

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/108067/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

MacDonald, Sarah, Murphy, Simon and Elliott, Eva 2018. Controlling food, controlling relationships: exploring the meanings and dynamics of family food practices through the diary-interview approach. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 40 (5) , pp. 779-792. 10.1111/1467-9566.12725  
file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12725> <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12725>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



**Controlling food, controlling relationships: exploring the meanings and dynamics of family  
food practices through the diary-interview approach**

**Abstract (words = 200)**

Potential merits of a social practice perspective for examining the meanings and dynamics of family food include moving beyond individual behaviour, and exploring how practices emerge, develop and change. However, researchers have struggled to encourage reflection on mundane practices, and how to understand associated meanings. Drawing on a study of families in South Wales, this paper reflects on the value of the diary-interview approach in addressing these methodological challenges, and aims to explore and understand the dynamics of control across family contexts.

Contemporary practice theories distinguish between practices as ‘performances’ and practices as ‘entities’ and the diary-interview method facilitated an examination of these dimensions. Detailed accounts of daily ‘performances’ (through diaries), alongside reflection on underlying contexts and ‘entities’ (through interviews), illustrated the entanglement of control, practices and context.

The paper adds further complexity to the concept of practice ‘bundles’ which facilitated an understanding of how food was interrelated with other practices – across family contexts and across generations. Sociological approaches with a practices perspective at the core, offer potential for developing public health interventions by acknowledging: the relational meaning of food; the embeddedness of food within everyday practices; and the need to consider interventions across a range of policy areas.

**Word count = 7,803** (including references)

## Introduction

Framed within concerns about population level nutrition, and associated increases in obesity and overweight in high-income countries (Department of Health, 2011; Foresight, 2007), there has been increased attention on improving children's diets (Stamatakis et al., 2010; Kopelman, 2007; Public Health England, 2016). As Warde notes, 'food has often been, and is becoming again, a primary tool of medical intervention to maintain and improve health' (Warde, 2016: 93). Improving nutrition has traditionally been conceptualised as an individualised, behavioural problem, and it is increasingly recognised that although behaviour change plays a significant role, focussing solely on behaviour change is unlikely to reduce health inequalities or develop sustainable health improvement at the population level (Baum and Fisher, 2014; Warin et al., 2008). Public health approaches to improve population nutrition have failed to appreciate the way in which food is intimately connected to social processes and social relationships (Delormier et al., 2009). This paper frames food and eating as socially constructed practices and aims to 'bring the social back in' by focussing attention on norms, everyday conduct and the wider significance of food beyond nutrition (Warde, 2016: 31).

One dimension of improving nutritional health has been a policy focus on families (Department of Health, 2011; Foresight, 2007; Department of Health, 2010), with what has been described as 'a juggernaut of family-focussed interventions' (Burrows, 2017: 498). Such approaches have been scrutinised for framing poor nutrition as related to parental failure, overlooking the way parent-child relations around food are imbued with broader meaning, and for adopting a narrow conceptualisation of the challenges faced (Warin et al., 2008; Bonell et al., 2011). Such a behavioural conceptualisation fails to grasp the way in which behaviour is related to particular circumstances, and in relation to families, there are

significant gaps in our understanding of everyday food choices and the negotiations that take place between parents and children (Wills et al., 2011).

In order to overcome these limitations, there is a need to move beyond individual based nutrition interventions towards examining social relationships that underpin population food and eating patterns (Delormier et al., 2009). Food studies research has increasingly highlighted the importance of taking account of the lived experiences of food, while at the same time exploring the meanings and priorities attached to food (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010; Wills et al., 2011). These studies are underpinned by a conceptual focus on food as practices rather than behaviour, with a particular emphasis on parent-child relationships and how this varies across different family contexts. Also of relevance to understanding family relationships are notions of power, agency and control, including explorations of how control is constructed, the function it serves, and the range of patterns of control in parent-child food relations, (O'Connell and Brannen, 2014; Wills et al., 2008). These patterns of control and the negotiations between parents and children deserves further exploration, with a need to examine underlying rationales for different levels of control, and the dynamic nature of control across different family contexts. Although researchers have struggled with encouraging participants to reflect on food practices due to their mundane, taken-for-granted nature, this study draws on the diary-interview approach as a way of encouraging participants to provide detailed everyday accounts, while also generating reflections on associated rationales and meanings.

### **Family food practices: conceptual and methodological challenges**

Although there has been a history of sociological interest in mealtimes, food and families, this tended to be located in socio-cultural studies where conceptual frameworks were drawn from sociologies of work and gender issues, whereas the latest move is towards sociological

approaches to understanding food practices (Warde, 2016; Twine, 2015). The need for improved understanding of the complexities of context, and how people and different settings interact, is a conceptual challenge addressed by the first wave of practice theory which argued for ‘the dialectical rather than oppositional relationship’ between structural constraints and the practices of social actors (Ortner, 2006: 2). These ideas have been applied in health research by Frohlich and colleagues through their ‘collective lifestyles’ approach which they define as ‘observable aspects of context; observable through individuals’ practices’ (Frohlich et al., 2001: 791). They applied this to understand youth smoking and looked beyond individual behaviour to encompass the connections between people’s social circumstances and their practices.

