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Health (London) 2000 4: 25

DOI: 10.1177/136345930000400102

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Adolescents' dietary habits and attitudes: unpacking the 'problem of (parental) influence'

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ABSTRACT Several interests – policy and research among them – appear aligned in concentrating on the antecedents of young people's eating habits. Between them they provide a vocabulary for, and convey an implicit model of, antecedents to adolescents' activities, that can resolve into a simply stated question: what are the *influences* on young people's dietary habits and attitudes? This article seeks to unpack/problematize the idea of influence that question contains, limiting attention to one presumed source of influence, that of parents. It aims to illustrate the manner in which the idea of parental influence eludes ready identification by presenting empirical material reporting conceptions of food and eating, of habits and attitudes, and of aspects of domestic life. Via presentation of material on images of household, on young people's bids for autonomy and independence, parents' concern and vigilance and features of the divisions of domestic (kitchen) labour, the observation that parent/child relationships are not well characterized as either uni-dimensional or uni-directional is confirmed. Caution is recommended in relying on an idea of influence for research or practical interventions.

KEYWORDS *adolescent health; food selection; influence; (un)healthy eating*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS We are grateful to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) for a grant as part of their 'Food Acceptability and Choice Programme'. We should also like to thank the following: the three members of the project Advisory Group, Professor Mike Bury, University of London, Dr Stephanie Valentine, British Nutrition Foundation and Dr Sandra Williams, Department of Health as well as Dr Nick Jardine, MAFF Programme Manager, for their support and comments; Roger Dickinson and Simon Leader of Leicester University and Gill Ereaud for their contribution to discussions of 'influence'; Rhodri Thomas for his advice on computer-assisted data handling; Pamela Janes for ad hoc clerical support and three

anonymous referees for their observations. An earlier version of this article was presented by the first author under the title 'The adolescent in the family: food, eating and the distribution of power' at the British Sociological Association, Medical Sociology Group Annual Conference, York University, September 1997.

according to the newest and most comprehensive survey of young people's health . . . The rot sets in from the age of five as children of both sexes spend increasing amounts of time in front of the television eating the wrong foods and getting fat. (*The Independent*, 15 December 1998)

As their busy . . . parents spend less time with them, so television, the Internet, magazines and peers are becoming more significant influences. (*The Independent*, 31 December 1998)

'Pester power is a misused catchphrase . . .' says Jane Matthews, managing partner of J Walter Thompson . . . 'Peer pressure and what they see and feel around them is far more important. What their parents say, their older brother or sisters say, is a much greater influence'. (*The Independent*, 10 December 1998)

Introduction

There are several elements that form the backdrop to this article. The most important centres on contemporary public health concerns about the long-term effects of young people's eating behaviour and the concomitant desire to encourage them to adopt better-advised eating habits (e.g. Heaven, 1996; Hackett et al., 1997; see also Department of Health, 1992; The Scottish Office, 1996). From that springs a corresponding policy interest: the manner in which such concerns represent a rationale for seeking to understand – e.g. by mounting research – how young people come to eat as they do. Indeed, the work to be presented here derives from a study designed to address just such a published research requirement (MAFF, 1995: 13). In other words, policy and research interests appear aligned in concentrating on the antecedents of young people's eating habits – and, as may be suggested by the earlier quotations, are also of sufficient public interest to be covered in the 'quality' press. Certainly those quotations are exceedingly selective: they are from a single UK newspaper, presented without indication of the items from which they are taken and they happened to be carried within just one month. But they are juxtaposed here to summarize a further element of the backdrop to what follows. Between them they provide a vocabulary and convey, albeit implicitly, a model of children and of the antecedents to their activities, that can resolve into a simply stated question: what are the influences on young people's dietary habits and attitudes?

It is the purpose of this article to unravel, unpack or problematize, that question – or, more exactly, the idea of influence it contains. Although questions expressed in terms of influences on young people are not just about several sources – parental, school, peers, commercial, the mass media and

so on – but also about which should/should not be more or less effective, here we limit our attention to one presumed source of influence, that of parents. We seek to illustrate the manner in which the idea of parental influence eludes ready identification by presenting empirical material of a selection of adolescents' and parents' reports of conceptions of food and eating, of habits and attitudes and of aspects of domestic life. We confirm the observation that parental influence is not well characterized as either simple or one way, and we illustrate associated bargaining and trade-offs between young people and parents. We do this via presentation of material on images of household, on young people's bids for autonomy and independence, parents' concern and vigilance, ending with divisions of domestic (kitchen) labour.

Our thinking leads us to suggest that characterizing antecedents to young people's attitudes and habits in terms of influence is widespread, so much so that it is commonly unnoticed and unmarked. But to say so, lands us in some difficulty, because a proper response to any challenge to substantiate our suggestion, threatens to turn into a project of its own. As our discussion unfolds here, we shall do no more than point to some examples – as opposed to mounting a full survey – that are part of the broader landscape in which this study is located. The article's purpose, however, does not solely depend on the ubiquity of the idea of influence, for not least it stands in the shadow of policy interests, as we have already implied. However, we make no particular claim to originality in seeking to problematize the idea. After all, such an exercise is part and parcel of a relationship between certain styles of (sociological) research and the world of practical policy making. One thing this relationship requires is to remain alert to the well-established distinction that is to be made between 'taking' and 'making' problems (Young, 1971). The manner in which policy interests identify or express a problem is not always to be taken as defining the terms in which the research is conducted: it may even be argued that thinking beyond or outside policy terms is exactly what researchers are awarded grants to do. The problem may need to be (re)made, perhaps at the initial stage when the research is designed, or as part of the results that figure in the eventual reporting. Either way, it entails a brand of translation. Our concern is not, however, confined to some contrast between policy modes of thinking and those of researchers that makes translation important. As will be seen, our discussion also represents an oblique commentary on differing models of human behaviour/activity and on different conceptions of the child/young person.

This article has been prepared at an early stage in our project before much of the empirical material is available for analysis. It means we draw on just a handful of cases. Work so far, however, gives us sufficient confidence that this is justified. Although we anticipate that continuing study of the data will permit us to elaborate our analysis and refine our interpretations, we cannot conceive of abandoning our view that influence needs to be unpacked. If nothing else, the day-to-day work of collecting and handling

the data has kept some very basic questions uppermost in our minds. What, for instance, does influence look like? Can we be sure that we recognize it when we come across it? What kind of thing do we point to as evidence? Indeed, is influence really a suitable way of describing the phenomenon under investigation? That the very word 'influence' was so prominent arises from the thinking behind the study's design which we set out in the next section. This is followed by brief reflections on some of the academic literature dealing with influence. The main part of the article divides into four parts in which we present some of our data illustrating aspects of influence unpacked.

