

Food and eating practices during the transition from secondary school to new social contexts

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Abstract

This paper examines how the new social contexts experienced by young people after leaving school are related to everyday food practices and eating habits. Findings from in-depth interviews with 31 young people aged 16-24 years studying at a college of further education in South East England are used to explore the role of new social spaces and places and their impact on young people's eating habits and routines. Young people's changing peer groups were related to the re-negotiation of food and eating practices and young people often adopted particular habits when with particular groups of peers. The consumption of alcohol, and feelings about appetite, weight and appearance were sources of anxiety for some young people, who often felt alone and different to their peers. Young people often voiced a desire to differentiate from the food ethos present in their family home and this was sometimes related to the adoption of a vegetarian diet; some young people, however, reported being nostalgic for the 'family food' they ate before making the transition from school. This study shows that food and eating practices are not ordinary, mundane events in young people's lives, but an important part of dealing with the transition to new social contexts.

Food and eating practices during the transition from secondary school to new social contexts

Introduction

The period of the lifecourse between adolescence and adulthood is a time when many young people experiment with 'risky' behaviours that may have an impact on long term health. One third of 15 year old girls and 28% of 15 year old boys smoke regularly (Denscombe 2001). Forty two percent of young men aged 16-24 years drink more than the recommended weekly amount of alcohol as do 32% of young women (Sproston and Primatesta 2003). Although young people are often thought of as resilient to the effects of such behaviour (Lawton 2002), West and Sweeting (2002) have argued that young people are as likely to be influenced by the social and economic factors that cause inequalities in health, as their parents are. Lower socio-economic status is associated with a greater likelihood of eating a diet that is not conducive to long-term health, with more disadvantaged populations consuming greater quantities of 'unhealthy' foods, that is, foods that are high in fat and low in fibre. A diet of this type is more prevalent among all 16-24 year olds than among the adult population as a whole (Henderson et al 2002). Young people's diets are characterised by high consumption of foods like burgers, crisps and chocolate and a low consumption of fruit, vegetables and higher fibre foods, like breakfast cereals (Henderson et al 2002). Although several studies have sought to unpack the nature of the relationship between youth transitions, social context and health-relevant behaviours such as drinking and smoking (Pavis et al 1998), little work has been done to examine how everyday food practices and eating habits interact with the social settings and situations which young people experience at the end of

compulsory education, arguably, one of the key transition periods linking adolescence and adulthood.

In this late, modern age, it is argued that young people face a protracted transition from childhood to adulthood (Furlong 2000). This is partly due to the copious changes that subsequent cohorts of young people have experienced since the 1970s and 1980s; fewer opportunities for paid work, higher unemployment, increasing pressure to participate in youth training, further and higher education, and inequalities in pay making it more difficult to move away from the parental home. Some social commentators have argued that these changes in structural context go hand in hand with an increase in personal agency, thereby creating more individualised routes and tributaries on the way to 'adult living' (Denscombe 2001). Young people's lives may be less constrained by traditional structures such as gender and class, resulting in greater uncertainty about the future and, perhaps, more opportunity for risk-taking and experiences which push the boundaries of what is and what is not 'normative' behaviour (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). This, however, may lead young people to question who they are, and to go through a period of trying out different behaviours, to see what 'fits', in terms of their established and also evolving values.

Young people are likely to come into contact with different groups of peers as they negotiate their routes to adulthood (Denscombe 2001), which may both assist in determining what their roles are whilst adding to the complexity of their everyday lives. This could result in feelings of fragmentation or tension, resolved by balancing a set of different values or behaviours. This may explain why young people have a 'repertoire' of health relevant behaviours (West and Michell 1998) as each one 'fits' a particular

