourth space is afforded by the lunchbox. This space may be bounded by adults – parents who pack lunches and teachers or supervisors who manage meal-times – but it is one within which the children can perform various food practices beyond the immediate eye of these authorities. These practices involve in the main eating, chucking, trading and comparing and talking about foods, and so through this constitute identities, forge relationships and manage subjectivities.

The three figures central to this interplay are the children, the parents and the school, and our aim is to examine the part played by each in the contents of the lunchbox, but also their relative involvement in what is done with the food. We have focused to a certain degree on how children use lunchboxes to negotiate relationships, to resist the power of parents and schools, and to create and manipulate identities and subjectivities. We have also pointed towards the place of the lunchbox in relation to school and government policies, and in particular how these might be policed by

dinner ladies. This can be further witnessed if we look at news articles relating to packed lunches. Only last week (29th August 2006) research on food in schools carried out by XXXX and commissioned by the Government was reported in the media. The conclusion was shock, horror, that children buy fatty and sugary snacks on the way to and from school, a practice that undermines the obvious wishes and efforts of both parents and schools who provide nutritious and wholesome food – at least was the implication. Children needed to be taught that this was bad for them, but there was also the sense in which it was scolding bad parents, and bad schools, for not giving their children good food, indeed giving them money to waste on junk, let alone properly informing them of the dangers of sweets. This supports earlier reports which reported that 'Children's Lunchboxes "unhealthy"' (BBC online, 1/9/03, accessed 31/3/06) and that 'Children throw away healthy lunch' (BBC, 26/8/03, accessed 31/3/06) – all timed to coincide with the new school year and the mix of guilt and good intentions this engenders. So Government policy is one of encouraging parents through the media to prepare or at least pack healthy foods for their children, but warns them to be vigilant for even when they do their kids will either just chuck it away or will buy sugary and salty snacks from shops en route to and from school.[1] It would be interesting to examine how these policies are inscribed into school policies are policing practices of the lunchboxes that children bring in to schools, but also how lunchboxes are 'read' by teachers and dinner ladies as something that is appropriate, balanced even and something that is of concern.

It is hardly surprising then that school food, in all its forms and the lunchbox in particular is a source of anxiety for parents. Food must bear the weight of the tension parents appear to feel between love and nutrition, of caring for their child and being a good parent. The tension is further expressed through the balanced diet. Governments have emphasised the need for balanced diets, something emphasised in the surveys reported by the media. Yet exactly what is a balanced packed lunch is open to contestation. On the one hand, Government's and through them the media follow a nutritional line, where there needs to be an appropriate balance of fibre, salt, fat and sugar … look up FSA website. However, there is a more popular notion of balance that may be followed by parents, and may succeed or fail the nutritional balance set out by the FSA. The balance of what a meal should contain for it to be a meal, just as Murcott (and others, e.g. Douglas?) have pointed out the meal is structured according to the cultural order so the packed lunch is too, it must have something savoury plus something sweet. The savoury item(s) are likely to be something such as a sandwich or perhaps a pasty, or for some today rice or pasta, this is something that represents or mirrors the proper meal for having savoury foods, such as salad, cheese, meat held

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[1] The contrast between the latter two reports is interesting, where the first implicitly criticises parents for preparing unhealthy lunchboxes, the second assumes that parents do and that, in the words of one nutritionist, they are 'blissfully unaware that their child is not receiving the balanced meal that they have prepared'. Firstly I would doubt they are blissfully unaware, particularly when in the same article 2/3 of parents were unconcerned by their children chucking stuff (although this could read as parents failing in their duty of care, it could also be seen as parents being realistic and not getting too concerned by it), secondly, I doubt the contents are so balanced nutritionally though they are probably balanced in that they contain savoury, sweet and fruit (sandwich, crisps, biscuit, banana) – though this is an interesting idea of balanced I'm not sure it's the one the nutritionist had in mind, indeed, who is this nutritionist talking to? To overcome this, it is as important says a representative of the British Dietetic Association, that lunchboxes are made as attractive as possible, isn't his what the savoury, sweet, fruit balance is? So balance is also about nutrition/ social/ eating, a balance involved trying to effect the identities and relationships of the child at school

together by a pastry or bread, the sweet may be some fruit, though more likely biscuits or even chocolate in lieu of cake. If biscuits are more likely to be the sweet, then some fruit is added, perhaps in the hope that the child will eat this thing that is good for them, and we would imagine it is the piece of fruit which suffers the indignity of ending up in the bin. And finally there is the packet of crisps, a savoury snack that is appears to be ubiquitous to packed lunches (c.f. Burgess, 1999). This idealised lunchbox, seems to emerge through the tensions of the balanced diet. There is an attempt to pack things that the child will eat and that are good for it. It will though be interesting to see the lunchboxes and talk to parents about these, and why certain things end up in there.