About the project

The study on which this article draws is an exploratory investigation of adolescents' conceptions of food and health. Concerned to remedy a deficiency in the sociological research literature and to complement investigative approaches represented by other social scientific disciplines, it depends on social anthropological and sociological traditions of ethnography which aim to capture an understanding of 'life as it is lived' rather than as it is reflected in the laboratory (see Murphy et al., 1998 for the most recent and most comprehensive, modern consideration of these traditions in the health arena). It was set up, then, to focus on naturally occurring (home-based) representations of diet, as opposed to those which might be introduced by a researcher under experimental conditions. The study was designed to single out three main types or sources of representations of diet – advertising, parental and the peer group – with attention being paid to the interrelation between them.

The original intention located the investigation firmly in the context of the household and the micro-politics of the social relationships between its members, especially with respect to food, eating and the domestic division of labour (for review see Mennell et al., 1992). A perennially neglected but important distinction needs to be borne in mind, namely that between the *household*, which refers to living arrangements, and the *family*, which refers to the manner in which kin or affinal relationships may be defined, independently of shared residence (see Brannen and Wilson, 1987). Failure to make this distinction may be responsible for an oversight when examining the social organization of domestic tasks in which researchers have ignored the possible contribution of children – not only mouths to feed, but also a potential source of labour (Murcott, 1986). Conscious of this omission, the original thinking behind the project assumed, in the case of relationships between adults and adolescents, that increased autonomy and independence from parents would be at stake – an assumption that rested on sociological understandings of socialization such that increasing calendar age is held to be associated with mounting expectations of the individual's taking responsibility for their own decisions. The assumption also encompassed

understandings that parents, among others, are significant agents in the process of socialization. The assumption is not, though, to be taken as pre-determining where on some imagined scale between the positive (with the young person accepting parental judgements) and the negative (in rejection and rebellion against them) the relationship and associated behaviours might lie at any one time. Developing this assumption depended in part on awareness of work illuminating the historical emergence of childhood and of theoretical perspectives arguing that the balance be redressed so that children are not simply seen as an empty vessel to be filled in the process of socialization but as social actors in their own right (Murcott, 1980; James, 1993; Mayall, 1996; James et al., 1998).

The project is collaborative, originally initiated and designed by the second author and joined later by the first, who undertook both the day-to-day running of the study and the lion's share of the data collection and handling. Noting this otherwise unexceptionable arrangement is relevant here, in that the original documentation initiating the project was written using simple enough vocabulary – including reference, in so many words, to *influences* on adolescents' attitudes etc.¹ The dialogue that collaboration naturally occasions confirmed that the usage coined during the preparatory stages was intended to do no more than signify a domain of general interest, empty of, indeed necessarily indifferent to, any supposition of causality. At the same time, it gave rise to the questions noted at the end of the last section. It was in this way that we became 'sensitized' to the notion of influence as the study unfolded. We recognized that it may need, at some stage and in some as yet unspecified fashion, to be addressed further, for, if nothing else, it represented one aspect of the kind of translation involved in (re)making problems for research noted earlier. In any event, we began to register research- as well as policy-related characterizations of antecedents to behaviour – in particular those of young people – in terms of influence. We consider some of these next.

'Influence' re-viewed

Though stopping short of developing a literature review in its own right, we began to note the kind of features which, were such a review conducted, it would be liable to include. To begin with, it would need to note unremarkable usages of influence, if only perhaps to set them on one side, but also to begin reckoning their frequency. An instance is provided in the title of an article by Graham (1980): 'Family influences in early years on the eating habits of children'. Under that head, she presents survey data, particularly the answers to open-ended questions, showing the way actively reconciling babies' needs, with those of the mother and of the rest of her family, lie behind women's decisions about modes of feeding. This type of example may turn out to be ubiquitous, an example where talking of influence is likely to imply little more than the same type of minimal significance of the

original statements of our own project. Thereafter, the review might move on to start distinguishing work from different disciplines, and work that refers to more and less explicit models in which, for instance, influence is to signify relationships that are causal or that run in one direction rather than another. A striking example² here could be the pathbreaking experimental work of psychologist Leann Lipps Birch, seeking to understand 'the factors influencing the development, modification, and expression of preschool children's food preferences' (1980: 489) in which she demonstrates the positive effects of peer modelling.

Both these contributions would, from some points of view, also be readily enough treated as examples of literature on what has come to be called 'food choice'. We suspect that this literature may well include ample reliance on a notion of influence. A recent example is an article by Furst et al. (1996) dedicated to developing an approach to food choice itself. Although including reference to neither Graham nor Birch, they refer to contributions from both psychology and sociology to signal the considerable extent and variety of work in this field. Thus anchored, Furst et al.'s own article proposes a 'conceptual model' that will 'provide a wholistic perspective of the factors influencing the way people constructed the process of choosing foods' (1996: 248). Derived from interview data, this model is presented diagrammatically to demonstrate the relation between groups of factors 'generat(ing) the process or pathway (indicated by arrows) leading to the point of choice' (Furst et al., 1996: 250, parentheses in original). The arrows in the diagram are to represent influences. In key respects, theirs is a mechanical model, which – although they do not discuss the matter – allows an analysis whereby a change in a force from one direction has an effect, and is therefore held to exert an influence, on another component part of the model.

Two further observations could now be possible. One is that though differing along the lines indicated, these types of work appear to share an acceptance of the idea of influence as having some self-evidently relevant and straightforward meaning. And they appear also to regard influence as either benign or neutral. By contrast, as we indicated in our opening newspaper quotations, part of the popular concern about influences especially on young people is of course the reverse: an anxiety lest baleful influences swamp or overpower those that are virtuous. As Dickinson (forthcoming) observes: 'outside the confines of academic debate, public discussion of social issues and social problems continues to hypothesise a (mostly malign) causal role for the media . . .'. Although he is speaking specifically of television's reputed influence on food choice, the same may be said for other kinds of influences taken to be exerted on adolescents by parents or the peer group. So, inspection of the literature needs to be aware of any evaluative overtones which frame research contributions, keeping an eye on whether they are carried over into, or deliberately countered by the research.

