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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Changing Habits? Food, family and transitions to motherhood

Researchers

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Summary

The expectation and arrival of a new baby, particularly the first, is a time of upheaval when family attitudes and expectations around food and eating are likely to change.

Current debates about rising levels of obesity and diabetes, together with changing understandings about 'healthy' eating, ascribe consumption practices with a moral 'weighting',

particularly within family settings where it is women-as-mothers who are traditionally charged with responsibility for feeding the family. Through the narratives of pregnant women and mothers, this study explored ways in which food and eating practices were manifested and negotiated within diverse and dynamic family settings, including those where women had pre-existing concerns about food and body shape.

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Research questions

- What understandings do pregnant women and mothers of young children articulate in relation to food and eating practices?
- How are these understandings influenced by women's concerns about food, body shape and concepts of 'good' parenting?
- How are the food preferences of infants and children expressed and how do they influence family practices and relationships?
- How are food-related behaviours and eating practices negotiated within different family contexts and families following a range of dietary customs and practices?

Methods

60 women were recruited: 30 were pregnant and followed into first-time motherhood, and 30 were established mothers with infant(s) under two years old. The sample included women who self-identified, or perceived themselves to be seen by others, as very overweight/obese, and/or women managing diabetes. A proportion reported histories of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). A variety of family forms and families of different socio-economic status and ethnicities were recruited. Participants followed into motherhood were invited to take photographs between interviews.

Key findings

- 'Foodwork' was a **highly gendered activity**. Whilst a minority of men did cook, upon entry to motherhood women assumed overall responsibility for the organisation of food and meals, regardless of culinary skills or employment status.
- Mothers **offset traditional ideals** of cooking 'proper', nutritionally balanced, family meals 'from scratch' alongside a variety of commitments in the context of time scarcity.
- **Eating together** remained an important symbolic component of family identity and attained greater significance with the transition to parenthood.
- Pregnancy and motherhood were widely recognized as '**projects**' to be individually managed in line with, and assessed against, expert guidance.
- Intense pressures to 'do' pregnancy and motherhood **co-existed and conflicted** with more established notions of bodies and their processes as 'normal' and 'natural', and of motherhood as an 'intuitive', evolving and relational identity.
- Less conservative **minority ethnic women** experienced difficulty in accepting traditional food-related customs and practices associated with childbearing, especially when these conflicted with Western science-based nutritional recommendations.

- Participants' previous, and ongoing, **relationships with food, appetite and body weight** influenced their ability to 'manage' the metabolic changes imposed by pregnancy and lactation. Prolonged pregnancy-related **nausea and vomiting** was widely reported by women managing diabetes and/or PCOS.
- A significant proportion of the larger women in this study **contested medical definitions** of themselves as 'overweight' or 'obese'. Medical risks known to be associated with obesity in pregnancy were not widely known by participants, who sensed reluctance on the part of maternity professionals to discuss these issues.
- While much current parenting advice is for carers to feed newborn babies '**on-demand**' and to resist imposing feeding routines, mothers interpret feeding 'on-demand' in many different ways. The same is true for understandings of 'baby led' feeding.
- Pre-existing concerns about food/body weight resulted in some mothers mistrusting their bodies to produce sufficient breastmilk; doubts were also expressed about infants' capacities for self-regulation of hunger. Mothers were more concerned about **weight loss than weight gain** in their infants, even when health professionals identified infants as 'obese'.

Publications

Stapleton H and Keenan J (2009) Bodies in the making: reflections on women's consumption practices in pregnancy, in F Dykes and V Hall Moran (eds) *Nutrition and nurture in infancy and childhood*. Wiley-Blackwell, in press.

Keenan J and Stapleton H (2009) "It depends what you mean by feeding 'on-demand'": mothers' accounts of babies' agency in infant feeding relationships, in A James et al. (eds) *Children, food and identity in everyday life*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

Stapleton H and Keenan J (2009) (New) family formation and the organisation of food in households: who does what and why? in P Jackson (ed): *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to research participants, who generously shared their experiences of becoming, and being, mothers. Thanks also to the health and social care professionals who facilitated recruitment, and to members of our research advisory committee who provided ongoing support and guidance. We especially acknowledge the contribution made by our colleague and co-investigator, Dr Amanda Wade (Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield) who retired during the latter part of the study.