A similar theoretical framework was drawn on by Delormier et al (2009) in relation to eating practices, and they argue that studying eating as a behaviour overlooks the way in which eating is embedded in everyday life. Theorising structure-agency interactions through the ‘collective lifestyles’ framework provided a deeper analysis of meanings, revealing the ‘invisible nature of family feeding’ or the second nature activities involved in the continuous planning of food, together with the values and priorities that influence these (Delormier et al., 2009: 220). As Williams highlights, ‘understanding at the level of meaning’ must be integral to the sociological analysis, not simply tagged on afterwards (Williams, 2003: 144).

These theoretical developments are useful for moving beyond a behavioural lens to encompass wider questions of context and meaning, and has much to offer current understandings of food and how it is negotiated within families (Maller, 2015). One important element identified by contemporary theorists is the distinction between practices as ‘entities’ and practices as ‘performances’, and the way this provides a lens for understanding the history and future trajectories of practices (Schatzki, 1996; Shove and Pantzar, 2007). A

practice entity refers to ‘the interrelated elements of a practice’ whereas a performance ‘describes the carrying out or performing of a practice in a precise moment in time’ (Maller, 2015: 58). This distinction between entity and performance is critical as it enables researchers to consider changing practices and how they can become modified over time – something which earlier accounts of practice theory struggled to conceptualise. In terms of food practices this is useful as it suggests there are opportunities for intervening and changing existing practices, and in terms of this study’s focus on the control of food, these concepts are helpful for addressing questions about the dynamics of control across different contexts and at different times.

Another productive way of thinking about practice theory relates to the interaction between multiple practices – or what has been termed ‘bundles’ of practices (Schatzki, 2001). The implication for empirical inquiry is that instead of focussing on one set of practices in isolation, there is value in examining how one set of practices relates to others – such as how eating practices also relate to other practices such as cooking, shopping and caring for family members (Maller, 2015).

With a social practice perspective at its core, this study aimed to develop understandings of family food practices and the way in which control is interwoven within these practices, drawing out meanings and rationales for variations in control, extending the focus beyond food to include wider family social relationships. Such an approach provides potential for elucidating insights into how practices emerge, change and develop, and this could be potentially useful for tailoring and targeting public health interventions.

Alongside these conceptual challenges are methodological challenges related to investigating family food practices in a way that progresses our understanding of how these different

dimensions interact. Such an approach necessitates methods which move beyond assumptions about what may facilitate or inhibit food practices, and instead indicate the need to start with families' own perspectives in order to draw out the meanings they attach to their practices. The challenges of researching practices have long been recognised, especially practices related to the family or domestic setting where 'action proceeds with little reflection' (Ortner, 1984: 150).

Practices are part of the taken for granted or mundane aspects of everyday life and therefore difficult for participants to reflect on (Twine, 2015). The different dimensions of practices (practice performances and practice entities) are also difficult to explore and Spurling's 'practice iceberg' metaphor is useful for visualising these challenges as it illustrates that although the tip of the iceberg (the practice performance) may be visible, the submerged elements of the iceberg (the practice entities) are harder to observe (Spurling et al., 2013).

There are also a number of specific challenges to examining food and eating as a practice, and the elements contributing to eating performances derive from many other practices (Warde, 2016). Focussing on food, implies attending to 'the tacit understandings involved in the ongoing planning and organisation' of food, which, 'due to their second-nature quality, are challenging for informants to articulate' (Delormier et al., 2009: 120).

Although these aspects of everyday life are difficult to access through face-to-face interview methods alone, diaries hold potential for drawing out participants' own perspectives and meanings through their ability to capture processes that are often taken-for-granted. Diaries have been identified as useful for drawing out the mundane, providing insights into reflections on events which would be difficult for researchers to directly observe. This includes using diaries to explore the negotiation of contraceptive use (Harvey, 2011), discourses of motherhood (Spowart and Nairn, 2014), and narratives of sleep (Hislop et al.,

2005). The case has also been made for combining diaries and interviews as a valuable method for moving beyond partial towards more pluralistic accounts of social events, with follow-up interviews helping to clarify diary entries (Latham, 2003). The diary-interview method can be traced back to Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) and there are three main elements: an initial interview; the research diary; and the debriefing or follow-up interview. Applications of the diary-interview approach have highlighted its value in allowing participants to choose their own frames of reference, and taken together, diaries and interviews provide a means of exploring valuable insights into variations and contradictions (Spowart and Nairn, 2014). From a practices perspective, this method offers potential for examining ‘people and their doings as the reference point for understanding the processes involved in the reproduction or change of some set of structural features’ (Ortner, 1984: 149).