context, with a particular group. Studies have shown that young smokers are friends with other young smokers and that teenage drinkers associate with other teenage drinkers (Pavis et al 1998). Peers are not always friends yet they may still exert a great deal of influence on young people (West and Michell 1998). Young people may want to become friends with a particular group and therefore adopt the behaviour that marks out the group's identity; they may want to fit in rather than stand out or they may seek to influence the behaviour of the group, although young people may seek out others who exhibit the behaviour to which they aspire, rather than a change in behaviour being the result of associating with a new group (West and Michell 1998). Whatever the mechanism by which peer influence operates, uncertainty is 'existentially troubling' (Giddens 1991) and young people need to feel a sense of 'collective belonging' (Fischler 1998) which interacting with peers may offer. Just as Denscombe (2001) found that young people saw smoking as a shared consumer activity that united them with their peers, so young people might use the consumption of food as a way of making sense of a risky society (Miles 2000). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the incidence of anorexia nervosa peaks when young people are leaving compulsory education¹ (Fombonne 1995) and that half of 15 year old girls are thought to be trying to lose weight at any one time (British Youth Council 1999), perhaps reflecting pressures to make friends and to be accepted by new peer groups (Paxton et al 1999). Dissatisfaction with one's body and attempts to control one's appetite are unlikely to fit comfortably with peer influences on food practices and eating habits.

One possible consequence of a protracted transition to adulthood is that young people remain semi-dependent on their parents for longer - financially, emotionally and in

¹ There are two peaks in rates of diagnosis; the other is at the time of puberty (Fombonne 1995)

terms of having a roof over their heads (Jones and Bell 2000). Family eating practices and eating habits are usually established over the course of childhood and the shared meanings and values attached to meals and the particular food ethos that prevails within a family may be particularly difficult for a young person to break away from whilst still attached to parental views and norms. Meals within families are a chance to catch up with each other and this serves to foster unity and to reinforce family identity (DeVault 1991). Just as Valentine (2003) argues that family meals serve to highlight gender roles and power relations between men and women in traditional nuclear families, so too might food and eating highlight power struggles and conflict between parents and their sons or daughters who are trying to make sense of their uncertain lives. Young people may struggle to re-negotiate their eating habits in the context of new social interactions and indeed some may not be ready to do so.

Teenagers play out their lives in a range of social spaces and places and the end of school often brings a decrease in adult surveillance and a potential increase in the range of geographical and social places that they inhabit (Valentine 2003). This might explain why Pavis and colleagues (1998) found that young people who drank regularly moved away from the open spaces (such as street corners and parks) of their school days and more frequently visited pubs and clubs as they got older, shifting away from being a school-aged drinker to an adult drinker who can legitimately gain access to the places where other adults drink. Going on to further and higher education, taking paid employment and leaving home also open up a plethora of new social places in which young people can continue to try out new health-relevant behaviours, without interference from teachers and parents (at least in terms of adults being less aware of what they do when they are at college or work, for example).

Whilst the negotiation of food and eating practices has been examined in relation to, for example, gender, illness and body image, little work (Valentine 1999) has focused on young people's food and eating practices during the transition to adulthood. The research discussed here focused on young people aged 16-24 years. It aimed to examine the social contexts encountered by this group of young people in the years following the end of compulsory education and to investigate how these contexts were interconnected with the everyday experiences of food and eating.

Method

The data this paper draws on come from research carried out in the South East of England between February and June 2001. The setting was a college of further education, chosen because it was the major provider of further education for 16-18 year olds in the area and a large proportion of students were aged 16-24 years. There was only a small number of ethnic minority students enrolled (3%), which reflected the low number in the area generally in 2000/01. There were fewer male students (41%) at the college than female students (59%), and this was different to the male/ female ratio in further education in England as a whole (45% / 55%) (Further Education Funding Council 1999). About half of the students were aged 16-18 years, which is considerably higher than the proportion of 16-18 year olds in further education generally in England (Further Education Funding Council 1999). Seventy per cent of the post-16 age group were still in the education system in this area and students were likely to have attended a grant maintained school before coming to the college. In 1996, after leaving the college, 28% of students went on to higher education, whilst just under one quarter were

working. Unemployment, although declining, was higher (4.2%) than in the county generally, although lower than the rate in England in 2000/01 as a whole.

