

1. Introduction

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The current sociological literature on food and family life highlights how feeding children is now well-established as an everyday activity suffused with moral discourses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parenting (see for example, de Vault 1991; Moisio et al. 2004; Miller 2005; Cairns et al. 2013). Expert guidance, mechanisms of surveillance and self-surveillance have been reported as common aspects of parenting (Faircloth 2010; The VOICE Group 2010; Elliot and Hore 2016). We see the growing extension of this surveillance and self-surveillance as a new form of intensive parenting (expanded in both time and space) whose consequences for family life, gendered identities and childhood have not been fully investigated (Faircloth 2014; Harman and Cappellini 2015; Harman and Cappellini 2017). Furthermore academic debates are restrained within disciplines, and as such a broader understanding of the complexities of feeding children is missing.

In looking beyond the nutritionist-driven approach which largely sees feeding children as simply a matter of providing “healthy” food, this edited book aims to provide new critical approaches to feeding children as a social practice influenced by a variety of institutions, norms, values and moral accountability. In particular this collection seeks to provide an interrogation of contemporary parenting culture across geographical contexts. As such, the book sets out to examine the everyday practices of feeding and eating inside and outside the home. This collection aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary literature on feeding the family and feeding children by engaging with theoretical debates around the moralization of feeding and eating practices, intensive parenting and everyday food consumption practices. This provides a timely reflection on government and marketplace discourses of feeding children, as

well as their relations to the micro and macro politics of family life. It also aims at understanding how parents and children interpret and (and sometimes challenge) messages from health campaigns, the government, peers and others, as well as demonstrating change and continuity over time within individual experiences. As such, the book contributes to the growing body of literature on the changing nature of parenting culture.

Changing parenting culture and changing childhoods

Parenting has long been considered of great importance when it comes to the transmission of social norms and values, the continuation of kinship, family and household, and for reproducing local and national communities (Barlow and Chapin 2010). Recent sociological work has situated ‘parenting’ as critical for understanding contemporary changes in modern society – particularly in the US and the UK but increasingly beyond (Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne 2013). Drawing attention to broader socio-cultural processes that have cast modern child rearing as a highly important yet problematic sphere of social life, this work starts from the premise that raising children has become a more complex task than it used to be in the past. Far from simply ensuring the transition to adulthood, today’s parents are expected to do much more to protect and optimise the development of their children (Lee et al. 2014). There are continuities with the past here, in that parenting has always been subject to moralizing and ‘guidance’, but the *magnitude* of the increase in expectations around raising children, particularly since the mid-1970s, (the fact that we even use the term ‘parenting’ as a verb at all) is striking: parenting classes, parenting manuals, parenting experts, and parenting ‘interventions’ are now so common-place as to be unremarkable (Lee et al. 2014).

Based on a deterministic model of infant development, itself dependent on the growth of

developmental psychology in the mid twentieth century, there is an assumption that infant experience is formative and sets the blueprint for later life. Parenting is cast as the source of, and solution to, a whole range of problems – at both individual, and social levels (such as the ‘obesity epidemic’). There is particular concern over ‘damage’ in this vulnerable period, and an increasing focus on what has been called early-intervention or ‘neuro-parenting’ (Macvarish 2016). Rather than being something that is simple, straightforward or common sense, parenting is routinely presented as a task requiring expert guidance and supervision, particularly for those in lower socio-economic groups. Child rearing has become increasingly mediated through a cultural narrative that provides parents with rules – albeit sometimes ambiguous ones – about how to realize and develop skills in their roles as mothers and fathers. It is these rules that constitute ‘parenting culture’ (Lee et al. 2014). Of course, advice and guidance might well be useful and welcomed by parents, particularly as it relates to ‘the basics’ of childcare; here, however, we are interested in the implications of this expansion of ‘parenting’ into an expertise-saturated, policy-focused and commercially fueled area of social life, particularly as it relates to feeding children.

As Lee and Furedi (2005) point out, the choices parents make today as to how to feed their children remain most likely to be narrated within this wider arena of debates about health, showing how, in the past few decades, the promotion of ‘healthy living’ has received enormous attention. As Fitzpatrick argues, “‘Health’ has come to operate as a “secular moral framework” for society, emphasizing individual responsibility and ... compliance with the appropriate medically sanctioned standard of behaviour” (Fitzpatrick 2004:70). Framed as an area where outcomes are the result of individual and family choices, structural inequalities and material and social conditions are downplayed within these debates (Peterson and Lupton 1996). Healthy lifestyles become an expression of engagement with a particular political regime and

a form of self-expression for the responsible citizen (Peterson and Lupton 1996) and more acutely, the expression of a responsible parent.