Although there are potential merits of social practice theory, such an approach does not easily convert into empirical research and this paper aims to explore the contribution of the diary-interview method for encouraging families to reflect on practices and their underlying meanings. It focuses on the particular contribution of contemporary theories of social practices, notably the concept of ‘bundles’ of practices and distinctions between the concepts of practice ‘performance’ and ‘entity’ (Schatzki, 2001). In turn, these offer a conceptual lens for examining how food practices are interconnected with a range of other family practices, and the dynamic nature of practices across space and time is explored.

## **Methodology**

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from a study examining the family-school interface in relation to children’s food, and case study families were associated with three primary schools within lower socio-economic post-industrial valleys communities in South



Wales. Eleven families were recruited to the study (18 parents and 18 children) through a range of methods including recruitment at school drop-off and pick-up, and the overall aim was to explore experiences of family-school interactions in families where there was at least one child between eight and eleven years, identified as a critical time for the negotiation of food (Warren et al., 2008; Department of Health, 2011). The recruited families included single parent families, and single and dual income families, with most employed in manual and skilled trades or caring and service occupations. Parents were aged between 28 and 56 years (with an average of 39 years), and children between six and 16 years (with an average of nine years). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University Ethics Committee and informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants.

All children and parents participated in the initial interviews and these aimed to provide an overview of family food, with families asked to recall a typical day and to talk through food-related practices (Wills, 2012). All participants were then asked to make an audio recording of their food practices at the end of each day, for one week. They were given suggestions about what to include such as: anything they enjoyed or disliked about food that day; and how food fitted in with other activities, providing a lens into 'bundles' of related practices. In most cases there was a three week period between initial-interview, diary completion and the follow-up interview.

In line with the practices approach, audio diaries are useful for gaining intimate insights into everyday life and provide a more accessible, less linear medium than written diaries (Worth, 2009; Hislop et al., 2005). The open and audio-format of the diaries provided opportunities to capture thoughts and feelings relating to moments of practice performance, and in several

diaries participants revealed how emotions were closely interconnected with food practices, such as how they were feeling in relation to everyday family events and activities.

After one week, the diaries were collected and analysed drawing out questions to be asked in the follow-up interview. The objective of the diary analysis was to draw out specific comments, events or experiences which could be explored in more detail in the follow-up interview where participants were asked to expand on their diaries and probed about the meanings, typicality and connections between events (Alaszewski, 2006). The diaries also provided an additional source of data in their own right and compared with the interviews they provided insights into different dimensions of food practices. Whereas the interviews provided reflections and overviews of families' approaches, in contrast, the diaries provided more about daily rhythms – related to food, social relationships and feelings.

All diaries and interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the study drew on a combination of thematic and discourse analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis proceeded through a six-stage process, starting with familiarisation with the data, followed by the identification of codes which were then collated into themes and reviewed, refined and named before selecting appropriate extract examples for presentation. The familiarisation stage included reading each transcript several times, making analytic notes and working towards an emerging thematic framework (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Will and Weiner, 2014: 294). Further coding involved examining the relationships between initial themes such as drawing connections between 'priorities for family food' and 'changing family relationships'.

The refinement of codes and collation into themes was facilitated by the software package N-Vivo 8 which was used to manage the data and facilitate further analysis. By systematically reviewing the transcripts and field notes line by line, codes were added at the 'manifest' level

of what was said and at the 'latent' level where meaning was inferred from the words spoken or actions perceived (Mason, 1995). In this way the analysis moved beyond the 'surface' or explicit meaning of the data, focussing on 'latent' themes whereby 'underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations' were examined (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 13).

In addition to thematic analysis, discourse analysis enabled a more detailed exploration of the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions which shaped practice performances. This level of analysis also provided a way into exploring notions of control and resonates with previous research which has explored a sense of control as 'an inherently discursive phenomenon, rooted in the rhetoric and life ethics of everyday existence' (Bolam et al., 2003: 18). A 'middle-range' discourse analysis was used which is relatively sensitive to language use in context but also goes beyond the details of the text to consider broader patterns and discourses (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; O'Key and Hugh-Jones, 2010). This compares with a 'micro-discourse approach' which focuses on the detailed use of language in a specific context, and a 'Grand Discourse Approach' which includes looking at organisational cultures and ideologies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Middle-range discourse analysis has been used in other studies of family food (O'Key and Hugh-Jones, 2010) and analytically this involved focussing on the structure of participants' explanations including their words, phrases, concepts and belief systems, drawing out contradictions and ambivalence. The concept of 'display' was central to this approach as it enabled a consideration of how families convey to each other what it means to do family, and also provides insights in families own values and priorities. Finch's definition of display is useful here as it draws attention to the actions which 'constitute "doing family things" and thereby confirm these relationships are "family" relationships' (Finch, 2007: 67). In terms of a practices approach and understanding family social relationships, the notion of display is a key analytical concept as it draws attention to social interactions as the mechanisms through which meanings are conveyed. In

this study the social interactions around food conveyed meanings about how family members related to each other – including relations between children, parents and grandparents. One of the tools for identifying the display of family relationships was through stories about family relationships (Finch, 2007) and the diary-interview method facilitated this with the precursors of family stories introduced in the initial interviews and diaries, which were then explored in further detail in the follow-up interviews.