The second observation that becomes possible at this point, is that the

term influence is used to refer both to antecedents to the activity of actually putting something into the mouth, and antecedents to activities, or behaviour that are themselves considered to be antecedents to the act of eating – including, for instance, what Furst et al. describe as ‘personal factors’, ‘ideals’ and the ‘social framework’. For the remainder of this section, though, we turn to highlight a pair of (unrelated) contributions that are exceptions in the field of adolescent health to the work considered so far. For they demonstrate a much more considered approach to the idea of influence.

The first of these two contributions is an article by American researchers, Lau, Quadrel and Hartman investigating the relative influence from parents and peers on young adults’ preventive health beliefs and behaviour (Lau et al., 1990). Their piece describes this area of research as interesting precisely because the morbidity and mortality associated with ‘unhealthy’ behaviours including eating habits is ‘under people’s control’ (Lau et al., 1990: 240). In their view, the developmental process is ‘crucial to study’ because ‘who the chief socialisation agents are may suggest when (if ever) people are open to change and what vehicles (what media, messengers, arguments) are most likely to be successful in attempts to influence these behaviors’ (Lau et al., 1990: 241). Having drawn the reader’s attention to the fact that most of the existing literature on adolescence and health ‘rarely gives clues as to the exact mechanisms through which influence takes place’, Lau et al. then take the important step of trying to focus on some of the unexamined features of influence. Thus they explicitly seek to arbitrate between two models of socialization – one type attributing more influence to parents, the other giving precedence to that of the peer group.

To this extent, although treating its source as multiple rather than unitary, they none the less accept the idea of influence. Indeed, one of the difficulties of this piece of work is that, in finding that neither a unitary nor multiple model fits their results, Lau et al. do not appear to ponder on the adequacy of their original thinking in terms of influence, but instead assume that the object, the target of the influence must be varyingly resistant/receptive. In the process, they perpetrate a curious analytic sleight of hand, so that the identity of the mechanism they are seeking slips from attention to the nature and *source* of the supposed influence, to the state of the *object* of that influence. To deal with this, they go on to posit a third model, which they describe thus:

The *windows of vulnerability* model predicts that parental influence on children’s health beliefs and behaviour generally will persist throughout life unless the child is exposed during certain critical periods to important social models whose health beliefs and behaviour differ from those of the parents. (Lau et al., 1990: 255)

Despite this attempt to develop a new line of thought about influence, Lau et al.’s conclusions retain the characteristics of a mechanical model. In theoretical terms, what continues to be missing from this study is the possibility

that socialization may be neither linear nor uni-directional – even though Lau et al. record that ‘[a]ll of the models assume that the parents’ factors influence the respondents’ baseline factors, but that respondents do not influence their parents’ (1990: 256).

Brannen et al. (1994) in Britain, have, on the other hand, sought to incorporate young people’s responses to parental (attempts at) influence by paying attention to resistance/receptivity in their analysis. Though not spelled out, influence is used synonymously with ‘determining’ what young people ate, with ‘mak[ing] decisions’ or ‘tak[ing] responsibility’ for the diet (Brannen et al., 1994: 144). They create a two-by-two matrix, with degrees of young people’s autonomy on one axis (high/low) and maternal influence (fathers, they note, play little part) on the other (also high/low). In this fashion they develop a classification of the patterns they identify in their interview data for 64 London households, which take account of the extent to which adolescents do, or do not, resist their mothers’ efforts. Thus they derive a typology of households, with most of their cases entailing low adolescent autonomy, falling either into the ‘integrated’ (high maternal influence) and delegated (low maternal influence) categories, and far fewer displaying high adolescent autonomy with either high maternal influence (expressed in versions of successful adolescent resistance) or low maternal influence (where the adolescent is ‘detached’). Although taking study of (parental) influence further, like Lau et al., Brannen et al.’s discussion none the less proceeds *within* the confines of a type of mechanical model, parallel to that implicitly adopted by Furst et al. (1996).

Our own approach contrasts with those just discussed. For the questions (noted earlier) we found ourselves raising – questions which led us to attempt to problematize the idea of influence – meant we also had to consider both trying to avoid making the same implicit assumptions, and also consciously seeking to step aside from the same underlying mechanical models. We turn now to introduce material from a small number of cases from our study by way of illustrating the manner in which we have begun to unpack the idea in respect of parents, adolescents and their conceptions of eating at home.

Methods – and cases from the project

As we indicated at the beginning, this article has been prepared early on in our study, with only some of the data available for analysis. So doing, we noted, is justified whatever elaboration is revealed as the analysis continues, for there can be no imaginable grounds for retreating from the view that the idea of influence deserves to be problematized. Accordingly, it would be as legitimate to draw on just one case as on many to illuminate the way in which the idea may be unpacked. Of itself, the number of cases at our disposal is not of immediate relevance. For our concern is neither to generalize to some population at large, nor to suggest that the case or cases we

present are necessarily somehow typical, but to make available for inspection some of the features that are neglected by treating the idea of influence as self-evident and straightforward. In the event, although drawing on two cases in a little depth, we also refer, albeit less fully, to others.

Some of the thinking underlying the study was set out earlier. Moving towards the project design itself, we elected to centre our study on the home, since it is taken to be the prime site of food selection and use, especially when it comes to young people who are as yet economically dependent. This led to the adoption of the household as the unit of investigation as a means of catering for aspects of the autonomy household members enjoy – in respect of the satisfaction of tastes and preferences in food as in anything else. When initially designed, the original intention was to confine the study to households composed of two heterosexual adults and at least one dependent child over primary school age (defined for practical purposes as an adolescent aged between 12 and 17). In the event, some of the socio-demographic criteria were relaxed.

