

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE NUTRITION SOCIETY

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### SYMPOSIUM ON 'FOOD HABITS AND CULTURE IN THE UK'

#### **The cultural significance of food and eating**

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From a strictly nutritional point of view it may not much matter what you eat as long as you are getting a balanced diet in suitable amounts. So, fish, pulses, meat or eggs can equally well provide proteins; what is important is their quantity and relation to other essential components of the diet. Sociologists and anthropologists, however, recognize that, nutritional concerns aside, it can matter very much what you eat. Smoked salmon, lentils, steak or coddled eggs, might be more or less equivalent nutritionally, but they carry markedly different connotations socially.

Elaboration of the cultural significance of food and eating focuses on social values, meanings and beliefs rather than on dietary requirements and nutritional values. In this paper, I have outlined a sociological approach to studying cultural aspects of eating, illustrating various facets with reference to three pieces of recent work (James, 1979; Atkinson, 1980; Murcott, unpublished results).

This approach starts by appreciating that peoples' food choice is neither random nor haphazard, but exhibits patterns and regularities. Further, sociologists are compelled to realize that eating habits are not solely a matter of the satisfaction of physiological and psychological needs, nor merely a result of individual preference. Food has also to be seen as a cultural affair; people eat in a socially organized fashion. There are definite ideas about good and bad table-manners, right and wrong ways to present dishes, clear understandings about food appropriate to different occasions.

Foods themselves can be seen to convey a range of cultural meanings; the four examples mentioned earlier communicate information in terms not only of occasion but also social status, ethnicity and wealth. These meanings, however, are not inherent in foodstuffs. They depend on the social context in which the items are found. As Atkinson (1980) has remarked, a 'mouthful of wine will convey very different meanings to the professional wine taster, the *bon viveur*, the Christian celebrating Holy Communion and the alcoholic down-and-out'. Habits of eating and drinking are invested with significance by the particular culture or sub-culture to which they belong.

The preparation and consumption of food provides, moreover, a material means for expressing the more abstract significance of social systems and cultural values. It may be argued that what people are prepared to take inside their bodies reflects their social identities, and their membership of social groups. To view eating habits as a matter of culture is to understand that they are a product of codes of conduct and the structure of social relationships of the society in which they occur. What and how people eat may, indeed, usefully be understood in terms of a system whose coherence is afforded by the social and cultural organization with which it is associated. It is this kind of approach which lies at the heart of a structural analysis of food and drink outlined by Mary Douglas (1972) and Edmund Leach (1976) in Britain, and given, perhaps, especial impetus by the work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1975). He has proposed that the place of eating and drinking in myths and rituals provides the medium whereby people may express their conviction that they are civilized and human, rather than savage and animal. His work continues by indicating more intricate variations on this theme, revealed in ever nicer distinctions of culinary techniques in relation to more detailed discrimination of social circumstances.

Not everyone will want to adopt the more controversial of his suggestions. In general terms, however, they offer a provocative means of addressing an issue central to the social implications of food habits. In common with other matters of individual and species survival—such as sex, or keeping warm—eating marks the characteristic way people are simultaneously biological and social; at once animal, but not like other animals. Human beings belong to the worlds of both nature and culture. Repeatedly people make sense of this double membership. As Leach (1976) has observed: 'Food is an especially appropriate mediator because when we eat, we establish, in a literal sense, a direct identity between ourselves (culture) and our food (nature)'. Food, then, has both a material and a symbolic significance.

Societies vary in the way this duality is construed, and shifts may be detected within a society. A case study of such a change in emphasis—and the first of my three illustrations—is provided by Atkinson's (1980) analysis of the symbolic significance of 'health' and 'whole' foods. His focus is the renewed fashion for a wide range of such foods, and his starting point locates their general significance in the broader context of 'alternative' or 'unorthodox' movements, especially in respect of alternative concepts of science and medicine. Despite the wide diversity of products, Atkinson reports a striking insistence on 'naturalness' in the way these products are presented. Such a claim is not only attached to items such as brown rice or stone-ground flour, it is also important in the promotion of more commercially produced goods; e.g. 'Potter's herbal and natural remedies can help you', 'Healthcrafts Natural Dietary supplements'. Commonly, this idea is linked to a portrayal of the pace, style and nutritional habits of contemporary living as 'unnatural' and damaging. The theme recurs in several guises. Health foods are grown naturally with only organic and no synthetic chemical fertilizers. They are naturally pure, neither overrefined nor 'contaminated' by additives. They are natural in that they are traditional, their value attested over centuries.