Overall, thematic analysis highlighted the complexity of family food practices which is illustrated below through descriptions of families, drawing out particular cases and circumstances. Alongside this, discourse analysis drew out more about how control was embedded within practices, revealing different dynamics of parent and child control within food negotiations.

### **Complex meanings of control: 'I make sure they've got a decent meal to come home to'**

Initial interviews tended to set out families' overall approach to food with discussions of goals, aspirations and recollections of how practices were performed. These initial accounts were often couched in terms of a high level of control including: restricting access to certain foods; controlling food purchases; and insisting everyone had the same food, so in this sense, the 'performance' that came through in the initial interview was of a particular set of controlled practices. In the Jenkins family, the three children (Jane, Jennie, and Joseph), lived with their mother, (Jemma), and in the initial interview, Jemma displayed a strict approach to food practices, setting out rules for mealtimes – always at the table, always together, and the children had to wait until everyone had finished their food.

**Jemma:** Yeah, they have to sit down to finish their food. They're not supposed to watch television when its food time, because it is food time. I encourage chatting

amongst everyone. You know we talk about day's events, stuff like that (*initial interview*)

Beyond mealtime control, Jemma was keen to steer the children's overall approach to food, including their judgements about 'good' and 'bad' food. In this way the initial interviews went beyond recollection of the everyday performance of practices, and also gave a glimpse of the underlying values and priorities for each family – more about practice entities. The children were described as being 'not that fussy', something which she seemed pleased about as she equated 'fussy' eating with 'awkward living.' These position statements were typical of the initial research encounter with families where they seemed keen to convey a particular image of their own family. In the case of the Jenkins family, Jemma presented a family where there was care and consideration about what the children ate, with attempts to shape food practices, set within an overall framework of agency and control.

Further meanings about parental control of food were discerned from the diaries and follow-up interviews which provided insights into the wider dynamics of family relationships, and practice entities. The participant-led nature of the diaries proved useful in raising difficult issues related to particular family circumstances. If an issue was introduced by participants in the diary, this legitimised it being brought up in the follow-up interview, and in this way the follow-up interviews often revealed more about the affective dimensions of food.

In the Jenkins' family, the parents' recent separation was introduced by Jemma in her diary and this provided a way into discussing these issues in the follow-up interview. Jemma's diary entries included reference to the poor quality food the children ate when they were with their father (John) - things she 'didn't agree with' including 'junk' and 'bought-in food'. Through a practices perspective we can identify different bundles of food practices associated with different family members, and Jemma's descriptions demarcated her own practices from

those associated with the children's father. There was the assumption that these were wrong for the children, and Jemma had to work to rectify these poor eating standards when the children returned to her care:

**Jemma:** I make sure they've got a decent meal to come home to on the Sunday...I like to do about six to eight vegetables cos they have to make up for what they missed out on (*diary*)

These different food practices shaped by these separate family arrangements were explored in more detail in the follow-up interview, and this more nuanced exploration of the family's approach to food (which uncovered more about the complexities of practice entities) may not have been achieved if the research had just focussed on initial interviews alone. The follow-up interview revealed how the family were going through a period of change and this had implications for food practices: food budgets were tight; Jemma was anxious about the food the children ate when they were with John; and she tried to create a relaxed atmosphere around mealtimes so that the children would feel able to talk about their feelings.

**Jemma:** I encourage chatting amongst everyone. You know we talk about day's events, stuff like that. I also like to take the opportunity, especially since myself and my husband split up, to talk to the children about their feelings at mealtimes. It's a time when they're relaxed and if there's a problem I can approach them. You know it's less confrontational. And that's worked quite well. I've got quite a lot out of that (*follow-up interview*)

In this case the control of food is doing a lot of emotional and relational work and reflects what others have noted about how caring is demonstrated through food provisioning and preparation (Rees et al., 2012; Burridge and Barker, 2009). In terms of food practices, changing family relationships had widespread implications, and it was easier to discuss these

issues in the follow-up interview after Jemma introduced them in the diary. Food was clearly demonstrated as woven into the fabric of wider social, contextual and affective dynamics of family life, and this depth of understanding was drawn out from the diaries and interviews in combination.

### **Diarising the challenges of shift-work: 'back to proper food at proper times'**

Compared with an initial emphasis on control, diary accounts elucidated far more references to constraints and compromises on family food. Although shift-work patterns were mentioned in initial interviews, the diaries revealed more about the taken-for-granted implications of shift-work. Diaries captured detailed day-to-day negotiations and fluctuating levels of control with work-days resulting in 'poor' eating and attempts to regain a sense of control on rest-days. In this way the diaries captured the rhythms of everyday life – something which did not really emerge in the initial interviews. Food and eating practices were intertwined with work, school and other 'bundles' of family activities, and there was a real notion of squeezing in meals between these activities.