The participants were selected from 480 students enrolled in the school of science and health for the academic year 2000/01, of whom almost three-quarters (n=328) were aged between 16 and 24 years at the time of enrolment. The students were predominately female, reflecting the gender biased intake of the health and beauty courses, and were mainly enrolled for level one and level two courses (equivalent to National Vocational Qualifications at level 1 and 2). There was also a bias towards the younger end of the age range of 16-24 years. This meant that there were very few older male students in the sampling frame.

Letters were sent to students in September 2000 asking them to participate. By the time the fieldwork began, in February 2001, 47 students aged 16-24 years had withdrawn from their course, leaving 281 (86%) in the sampling frame. The young people who replied (40 students) were then asked to keep a 24-hr descriptive food diary, detailing what they ate, where they were and who they were with at the time and to add any other comments if they wished to. Interviews were then arranged with each respondent.

Individual interviews were carried out, after a pilot phase, with 31 students in a private room at the college. Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, and used a topic guide and the food diary as prompts to elicit information about respondents' everyday food practices and eating habits and the social contexts in which these took place. Each respondent was interviewed using a biographical approach, that is, they were each asked to recall as much information as possible about their food practices and eating habits, from their early teenage years to

the time of the interview, using the key events considered salient to each young person as prompts for recall. With each respondent's consent, interviews were tape-recorded, and all were transcribed immediately after the interview had taken place.

The analysis was an iterative process of looking for broad themes across transcripts and then clarifying sub-themes within each transcript. New themes were explored further in interviews with subsequent respondents. Once the inquiry had proceeded this far, with the analysis firmly grounded in the data, other substantive areas and associations arising from the literature were explicitly looked for amongst the data and categories.

Conclusions and theories became increasingly objectified and were situated in context at both individual and aggregate levels. The software package QSR Nud*ist (Version 5.0) was used for the purpose of data manipulation and management and this also helped with the process of logging the themes and theories developed during the in-depth analysis stage.

More women (n=25) than men (n=6) were interviewed, reflecting the gender bias within the faculty. The majority of students (77%) were still living with their parents. There were fewer 19-24 year olds in the study than 16-18 year olds; therefore, where quotes from older respondents are reported, their age is reported as 19-24 years, to ensure anonymity is maintained. Most of the students were studying full time and most had part-time jobs, usually in supermarkets or other local shops. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms and the data have been decontextualised, where appropriate, to ensure individuals cannot be identified.

FINDINGS

The impact of new spaces and places

The respondents had been at college for varying amounts of time, depending on their ages and whether they were studying full- or part-time. The majority had also taken on part-time jobs since leaving school (one respondent was working full-time). As well as these educational and occupational transitions, some respondents had left the parental home to live with a partner, to live alone or to live with siblings. These changes in working, living and studying environments influenced what, how often and where young people ate meals and snacks. Although it could be argued that young people choose how to negotiate these changes to their everyday lives, being placed in a new environment contributed greatly to young people's adaptation to their new routines and eating habits.

Some respondents found that the college timetable did not allow an adequate amount of time to purchase and eat lunch, whilst others felt pressured to spend the lunch break preparing for classes or spending time in the library or on the computers. This resulted in young people missing lunch. The short breaks that were built into the college timetable often facilitated the purchase and consumption of snacks, either brought in from home or bought in the college shop or refectory, although many respondents also chose not to eat during these breaks. These new situations were seen as an embedded part of college life, rather than something that respondents could control.

Wendy: "so how does that differ to when you're in college all day?"

Michael: "quite a bit! When I'm in a college I normally don't eat as much.

Normally I've got too much work to do and I just work through breaks and

especially with this semester we've got less breaks and they're much shorter breaks so you don't have time to go out and do anything, especially if you've got a lot of work on. You have to work through, just to catch up" [18 years old]

Many of the respondents commented that their health-related behaviour had changed since leaving the school environment, with snacking replacing meals at lunchtime. This was often because of the removal of the adult surveillance inherent in school life; some respondents felt pressured to eat lunch at school and the move to the more autonomous college environment removed this requirement to eat a proper meal.

