

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Allison James, Anne Trine Kjørholt, and Vebjørng Tingstad, eds., *Children, Food and Identity in Everyday Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 208 pp. \$US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-57599-8).

Both childhood and food are the objects of considerable anxiety in the contemporary public sphere; these anxieties have been interwoven and accentuated by concerns about rising rates of childhood obesity. Public health attention has thus turned to issues such as the school food environment, children's exposure to marketing, and children's access to fast food. Implicit in public health debates about childhood obesity are assumptions about the nature of childhood and children's agency (or lack thereof); the relationship between the child and the family, and the child and society; ideas of risk and responsibility; and the ways in which notions of health are implicated in contemporary constructions of identity.

The editors of *Children, Food and Identity* set their volume against this backdrop of anxiety. A few contributors confront this topic directly, but most take a step back to interrogate more broadly the significance of food practices for the construction of identities. The editors and the majority of the contributors have a scholarly base in Childhood Studies, and thus emphasize the ways in which children's identities are constructed through the material processes of food and eating practices.

Half of the ten chapters in the book are studies in a large research program, *Changing Families, Changing Food* based at the University of Sheffield (UK), and co-convened by the book's first editor, Allison James, one of the founders of the field of Childhood Studies. James has dedicated her career to theorizing childhood and developing appropriate methods to document children's everyday lives, with an emphasis on children's agency and the meaning that children bring to their everyday experiences *as children*, not "adults-in-becoming." James has also written one of the few "classics" in studies of children and food, an anthropological study of the ways in which candy helped British children create their own identity and culture, separate from adults.

Four of the five chapters that emanate from the *Changing Food, Changing Families* project are analyses of qualitative interviews of children and parents from a variety of social and family backgrounds in England. The first chapter is a good example of the power of the overall collection in undermining dominant ways of thinking about food and

feeding practices. The authors, Julie Keenan and Helen Stapleton, consider the role of babies, a group seldom theorized to have agency, in mother-infant feeding relationships, demonstrating the ways in which the mothers' perceptions of their infants influenced feeding decisions. Keenan and Stapleton argue that infant feeding is a *relational* practice embedded in power relations. This contrasts starkly with the dominant public health position that mothers are independent, rational agents who make "good" choices (i.e., in accordance with public health nutrition guidelines) about infant feeding because they have the proper, "correct" knowledge, and that those who make "bad" choices would do "better" if only they had nutrition education about the "right" facts.

Chapter Two reconsiders, from the perspective of children, older research (notably Devault in the US, and Charles and Kerr in the UK) on the ways in which the production of the family meal is a constitutive aspect of "doing" and "creating" family, examining how children's participation in the family meal reflects their position and identity in the family. Chapter Four is based on analysis of innovative visual methods with nine to eleven year old children, whose drawings of lunch boxes show how the children's active engagement in consumer culture creates age, gender, and moral boundaries. Chapter Five considers how fathers' limited involvement in family food provisioning collapses the usual hierarchical and generational boundaries between children and their fathers, and re-inscribes the gendered division of labour in household food work. The final chapter in the collection, also part of the *Changing Families, Changing Food* research program, is not based on interview data, but rather examines how food advertising in British women's magazines positions children as irrational, "deficient" consumers, setting their presumed preference for pleasurable food choices in conflict with their mothers' interest in feeding them healthy food. The food products being advertised claim to reconcile the competing interests of both groups because they are healthy *and* enjoyable. The author argues that social scientists need to be careful about reproducing this constructed, dichotomized alignment of enjoyment with childhood and health with adulthood if they wish to tease out the complex relationship between contemporary childhood, food and identity.

Of the other five chapters in the book, four are also based on analyses of interview data. Chapter Three concerns the practices of Scottish middle class teenagers, whose avoidance of fast food reflects their families' middle class, health-conscious habitus, disrupting common stereotypes of teenagers and theoretical assertions of individuation in the construction of self-identity. Chapter Eight shows how food is central to the caring environment in British residential care homes and is used

symbolically by children and staff to “make, break, negotiate and sustain relationships.” In Chapter Six, US-based scholar of child consumer culture Daniel Thomas Cook examines how mothers’ selective engagement with consumer culture in feeding their children helps construct a middle-class American child identity that contrasts with the middle-class American parent/adult identity. Chapter Seven features analysis of interviews with Bosnian and Iraqi mothers who are newcomers to Sweden, and the ways in which their children attempt to leave their ethnic differences behind and integrate into Swedish culture by consuming food they consider “Swedish.” Finally, in Chapter Nine, Vebjørng Tingstad examines public discourses and television advertising in Norway to assess the explanations and solutions offered for childhood obesity, where responsibility is being located, and the implications for conceptions of childhood identities and the nature of childhood. She observes the ambiguities regarding children’s participation in Norwegian society, highlighting the tension between the Norwegian welfare state’s traditional social responsibility to protect children with the growing emphasis on children as active citizens and competent consumers that may, paradoxically, end up positioning them as responsible for their own obesity.

Through their theoretically rich and methodologically strong research, the authors in this collection demonstrate the ways in which interpretive social science can “talk back” to dominant discourses. Their research provides novel understandings of children’s everyday food practices and experiences, and why children eat what they do. Such perspectives are notably missing from the public health debates about childhood obesity and could fill a significant gap. The collection is a valuable addition to two relatively new scholarly fields, Childhood Studies and Food Studies, and would be of interest to those in Family Studies and Health Studies. As someone based primarily in Food Studies, I would have liked more engagement in this literature, but this is a small quibble. I hope the publication of this book marks the beginning of a vigorous scholarly conversation between these two fields.

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Elaine Power is associate professor in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University, and was a registered dietitian in a previous career. Her research interests lie in the intersection of food studies and health studies with particular attention to issues related to class, poverty, and childhood. She is a co-investigator on the multi-site, CIHR-funded qualitative research project *Local Food Cultures and Socioeconomic Status as Social Determinants of Nutritional Health: Exploring Family Food Practices* and is currently writing up an analysis of her research project examining the anxieties of parents from different classes about their children’s weight.

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