In the Edmunds family, Emma and Edwin lived with their two boys (aged eight years and four years). Emma was not working at the time of the interviews, but Edwin was employed as a shift-worker in a local food processing factory, and he worked day and then afternoon shifts on alternate weeks. Emma's diary revealed how her husband's shift-work was a major influence on the way food was managed and enjoyed. In her diary, Emma drew clear distinctions between eating practices when Edwin was on day shifts compared to afternoon shifts, and she talked about 'proper food' being on hold every other week when Edwin worked afternoons:

**Emma:** Thankfully Edwin's days tomorrow so we're back to proper food at proper times (*diary*)

The diaries provided a space for self-reflection which proved useful for capturing these dynamics of control. In one diary account Emma described how her own food practices became less haphazard when Edwin was at home and they were able to eat together. When he was on afternoon shifts there was a breakdown in this structured approach and Emma's food practices suffered – she failed to 'eat enough', she ate 'at stupid times of the day,' or she tended to eat unhealthy snacks. This notion of structure versus breakdown was summed up in the following diary entry where Emma's food practices seemed to spiral out of control when Edwin worked afternoons – she ate later in the day, which meant she became tired, and so ended up eating 'rubbish':

**Emma:** ...Then, when he's afternoons the kids will have something as soon as they come in from school and then maybe it's sort of nine o'clock at night before I think about making something for myself and by that time I'm too tired, or can't be bothered, so I tend to eat a bit too much rubbish (*diary*)

Emma's diary entries reflected the different rhythms associated with shift-work. Further descriptions of working patterns revealed how shift-work impacted on family life and the allocation of roles and responsibilities. In this way bundles of food practices and work practices were closely interconnected and the diary descriptions make the interaction between shift-work and food sound like they were locked into a structure which was beyond the family's control.



### **Control across family contexts: 'if you're in Nana's house, they always give you treats'**

Variations in practices across different family settings highlighted different and changing levels of control over children's food. Grandparents played a significant role in children's lives and amongst the eleven study families, eight referred to children eating food with grandparents, usually once a week. The findings extend our understanding of the role of care and emotion, with grandparents' 'spoiling' practices interacting with parental control to produce more varied patterns of food practices (Curtis et al., 2009). In terms of conceptual developments this highlights the entanglement of different bundles of food practices – and an examination of children's food needs to take account of the interconnected food practices that are associated with parents, grandparents and other family members.

In the Banks family, the eight year old son (Bobbie) talked about eating with grandparents in his diary and on one occasion he noted that they allowed him to eat tea in his bedroom. This paved the way for further discussion about grandparents' practices in the follow-up interview. Children demonstrated their awareness of the different levels of control in different family contexts and in one example Bobbie talked about different levels of access to treats in his grandmother's house compared to his own:

**Bobbie:** Treats are only for special occasions according to Mum, but Nana; if you're in Nana's house they always give you treats, even if it's not a special occasion (*follow-up interview*)

As well as provisioning treats, grandparents also paid attention to food preparation in response to children's particular tastes. There was also a sense that grandparents often went a step further than parents and contributed more time and effort towards food preparation. This

came through clearly in descriptions from Emma and Edward (the mother and eight year old son in the Edmunds' family) when they talked about the grandmother making a sausage and mash 'camp-fire' meal:

**Emma:** ...Edward decided he wanted a campfire so she made him sausage and mash

**Edward:** Sausage and mash. The sausage is like that and a big dollop of mash and sausages for the stick and tomato sauce on top for the fire...

**Emma:** Well she's got time to mess about with it haven't she? I haven't got time to mess about. It goes on the plate and they eat it (*initial interview*)

A sense of care and love comes through when we picture the grandmother taking time to arrange the food, and the special relationship with grandparents is more than just about the food on offer. It is also about the effort and time taken to prepare the food, and the children seem to respond to this. The different (and usually more relaxed) practices adopted by grandparents, reflected the way in which family relationships were underpinned by notions of care and love, and this corresponds with other findings about the way that food is closely integrated into the creation of happiness within families (Burridge and Barker, 2009). Food is also an expression of their relationships and feelings towards each other, and in this context the provision of treats emerges as a practice which is imbued with meaning about the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

**Practice trajectories across generations: 'I wanted it to be more relaxed about food, what they wanted, when they wanted'**

In addition to spatial variations in food practices across different family contexts, the findings also revealed temporal variations, with the practices approach helping to locate everyday

practices within an historical context. Parents drew comparisons with their own childhoods and looking to previous generations, parents mainly talked about relaxing control with an attempt to disconnect with the past and do something different with their own children. This echoes other reports about how compulsion and lack of choice during parental childhood is then contrasted by experiences with their own children, where they try and instigate more freedom and choice (Curtis et al., 2009).