Wendy: "so how has it changed from when you were at school?"

Shan: "well at school I had to eat my lunch, I used to get free lunch, I had to eat it. I always used to eat at school once a day. At college now, I didn't eat nothing at college today but I went into McDonalds and had a quarter cheese burger, and that will last me for the whole day, a cheese burger" [16 years old]

Starting college often required adaptation to an earlier start to the day because of long journey times. For a minority of respondents, enrolling at this particular college meant a journey time of up to 2-3 hours each morning and evening. Many of those interviewed said that they ate breakfast when at school but had started to skip this meal to accommodate the extra time needed to travel to classes. Some young people did report, however, that breakfast had become more important since leaving school, to provide

energy for the long journeys undertaken and the concentration required during classes at college.

Nina: “on a week day I don't have a breakfast in the morning, I haven't got no time, got to get to the train station and that, but on a weekend, it's either toast and Bovril or cereal, because there's never anything else in the house” [17 years old]

Zoë: I never used to eat breakfast [before school], because I used to go to the shop and get crisps. I'd be like, oh I'm late, can't be bothered, run up the shop and get crisps or something. So now I think I've made a bigger effort to eat breakfast cause of the fact that, y'know, lessons are two hours long, I've got a lot of travelling to do, so I make sure I do eat a lot of breakfast in the mornings. So, yeah, I've changed into eating a lot of breakfast [17 years old]

Combining full-time study with a part-time job was an everyday reality for most of those interviewed. This added additional time pressure and almost all the respondents reported skipping meals, going for much longer periods without eating because of the need to get from college to work, or eating a snack instead of a meal. The prevailing work culture also influenced whether, and what they ate whilst at work.

Wendy: "and what about since you've been working?"

Amelia: "no not really I don't think...I might skip...if I'm working in the mornings I might skip, I don't have time for breakfast, so I suppose it

might have affected that because I always used to have breakfast on a Sunday morning and I don't tend to have that, or if I have a break, I have a break at 9 o'clock, I have a Snickers bar and Red Bull just to keep me awake. So that's not very good." [17 years old]

Wendy: "but do you enjoy [your new job at the hospital]?"

Samantha: "Oh yeah! Definitely. I've lost a stone in weight, because I don't have this eating pattern anymore. I'm not sitting at a desk picking"

Wendy: "is that what you used to do?"

Samantha: "oh yes!"

Wendy: "stuff you bought there, or took in?"

Samantha: "there always used to be biscuits there, you do in an office don't you? Or sweets, or we'd bring something in for special, then cakes for birthdays, cakes for Easter..." [19-24 years old]

Whose home? Whose food?

Young people's food and eating practices were often strongly influenced and reinforced by the culture of the eating environment (and the food available) in the parental home. When spending more time outside the home (at college and work), some respondents still waited until they returned home to eat, which often meant not eating for considerable periods. Moving out of the family home and becoming more independent by living alone, with a partner or with older siblings influenced what young people ate. There was a tendency when first living away from parental influences (and from food which is so readily accessible when it is bought by somebody else) to choose convenience foods, snacks and to over-indulge in treats. This was often followed by

young people's attempts at improving their diets and making the transition to a more stable, or at least more sustainable, eating habits. After the initial period away from home, young people reported wanting to eat better quality food, more fruit and vegetables and more regular meals with fewer snacks. In reality, however, budgeting for, preparing and eating better meals in the new context of one's own home was a huge leap into unknown territory, as illustrated by the following quotes from Carol's interview.

Carol: "I can't be bothered to cook [vegetables]. If I buy them fresh, like fresh carrots, if I'm cooking for myself I can't be bothered. And I've found with frozen packs, it says it takes 15-20 minutes, but I've found you take them out then and they're still hard, so it's like 30-45 minutes, and I haven't got the time to be waiting around for it" [19-24 years old]

Wendy: "so when you'd left home, all of a sudden you had to cook for yourself, shop..."