Part of the new health paradigm is an injunction to the individual to minimise risks from so-called ‘bad’ foods. As children are positioned as innocent and vulnerable within such debates, this carries moral implications for parents. Given the gendered distribution of food work (DeVault 1991) the effect is felt particularly heavily by mothers, and the moralisation of eating intersects with the social construction of motherhood (Lee 2007; see also Lupton 1996). This is despite the fact that dual working families are now the norm, raising questions about how families negotiate food work and paid employment (O’Connell and Brannen, 2016). In recognizing the gendered dimension to these shifts, much work has drawn on the concept of ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays 1996) in understanding the experiences of contemporary women, who are increasingly ‘torn’ between the spheres of work and home – as well as to theorise how and why certain everyday tasks of childrearing, such as feeding have become moralized sources of heated public debate (Faircloth 2013; Hays 1996; Lee et al. 2014). Whilst this is most clearly obvious in the case of *infant* feeding (and debates around the benefits of breastfeeding or formula feeding) such antagonism around children’s eating in general is increasingly visible in discussions of ‘healthy’ versus ‘junk’ food in childhood.

Arguing that the mother-child relationship represents a sacred bastion in a society otherwise governed by the pursuit of profit, Hays summarizes the characteristics of intensive motherhood, as ‘child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive ’ (Hays 1996: 8). Fathers have not been immune from this trend towards a more ‘intensive’ style of parenting, but it remains mothers to whom these cultural messages are largely targeted, and around women’s reproductive choices that the fiercest debates reign. The

child-centered ‘intensive’ mother is one who is considered responsible for all aspects of her child’s development – physical, social, emotional and cognitive – above and beyond anyone else, including the father (Hays 1996:46). Ideally she demonstrates this commitment through embodied means, such as by breastfeeding, and no cost, physical or otherwise, is considered too great in her efforts to optimize her child (Wolf 2011).

As a body of work, *Parenting Culture Studies* therefore draws on important traditions within sociology around not only the ‘doing’ and ‘display’ of family (Finch 2007) but also individualisation and risk-consciousness (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002). Indeed, one of the main features of this model, chiming with work done by modernization theorists (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999) is that although children are safer than ever (materially at least) they are seen to be particularly vulnerable to risk in the early years, and must be protected and catered to by their mother at all times, lest their development be compromised. In a ‘neo-liberal’ era, with its emphasis on self-management, ‘good’ mothers are reflexive, informed consumers, able to ‘account’ for their parenting strategies (Murphy 2003). Arguably, children have become not only ‘lifestyle projects’ but also a site of women’s ‘identity-work’ (Faircloth 2013).

Being an ‘involved’ mother means more than merely being available, as it did for the 1950s housewife. Today, child rearing has become a full-time activity about which mothers are expected to be highly informed and reflexive. In a period of ‘intensive’ parenting, permeated by processes of individualization, parenting must continually be reflected upon and the individual is assigned responsibility for ensuring that his or her parenting is ‘good enough’. Of course, the perception of what is a ‘good parent’ is largely culturally, historically and ideologically rooted, and thus in continuous change. So this cultural script does not affect all parents in the same way around the world – class, ethnicity and gender all affect its

internalization, and there may be a curious combination of adoption, resistance or adaptation according to specific time and place, as this cross-culturally informed collection so aptly demonstrates. What is important, nevertheless, is that this script is increasingly recognized by many parents the world over as the ‘proper’ way of parenting, an injunction to which they must respond (Arendell 2000). As fathers’ roles in society change (see for example Dermott 2008), more information is needed about the extent to which they too are influenced by these processes in key areas such as feeding children.

Parenting, in most areas of everyday life, is now considered to have a determining impact on a child’s future happiness, healthiness, and success, and we suggest that feeding serves as a case-study par-excellence by which to explore this trend. As historical studies indicate, how babies and children are fed has long been construed as a matter of public debate and public interest (Kukla 2005; Murphy 2003). Yet as the accounts of many parents in this collection show, public surveillance and monitoring of maternal decisions has certainly not receded, regardless of drastic declines in infant mortality and morbidity associated with very early childhood in the past. This monitoring is stronger than ever has become connected to an ever-widening set of claims about children’s ‘success’ or ‘failure’. Even the biological core of a person – their brain – has come to be viewed as profoundly and directly impacted by the way that person was fed as a baby (O’Connor and Joffe 2013). This collection therefore makes a timely contribution to thinking not only about parenting, but also our very notions of personhood and social reproduction.