They are also 'natural' in being held to have an exotic provenance—their virtue deriving from being 'uncontaminated' by Western culture.

This last feature offers a clue to Atkinson's analytic purpose. Health foods, he suggests, can be understood according to at least three dimensions which imply an opposition to industrial, scientific, western culture. This is to be seen as a version of the duality of the human condition between nature and culture which Lévi-Strauss regards as underlying many culinary systems. Atkinson remarks: 'In this instance, there is an attempt to change food symbolism from the cultural to the natural—both in terms of the production and consumption of foodstuffs'. What is happening is that contemporary industrial society is being seen as over-cultured and its members suffering the unhealthy consequences of too much modernity in all aspects of lifestyle including diet. In line with this 'diagnosis', 'health' foods, more 'natural' foods, are presented as the appropriate antidote.

There is, however, a twist to the story; many of the 'natural' products appear to be as much cultural artefacts as the orthodox commodities to which they are supposedly superior (indeed the short period since Atkinson conducted his study has seen a burgeoning of highly processed food products being re-named and promoted in terms of the rhetoric of the 'healthy' and 'natural'). This underlines the point that the vision of the 'natural' as the suitable means of restoring the balance in an over-cultured life works at the symbolic rather than the literal level. Simultaneously defining a problem and its solution Atkinson says that the presentation of health foods conveys: 'the message that ills are created by the particular characteristics of modern living, specifically by virtue of a fracture between the realms of nature and culture. Hence, health-foods provide a concrete resolution of this problem'. Perhaps unusually, this analysis reveals a view of humankind's place in the realms of culture and nature as having moved too far towards culture. But in this instance, culture is identified with a 'nightmare' of dirty, noisy urban living, not in contrast to the animal world, but to rural life—pure, peaceful and 'natural'. Atkinson concludes that what health foods—and especially the more commercialized kind—offer is a pre-packaged 'concrete embodiment of a pastoral dream for their urban consumers'.

My second illustration of the cultural significance of food habits is ostensibly far removed from ginseng and brown rice. Here I draw on James' (1979) study in North East England of the sweet eating habits of mainly younger children in the 11–17 age group. Her researches revealed a curious pair of usages of a local word. 'Ket' was the term children used for sweets, but also that used by adults to mean rubbish. Apparently the meanings were unrelated. No doubt adults might consider sweets to be rubbish, but they would certainly not see rubbish as sweets. Yet, James proposes, this is precisely what children do.

Although adults may not always notice it, children occupy an identifiable social world. This is distinct from but also dependent on the adult world. As James points out, however, children do not leave it at that; they make a world of their own out of the ordered system of rules the adults provide. But in the process, children reorganize adult perception, most frequently by the simple device of

inverting that order. James attaches considerable significance to the idea that 'something which is despised and regarded as diseased and inedible by the adult world should be given great prestige as a particularly desirable form of food by the child'.

Central to James' discussion is the contrast between adults' and children's concepts of eating in general and sweet eating in particular. Sweets for adults are, by and large, regarded as an adjunct to food, or related in some fashion to meals; they should not spoil the appetite. 'Kets' to children are manifestly not food, nor even are they sweets in the sense adults understand—quite the reverse. James seeks to show that instead 'it is meals which disrupt the eating of sweets' (original emphasis). Her evidence indicates that children are attracted to 'kets' precisely because they contrast with usual adult sweets and eating patterns. Although at the cheapest end of the market in confectionery, children were observed to spend more on 'kets' than would have bought them a more conventional 'adult' sweet.

The distinction between 'kets' and sweets appears in their names, their colour, the sensations they induce, as well as their presentation and the timing and manner of their consumption. For a start, the names given to 'kets' emphasize inedibility. They include, for instance, names usually reserved for utilitarian objects—Fizzy Bullets, Telephones, Car Parks. They use the names of animals whose consumption is normally hedged by dietary taboos—Mickey Mouse, Jelly Gorillas, Lucky Black Cats—and even go so far as to imply cannibalism—Bright Babies, Jelly Footballers, Fun Faces. Parallel emphasis is found in the colour schemes of 'kets'; shocking pinks, luminous and fluorescent blues, vividly piebald. Regular sweets come in sombre or pastel colours which, as do their names, describe what they are. Dealing with the sensations induced, James warns: 'eating of this metaphoric rubbish by children is a serious business, and adults should be wary of tackling 'kets' for, unlike other sweets, 'kets' are a unique digestive experience'. Many 'kets' contain sherbert, citrus flavours are common, acid and acrid, and there is apparently no real chocolate among 'kets', only a chocolatey flavour accompanied by a dry, gritty texture. By contrast, the sweets favoured by adults are sugary, of chocolate and nutty ingredients, with soft or smooth textures predominating.