Carol: "it was a bit of a shock! You realise how expensive it really is. I didn't realise the cost of food before. Just buying chocolate bars and crisps, it's only 35p a time, then as soon as you leave home, it's like a can of spaghetti, or just buying mince, fresh or frozen mince, it's £5-6, and you're like Wow! I didn't realise"

Peer groups, food and eating

The young people in this study invariably entered new social situations after leaving school. They met new peer groups through college, their part-time jobs and becoming

more involved in adult leisure pursuits, for example, going to pubs and clubs and spending time with peers who owned, or had use of, cars. Developing a busier, more adult social life served to shift young people's food and eating practices further away from being home-based to becoming focused on 'riskier choices'; missing meals, eating high-fat 'junk' food and drinking alcohol.

Zoë: "Sometimes I miss meals, because I'm supposed to be going out. If I do a late shift at [work], if I finish work at 7:30 and Dominic finishes at 6, he'll come pick me up, rush back to mine, get changed, 'cause we're meant to be going out, so whoops! Miss dinner, I don't really think about it..." [17 years old]

Amelia: "If I've been drinking the previous night, I might not have breakfast or like, and then on a Friday night we all go drinking and then we go to the kebab shop, that's like a rule, that we normally do that" [17 years old]

Young people often reported purchasing and consuming foods when outside the home that they would not eat when at home. Becoming involved with new social networks and using these as an impetus to eat different foods acted as a way of differentiating young people's past (adolescent) self from their evolving adult identity. Specific foods were consumed when with particular friendship and peer groups (these foods were not eaten consistently) and young people were often aware of this difference. Some respondents reported consuming food as a way of fitting in with peers, despite not being hungry and this created tensions or inconsistencies with their normative habits.

Alcohol had a dual role to play in influencing young people's eating habits and food practices. Drinking when out with friends was often related to snacking on crisps and burgers but suffering from a hang-over resulted in some respondents skipping meals the following day because of feeling nauseous. Fitting in with British cultural norms with regard to drinking alcohol and eating 'junk' presented some young people with a difficult tension because of concerns about their appetite, weight or appearance. Christina, for example, frequently expressed her desire to go out drinking with her new friends, but she was unhappy with the resulting weight gain that she perceived this caused:

Wendy: "what about if you have been out, you don't get something on the way home...".

Christina: "sometimes I do, sometimes it's like a kebab or something, like a bloke!"

Wendy: "how often do you do that?"

Christina: "not very often, only on really special occasions, like someone's birthday, someone's 18th or 21st, not often"

Wendy: "how often do you go out drinking?"

Christina: "A LOT, I drink a lot of alcohol, that's why I've put on a lot of weight I think, cause I drink like Bacardi Breezers as well, and they're like so full of sugar" [17 years old]

Other respondents also highlighted these issues. Young women keen to be identified with the female 'thin-ideal' (Williams and Germov 1999) often reported trying to control their appetite and eating behaviours so that their peers, and boys in particular,

liked them and were attracted to them. Failing at this food control resulted in guilt, anxiety and further attempts to succeed.

Karen: “A good way to lose weight is to starve myself. Which is not the proper way at all, but, now, I only do it for a couple of days, so it’s not too bad. It’s only when I get with a boyfriend, or something like that. I’m a bit loony!” [17 years old]

The young women in this study who were anxious about the need to be slim and in control overwhelmingly perceived that they were alone or different to their peers.

Amelia: “I suppose [my weight] does bother me quite a lot, because most of my friends are slimmer than me and that bothers me, ‘cause I think, God, if only I was their size. I mean, I'm not playing on it all the time.” [17 years old]

Vegetarianism: Young people’s constructions of autonomy through not eating meat

Younger adults, particularly women, are more likely to be vegetarian than older adults (Henderson et al 2002). Apart from indicating a preference for a non-meat diet, the young people interviewed for this research often used their vegetarianism to assert their views about wider issues of their evolving autonomy, as the following quote from Veronica illustrates.

Wendy: “do you have the same views as [your parents]?”