In the Harris family, initial parental accounts included references to creating a comfortable, relaxed home for their children, and their negotiations around food were underpinned by the parents' desire to build a happy home where the children were content and comfortable. This overarching priority for relaxed food practices was introduced in the initial interviews but we find out more about more about this practice entity, and what lies beneath it, in the follow-up interviews. Hannah (the mother) emphasised comfort and care for her children and this was associated with her childhood experiences. Hannah talked about family practices at home when she was growing up and how her father dictated what they had to eat. There was a sense of discomfort about these childhood experiences of control and enforcement, and this contrasted with the experiences she wanted to create for her own children:

**Hannah:** ...my father would have his regular things and if you didn't like what my father had that was it, you had nothing else, you had to eat. So I think I didn't like that when I was a child so I want to make sure my children are eating what they want to eat...I didn't want that. I wanted it to be more relaxed about food, what they wanted, when they wanted (*follow-up interview*)

The diary-interview approach provided contact with participants at three separate time-points which helped build rapport and developed a research relationship where participants felt more comfortable providing these sorts of in-depth, intimate insights. In the case of the Harris

family, we see the abandonment of strictly controlled practices, replaced by a more relaxed approach towards family food, with an overall emphasis on care and enjoyment. In this case, the follow-up interview revealed more about the historical trajectories of food practices, which includes the emergence of new practices and also ‘the gradual withdrawal from or the abandonment of a practice’ (Warde, 2005).

## **Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to deepen understandings of family food practices and explore how control was interwoven within these practices, drawing out meanings and rationales for variations in control. The paper also set out to explore the value of the diary-interview method as a way of providing a lens into food practices, addressing challenges faced by researchers about how to encourage participants to engage with the tacit and taken-for-granted nature of food practices. Although the case has previously been made for combining diaries and interviews as a means of generating in-depth narratives about everyday experiences, the potential for investigating mundane practices associated with food and eating has not previously been drawn out.

The main implication of theorising family food through a practices lens was the way in which it uncovered multiple and diverse discourses of control. The findings support the notion that control ‘must be understood within the context of an individual’s whole life of circumstances’ (Anaf et al., 2013: 10). Levels of control over children’s food could be more fully understood when taking account of the wider family context and the issues and challenges they faced. This builds on previous research about parent and child control of food (O’Connell and Brannen, 2014), and also draws out more about the dynamics of control, as well as the rationales for different levels of control. Intimate family factors were a key influence, particularly the role of social relationships – between parents and children and

relationships with extended family members. Echoing contemporary social theorists, the practices lens provided a way into exploring ‘bundles’ of practices beyond food related to care and intimacy, revealing more about underlying meanings. This included re-asserting control over food choices as a way of re-affirming strong relationships within contexts where relationships were seen to be breaking down (as with the Jenkins’ family). In other cases (especially with grandparents), relaxing adult control over food, and allowing children to take more control (over food choice and preparation), was closely associated with caring practices, and illustrates how food is interwoven with social relationships.

Changing levels of control across different family spaces (such as when children spent time with grandparents or when children returned to the family home after spending time with other family members) was a key theme to emerge from the findings. This notion of change is in line with recent conceptualisations in practice theory which contends that ‘practices emerge, persist, shift and disappear’ (Shove et al., 2012: 14). This widened the perspective to consider links with history and biography, which was useful for drawing out more complex rationales and meanings.

Parental reflections on their own childhoods illustrates how certain controlled and formal food practices disappeared and were replaced by more relaxed practices, where the focus was on enjoying food and where there were minimal rules about how and where food was consumed. Although historical trajectories at a cultural level have been highlighted elsewhere (Twine, 2015; Warde, 2016), the findings here also illustrate historical trajectories at a micro level, with individual family practices changing and shaping over time.

As well as confirming the merits of a practices approach for understanding family food negotiations, the paper also contributes to the overall development of a practices approach by transferring concepts and theories into empirical analysis through the application of the diary-

interview method. In this way it addresses the methodological challenges related to: how to encourage reflections on the mundane; how to draw out meanings associated with food practices; and how food is embedded in other aspects of everyday life.

The diary-interview approach illustrated the dynamic and complex nature of practices across space and time. Overall, it was the combination of methods that worked well and whereas interviews often presented one dimensional perspectives, diaries contained more hectic, original narratives (Latham, 2003). The initial interviews were useful for presenting families' over-arching approaches, illustrating their aspirations and priorities. In contrast, the diaries drew out much more about constraints and compromises, providing a lens for zooming in on mundane daily rhythms. The diaries enabled us to see how individuals 'act out' the structure in their practices (Frohlich et al., 2002: 1415). Participants did not simply talk about the variations in food practices across different contexts and at different times, but they documented the details of these variations in their diaries.