We adopted ethnographic interviewing as the primary mode of data collection, supplemented by a limited amount of opportunistic observation. Although not ideal, it was the most feasible in the circumstances. Participant observation supplemented by ethnographic interviewing would have been preferable.³ Since the nomenclature is not standardized (see Murphy et al., 1998: 159–60) we note that these interviews are not solely unstructured (although an aide-memoire is used, literally as a reminder for the interviewer) but are designed to elicit topics and whole areas of discussion to be introduced by informants, the relevance or significance of which investigators are hitherto unaware. These topics or areas are then incorporated into the aide-memoire for attention in subsequent interviews in the series. The interview data, of course, constitute records not of the actual occasions, attitudes, activities and so on, but of conversations about them. Thus they represent reports, reflections and characterizations expressed in the course of those conversations and need to be understood as such, even though, for the sake of tolerable readability we do not persistently repeat the point in the text. It should be noted that in like vein, Murphy has recently (1999) drawn attention to the status of interview data in her study of women's infant feeding decisions. She takes such attention a good deal further than has been possible here, by incorporating sensitivity to informants' interview responses as 'accounts' – i.e. in effect, refuting potential accusations of inappropriate behaviour – as a necessarily integral feature of the analysis. In so doing, she provides an excellent exemplar of an unduly neglected line of enquiry in the handling of qualitative interview material.

We have interviewed a non-randomly selected set of 40 cases of adolescents aged 12–17, including 11 parents (nine mothers, two fathers) recruited via two schools in similarly socio-economically mixed, inner-urban areas in London. The majority of interviews ran for approximately 30 minutes, and were held at informants' convenience, either in their home, or in a separate

room at school. Two of the households included here are cases in which both parent and adolescent were interviewed, and talked at some length about their domestic arrangements and dietary habits. The Jarvis household (pseudonyms are used throughout) comprises a 13-year-old boy, Jeremy, and his father, Bill. Bill Jarvis is a single parent living in South London, and although Jeremy does have siblings, they do not live with him. Bill is unemployed, but makes some extra money by working casually as a football coach. Both members of this household are vegetarian. Bill Jarvis explains that he became vegetarian when he met Jeremy's mother, but although she no longer lives with them, he has continued this practice for more than 10 years. Jeremy has been vegetarian all his life. One thing that is significant about this household is that while the family does not have a great deal of money to spend on food or anything else, they do not appear to see this as a 'barrier' to healthy eating, even though – unsurprisingly – Bill is quite explicit about the fact that it limits options.

Lesley Strich is an actress whose work can be intermittent. Her younger child, Eliza, is 16, at school doing A levels. They elected to share an interview – examining the implications of which could not, unfortunately, be accommodated in this project. Although theirs is a (nuclear) family of four, at the time of the interview the household was temporarily reduced to two during the week and three at weekends; Tom Strich is a senior manager in a large company, whose work takes him away from home during the week, and 19-year-old Stuart is travelling in his gap year before university. Financial considerations do not appear to be an issue for the household overall, although Eliza explains that she and her friends rarely go out to eat because of the cost. Unlike the rest of the family, she has given up eating meat, and describes herself as vegetarian. It should be noted that, as far as we are aware, there is no formal definition of vegetarianism in accepted and uniform use, even by food or health professionals. Recent studies suggest that those who eat fish may, and may not, describe themselves as vegetarian, and that self-styled vegetarians will also report a penchant for bacon sandwiches (e.g. Keane and Willetts, 1995: 38–40). The designation 'vegetarian' used in this article is that adopted by informants to describe themselves.

In presenting verbatim material from the interviews, we make minimal attempt to capture conversational features, accent, etc., adopting the following notation. Informants' utterances are prefixed by their initial; those prefixed by 'I' are the interviewer's; () indicates the transcribers' inability to hear what was said; upper case indicates emphasis/increased volume; and italicized passages indicate our added emphasis.

Images of the household: shared options, shared limits

One obvious feature of Jeremy and Bill's household is their declared vegetarianism. Given that Jeremy has grown up alongside parents who choose

not to eat meat, it would be possible to see this as a clear case of parental 'influence' on his own choices. However, Jeremy can be heard to use the fact of his vegetarianism to say something about the household in general: that is, about the eating habits that the two of them *share*.

J: We're vegetarians, so we have like, lettuce and houmous . . . And we, like, sometimes get the vegetarian burgers or kind of – stir frying ones . . .

I: Have you always been vegetarian?

J: Yes. Well, since I was born. My dad – I think he was a vegetarian since he met my mum. So, but he's like – he likes being a vegetarian.

An important point to register here – as we shall see when turning later to consider the Strich household – is that while vegetarianism in adolescents has sometimes been understood as an attempt to 'take control' over their diet, Jeremy sees it in a rather different way.

For Jeremy, not eating meat is an important way in which he and his father identify themselves as a household – that is, as a partnership. For example, his first reference to the fact that he does not eat meat is expressed in the plural: 'We're vegetarians', and comes not in the context of a discussion of his own food preferences, but rather as an aside in a conversation about how he and his father organize the shopping, as demonstrated below:

I: So you do that how often?

J: Shopping?

I: Mmmm.

J: Once a week. When the fridge goes low. Sometimes we like, we can last about a day or two, just like with the bare minimums, just like with soup. But we're usually alright. We usually like, eat really well. Cos it's important. He [father] can make really good spaghetti. And that's like, with real (). And in the summer we have like, kebabs, just like pitta bread. We're vegetarians, so we have like, lettuce, and houmous, just like stuff on.

It should be noted that Jeremy does not refer to this shared dietary pattern as a personal choice, or a parental 'influence' that limits him, yet he has always lived with adults who are vegetarian. Instead, he talks about it in terms of 'not missing out' – as if he is well aware that there may be other things on offer of which he has, perhaps unwittingly, been deprived. The first author discussed this with him further:

I: Have you ever eaten meat then?

J: No, I think I might have eaten meat once at a – at a friend's house . . . But I was about five years old, so I can't remember.

I: But you don't ever get the urge to?

J: No, not really, never. I don't see it as a big loss for me. Like, I eat fish

and stuff, so I don't miss out on a good fish and chips. That's about it really.

This extract immediately complicates a model of parental 'influence' that understands adolescent eating patterns to be the outcome of a number of alternatives about who takes responsibility – alternatives including parents, the mother and/or father in conjunction with the teenager; or the young people themselves.