Veronica: “not really, I don't really have the same views, I'm a vegetarian, and they eat meat. And stuff to do with like, mm, what was happening in

Kosovo, my dad said it was a good idea to bomb them, and I didn't think it was necessary” [17 years old]

Being vegetarian also assisted young people in differentiating themselves from their family² (and to a lesser extent, their friends and peers). Announcing ‘I’m vegetarian’ to parents, even if young people subsequently ate fish, chicken or other meats, meant that parents had to adapt meals that were cooked at home to suit their son’s or daughter’s changing eating practices. Some parents were particularly accommodating, preparing separate dishes for young people to eat when they wanted. Other parents complained about this need for different foods, sometimes resulting in respondents preparing their own meals.

Family life: Difference, sameness and conflict surrounding food and eating at home

It is usually expected that young people start to express a desire to be more autonomous during adolescence and that this increases with the advent of key transition events.

Despite the prolonged nature of such transitions in a late, modern society, a desire for autonomy is still a normative part of the transition to adult life. This was evident in the way that young people negotiated their food and eating practices within the family home. Apart from young people demanding vegetarian food (as discussed above), most respondents started making greater demands on their parents for the foods they preferred to eat. Often, this was associated with a desire to eat less ‘fattening’ foods or more ‘healthy’ foods, irrespective of the food ethos established at home. For example, in homes where a respondent’s family reportedly ate a ‘healthy’ diet, young people

² Michael was the exception here; his immediate family had been vegetarian for many years and his evident pride in adopting his family’s beliefs actually served to strengthen his attachment to family values

asked for further reductions in fatty food and greater availability of, for example, fruit or low-sugar muesli bars.

Most young people also began to eat in different rooms to the rest of their family, or at different times. This detachment from family meals was additional to the effect of not being at home when meals were served because of changing schedules due to college, work and social demands. Young people's growing autonomy and differentiation from family meals and family food did create conflict in some families, particularly when young people (all female) were perceived as trying to lose weight or worrying unnecessarily about their appearance. The young women who experienced this conflict were often frustrated and angry because they felt they were capable of constructing their own food practices and eating habits (and body image) without parental interference.

Tania: "they've noticed I'm not eating as much obviously [...]. I compare myself back to what I used to look like, and I say "I'm getting fat" and my face is getting chubby and they're like "you're not, just stop saying that". But I try and explain to people, I know what I used to look like and I know what I look like now, I should know the difference. But they're always moaning at me, about what I eat, because I don't eat the meals that they eat, but it kind of annoys them, but I say, "don't start hassling me about what I'm eating", 'cause I am eating, I can give them a run down of what I'm eating throughout the day, but would they believe me obviously [not]" [17 years old]

Sometimes respondents expressed a desire to maintain their attachment to family eating patterns, despite this being impossible because of changes to their social and economic

situations. As a result of work commitments, they were not at home when the family meal was served, and this often meant that they had to prepare and cook meals for themselves when they arrived home. For most, this meant choosing convenience over taste.

Wendy: "do you all have microwave meals?"

Lorna: "no, because I'm working, I don't really sit with my family a lot, I have my dinner from the microwave, in my room [...]"

Wendy: "have you always done that, what about when you were at school?"

Lorna: "no, no I did eat with my family then, 'cause I do miss my mum's meals, and sometimes, like last night, she saved me a curry for when I got home from work, and I eat at half ten at night and then go to bed, that's how it works out, I have it later on" [18 years old]

There was also a further notion of 'sameness' when young people felt that, despite leaving home, their eating habits or patterns were still modelled on those of their parents.

Charlotte: "I do have problems with food, it does relate exactly so closely to my moods. And I think that might have come from my mum, because she's exactly the same. But she's worse, she did break up from my dad, when I was about 19, and after that, she was fine before that, but after that happened she completely, her eating went....she stopped eating, she was really thin, really underweight. She'll go through bouts of eating lots when she's comfortable and happy. And I

think that's how I dealt with the break up of their marriage, things in my life, I'll use food to control...to be in control of my life" [24 years old]

Discussion

Moving away from the school environment into the realms of college and paid employment served to influence what and when young people ate. These transitions were associated with an earlier start to the day for many, longer journeys for most of the participants and a new timetable and schedule to adapt to. Social spaces are porous places (Holloway and Valentine 2000) where young people merge different parts of their lives. Many of the young people in this study were adapting to eating breakfast more or less often than when they were at school; deciding whether to eat lunch or to graze on snacks and how to 'fit in' to new work cultures. Participants who had moved out of the family home often reported going through a period of eating more snacks, before settling down to a more sustainable pattern of eating. These contexts provided young people with new opportunities for 'trying out' different food and eating practices during a period of experimentation.