The websites thrown up by Google and Google Scholar when searching for 'lunchbox' and 'packed lunch' were about health and nutrition[2]. The range of sites gave ideas for lunchboxes, and in particular emphasised the need to give healthy balanced foods, as well as advice on how to achieve this. These ranged from the government departments such as the Food Standards Agency, to corporations such as Asda and the BBC, as well as more independent websites written by parents for parents.

One interesting site we came across was 'familyeducation.com', which not only provides a forum for advice on various matters on raising children, they also had a section on lunchbox recipes, with quite a few recommending sugary, fatty and quite insubstantial things, like hot dogs or a bowl of cereal, but they generally seem to be appreciated by others, again suggesting that it is getting kids to eat something and giving them something that they will like and appreciate rather than something that is good for them is the concern of many of the parents that contribute. What was more interesting than the recipes though was the idea of the 'lunchbox love note'. One contributor, 'a visitor', left the following 'recipe':

> Work, overtime, school, homework and after-school activities keep all our lives extremely busy. But it's so important to connect with your children and here's a great way how. Take a minute in the morning to write your kids a note and send it along in their lunchbox. It doesn't have to be fancy, and it doesn't have to be long. With a pen and a napkin you can send along your thoughts, such as I love you, I can't wait to see you later, or good luck on that test today. It's cheap. It's simple. It's low in fat and calories. And it can really make their day!

This was picked up by the website organisers and became the 'editor's choice, and while most recipes had only one or two responses from other parents, this had eleven. All of which rated the idea very highly. Talking about their own memories of receiving them as children, how their own children loved them, so helped them connect with their kids as well as how they were educationally functional as they help with reading and writing. Ont eh website we then found some ready made, print out and keep samples of love notes, which had messages such as:
'Apples are sweet, cherries are tart, when we're not together, you're still in my heart xxoo', printed inside a heart shaped apple;

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[2] Typing in lunchbox covered a range of materials on aesthetics, design, science and music. Health and nutrition dominated in that it was the issue most likely to reference the lunchbox or the packed lunch

'Roses are red, violets are blue, Don't trade this sandwich, I made it for you! xxoo' printed on a sandwich, and finally
'Roses are red, violets are blue, know as you're eating I'm thinking of you'.

Love-notes are now available to buy on another website, at activityvillage.co.uk, £2 gets a pdf file with cut out and pack in the box notes, at lovelylabels.com, or alternatively there are some Christian ones which give a message encouraging the child to be godly.

These notes seem to exemplify two issues about lunchboxes that we have highlighted. First of all, that the lunchbox is a bridge between home and school, and a bridge that (some) parents try to construct so that they have influence if not control over their children. Secondly, it relates to the anxieties that parents feel about lunchboxes and about their child being elsewhere. Although this smacks of anxiety, given the recipes recommended I'm not sure it's an anxiety about nutrition so much as an anxiety about the child being away from the parent, it is anxiety about love. It is a more literate, if not literal way of the parent placing themselves and the home in school with the child, a means of being there while they eat their lunch. As if the food itself is not enough of a connection the note makes present the absent parent, a different order of metaphor than the food. Moreover, in the note, the parent communicates a wish, even a command more directly whereas the food is merely from the parent, and the two we found most interesting were those that implored the child to eat up what had been prepared for them.