It will be recalled that it is in these terms that Brannen et al. (1994) couched their discussion of maternal influence. But the difficulty with their attempt to calibrate the outcome of 'maternal influence' is that, even in cases where responsibility for diet is negotiated, analytic attention is still focused on people's conscious adherence to particular belief/value systems, rather than the ordering of everyday priorities. The outcome of this is that, in Brannen et al.'s study, parental beliefs and values about food are taken to be the most important contribution to negotiations between parents and children over eating. From this point of view, the way that Jeremy talks about his vegetarianism as something not consciously chosen, but rather as 'not a big loss' could easily be taken to suggest that his eating behaviour is strongly 'influenced' by his father in this way. Yet, this interpretation is, as it were, countered by Jeremy's father, who is well aware of the possibility that his son may choose not to comply, and who, in principle, is not against it:

- I: And is [Jeremy] happy not to eat meat as well?
B: Definitely. He has never eaten it in his life. . . . Yeah, he is quite anti- it actually. He sometimes says he's going out to get a burger but it is just a wind up. I don't particularly mind if he wants to eat it or not. I mean if he likes pieces of slaughtered cow – it's up to him really. . . . I said he was thirteen now – fourteen in a couple of weeks. If he wants to eat meat he can.
I: You would be quite happy?
B: I would be quite happy. He would have to find different utensils or different times of the day to do it. Or he could just go outside and barbecue it, I don't know. But – it does not appear to be I mean, I have said that the only thing, the only thing that would make him do it would be peer pressure.

But – an alternative reading cannot be discounted. Bill may well be saying, in so many words, that he has no objections to Jeremy's eating meat, but his vocabulary – pieces of slaughtered cow – might suggest that he is simultaneously disagreeing with himself. As this example demonstrates, evidence that parents are often willing to accept adolescent eating habits that are different from their own, does not necessarily suggest that this is the outcome of some simple or wholesale capitulation to what market-researchers have

called 'pester power' or other 'influence'. All the same, Jeremy's father would still want his son to keep his meat eating to himself, preparing it somewhere else or at different times of the day. That people are capable of holding two contradictory positions simultaneously makes it harder to identify what might count as influence. We pursue the point further in the next section, but here dwell on the images of household as containing difference, as shared.

It will be recalled that like the Jarvis household, there is also a vegetarian adolescent in the Strich's. They too express an image of household as shared; eating together is clearly valued, and although dispersed, household members come together at weekends. As Eliza declares: 'We always have Sunday dinner together'. Her mother, Lesley, agrees, but adds: 'And yesterday we had dinner together. But, but Eliza's a vegetarian, and the rest of us aren't'. The image of a shared household subtly reflects current circumstances in other ways too. For Eliza, again with her mother agreeing, returns to the point later on when discussing who does which cooking: 'I think during the week, we're more vegetarian and at the weekend it's normally more meat'. Lesley is interested in cooking, including vegetarian dishes and, as we shall see, that she has not discouraged her daughter may well reinforce, or be reinforced by, the everyday priorities when during the week only the two of them are at home.

A similar kind of compromise, although in a different direction, is demonstrated by the next extract, in which with Mary, the mother of a 12-year-old girl, Carol, talks about her refusal to make puddings:

I: Is there a thinking behind avoiding those kinds of foods?

M: Well, cos they're very time consuming for a start. And um, not terribly healthy. Although, given that growing children need loads of carbohydrate, as long as they're not too sweet, they'd probably be okay. Like my daughter loves custard. She absolutely loves custard, but I never make anything that I can put it on really. I mean, occasionally I make a sort of crumble or something and just, you know, with fruit. But very rarely. And she just has a yearning for a pudding. But she can have it at school if she wants, so she's not too deprived.

So far, we have two different, but related, reasons for parents' restriction of adolescents' diets: Jeremy's vegetarian father, Bill, is quite happy for Jeremy to eat meat, provided this does not impinge on his own preferences – or even appear in his field of vision; Carol's mother's refusal to make puddings, on the other hand, derives from a recognition that this would involve her in a considerable amount of extra work. Lesley, however, appears to be economizing on effort by perhaps restricting her own, rather than her daughter's, diet. None appear to consider these household negotiations to be an attempt to 'influence' their adolescents' diets. Rather than being an expression of their beliefs about what *should* be eaten, they are the outcome of broader decisions over food preparation, including the labour this involves.

To illustrate the extent to which the term 'influence' conceals or elides the matter of food preparation as work, we will turn to an example from another of the early interviews. In the following extract, Simon, a 17-year-old boy, talks about the packed lunch his mother makes for him to take to college every day:

I: So what kind of thing would you have on your sandwiches?

S: Um, well, it's usually – my mum does buy cooked meats, but it's all, it's not reconstituted. It's not processed, it's all um, fairly good stuff. Or, more usually, it would be cheeses. It would be something like that, that, that I know I'd like and – as I said, that, given that my mum buys the stuff in the first place – gives my mum control over what I have, and gives me that choice to choose. It's just, it's – that, or I can just sometimes have salad or stuff. Which is always, which you can't have at . . . Or, and I just don't like the sandwiches that they do at college. It just gives me a lot more choice for my mum to make them.

Although in this case Simon's mother clearly *does* want to influence him in a more deliberate way than either Jeremy's father or Carol's mother, Simon sees his decision to conform to parental expectations or 'influence' as something that gives him *more* choice (than at college, for example), since he gets better food. Nevertheless, choosing to take sandwiches from home obviously requires somebody both to purchase and prepare the food.

As can be seen from the next quotation, the way that Simon's mother's interests and his own intermesh over the matter of what he eats during the day, is quite complex:

S: It's just that I think really that, um, that with taking the food my mum makes me in the morning, there's a lot more choice in what I can have. And also I can, if I need to, if I am hungry, and I've got break – I can eat something at 12, rather than wait until 1.15, which is when food is served in the canteen. And as I say, there's a lot more choice. Cos the canteen, it doesn't cater very well for vegetarians or – not that I am a vegetarian, but I usually prefer that kind of food, rather than eating meat that might be processed or . . . And so it's just that, they've never had – I don't think the canteen's a very good range. And other than that all you can buy are soft drinks, chocolate bars and crisps. All of which are fairly expensive. So I suppose it's also saving money. Cos it saves my mum money, packing the lunch. Because it's cheaper, giving me the lunch that she gives me.

Here, Simon talks not only about the kinds of food he prefers to eat, but also about the times of day when it is possible to eat, the availability of his preferred food items, and the cost. In doing so, he draws attention to a whole series of other ways in which the need to eat comes to structure both

his relationship to his mother at home, and also his relationship to the educational establishment he attends.

