Making sense of ‘convenience food’ in theory and practice

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The FOCAS project

- New project on ‘Food, Convenience and Sustainability’ (FOCAS), part of an ERA-Net consortium on sustainable food (SUSFOOD) with colleagues in Gothenburg, Bonn and Roskilde

- Convenience food often regarded as the least healthy and most unsustainable dietary options in terms of its nutritional value, packaging and waste

- Understanding the reasons for its popularity and how it’s used in practice may encourage the development of healthier and more sustainable alternatives.
‘Convenience’: a chaotic concept

- ‘Convenience’ is a complex and contested term with multiple meanings.
- An example of what Andrew Sayer calls a ‘chaotic conception’ which arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential (1992: 138).
- Chaotic concepts can be used unproblematically in everyday life and in scientific discourse for descriptive purposes.
- Problematic when explanatory weight is placed upon them.
‘Convenience’ in food retailing
(Environment and Planning A, 2006)

- **Physically accessible**: ‘This store is probably the most convenient one ... because we live nearby’
- **Easy combination with other activities (domestic routines)**: ‘I fit the shopping in, if it's convenient I fit it in with collecting Sally from school’
- **Frequency of shopping, range/quantity of goods, quality and freshness**: ‘Yes, basically it's the convenience and I just buy you know once a week’; ‘I prefer to go to the butcher's ... it's convenient because there you can have it fresh ... you can buy the amount you want, not what's in the packet’.
‘Convenience food’

- Sprawling category including processed foods, manufactured for mass consumption including frozen, chilled and canned goods; confectionery, snacks and beverages; processed meat, pasta and cheese; take-away food and ‘ready meals’
- ‘Convenience’ and ‘homemade’ food are part of a continuum, not two separate categories (Marshall & Bell 2003); distinguished by context not content; frequently combined with other foods.
Mothers of invention?

- Carrigan et al. (2006) describe how convenience food is incorporated into versions of home-made or ‘proper’ meals.
- They refer to a ‘hierarchy of acceptability’ that allows mothers to take advantage of (some kinds of) convenience food without compromising their sense of being a ‘good mother’.
- Such ‘necessary concessions’ involve the negotiation of ‘emotion complexity’.
Trade-offs and compromises

- Use of convenience food can be justified in various ways
- Less time spent cooking may enable more ‘quality time’ with family members
- May lead to reduced food waste (e.g. using pre-packed salad vs buying a whole lettuce)
- Enabling children to fend for themselves when parents are out
- Catering to a range of food preferences among different family members – an expression of love, not neglect.
Moralization of convenience

- ‘Care vs convenience’ is one of Warde’s (1997) culinary antinomies.
- Bugge and Almås (2006) describe the way Norwegian mothers associate the rise of convenience food with the disintegration of family life.
- Pejorative terms like ‘junk food’ and ‘TV dinners’ abound, together with references to ‘shame’, ‘guilt’ and ‘confession’.
- Market researchers also report that >20% of British consumers feel guilty about serving ready meals (Mintel 2013).
Convenience as practice

- Halkier describes convenience food as ‘embedded in the complex practices, processes and conditions of … everyday life’ (2013: 123)

- ‘Convenience’ is enacted through routines and conventions that are socially recognised and evaluated through notions of ‘suitability’ and ‘normative framing’ (Halkier 2009) or in terms of their cultural ‘appropriateness’ (Prim et al. 2007)

- Similarly, cooking ‘from scratch’ covers a wide range of practices that must be enacted and recognised to count as such – hence all the ambivalence and guilt that attach to cutting corners, taking short cuts and ‘cheating’.
Halkier gives the example of a mother who bought ready-made porridge for the family Christmas dessert (*ris a la mandle*) and her daughter’s criticism that ‘she doesn’t bother to make the porridge’, noting that it ‘doesn’t taste good either … not stirred with love’.

Participants talked about the lack of transparency regarding ingredients in convenience food (‘decent raw materials’ without additives) and lack of information about food’s provenance.

For Bugge & Almås: ‘To cook a proper dinner for one’s family is an important part of a woman’s understanding of her own identity and an implicit part of realizing the ideal family and the ideal home’ (2006: 210) – the *relational basis* of these conventions being maintained through ‘mutual confirmations’.
Growth of ready-meals market

- Chilled ready-meals ‘invented’ in late 1970s as ‘respectable’ alternative to frozen TV dinners.
- Related to increased female participation in the labour force
- Market researchers talk about ‘meal solutions’ for time-scarce consumers with busy lifestyles
- Increased number of single-person households including elderly people living alone
- Technological change (refrigeration and microwave ovens) and rise of supermarket shopping.
The European market

- Three biggest markets for ready-meals are UK (42% of European sales), France (21%) and Germany (20%), especially among men and urban populations (MINTEL 2013).
- UK consumption of ready-meals is twice as high as France and six times higher than Spain.
- 30% of UK adults report eating ready-meals more than once/week (cf. 16% in France).
The UK market

- Chilled and frozen oven-ready meals are a well-established and popular component of the British diet
- Most supermarket chains have numerous lines of American, British, Indian, Italian and Oriental dishes at numerous price points and with both branded and own-label options
- UK read-meals market currently (Feb 2013) worth £2.6b (c.€3.2b).
Health and sustainability?

• Convenience food has reputation for poor nutritional quality and wasteful packaging: high in salt, sugar and saturated fat; highly processed with many artificial additives; often including a high proportion of imported ingredients (rice, spices), excess packaging and high levels of waste.

• DEFRA’s Green Food Project (2013): examined the potential for product reformulation, including more locally-sourced ingredients with lower environmental impact and better nutritional value, less wasteful packaging and reduced portion sizes.
Retail innovation

- ‘Healthier’ options: lower calories, reduced fat and salt (BMJ reported that none of the supermarket ready meals they tested in 2012 fully met WHO nutritional guidelines)
- Bio-degradable packaging, multi-portion split packs, re-sealable bags to reduce waste
- Children’s ready meals.
Future research

- Addressing Halkier’s (2013) ‘open question’ about how ‘convenience’ food is used, appropriated and made sense of in everyday life
- Interviews, kitchen ‘go-alongs’ and ethnographic observation (range of households in UK and Germany)
- Research questions:
  - How do consumers incorporate ready-meals and other ‘convenience’ foods as part of their everyday lives?
  - What ‘stocks of knowledge’ do consumers deploy in understanding the health and sustainability implications of their dietary choices?
  - What are the implications of a ‘theories of practice’ approach for the development of healthier and more sustainable dietary choices?