For the participants in this study, experiencing new spaces and places was accompanied by meeting large numbers of new people and, for many, a move towards a more adult use of leisure time – going to pubs and clubs, for example. This led many young people to eat more high fat snacks and to differentiate their home-based eating from their peer-based eating habits. Others have also found that young people associate the eating of 'junk' food with spending time with peers and not with the food they eat at home (Chapman and Maclean 1993; Croll et al 2001). Finkelstein (1989) suggests that eating outside the home is a form of self-presentation, when individuals can decide on the self-

image they want to portray. Going to the pub or hanging out and drinking alcohol and eating a burger are ordinary, mundane events, yet they form an important part of the transition to adulthood. Drinking alcohol is a normative aspect of British culture (Bynner 2001) and therefore it is not surprising that young people move towards an increase in this behaviour – few young people in this study were willing to step outside this social norm and the participants who did not drink alcohol were more socially isolated than their peers.

Changes to family meals and eating patterns were reported by all participants, partly because of being out of the family home more often than when still at school and partly because of an increased need to differentiate one's self from family life. However, some young people were nostalgic for their past eating practices within the family and it could be that family food offers young people some protection from the new 'risky' social worlds in which they find themselves situated (Miles 2000; Denscombe 2001). The established meanings that family meals signify (Valentine 2003) are comforting when food and eating roles outside the family are perceived as needing constant work; young people do not feel the need to assert other aspects of their evolving autonomous self when experiencing the 'safety' of the family meal (Bisogni et al 2002).

Juxtaposed with the need to 'fit in' with peers was, for some young people, the need to have or acquire a slim, fit body and an appetite that was under control. Whereas others (Paxton et al 1999) have reported that young people are more likely to restrict their eating if they perceive their friends as exhibiting similar behaviour, the young women in this study who were anxious about the need to be slim and in control overwhelmingly felt different to their peers. Frost (2003) has argued that, when young people buy into

the idea of ‘doing appearance’, they risk damaging their already insecure lives. It is destructive to constantly aim for perfection, but in a risky modern world, self-control and discipline through restrictive eating and dieting are perhaps attempts to restore order during a period of chaos. Consumption may serve to delineate group boundaries (Miles 2000) but, when consumption is out of control, the everyday reality is that young people feel more isolated and excluded from their peers.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the influence of peers and this study adds to the argument put forward by some that young people develop a repertoire of ‘risky’ health-relevant behaviours whilst in specific social situations. The importance of social contexts seems clear from these findings though the possible mechanisms through which young people experiencing different social worlds (from those experienced by young people at a college of further education) adopt different food and eating practices is, as yet, still unclear. Although there is scope for further research that situates young peoples’ food and eating practices within a social framework, there is also a need to explore the interplay between specific health-relevant behaviours (eating, smoking and drinking for example) to determine the relative importance, ‘risk’ and longevity of specific health-relevant pathways during the transition to adulthood.

It would also be pertinent to remember that whilst peers perform an important function in young peoples’ lives, the parental home and the relative stability of the home food environment is still a significant pillar of everyday life. There is significant scope for further exploring how young people use ‘home food’ in relation to food and eating practices developed outside the home. Whilst others have written about the prolonged

nature of transitions in a late, modern society, less is known about the ways that young adults fall back on parents and parental resources, including food. All of these issues have implications in terms of advancing knowledge about the development of health-relevant behaviours. The importance of gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity for the food and eating practices of young people, within and outside the parental home, still needs considerable work.

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