The place of the lunchbox is made more manifest when we compare it to the Japanese equivalent, the *obentō*. Anne Allison (1991) has written an interesting piece on this form of packed lunch given to Japanese nursery school children. Her point is that this lunchbox is elaborately prepared for its aesthetic and nutritional value by the mother (always), and that the children and the mother are judged on the quality of the obentō as a sign of her commitment as a mother and her capacity to inspire her child to become a committed student, and on the capacity of the child to eat it all and to eat it quickly and so to follow the rules of Japanese society, a society in which social order and the individual's adherence to it is paramount. After nursery, children are given institutional meals, unappetising but nutritional. The obentō is, like the lunchbox, a link between home and school, and a link that provides a personal touch. Ultimately though, for Allison, the subjectivities of the mother and child are being guided by the school and the state, the obentō is imbued with gendered ideological meanings that the state indirectly manipulates. But it is also a means of enjoyment and creativity for mother and child.

The British/ American/ Western lunchbox and the Japanese obentō are similar int hat they are both concerned providing the child with a sense of security as it moves between home and school, and shifts from an existence centred in the private realm to an increasingly public persona. The difference, is that the school and so the state is intimately involved in what goes in the lunch and in how the child eats it, this is a means by which the child becomes immersed in the school regime. By contrast the western lunchbox is largely a matter between parent(s) and child, and while the state encourages parents to provide nutritional food and schools can have policies over lunchboxes and use them as an indicator of home life, it remains on the whole a matter for parent and child what goes in there. The lunchbox is therefore a means of

extending the private sphere into the public realm. And it is, as pointed out, a source of anxiety, as the public realm can be a scary place for parent (and child) and so reassurance is given. So what parents put in the lunchbox is a balance between as noted, savoury and sweet (proper food), between what is good for the child nutritionally and socially, and between what the should eat and what they will eat.

This discussion has taken us into the realms of lunchboxes, into the different influences and possible reasons for the contents. But it has singularly failed to examine children's food practices, which was at the heart of the research. Indeed, in this discussion we have addressed much more parents' subjectivities, and even parents' approaches to and imaginations of (their) children's subjectivities than examining children per se. This is because we have not begun the research yet. Because of the intervention of an ethics committee we have remained at the level of imagined children's subjectivities. It is to the issue of ethics committees and the issue of children's subjectivities that we will now turn and examine the capacity of undertaking ethical research/ research ethically. While not wanting to go into too much depth with regard our 'clash' with the local ethics committee we want to point to the main point of contention and then to examine the implications for conducting research.

Ethics and the Research

As is becoming increasingly common in universities it seems, research has to be ethically reviewed. The main point of contention for our research was that of informed consent. We took seriously the idea that children ought to be seen as subjects in their own right and that we would ask them whether they wanted to take part in the research. We would go to the school talk to them about the project and then give them information sheets to take away for themselves and a letter for their parents. To supplement this though we would have to get permission from the headteacher of the school and would be giving the parents the opportunity to opt the children out of the research. However, the ethics committee insisted that we could not assume parents were happy if they did not opt out but that they had to opt their child in to the research if we were to include them in our study. Apart from the difficulties this would present for actually undertaking this research the stumbling block is the idea of informed consent. Our basis principle was that we were seeking consent from the subjects of the research, the children, and would do our utmost to inform them about the work; whereas it was the opinion of the ethics committee that children were unable to give informed consent and that we could not accept the school's authority, as only parents could give such consent because they conceive of children as vulnerable subjects, as a potential victim who needs protecting.

In an article examining the implications of seeking informed consent with regard to vulnerable groups Crow et al report on a series of interviews and focus groups with qualitative researchers and argue that researchers tend to position themselves in relation to optimistic and pessimistic scenarios (2006). From the optimistic scenario they articulate four ways in which paying careful attention to gaining informed consent has desirable effects on research practice. It helps prepare researchers for the data collection process; it helps to prepare research participants; and it establishes a more equal relationship between researchers and participants in which the latter can have confidence in the whole process and so will be more frank and open; all of

which combined will have a positive effect on participation rates. The pessimistic scenario they trace out draws together a number of problems not so much with informed consent, but with the way in which such consent is handled. First of all, it can lead to the exclusion of certain vulnerable groups because doing research with them is made more difficult: on the one hand this can have a quantitative impact as participation rates are often lower, and more qualitatively, certain research can become unfeasible, we would contend that ours is a case in point. Secondly, the process of gaining informed consent can inhibit the relationship and rapport developed between researcher and informants. Too much information can be a problem as people are not informed they are befuddled and bored. In the end the point is that quality of data suffers as a result of the practical arrangements for gaining consent.

