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University
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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Changing Habits? Food, family and transitions to motherhood

Principal Investigators

Helen Stapleton (Midwifery and Children's Nursing)
Amanda Wade (Sociological Studies)

Researcher

Julia Keenan

Summary

This study explores the ways in which food and eating practices are manifested and negotiated within diverse and dynamic families, including those where women may have pre-existing concerns about food and body shape.

The study will focus on two significant stages in the life cycle: that of pregnancy and the transition to parenthood amongst first-time mothers, and the transition from infancy to early childhood.

This study will seek to identify whether, and to what degree, maternal understandings about food and related issues are transmitted to

children; and the extent to which these are influenced by agents such as partners, children, other family members and outside influences such as health and allied professionals. The perceptions of women are central to the study aims because foetal well-being, and indeed health outcomes throughout the life-course, are increasingly linked with pregnancy-related behaviours and because women-as-mothers are usually the primary carers within the family domain.

Royal Holloway
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Research questions

We aim to investigate how mothers' experiences and understandings of food and eating practices play out in their food relationships with newborn infants and young children.

- 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 within families following a range of dietary customs and practices?



Research design

This will be a qualitative study, utilising in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A longitudinal element has been included, supplemented by participatory visual methods (photo-elicitation), to emphasize the processual nature of childrearing.

Two groups of 30 women will be recruited, half of whom will be pregnant and anticipating the experience of first-time motherhood at the point of entry to the study and half of whom will be mothers of at least one child aged between nine months and two years.

Each group will include:

- 10 women with Type 1 (insulin-dependent) diabetes
- 10 women who are very overweight
- 10 women who are of average weight with no particular weight or eating issues

Representation will be sought from a variety of family forms (eg single-parent, married, co-habiting) and families of different socio-economic status and ethnicity.

The 'Changing Families, Changing Food' Programme

'*Changing Families, Changing Food*' is a major inter-disciplinary research programme, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. The Programme began in October 2005 and will run for just over three years.

It is organised into three research strands on: pregnancy and motherhood; childhood and family life; and family and community. Focusing on contemporary Britain, the Programme also includes some international comparisons and a 'time-line' to establish the quantitative and qualitative nature of social changes affecting families and food over the last century.

The Programme is coordinated by Peter Jackson (Director of Research for the Social Sciences at Sheffield University) and is based in ICoSS (the University's new social science facility). The Programme involves colleagues from Clinical Sciences, East Asian Studies, Geography, Nursing and Midwifery, the School for Health and Related Research and Sociological Studies at Sheffield in collaboration with colleagues in Health and Social Care at Royal Holloway, University of London.

The research takes food as the lens through which to observe recent changes in family life and examines how changes in family form have affected patterns of food consumption. The Programme's findings are expected to contribute to current debates about obesity and nutrition, media and consumption, food choice and deprivation.

Contact details

Julia Keenan
Floor 4
ICoSS
The University of Sheffield
219 Portobello
SHEFFIELD
S1 4DP
j.keenan@sheffield.ac.uk
0114 222 6286