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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Families Remembering Food

Researchers

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Summary

Families Remembering Food is an oral history study informing, and informed by, the other projects in the programme. The study documents changes in family structures and relationships as well as changing patterns of food consumption, based on the re-use of qualitative data from existing archival sources.

A particular focus is on inter-generational attitudes to family, health and food across Britain. This study also seeks to address some of the practical, theoretical and ethical issues that arise in re-using secondary data sources

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Research questions

- Have social constructions of the family, and memories of family life, changed over time and place (with particular reference to food consumption and mealtimes)?
- What is the place of food in people's memories of family life (and are there geographical differences)?
- How do gender, ethnicity and social class impact on the different interconnections between family and food?
- What methodological considerations do researchers face when re-using oral history archives?



Research design

The project involves the re-examination of archived oral historical evidence collected in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The evidence, elicited from these collections, allows us to identify changes in family and food from the Edwardian period to the turn of the 21st century. The data sources include The Edwardians (ESDS), 100 Families (ESDS) and the Millennium Memory Bank (The British Library)

Key findings:

- Our research suggests that contemporary concerns about **the decline of the 'family meal'** are over-simplified. The 'family meal' has taken a variety of forms in different times and places, and varies by social class, ethnic background, religious affiliation and geographical region. Evidence from the early 1900s suggests that families rarely had a common meal time and that the 'family meal' probably only ever existed among certain middle class families in certain places (more as an aspiration than as a regular practice). In most cases, then as now, meal times had to be fitted in around people's working lives and domestic routines.
- Our research provides a valuable historical perspective on **men's changing domestic roles and responsibilities**. The oral history evidence confirms that men have played a role in cooking and preparing family meals for many years but usually only in specific circumstances (where they have professional experience as chefs or army cooks, for example; where their partners are indisposed or deceased; or on special occasions such as weekends and holidays). Men's involvement in routine cooking for the family and in other domestic roles (such as cleaning) remains limited.
- The research also sheds light on current methodological debates about **re-using secondary data sources**. Here, we argue that there is a great potential for re-using life history data provided that the evidence is adequately (re)contextualised and that the specific nature of life history data is sufficiently understood (where the past is approached through the lens of the present and where the positionality of researcher and researched is fully addressed).

Publications

Jackson P, Olive S and Smith G (2009) Myths of the family meal: re-reading Edwardian life histories, in P Jackson ed. *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

Olive S (2007) Interpreting food and family within life stories. Working Paper, available from www.sheffield.ac.uk/familiesandfood/resources.html

Smith G (2007) Beyond individual/collective memory: women's transactive memories of food, family and conflict. *Oral History* 35: 77-90.