The idea that a packed lunch from home can be eaten any time is just one of many references made by adolescents in our study to how teenage food choices are so often organized around not simply the kinds of foods they prefer to eat, but also their membership of social groups and institutions that require a certain structuring of time (see Burgess and Morrison, 1998). In the next section, we shall go on to discuss one very striking finding from our research, which concerns the degree to which each adolescent's time is actually organized *for* them – by school, parents or other adults. As a result, the time adolescents do have for leisure or for them to do as they please, is, in some cases, severely limited.

Making up their own minds: adolescent autonomy and independence

Managing time, we suggest, is at issue in the extent to which adolescent autonomy can be enjoyed or permitted on the one hand, or is circumscribed on the other. We have already seen how Carol's mother's decisions about the use of her own time led to the 'restriction' of her liking for puddings and custard. To illustrate further the extent to which adolescents' eating habits are regulated by the need to manage time, we shall return to Jeremy, who describes what happens on weekdays:

J: At school I don't go to tuck. That's too much for me, really. Really. I used to go to tuck, but I don't go any more. And so at lunchtime I go with – I go to the library because, like, the librarian, Miss C., she lets me in early. Cos sometimes I help her out. Then I might just play on the computer, or read a book, or – play L. at chess. At lunchtime.

Jeremy's account of how he arranges eating at school – whichever is the quickest option so he can go and do something else – leaves us unsure as to whether he is 'influenced' by anyone, be it his father or his peers. Clearly his eating both at home and at school is negotiated, but his choices about what to eat also form an integral part of the patterning of his day which, in turn, belongs to a set of much broader organizing principles. For example, whereas Jeremy organizes his school lunchtimes to satisfy his liking for peace and quiet, back at home, this same preference organizes how he and his father choose to prepare and eat their food. They both eat 'from the same pot' – as Jeremy puts it – but most likely in different places. Jeremy likes to read while he is eating, whereas his father prefers to watch television. Neither Jeremy nor his father takes talking to be an essential part of the 'family meal', which is nevertheless still something that is prepared with two people in mind. The separate interview with Bill also reveals that the very act of cooking blunts his own appetite, and he waits a little for it to return before eating.

The idea of eating together is a key element in much professional discussion about healthy eating among adolescents (Brannen et al., 1994; Fatchett, 1996). But while eating together is frequently held to be important, we want to suggest that its meaning can easily be lost underneath oversimplified ideas about 'influence'. In recent years there has been much talk about the so-called decline of the family meal (see Murcott, 1997). Yet a preliminary review of our data (and that from a parallel study in progress in Leicester (Dickinson and Leader, personal communication)) suggests that household members still invest much in the notion and in the practice of family food sharing, although this does not always happen in a self-evidently conventional way. Jeremy's family meal, for example, was defined as such because both he and his father ate the same food at more or less the same time, although they saw no need to eat in the same place.

Furthermore, it is important to note that when parents and adolescents choose to share a meal, it may not be simply the choice of food that is at stake. The next extract comes from an interview with a 14-year-old girl, Nicky, whose parents claim to share the food preparation and cooking. Nicky is describing her father's attempt to prepare a family meal:

N: He wants to . . . plump me up to stick me in the oven, he does . . . it's weird. But – you can't get through to him that. The way he does it, he gets the, say if the chips are there, the fish fingers are there, and you've got to stick beans on it. Instead of putting it on the side, he gets the fish fingers in the middle and the chips, and then shoves all beans over it. Can't he just make it neat? Like a couple of fish fingers, chips there, and beans there. NO. He has to stick all of it together, and go plonk, plonk, plonk. I looked in, I said, I'm not eating that. And then he gets all angry. And I say, look, the way you made it. And he'll just throw it on the table. I say, it's the way you made it, you know.

The first author continued this conversation by asking:

I: And what does he say when you say, oh, you could have – arranged it nicely, or whatever?

N: Do it yourself.

I: Right. So he's not interested in that.

N: No. He just likes doing things quickly. Or when, say his dinner's been there for about ten seconds, then you come to get your dinner, and goes to you, oh, hurry up, mine's – mine's getting cold. I say, It's been there for two seconds, or ten seconds. And he goes, my dinner's getting cold. And then he **THROWS** it at you. It's kind of, well, okay, I'm going. And sort of, walks off with it.

Here, Nicky is showing us a different view of how 'influence' is cross-cut by the need for time management. In this case, it is the *parent* who wants 'fast

food', not Nicky, the teenager. But while it is easy to laugh at this rather stereotyped representation of fathers' attempts at food preparation, this kind of scenario does show how the organization of family food practices is quite intricate, and how the question of *who* influences *whom* becomes increasingly unclear. Nicky's refusal to eat what her father cooks is a significant factor in her own eating habits; in any case she reports that she and her mother most frequently team up to make something different.

Indeed, one of the problems with asking to what extent teenagers have control over their own diets is that the question tends to support an assumption that the choices teenagers make are autonomous. From this point of view, what teenagers eat when alone, or with their friends, comes to represent an 'adolescent diet'. What they eat at home with their families is then taken to be 'influenced' by the parents' beliefs and behaviours. However, Jeremy's explanation of his own eating practices raises questions about how appropriate it may be to understand food choices (either adolescent or adult) as the product of independent thought or autonomous action. For Jeremy, the kinds of food he chooses to eat when his father is not there are perhaps less well described as food 'preferences', than as components of an organizing principle that *connects* the school with the household, parents with peers. Here, a principle of 'balance' (of the popular kind, captured by expressions such as 'swings and roundabouts' rather than the professional dietetic assessment in terms of nutrients) is crucial. In the following extract, Jeremy is talking about what he eats at school:

J: Well, I go to the canteen, then eat, then come back. Maybe go to the library again, then just – go back. I'm not – I don't eat healthily at lunchtime. I usually have two doughnuts and a soft drink. Two snickers and a soft drink. Or chips and a soft drink. I, like, have a soft drink nearly every day, so I'm not really that nutritious.

I: Right. Is that the kind of food you prefer then?

J: Yes. Well, I eat really well at home, cos my dad cooks like, really good stuff.

I: So you think that's fine then.

J: Yes. Cos like last night my dad made this really good soup. So it kind of made up for the two doughnuts.

In this extract, the first author keeps coming back to the idea of 'preference' or taste, and Jeremy keeps politely agreeing, but then goes on to explain that it does not quite work like that. When Jeremy is talking about preferring doughnuts, however, he is talking not just about the taste and so on, but crucially about how eating fits into his everyday life in a much more continuous fashion than would be suggested by categories such as 'school dinner' or 'evening meal' at home. Note of the persistence of popular conceptions of dietary balance is dotted through the literature (e.g. Murcott, 1983, and for review, Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). Understanding the

import of these conceptions, we suggest, needs to be elaborated by allowing for consideration of priorities in and practical exigencies of everyday life – all of which is also required in interpreting the antecedents to eating behaviours.

