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Changing Families,
Changing Food.



Men, children and food

Researchers

Geraldine Shipton, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield
Jenny Owen, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield
Caroline Dryden, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield
Alan Metcalfe, Department of Geography, University of Sheffield
Maxine Johnson, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield

Summary

This research explored fathers' involvement with family food practices – such as shopping, cooking and the organisation of meal-times. We aimed to develop an understanding of the extent to which preferences and practices were tied in with self-identities, conceptions of parenting and partnering and to examine how these are constitutive of and relate to changing families. The study was based in three distinct geographical areas: inner-city Sheffield, an ex-mining area in South Yorkshire and in rural

Lancashire. The findings from this project have contributed to developing our knowledge of men's current roles in 'feeding the family' and to our understanding of how fathers and children make sense of food practices in the wider context of family roles, relations and structures. The analysis is in process with the eventual aim of informing our understanding of the relationship between food, gender and changing family lives.



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Research questions

- How do men make sense of their role in relation to feeding the family?
- How do children use food in public and private spaces?
- What is the relationship between fathers' and children's understandings of the role of food in family life?
- How is food used as a means of negotiating with and relating to others, so constituting identities of self, family and gender?
- Do class, ethnicity and geography relate to the food practices of men and children?
- How does personal sense making around food by fathers and children relate to broader social processes?



Research design

The research was carried out using a qualitative methodology involving the following specific methods of data collection:

- Participant observation in schools;
- Arts-based activities in relation to food practices;
- Semi-structured interviews with 29 families

Key findings

- Our research redresses an imbalance in previous research by focusing on men's accounts of their experiences.
- Our work suggests that fathers' sense making around feeding practices in the family is highly complex and multidimensional.
- The research identified a wide diversity of experiences, practices and understandings amongst fathers in our sample.
- There appear to be a variety of ways of 'doing fathering' in relation to feeding the family and multiple understandings of the meaning of fathering in contemporary life.
- Despite significant differences, food practices were highly meaningful to all the men interviewed. For example, even where involvement in cooking appeared to be restricted to the 'set piece' weekend cooking and barbecues that have traditionally been associated with men, these meals were still

highly significant as part of a process of redrawing the family and recreating the couple.

- Although family meals were highly valued by most of the men interviewed, it was usually considered by parents to be more important for hungry children to be fed early and given a set routine than to wait until all members of the family could eat together. Therefore, time constraints imposed by paid employment meant that any parent who did not return from work until later – usually the father – ended up eating alone.
- The lunch box signifies a transitional space on number of levels, for example, between home and school; family and peer-group; imagination and reality.
- School dinner halls are contested spaces. Various actors from the State through teaching staff and 'dinner ladies' to parents and children draw on and mobilise various, often competing, discourses relating to: civility; nutrition; choice and efficiency, to order and organise these spaces.
- Food-related art work produced by the children showed how they used food to construct and play with identities, make friends and relationships and express themselves and, sometimes, their imaginary worlds.

Publications

Metcalfe A, Owen J, Shipton G and Dryden C (in press) Inside and outside the lunchbox: themes and reflections. *Children's Geographies*

Metcalfe A, Dryden C, Shipton G and Owen J (forthcoming) Socialising children and managing identities: the contested spaces of the school dinner hall. *Population, Space and Place*

Dryden C, Johnson M, Metcalfe A, Owen J and Shipton G (2009) Fathers, food and family life, in P Jackson ed. *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press

Contact:

Dr Alan Metcalfe
Department of Geography
University of Sheffield

Email: a.metcalfe@sheffield.ac.uk