Summary of the contributions

This edited book brings together a collection of chapters exploring feeding children inside and outside of the home across a range of socio-cultural and geographical contexts (from Portuguese schools to Polish homes, from Danish supermarkets to preschools in Bolivia). Although sociologically informed, this is an inter-disciplinary conversation taking into account perspectives from anthropological, socio-historical and interpretive consumer research. Such a conversation seeks to address the following questions: *What pressures are experienced when feeding children outside the home? To what extent do they build on, converge with or differ from those experienced in the domestic sphere? What are the implications for parental subjectivity when childhood eating has become so moralised?*

The answers to these questions have been organised in three main sections. In Part 1, focusing on feeding children in schools and childcare settings, the authors provide new insights into the dynamics of feeding and eating practices outside of the home. In Chapter 2, Deborah Albon draws upon ethnographic research in two early childhood settings in order to draw out some of the key differences in food practices in these contexts. She shows how children's eating practices conjure up particular images of family life, with the same practice (finishing off breakfast from home 'on the go') being seen very differently in each context. She points to the importance of taking into account social class and ethnicity (of both the families and the educators), power differentials and the type of setting. Her attention to social class and ethnicity shares some synergies with Chapter 3 where Vicki Harman and Benedetta Cappellini draw upon interviews with migrant parents preparing packed lunches for their children in order to highlight how the mundane practice of selecting food to be consumed at school reveals much about families intersectional social identities. Following this, in Chapter 4 Monica Truninger and Rosa Sousa examine school meal reform in Portugal. They focus on two key areas: how school meals are organised and children's tastes. Their chapter highlights the importance of

questions relating to how food is transported and served, as well as what children eat. This also draws our attention to some of the disputes and compromises evident in the process of feeding children in a school setting. In Chapter 5, Cara Donovan and colleagues explore the experiences of directors and food preparers at child centres in Bolivia. Their work shows how the scrupulous medical monitoring and surveillance of children's bodies operated by different actors at the child centres imposes hard-to-achieve targets onto families.

Part 2 of this volume titled 'The home (and beyond)', focuses on domestic eating practices experienced by children and their families, but understands these as being connected to wider social structures and social processes. Providing a link between the section on the home and that concerning the school, in Chapter 6 Pamela Graham and colleagues explore the issue of food poverty and feeding children during the school holidays. They review existing health and science literature to examine the potential impact of holiday hunger on childhood wellbeing before examining the way communities and local governments have established "holiday clubs" to try to ameliorate the problem. Important questions are asked about whether these clubs should be available to all or only those most in need. Next, in Chapter 7, Zofia Boni shares her ethnographic research on foodways in Warsaw and argues for a relational approach to feeding and eating. Her findings paint a rich picture of feeding and eating practices and the relationship between the two. Following this, in Chapter 8, David Marshall focuses on children's perspectives on family meals and eating as a domestic socialized practice. He argues that children generally appear to be embracing family meals as an important part of family practices. He suggests that there appeared to be relatively little conflict in children's accounts although they reported increased input regarding specific parts of the family meal.

Part 3 of this volume, titled ‘new parenting styles?’ draws our attention to potential new practices, ideas, ideals and understandings visible through research on parenting and food. In Chapter 9, Malene Gram and Alice Grønhøj explore fathers’ participation in food work drawing upon a qualitative study conducted in Denmark. They argue that focusing solely or mainly on mothers’ accounts risks men’s housework being seen as invisible or undervalued. Interviewed in a family setting, fathers in their study were found to be actively involved and responsible for food work in a number of areas. In Chapter 10, Susana Molander also considers fathers’ participation in food work by focusing on the perspectives of single fathers in Sweden. She found that overall, the fathers in her study had a rather laid back approach to cooking and it was their own cooking interest and capabilities that emerged as point of departure rather than their role as parents. She argues that perhaps this new way of relaxed fathering can lead the way to a kind of caring that is not judged so harshly, by the parents themselves or by society at large.

Picking up on the notion of judgement, in chapter 11 Katie Cairns, Josée Johnston and Merin Oleschuk highlight two pathologized and polarized extremes with regard to food work: the image of the woman who feeds her children “junk food” and “Organic Mom”. They highlight the difficulty for mothers in walking a tight moral tightrope when trying to avoid stigmatization with regard to food work, with insecurity, frustration and guilt as often-present emotions. Following this, in Chapter 12 Michelle Webster focuses on parenting practices when implementing the ketogenic diet – a diet high in fat and low in carbohydrates used to treat epilepsy. This chapter explores how the diet is incorporated into family life and the gendered nature of this incorporation. Additionally, it illuminates how mothers were expert carers; experts in implementing the diet, experts on their own children’s food tastes and experts at treating their child’s condition. One key point to emerge from this chapter is that intensive

parenting is not always the result of cultural ideology, but it can be the result of particular situations such as treating epilepsy through the ketogenic diet. Finally, in Chapter 13 we bring together the overall themes emerging from the collection and makes some suggestions for future research.

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