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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Feeding the Family: UK and Hungary

Researchers

Megan Blake, Geography, University of Sheffield
Lucy Crane, Geography, University of Sheffield
Jody Mellor, Geography, University of Sheffield
Brigitta Oz, Geography, University of Sheffield

Summary

This research aims to understand how rules and expectations pertaining to food practices and imaginations in two contrasting economic and social institutional settings are made and re-made within the family setting. Specifically, examinations of the practices and expectations regarding eating, food provision and cooking in

a post-communist context (Hungary) are compared to the practices and expectations of families located in a context of advanced capitalism (UK). This line of inquiry is particularly important as there are increasing concerns over food waste and food quality, obesity, and family decline.

Contact:

Dr Megan Blake
Department of Geography
University of Sheffield

Email: M.Blake@Sheffield.ac.uk



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Research questions

- Within families in the UK and Hungary, what are the food related practices that help to define 'the family'?
- How are tasks associated with food provisioning and eating performed by family members and how does this change over time within families?
- What are the rules of provisioning and eating within UK and Hungarian families and how are they established, negotiated, and enforced?

Research design

The context for this research is largely white, middle class families in the UK and Hungary. The research findings are based on data collected through diary-interviews, observation, life history accounts (gathered in partnership with local Soroptimist International clubs in both locations), and visual imagery. Contextual materials, such as cookery books, newspaper archives, government and NGO documents, and published images were also used to provide background information on food practices in both contexts.



Key findings

- Our research finds that UK consumers negotiate the term 'local' as a food label through a process of comparison with what else is available in the store as well as what might be available elsewhere in the town where they live. Local food is often understood by consumers to be of higher quality but also more expensive, than what they viewed as 'ordinary' or 'family' food, which has implications for determining when local food is purchased as well as its accessibility to those on low incomes. The research also finds that it is easier for large retailers to source food with a provenance local to consumers than is the case for small greengrocers, who rely on wholesale markets dominated by food importers.
- Our research provides valuable insights into the role of food practices as part of what defines family practices. Our evidence indicates that cooking remains a central part of how friendship is done for the middle aged, middle class people in the UK with whom we talked, though perhaps not so important for older and younger people. The UK case shows how the friendships enacted at dinner parties make available greater cultural resources, which in turn help to maintain existing social division in place. By comparison, the Hungarians in our study rarely 'entertain' others by cooking them a meal. Hosting, however, is still an important activity used in social reproduction, which relies on the performances of particular (gendered) individuals. In the Hungarian context, male householders will serve drinks and offer toasts when entertaining guests in their home. When food is provided for others beyond the immediate family, such as for a birthday, name day or other celebration, male hosting will also involve tasting food as it is being cooked and serving, while females provision and do the actual cooking work. These hosting activities are not done during a family meal and help to define the boundaries between family and non-family.

Publications

Blake M, Crane L and Mellor J (2009) Eating in time; eating up time, in P Jackson ed. *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

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Blake M (2007) Formality and friendship: some reflections on the University Research Ethics review process. *ACME: an international e-journal for critical geographies* 6: 172-181