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**Symposium on
'Psycho-social influences on food choice: implications for dietary change'**

Social influences on food choice and dietary change: a sociological attitude

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For someone with a training in social anthropology or sociology a title 'Psycho-social influences on food choice: implications for dietary change' immediately looks a bit odd. The title may seem obvious and perfectly straightforward to some, and in certain respects it is. However, others who look at it from another disciplinary point of view will hesitate; it does not get things quite right. So what I have tried to do in this short paper is describe the sociological attitude which gives rise to this hesitation.

I begin by picking out the underlying methodological and theoretical model that the symposium title immediately calls to mind. I then describe an alternative model, before going on to use the main part of the paper to illustrate this alternative. I stress that neither of the models I discuss is superior or inferior to the other. Both have strengths as well as drawbacks.

The underlying model implicit in the title treats food choice as a dependent variable and social factors as independent variables. The relationship between dependent and independent variables is indicated by the word 'influences' which suggests more than mere correlation but less than cause and an assessment of the strength of that correlation, if there is one. The model provides for a mode of scientific procedure that requires operational decisions about the instances of food to be studied, the definition of choice to be agreed, the social factors to be selected and the means of measuring them all to be devised. And, somewhere at the core of the model is the assumption that food choice involves 'the individual' who is subject to one or more of the (psycho-) social influences in question.

The rest of the title, 'implications for dietary change', suggests that we are to use the results of investigation conducted according to the scientific model just described in order to help decide one of two things. Either we shall know better how dietary patterns, habits, or customs are or are not changing, assuming we have data for the past; or, for the future, the results will tell us how better to manipulate behaviour successfully to get people to eat what is best advised for their health. I shall, incidentally, say no more in the present paper about the use to which results may be put, and instead reserve that discussion for another occasion.

The model outlined is very familiar, a standard kind. It is also immensely powerful. It draws on an essentially mechanical view of the world in which there are separate components which we try to isolate and whose influence on one another we try to measure. It has got us all a long way scientifically and we cannot dispense with it. What I want to remind us of here, however, is an alternative methodological and theoretical model which looks at the same materials but in a very different way. It, too, is a powerful model, used to great effect not just in sociology and social anthropology, but also in social history, political science, parts of psychology and, these days, human geography. It is neither a better nor worse model, just different. It does not draw on a mechanical view but attempts to come to grips with phenomena that defy mechanical analogy. It is a model that recognizes and tries to accommodate distinctively human properties of the world that are social as opposed to physical or biological. A mechanical model does supremely well in describing the properties of a physical structure like a wall made of bricks. It goes some way towards describing a social structure, as if human activity and behaviour were entirely like the behaviour of a brick. The mechanical analogy, however, cannot cope with a load of bricks destined for the wall of a house which are capable of having a say not only in whether they will be part of a wall rather than the foundations, but even in whether they will not have a house but a library instead.

The alternative model also pays attention to the nature of what, in the mechanical model, are taken as variables. Instead of regarding the mode of scientific procedure as a practical, and difficult, matter of operationalization, the alternative takes the characterization, the act of defining and identifying those variables as its main object of scientific enquiry. In other words, it does not take the variables as given. Undoubtedly, the mechanical model is enormously important in giving us long lists of statistics correlating food use with age, sex, income, ethnicity, religion, level of education and more, not to mention attitudes and mood, disability and clinically-definable pathology. The alternative model regards these lists as the beginning rather than the end of the scientific investigation, and tells us a couple more things besides. It tells us that we should not separate 'food choice' from 'social influences'. To do so runs the risk of making statements about their relationship which are unduly circular. It also warns us that to think of food choice only in terms of individuals who happen by chance to vary in their likes and dislikes is to risk coming up with superficial explanations.

Having set out the alternative model in abstract terms, I give some examples, beginning by illustrating the risk of providing explanations that are circular. For instance, to say that he does not eat prawns because he is Jewish, or that she does not eat steak because she is vegetarian, is a perfectly satisfactory pair of explanations when deciding what to cook if either of them is coming to supper. But it tells us nothing at all about why Jews do not eat prawns, or vegetarians do not eat steak (or a host of other examples about horsemeat and Americans, termites and the Dutch, dog and the Danes and so on). Without knowing what it means to be Jewish, or vegetarian, we cannot understand why he or she does not choose to eat prawns or steak. Knowing that prawns or steak are not defined as food, or put the other way round are classified as non-food, does not take us any further either. We have to ask what is the thinking of a whole social group that identifies itself as Jewish, or of a whole social movement that adopts the name vegetarian, that lies behind and results in such a classification.