Keeping an eye on what they eat: parental vigilance and encouragement

One way of thinking about adolescent autonomy is in terms of young people's escaping from some sort of parental gravitational pull. Such a view risks relying, however, on assuming a somewhat inflexible parental position. Yet though parents are likely to want to ensure they are vigilant, they may equally seek to encourage their adolescent children. Pamela Merrick, for example, talked of her 12-year-old daughter's resourcefulness, her determined character. She described her as 'dancing to her own drummer', one who insists on 'mak[ing] up her own mind . . . She's not a sheep'. Far from this propensity's occasioning parental disquiet, Pam goes on to declare:

P: I like a child that's independent. That is Laura. If she's living in the house she lives under my rules, but she's a person. She has as much right to question what goes on in the house as we have to make rules.

Lesley Strich also offers parental encouragement. Her daughter, Eliza, explained that she has been a (fish eating) vegetarian since she was almost 13. She had, though, taken several attempts to convert. Eventually, since it seemed hypocritical to worry about animals but continue to eat meat:

E: me and my friends sort of decided we would . . . we'd all thought about it . . . It wasn't – peer pressure or anything like that. It was just because we thought . . . we'd be more likely to stick at it if other people were doing it . . . we'd all sort of done it on and off before that.

Her mother has, as she put it, 'spurts' of being more imaginative with vegetarian cooking but in between whiles, the daughter has 'loads of Linda McCartney meals and things like that'. Though Lesley admitted it was inconvenient to have a non-meat eater in the household, she also sought to maintain some oversight of the nutritional quality of her daughter's now vegetarian diet. She did not, it seems, attempt to discourage her daughter, but explained: 'she thought she was right *so it had to be respected*'. With possible echoes of Jeremy's father's view, both Pamela's and Lesley's position is of a piece with parental valuation of, and attempts to encourage their children in, some independence of mind and self-reliance, which, in turn, rather blunts any sharp distinction between an adult and adolescent outlook.

In any case, though some researchers have attempted to differentiate

adolescent dietary habits from those of adults by referring to perceived differences in preferences and patterns of consumption, it is important to recognize that these differences may be less the effect of some kind of either/or (either adolescent 'choices' or even parental oversight) than the consequence of the social circumstances they find themselves in. By this, we mean that the empirical differences between teenage and adult dietary habits which have most often been accounted for through the term 'influence' (see Lau et al., 1990; Brannen et al., 1994) may be better understood through an examination of eating as a social practice via which adolescents negotiate their relationships with one another, and with their families. For example, in the following extract, the first author is talking to Jeremy's father about the prawn curry he says is Jeremy's favourite food:

- I: So would Jeremy perhaps ask one day for prawn curry because it's his favourite?
- B: Yeah. If he has been good – I make him prawn curry and offer him that. Yeah, it is that. I mean that is a treat – because prawns are real expensive. Nothing else really. That is a particular favourite of his. I try to balance it a bit – you know? Cheap stuff, expensive stuff. We eat a lot of kind of – pulses. I mean, we don't eat meat.
- I: Right.
- B: So – fish basically – some pulses. A lot of pasta – vegetables, stuff like that. I mean, if he has beans on toast then I try to make sure that the next day is kind of – has something a bit more balanced, you know.
- I: I see. So you keep an eye on what he eats?
- B: Yeah. Definitely. Definitely. Yeah. Yeah.
- I: And when you say balanced – how exactly . . . ?
- B: Well you know what I mean. Sort of fish, potatoes, a couple of veg – fresh food if possible, not like – frozen fish isn't too bad. Uh – just the things that you are supposed to. I mean I don't chart or anything whatever he is having. Just – er – I don't know. I suppose when he has meat and two veg you know that is a balanced meal. Something like – that would be fish instead of meat . . . We plan it when we are shopping, you know what I mean. You know what you are buying – er – you know that there is a couple of . . . two or three . . . decent meals, like. Proper meals. Rest might be soups or something like that. Or salads with something on them, you know.

As this exchange shows, Jeremy's household is one in which the 'easy' meals (whether at school or at home) are devolved to the child.

So although Jeremy's eating habits at school (two doughnuts and a soft drink) might suggest that his independent choices conform to a stereotypical notion of a typical 'teenage diet', in contrast to his eating at home which may then be said to be 'influenced' by his father, this should not be seen as a battle about young people's wayward preferences. On the contrary, if

there is a conflict between parent and child over what gets eaten, it is perhaps more appropriately described as a battle over who does the domestic work. It is this division of labour which brings us to our final consideration of 'the problem of influence'.

Domestic labour: parental persuasion, adolescent objection

The long-standing convention that a household is defined by a shared table and keeping common accounts, serves as a neat reminder that (adolescent) eating habits provide an important way in to recollecting the day-to-day practicalities of domestic food arrangements. In Jeremy's household, the sharing of resources – both economic and emotional – is shown both in the actual meals prepared, and in their shopping arrangements, where Jeremy often goes with his father to remind him of what is needed – acting, in effect, as a kind of human shopping list. But the point to be made here is that in this household it is less that Jeremy is expected gradually to make his own decisions about food, and take control or responsibility for his own diet. Rather, in his as well as other cases in our study, becoming 'adult' means joining in making household decisions, and beginning to take more responsibility for domestic labour. The following extract comes from a conversation with Jeremy's father about how much work he thought Jeremy should contribute to household eating arrangements.

- I: So you have not tried to sort of force Jeremy?
- B: Um, not really. I think – it will come naturally if he is interested in cooking. You just, you have to force him to do anything. Like you need a salad NOW. If you get the salad made he will go upstairs and play with his computer or something like that.
- I: I see. So if you say he has to do it then he does his bit, but if there is the question of you doing it, then he . . .
- B: Yes, definitely, yes. I mean, he leave a mess and everything, you know. I mean, cook, er, get some spuds ready, scrub the new potatoes, find the new potatoes scrubbed, then there is soil all over the sink and around on the floor and bits that he has cut the eyes out and has just thrown them on the floor, you know.