In this study, the unstructured diary format had a number of advantages and highlighted affective dimensions of family life – beyond food. Thus we gained a sense of how food was imbued with emotion and care, and how food served as a mechanism for reinvigorating family relationships. Avoiding an overly structured diary format also allowed for expressions of thoughts, feelings and a space for self-reflection. Capturing day-to-day experiences and events, the diaries hinted at the challenges families faced and this facilitated a way into discussing these issues further.

There were also benefits of the follow-up interview and the diaries alone would not have made as much sense without these. Rather than producing a summative, unified narrative, the diary and interviews offer multi-layered accounts and as Latham describes, this presents researchers with 'an interrelated mosaic of interpretative snapshots and vignettes of a

particular social space and set of social practices in the making' (Latham, 2003: 2005). This resonates with theories of practice and the distinction drawn between 'entities' and 'performances'. The diary-interview approach provided a way into visualising this distinction and whereas diaries were more likely to document the 'performance' of practices at a specific moment in time, the interviews revealed more about the practice 'entity' and the contributing elements, meanings and contexts that shaped them.

In relation to intervention development, the paper adds to the case for moving beyond a behavioural perspective towards a social practices approach for helping develop more effective public health interventions, and there are a number of specific implications arising from this paper. Firstly, interventions need to take account of the social and relational dimensions of food, and a stronger appreciation of the way in which food is imbued with emotions and care-giving is likely to resonate with families. Secondly, a practice theory perspective reveals how some food practices are deeply ingrained within their social context and 'embedded in the flow of day-to-day life' (Delormier et al., 2009: 217). Although practice theorists have previously highlighted the intersections between bundles of multiple practices (Maller, 2015), the findings here provide empirical examples and reveal further levels of complexity – particularly in relation to caring and employment practices. Sweet treats offered by grandparents were firmly held in place by expressions of care and love; and snacking or eating 'rubbish' was anchored within working practices and shift-work rhythms. These deeply-rooted interconnections between food practices and other aspects of everyday life are often overlooked within public health research but the findings presented here suggests that a broad range of interventions are needed, covering a range of policy areas, including shift-work and the implications for family food. Overall the findings confirm the merits of exploring eating as socially constructed, and with a practice perspective at the core we can see how 'sociology dissects the context of eating' (Warde, 2016: 30). Through a

practices lens this dissection begins to unravel everyday negotiations and their connections with social relationships, as well as their historical and contextual meanings.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research was made possible by a Doctoral Fellowship awarded by the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR), funded in Wales by Health and Care Research Wales, within the Welsh Government. We would also like to thank the families and who have taken part in the research. We are also grateful to the referees for their comments, which have strengthened and improved this paper.

The work was undertaken with the support of the Centre for the Development and Evaluation of Complex Interventions for Public Health Improvement (DECIPHer), a UKCRC Public Health Research Centre of Excellence. Joint funding (MR/KO232331/1) from the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Economic and Social Research Council, Medical Research Council, the Welsh Government and the Wellcome Trust, under the auspices of the UK Clinical Research Collaboration, is gratefully acknowledged.

## **References**

- Alaszewski A. (2006) *Using Diaries for Social Research*, London: Sage.
- Alvesson M and Kärreman D. (2000) Varieties of Discourse: On the Study of Organizations through Discourse Analysis. *Human Relations*, 53, 1125-1149.
- Anaf J, Baum F, Newman L, et al. (2013) The interplay between structure and agency in shaping the mental health consequences of job loss. *BMC Public Health*, 13, 110.
- Backett-Milburn KC, Wills W, Roberts ML, et al. (2010) Food and family practices: teenagers, eating and domestic life in differing socio-economic circumstances. *Childrens Geographies*, 8, 303-314.
- Baum F and Fisher M. (2014) Why behavioural health promotion endures despite its failure to reduce health inequities. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 36, 213-225.
- Bolam B, Hodgetts D, Chamberlain K, et al. (2003) 'Just do it': an analysis of accounts of control over health amongst lower socioeconomic status groups. *Critical Public Health*, 13, 15-31.
- Bonell C, Martin M, Adam F, et al. (2011) One nudge forward, two steps back *BMJ*, 342.