Both scenarios have valid points, and we have certainly befitted from taking more time to consider the issues, in particular our approach to informed consent, but it has delayed us by almost six months, losing much of the initial impetus. Our argument though is less about such practicalities and more about how this difference of informed consent occurs and its implications with regard conducting ethical research. Both positions, our own as researchers submitting a research proposal for ethical review and the members of the ethics committee co-opted to review the proposal begin with an imagination of children's subject positions. We saw children as capable of making decisions based upon information we would give to them. Their subjectivity was never absolute though and we sought to develop a 'network' for them through which their welfare was protected, by schools, who acted as gatekeepers, and by parents who were informed about the research and could withdraw their child. On the other hand, the ethics committee saw children as vulnerable (for instance, within the proposal we had to write how we would protect them if things went wrong, if they got upset during the research) and as needing protection and the school and in particular parents were the only ones capable of giving this consent.

While both positions start from an imagined subject position of the other, we would argue that while our position is not in and of itself purely ethical it is more likely to lead to an ethical position that that of the ethics committee. This is because we will actually talk to children and through this they will gain a 'face', they will become human beings with whom we can engage. Hence, our imagination of their subjectivities as fairly autonomous individuals capable of making decisions and acting independently of school, teachers and parents is open to re-appraisal as each person becomes known to us and us to them. In contrast, because the ethics committee never come into contact with the people being researched so their imagined subjectivities remain at the level of the imagination, these vulnerable subjects remain 'faceless'.

However, while we would argue that there is strength to our position of supporting the apparently autonomous child through networked relations there is no ethical purity. While we believe it is ethically responsible to keep those responsible for the children's welfare informed we had decided to only provide parents with the capacity to opt their children out. This had a certain methodological rigour to it, i.e. that we were genuinely asking children rather than only paying lip service to the notion that that they are subjects in their own right. But more than this, it was the practicalities of asking parents for written consent, as very few parents would return forms. But to simply assume consent if they don't refuse is hardly the most ethical position, as it

surely suggests that doing the research is more important than convincing people to take part, or to allow their children to take part, legitimately. Indeed, by talking to children and then getting them to take letters home to their parents and asking them to talk with their parents and friends about the research, is another way in which ethical action slips a little at the expense of the practicalities of getting the research done.

Despite these points, because we engage with people face to face and because we develop relationships with them, and because they can 'opt out' of the research by simply not talking or talking about something else, so our position we would suggest leads to a more ethical standpoint than that of the ethics committee. For while doing research may lead to an elision of ethical action, it does not result in unethical practices. This is different from ethics committees.

Because ethics committees are concerned principally with the problem of gaining informed consent from and for vulnerable groups, then their answer is to create regulations and guidelines for the researchers to follow. Their answer is to govern the research process. This is due to the fact that, on the whole, they derive their notion of ethics from the medical model, where medics and medicine is capable of doling harm to subjects if their actions are not held in check. However, this has a great problem in that it results in an externalisation of ethics, form the subjects involved to pieces of paper and the need to complete these. Once these are complete then, the ethics box can be ticked and the researcher and the ethics committee need pay no heed to ethics again. If the procedure has been carried out then properly then the subject only has themselves to blame. A qualitative model of research, such that we are following, cannot defer ethics to pieces of paper, externalities that stand in for an overseeing ethics committee, whether in terms of informed consent elsewhere, because qualitative research is based upon a face to face interaction, where the nature of the research requires the subjectivity of the informants to be emphasised and drawn out.

This of course does not mean that we are ethical and ethics committees are not, what we are suggesting is that the qualitative method of research is more likely to lead to ethical action (though this is far from guaranteed), while the medical model is more likely to lead to unethical action. This is because for the medical model of ethics committees subjectivities remain at the level of the imagination while in conducting qualitative research they become more detailed and nuanced as children (and others) assert their own subject positions through face to face interaction, and so researchers, as responsible adults like parents and teachers become concerned with the welfare of those they are studying. Nevertheless, research remains murky in terms of ethics, and perhaps it is only possible that it can be conducted because at some points ethics need to take a back seat, while at others they need to come to the forefront. It is judging these points and so ensuring that research gets done, that quality is enhanced but that subjects are not only 'protected' but given a voice that good research can be done.