

‘Ourfoodstories@e-mail.com’: An Auto/Biographical Study of Relationships with Food

Julie Parsons

Plymouth University, UK

jmparsons@plymouth.ac.uk

Abstract

Popular discourses and current government policy focus on the need for individuals and families to make healthy food choices, without acknowledging the social and cultural milieu in which these are embedded. A neo-liberal focus on responsible individualism is part of a middle class habitus that ensures foodwork and foodplay are located within distinct heteronormative cultural fields. In my thesis I explore narratives from seventy-five mainly middle class respondents who engaged in a series of asynchronous online interviews over nine months beginning in November 2010.

The themes that emerged aligned with public policy debates on the family, healthy eating, eating disorders, ‘fat’ bodies and elite foodways. Hence, feeding the family ‘healthy’ meals ‘prepared from scratch’ was considered a means of acquiring social, symbolic and cultural capital. ‘Fat’ talk and ‘lipoliteracy’ or learning to read the body were ways of performing femininity, whilst elite foodways were utilised as forms of hegemonic masculinities. Hence, in a challenge to the individualisation thesis my research demonstrates the complexity of food relationships beyond individual consumer choice.

Throughout I adopt an auto/biographical approach that stresses the interconnectedness of biography and autobiography, focuses on researcher reflexivity and is sensitive to respondent subjectivities. Respondents used a common vocabulary of individuality, whilst simultaneously embedding themselves in family and kinship relations. Indeed, family, gender, and class, were the means of anchorage in a sea of remembering that engendered a sense of ontological security.

Foodways are, thus, part of a habitus that is gendered, classed, temporal and historical. Women in the study conformed to cultural scripts of heteronormative femininity, whilst men resorted to hegemonic masculinities to distance themselves from feminised foodways and care work. These identities were not part of a negotiated family model, but located in cultural fields that reinforced and naturalised gendered divisions, they were bound by gender and class.

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