- Braun V and Clarke V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Burridge J and Barker M. (2009) Food as a Medium for Emotional Management of the Family: Avoiding Complaint and Producing Love. In: Jackson P (ed) *Changing Families, Changing Food*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 146-164.
- Burrows L. (2017) Children as change agents for family health. *Health Education*, 117, 498-510.
- Curtis P, James A and Ellis K. (2009) 'She's got a really good attitude to healthy food...Nannan's drilled it into her'. Inter-generational relations within families. In: Jackson P (ed) *Changing Families, Changing Food*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 77-92.
- Delormier T, Frohlich KL and Potvin L. (2009) Food and eating as social practice - understanding eating patterns as social phenomena and implications for public health. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 31, 215-228.
- Department of Health. (2010) Healthy lives, healthy people: our strategy for public health in England. London: Department of Health.
- Department of Health. (2011) Healthy Lives, Healthy People: A call to action on obesity in England. London: Department of Health.
- Finch J. (2007) Displaying Families. *Sociology*, 41, 65-81.
- Foresight. (2007) Tackling Obesities: Future Choices - Project Report. London: Government Office for Science.
- Frohlich KL, Corin E and Potvin L. (2001) A theoretical proposal for the relationship between context and disease. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 23, 776-797.
- Frohlich KL, Potvin L, Chabot P, et al. (2002) A theoretical and empirical analysis of context: neighbourhoods, smoking and youth. *Social Science & Medicine*, 54, 1401-1417.
- Harvey L. (2011) Intimate reflections: private diaries in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 11, 664-682.
- Hislop J, Arber S, Meadows R, et al. (2005) Narratives of the Night: The Use of Audio Diaries in Researching Sleep. *Sociological Research Online*, 10, 1-16.
- Hsieh H and Shannon SE. (2005) Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15, 1277-1288.
- Kopelman P. (2007) Health risks associated with overweight and obesity. *Obesity Reviews*, 8,13-17.
- Latham A. (2003) Research, Performance, and Doing Human Geography: Some Reflections on the Diary-Photograph, Diary-Interview Method. *Environment and Planning A*, 35, 1993-2017.
- Maller CJ. (2015) Understanding health through social practices: performance and materiality in everyday life. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 37, 52-66.
- Mason J. (1995) *Qualitative Researching*, London: Sage.
- O'Connell R and Brannen J. (2014) Children's food, power and control: Negotiations in families with younger children in England. *Childhood*, 21, 87-102.
- O'Key V and Hugh-Jones S. (2010) I don't need anybody to tell me what I should be doing'. A discursive analysis of maternal accounts of (mis)trust of healthy eating information. *Appetite*, 54, 524-532.
- Ortner S. (2006) *Anthropolgy and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ortner SB. (1984) Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26, 126-166.
- Public Health England. (2016) Child obesity international comparisons data factsheet. London: Public Health England.
- Rees A, Holland S and Pithouse A. (2012) Food in Foster Families: Care, Communication and Conflict. *Children & Society*, 26, 100-111.
- Schatzki TR. (1996) *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Schatzki TR. (2001) Practice Theory. In: Schatzki TR, Knorr Cetina K and Von Savigny E (eds) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Shove E and Pantzar M. (2007) Recruitment and Reproduction: The Careers and Carriers of Digital Photography and Floorball. *Human Affairs*, 154.
- Shove E, Pantzar M and Watson M. (2012) *The dynamics of social practice. Everyday life and how it changes* London: Sage.
- Spowart L and Nairn K. (2014) (Re)performing emotions in diary-interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 14, 327-340.
- Spurling N, McMeekin A, Shove E, et al. (2013) Interventions in practice - re-framing policy approaches to consumer behaviour. *Sustainable Practices Research Group: Manchester University*.
- Stamatakis E, Zaninotto P, Falaschetti E, et al. (2010) Time trends in childhood and adolescent obesity in England from 1995 to 2007 and projections of prevalence to 2015. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 64, 167-174.
- Twine R. (2015) Understanding snacking through a practice theory lens. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 37, 1270-1284.
- Warde A. (2005) Consumption and Theories of Practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5, 131-153.
- Warde A. (2016) *The Practice of Eating*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Warin M, Turner K, Moore V, et al. (2008) Bodies, mothers and identities: rethinking obesity and the BMI. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 30, 97-111.
- Warren E, Parry O, Lynch R, et al. (2008) 'If I don't like it then I can choose what I want': Welsh school children's accounts of preference for and control over food choice. *Health Promotion International*, 23, 144-151.
- Will CM and Weiner K. (2014) Sustained multiplicity in everyday cholesterol reduction: repertoires and practices in talk about 'healthy living'. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 36, 291-304.
- Williams GH. (2003) The determinants of health: structure, context and agency. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 25, 131-154.
- Wills W. (2012) Using Spoken and Written Qualitative Methods to Explore Children's and Young People's Food and Eating Practices. *Sociological Research Online*, 17, 16.
- Wills W, Backett-Milburn K, Roberts M-L, et al. (2011) The framing of social class distinctions through family food and eating practices. *The Sociological Review*, 59, 725-740.
- Wills WJ, Backett-Milburn K, Gregory S, et al. (2008) 'If the Food Looks Dodgy I Dinnae Eat It': Teenagers' Accounts of Food and Eating Practices in Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Families. *Sociological Research Online*, 13, 15.
- Worth N. (2009) Making Use of Audio Diaries in Research with Young People: Examining Narrative, Participation and Audience. *Sociological Research Online*, 14, 1-13.
- Zimmerman DH and Wieder D. (1977) The Diary-Interview Method. *Urban Life*, 5, 479-498.