When it comes to their presentation, timing and manner of consumption, sweets are identified as food and linked with meals. 'Kets', on the other hand, continue to de-emphasize connections with conventional eating and routine mealtimes. For instance, 'kets' are generally sold unwrapped, piled up in cardboard boxes on a shop counter. As a result there is little scope for messages—no list of ingredients, no account by the manufacturers of how the product is to be seen. But sweets are mostly wrapped, allowing the wholesomeness of their ingredients and their food value to be advertized. Further stressing their food-like character, sweet recipes are found in cookbooks, and can be made from domestic ingredients, whereas 'kets' are impossible to concoct in the kitchen.

Perhaps the manner of consumption most dramatically distinguishes 'kets' and sweets. Sweets are kept distant from bodily contamination; they are carefully and hygienically wrapped—the more formal or ceremonial the occasion for which they

are meant, the more elaborate the packaging. The very adult sweets that the name 'After Eight Mints' connotes, are concealed in layers of cellophane, card and paper, each portion presented in its own delicately 'personalized' envelope. At quite the other extreme, children rummage through boxes of 'kets' in the shop; they share sweets, offering one another a bite or a suck; they take them in and out of their mouths, pulling out strings of gum, or inspecting the colour changes of gob-stoppers.

Thus, the way 'kets' are eaten contrasts sharply with sweets. Sweets accord with, even mimic, the way food is 'properly' taken. Sweets belong to the adult world of 'real' food; 'kets' to the inverted world of children. There they confer prestige on the owner. Children choose to spend their money not on adult sweets, but 'kets', items deprecated by adults. Children display a notable virtuosity in their knowledge of 'kets'; insisting on using the exact names, *au fait* with the exact characteristics of each variety.

Referring to the ideas of Levi-Strauss, James proposes that the adult meaning of the term 'ket' becomes especially significant. She observes: 'If sweets belong to the adult world, the human cultural worlds of cooked foods as opposed to the natural, raw food of the animal kingdom, then 'kets' belong to a third category. Neither raw nor cooked, according to the adult perspective, 'kets' are a kind of rotten food'.

By eating 'kets', James argues that children are, metaphorically speaking, chewing up the adult order. For them, 'kets' are an important vehicle for self-identity. By analysing a childish attachment to 'kets', James is able to reveal an order incomprehensible to or unnoticed by adults, in which children create for themselves their own system of shared meanings. It is here that the cultural significance of children's sweet-eating lies.

The two examples already considered deal in the metaphoric rather than the literal; only relatively rarely do children really eat rubbish, and the potency of health foods lies precisely in their symbolic rather than actual 'naturalness'. My third illustration, however, involves the literal as much as the symbolic. Based on a working paper I recently prepared, it derives from my current research on food concepts among young mothers in South Wales. Once again, questions such as the selection of food items, their preparation and the manner of their consumption are involved.

The study shows that people readily identify a meal known as a 'cooked dinner'. This is so in England as well—though apparently less evident in Scotland—and while familiar to those in different socio-economic groups is not straightforwardly a matter of social class. Effectively it refers not so much to a whole meal, composed of different courses, but 'meat and two veg'—a plateful. How far those who took part in the study could afford 'cooked dinners' three times a week and once on Sundays—the frequency considered suitable—is not known, nor is the effect of continuing high rates of unemployment, in South Wales and elsewhere, fully documented.

Such a 'cooked dinner' is more, however, than a familiar cliché of indigenous British eating. A plateful so composed is regarded as a 'proper' meal, one that

women believe is necessary to the health and welfare of their households. They have no worries about their family's diet, 'as long as they are getting their dinners'—the right meal to come home to after work or school.

'Cooked dinners' are of a certain sort. They are complex affairs, cooked not raw, hot not cold—a transformation of basic ingredients according to a specific and elaborate set of rules. Even though a proper meal need only consist of one course, that course has to be a variation on the 'meat and two veg' theme. The centrepiece has to be some sort of meat as distinct from offal or sausage; poultry can substitute, fish cannot. In other words, the meat component has originally to be fresh, not preserved, warm- not cold-blooded. Essential accompaniments are, first, the potatoes, then two, if not three other vegetables, of which at least one must be green; produce from both below and above ground is to be represented. Finally the whole is completed by the gravy.