I imagine many of us are by now fairly familiar with the thinking of vegetarianism, at least in the modern British versions. We have probably become more familiar with it for

at least two reasons. First, as members of a minority, even if not wanting to convert others, vegetarians still tend to find they have to explain themselves to the meat-eating majority. So they are far more likely to talk, and write, about their viewpoint than members of the majority are likely to spell out a meat-eating viewpoint. Second, like many other noticeable minorities, their viewpoint and associated set of activities tend to be studied precisely because they are unusual. So we have available a small body of recent research about vegetarianism in Britain by social anthropologists such as Twigg (1979, 1983) and Fiddes (1991) and sociologists Beardsworth & Keil (1992), who have worked on it together. The results of their research allow me to summarize a broad, idealized version of modern vegetarianism in Britain which runs something like this:

Vegetarians are no different from meat-eaters in holding dear the principle of being 'for life' and 'against premature or unnecessary death'. Simply, but crucially, vegetarian thinking revolves around a different interpretation of this principle that draws boundaries in different places. Instead of defining animals as members of a non-human category, and thus available for human use, animals are classified together with human beings. Thus, to eat them is to eat flesh like one's own, i.e. is virtually tantamount to cannibalism. Thus, animals are to enjoy the same rights as people, to be protected and not to be exploited. Caring for and about life is to be human. Caring about one's own life is also to care about one's own health; eating flesh is unhealthy, and leads to undesirable effects on the body and to intemperate, and thus inappropriate human, behaviour. Of course, the human population needs to eat to survive, but, after avoiding killing human-like animals, they are to choose their food in such a way as to do everything possible to conserve and enhance life. This applies both in what is chosen to eat and for others elsewhere and in the future. Thus, when taking plants as food, the leaves, fruits, nuts etc. are selected to avoid uprooting and so killing the whole plant. Selecting nuts and seeds is simultaneously to assure ingesting the vitality and vigours of those items considered most 'full of life'. The principles involved extend to urging modes of food production that are deemed to maximize the opportunities to life for people worldwide and that conserve the planet's capacity to sustain life.

Certainly not every self-styled vegetarian adopts every element of the brief general statement I have just given, and not all always strictly adhere to eating practices to which in principle they subscribe. I use the example of vegetarianism to illustrate the kind of enquiry the alternative model suggests is needed in order to understand the thinking that lies behind any definitions of items as food. Where there is widespread agreement of the collection of items called food, it is particularly difficult, and normally unnecessary, to imagine what any such enquiry might look like. We only tend to wonder about the question of why things are, or are not, considered food when we come across different bases for the choice from those we ourselves take for granted. The vegetarian example gives us clues. If we want to explain instances of food choice, the alternative model suggests, although it sounds pretty grandiose, that at some point we would need to enquire about whole visions of the world, beliefs about human existence and human identity within it, matters of life and death, in short, whole cosmologies. For the moment, however, I set such large concerns aside to return to consider other directions in which the alternative model can take us.

Circular explanations arise, according to the alternative model, since 'food choice' and 'social influences' are arbitrarily separated. Instead, it suggests we should regard 'food choice' as social. Defining some substances as food and others not is, in this view, a social

act. It has some non-social features, of course. Defining something lethal to the human body as food puts paid to the social as well as the biological. So too does defining something as food that universally prompts a physiological reflex that means no one can swallow it. There are obvious physical and biological limits. But within those limits there is, equally obviously, enormous scope for the social definition of items as food. Defining substances as food does not begin and end with the twofold classification into food and non-food. There are numerous, more detailed, variants on the social acts of definition; it is to illustrating a few of these that I turn now.

One way of getting a purchase on these variants is to ask whether what is defined as food has always been the case. We know the simple answer already. For instance, in mediaeval Europe, sugar belonged in the pharmacopoeia, not the kitchen. Indeed, it featured among the supposed remedies for the plague. By the seventeenth century, however, it had become redefined as a food, although a luxurious one available only to the nobility and very wealthy. Only two centuries later it had been further reclassified to become a food for the masses, a necessity (especially in the form of treacle) in the diet of the factory worker. By the middle to later parts of the present century, it has spread so far as to become a universal sweetener, one which so eminent a nutritionist as John Yudkin memorably described as 'pure, white and deadly'. This slow historical progression of the definition of sugar from a medicine, i.e. non-food, to different types of food illustrates one version of what I mean by variants on the social act of defining a substance as food. Here too, incidentally, there is a risk of circular argument. Take, for example, the definition of sugar in the astonishingly elaborate confections of the seventeenth century wealthy; to say it was eaten by the wealthy because it was a mark of their wealth is true, but does no more than superficially restate that truth.

The more difficult question, of course, is how did the changing definitions of sugar come about? The American social anthropologist Mintz (1985) has provided a great many of the answers. He argues that the definitions of sugar as one or other type of food, luxurious and exotic, to ordinary and commonplace, changed as a consequence of increased usage. Thus, the social forces that led to increased use also must be understood. So he analyses the nature, organization and growth of sugar production that made increased demand possible and which, over the centuries, in turn, further stimulated supply.