When asked about whether he would like Jeremy to take more responsibility for cooking and preparing food, his father says, yes, of course, but this is tempered by the fact that this takes more time, is more 'hassle', and makes more mess.

Such observations carry important implications for some of the debates in nutrition and health education – most particularly those about adolescents' poor culinary knowledge and skills. For example, a recent intervention by the School Curriculum Assessment Authority (SCAA) in association with the Design Council and the Royal Society of Arts with the

title 'Focus on Food' aimed 'to identify, promote, develop and sustain the place of food in education'. Underlying this initiative was the idea that 'experts' and professionals with an interest in food may be able to 'influence' children and adolescents positively in such a way as to increase their knowledge of food and food preparation, and to promote an appreciation of 'excellence' in this area. Although such interventions may be educationally beneficial in themselves, it must be recognized, however, that knowledge and 'appreciation of excellence' are not the only factors that determine whether or not parents, or children, choose to prepare particular kinds of meals.

The notion of 'influencing' young people positively to enjoy cooking and eating still does not take into account the fact that if teenagers were to take full responsibility for their own eating, this would mean asking important questions about the effect this may have on the household as a whole, and, perhaps most importantly, the kinds of *work* this would involve. Jeremy's following account of his attempts to prepare food for the household illuminate some of the issues at stake:

- J: I'm not really a very good cook. But recently he made me do, like, potatoes. Just like get the potatoes, wash them, put them in the pan. Boiling water. Add the salt. Put the lid on, and just let them steam.
- I: And why do you think he's made you do that?
- J: Cos, like, he wants me to cook these things.
- I: Are you terribly keen to learn, or not really?
- J: I'm not really keen to learn, to learn. Cos like, if he – if he's back he'll do it. Most of the preparing, like. I like making beans on toast, and soup. I can make egg, kind of. Any type of egg. I just get an egg, and just put it in, and like I cook scrambled egg, boiled egg, different types of egg. It's just like – so it's there for a sandwich. I'm not good, but I'll get by.
- I: Because it's not something you're keen to sort of – get into?
- J: No not really.
- I: No. Do you know why, particularly?
- J: Because you – there's like so much stuff on the market. Just like – microwaveable stuff and things like that. It's just like – easier. Just like – you can't eat that well, it's not very nutritious, but like . . . Well, my dad cooks for me, like in the week. He cooks like four times, five times a week. And so, I'm just like, I'm okay. I just have like soup, and a piece of toast or a kebab. Just like on the remaining two days. So – or leftover pasta from last night maybe. Some old curry, or just an egg sandwich or something. Cereal, something like that.

Descriptions such as these help us begin to understand why particular households end up preparing and cooking certain foods rather than others. As this quotation illustrates, Jeremy and his father have developed a division of household labour which suits both of them, while allowing each to

make some of their own decisions about what is eaten. Food thus plays a part in the economic and emotional organization of the household, and also features in the relationship between father and son in so far as it serves to construct a sharing of resources and of labour. From this, we can infer that for adolescents to assert more control over their own eating would involve more than simply changing their dietary habits. 'Influence' on eating is not something that passes in a direct, linear fashion from adult to child – or indeed from school, friends or television screen to plate. Undoubtedly, what adolescents eat is to some extent related to the habits and attitudes of their parents and peers. However, we would suggest that the complex processes which we have only begun to document here are less well understood via the term 'influence', than through an understanding of how food is part and parcel of day-to-day living, the social organization of the household itself, and the negotiation of relationships within it.

Conclusion

Seeking to problematize 'influence' casts the use of the expression in much more complex a light than may always have been catered for. The expression may serve very well as a shorthand just to sketch something quickly in non-technical terms. But even then, so doing may still disguise the intense complexity of the everyday lives of adolescents whose eating habits and attitudes it aims to describe and explain. The conduct of our project leads us to suggest that the interactional processes involved are poorly characterized in terms of mechanical models, such as the one by Lau et al. described earlier. As our examples suggest, negotiations between adults and adolescents over cooking, shopping and food preparation, the need to co-ordinate different work and leisure schedules and the wishes of parents to be both vigilant and encouraging operate against an idea that there is some simple 'influence' emanating from any one source, be it individual, group or set of routine practices. In other words, we confirm that it may be much more appropriate and illuminating, to talk less about (parental) 'influence' and much more about negotiations between household members.

Our discussion is of a piece with exposing to critical appraisal the way the expression influence is used to imply the independent will of one individual or group, acting upon the choices and attitudes of individual adolescents, in such a way as to affect their behaviour in particular, predetermined ways. In contrast, we have aimed to demonstrate here that adopting a notion of 'influence' as signifying some phenomenon which can be held to explain, or even is merely temporally antecedent to, adolescent eating habits – never mind a question of changing them for better or worse – is to cover over a wealth of detail about household relationships and negotiations that we propose is essential to consider in order better to understand how and why adolescents eat what they do. In this respect, those negotiations serve both

to construct and secure the very relationships between parents and children that are presupposed in many familiar debates and anxieties about influences on adolescents.

The implications for both the promotion and study of health are, we propose, self-evident and potentially far-reaching. Diet is not just a major feature of the promotion of healthy 'lifestyle' but a feature that has been held to be somewhat intractable in attempts to effect change in a desired direction. The manner in which the social and behavioural concomitants associated with one or other actual diet are characterized, defined and understood is, then, crucial in at least two directions. Both entail adopting caution. Future research geared to an improved understanding of diet-related behaviour may well be strongly advised to be sure to couch its thrust, conception and design in the light of a developed appreciation of an idea of 'influence' presented here. Indeed, there may be a case for extending this appreciation to the investigation of other aspects of health-related behaviour in addition to diet. Second, the formulation of relevant health policy may just risk missing the mark without a grasp of the complexities hitherto concealed by thinking solely in uni-dimensional and uni-directional terms that 'influence' commonly connotes.

Notes

1. That the second author paid relatively little attention to this choice of terminology was not out of carelessness but as a result of aiming for clarity via a direct rather than complicated literary style, writing to length, etc.
2. We are grateful to one of the anonymous referees for this suggestion.
3. The work done in the early 1970s by Douglas and Nicod (1974) where the latter took up residence as a lodger in four separate households is the only instance, as far as we know, of something approaching participant observation of domestic food/eating in industrialized contexts, although it is understood that commercial market research companies are paying attention to the possibility of videorecording naturally occurring activity in the home.

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