Stress is laid on cooking—only certain techniques are appropriate. Underlining the point, the verb 'to cook' is found to take on a special meaning. A woman who announces, as her husband and children prepare to leave home in the morning, that she will be 'cooking tonight' is giving her family notice that they can look forward to a 'cooked dinner' rather than, say, spaghetti, or egg or beans. Notably, apart from the superior Sunday variant when meat and potatoes must be roasted in the oven, the components of a 'cooked dinner' are baked or grilled (meat), and boiled (vegetables). Chips do not properly 'count' in place of roast or boiled potatoes—and no more do casseroles or other composite dishes which, once assembled, can be left to look after themselves. For the techniques needed to cook a proper dinner all involve having to keep a regular eye on the proceedings. Not only has work to go in to achieving the plateful, but work is needed right up until the moment of serving—for most importantly, a cooked dinner is a hot meal.

Preparation of the cooked dinner is women's work, while the man's is the job that brings in the money. In deference to this, a woman plans meals according to her husband's rather than her own likes and dislikes. She organizes and mostly does the shopping, oversees storage and preparation, cooks and serves. And even if a wife has a job for the moment, she retains a primary duty to manage the home—even if a husband helps a good deal, she remains in charge. So, she is more likely to know the trickier cooking techniques, understand the niceties of planning, provisioning and timing, and she remains responsible for the 'cooked dinner'.

The 'cooked dinner' at home after a day's work symbolizes leaving work and returning home; it marks the transition from employer's time and employer's place and reasserts employees' mastery over their own time and their own place. Meals and mealtimes emphasize the contrast between home and work. Weekend eating varies from weekday (workday) eating—'cooked dinners' are rare on Saturdays but extra special on Sundays.

The 'cooked dinner' simultaneously epitomizes the wife's obligation as homemaker and her husband's as breadwinner. The nature of the dinner, its mode of preparation, demand that the woman be in the kitchen for a required time before his homecoming—and that not too infrequently, even daily, she has been

shopping. Otherwise, the 'cooked dinner', visibly composed of appropriate items, could not be ready on time. If a job defines how a man occupies his time during the working day, to which the wage packet provides regular testimony, proper provision of a 'cooked dinner' testifies that the woman has spent her time in correspondingly wifely fashion.

While the old-fashioned Greek description of quickly prepared dishes as 'prostitute's food' (Hirschon, 1978) may scarcely be appropriate, the point at issue was thoughtfully summarized by one Welsh informant who said: 'I think it lets him know that I am thinking about him—as if he knows I am expecting him. Fair play, he's out all day—it's not as if he's been very demanding—it's really a pleasure to cook for him'.

It must be said that the very compressed version of the three studies presented here cannot do them justice. Each of them, however, show that people's attachment to certain eating habits reveals the social relationships and cultural identities of which they are a product—and by the same token, all make apparent the enduring cultural and social rationale for the persistence of the habits in question. This is so, independently of nutritional, ecological or dietary consequences. Emphasis on animal protein and certain cooking techniques may be medically unwarranted or ecologically undesirable, adherence to health foods might be dismissed as no more than a fad, eating 'kets' may very well be regarded as disastrous for dental health. Each habit, however, makes very 'good' sense socially.

At the beginning of this paper, it was suggested that in very general terms, the sort of structural analysis proposed by Lévi-Strauss and others, merited attention for it offers an articulated way of understanding the duality of humankind as both natural and cultural—and that the business of eating is equally so. Lévi-Strauss builds (in a way that need not be detailed here) on this dimension to derive his 'culinary triangle' at whose points are located the three contrasts, raw, cooked and rotten.

The three studies described here were selected with two things in mind. One was to avoid instances of regional or ethnic variations in order not to overlap with other presentations in this symposium. The other, and more important, was to select food habits which, while not necessarily peculiar to the UK are familiar and notable enough in this country at the moment—and all three just so happen to recapitulate the contrasts of Lévi-Strauss' triangle. In this they help underline the point that concern with the raw, the cooked and the rotten is indeed live, and that such concern is pertinent to unravelling the symbolic and social meanings of food and the cultural significance of eating.

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