We may know little of how the West Indian plantation slaves and workers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries defined sugar as a type of food. No doubt they viewed it in a different light from that of the wealthy European consumers in the earlier period, or the way the English working classes regarded the finished product rather later. However, we do have a contemporary example of the two types of definition of another set of items by way of parallel. In his study of the route taken by tropical fruits from Jamaican farm to British supermarket shelf, the geographer Cook (1995) like Mintz (1985) provides an analysis that brings together the socio-economic circumstances of production and the social forces governing marketing up to the point of sale on the consumption side. In it, he points out the contrast between the definition of the fruits to the women working in the packing house and the type of definition promoted in the supermarket. To the packers, these fruits are mundane, ordinary and familiar, as well as being objects to be handled carefully and packed without bruising, as tasks all in a day's not particularly well-paid work. To the Britons browsing along the supermarket aisles, the same fruits are defined as exotic, a novelty. In order to sell them, the supermarkets

provide free specially-designed leaflets to show, for example, how to manage a mango by cutting it into cubes, or to suggest how the unfamiliar fruits can be incorporated in some reasonably-familiar recipes.

We all know, then, that items chosen as food are not given once and for all. Equally, we all know that the classification as one type of food or another changes. Otherwise, no new food products could successfully be developed; no items could be successfully introduced to social groups initially unfamiliar with them. The questions that need to be asked in order to understand how this is possible are provided for by the alternative model described here. In significant measure, these questions are about the social world. Answers to them help us go beyond circular explanations. They also help to go beyond superficial explanations about likes and dislikes, which is yet another variant on the manner in which defining items as one or other types of food is to be understood as social. The sociologist Mennell (1985) has devoted the whole of one of his books to arguing just this point.

Mennell (1985) begins by drawing his readers' attention to an explanation of differences in food preferences that has frequently been offered. It runs: people like what they are used to and dislike the unfamiliar; and, because, by definition people eat what is familiar, thus they come to like it. This, Mennell (1985) insists, is both circular and superficial. What has to be asked, he argues, is what makes it possible for the unfamiliar to become familiar, how do tastes change; not just the tastes of one other person, but of whole social groups. So he traces the change in tastes from late mediaeval France and England when preferences were geared to enormous quantities of food, to the gradual emergence of self-conscious refinement that tastes had to be more discriminating in what is eaten as opposed to how much. In short, he shows how likes and dislikes in food, a variant of the social definition of food, are to be analysed as a social, i.e. group, not individual affair.

The alternative model I am describing thus advises also that we take care not to think *entirely in terms* of individuals who happen to choose what they eat either by chance, or as the outcome of human physiology, or as an expression of psychological make-up, or as a consequence of familiarity with some items but not others. This model warns that at times we will make mistakes if we only think of the human population as separate individuals. Instead, it reminds us that 'the individual' that is assumed in the mechanical model, is an abstraction. It is a most convenient abstraction which, as a shorthand, serves all kinds of different purposes very well indeed. But it has minimal value in understanding many of the realities of human activity. As an abstraction it tempts us to think of people as autonomous and to consider their actions as unrelated to other people. Instead, the alternative model reminds us that, among other things, a person is identified in relation to others. This is a useful reminder. For what someone actually eats can be contrary to what that person knows, and tells researchers, they like and would prefer to have instead. The alternative model suggests that in order to work out how this can come about we turn to investigate social relationships. I give just one example.

As I (Murcott, 1982, 1983a,b) and the sociologists Charles & Kerr (1988) among others (for example, for the USA, DeVault, 1991) have shown, married (or cohabiting) women report that they do not always eat what they would actually like to choose. At times their own tastes do not neatly coincide with their husbands'. On these occasions, each partner does not then sit down to completely different meals; nor, it seems, does the husband normally set his preferences aside and eat according to his wife's tastes. The

reverse happens. The shared meals which women (or at times their husbands) prepare are commonly chosen to satisfy their husband's preferences above their own. Whatever the women privately think about this arrangement, deferring to their husband's choice is known to be part of a wife's responsibilities to manage the home smoothly and keep arguments to a minimum. Women report it is all part of their side of the bargain. Correspondingly, he keeps his side, by taking responsibility for other household tasks like do-it-yourself, for instance. Marriage is viewed as a matter of give and take. So, if she can choose the wallpaper he puts up in the dining room, he can choose the meal that she puts on the table.

Analysed in this way, following the alternative model, the initially rather surprising suggestion that people routinely do not choose to eat food they prefer is more readily understandable. I should add, as an important aside, that there is a great deal more work to be done to ensure that we have uncovered all sides of the picture (Murcott, 1986), but we have a start. And, to underscore my main point, it illustrates another way in which the alternative model has its uses.

Now to conclude: I have drawn attention to an alternative model from the one the title of the present symposium first calls to some scientists' mind. I have all too briefly illustrated some of the potential offered by a sociological attitude which gives rise to this alternative model. There are times when the alternative directs our attention to complexities of social relationships, grand matters of cosmology, long-term but major changes, in all of which choosing food is an intimate and integral part. As the Norwegian political scientist Johan Olsen (unpublished results) has remarked, albeit in a wholly different context: 'It is . . . doubtful whether major changes can be captured by the language of dependent and independent variables and the logic of regression analysis'.

In case there is any lingering misunderstanding, I repeat that I am not proposing that the alternative model should supplant the mechanical one with which I have contrasted it. They are different; they complement one another. They could, and should, inform one another better than they do at present.

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