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How (not) to feed young children: A class-cultural analysis of food parenting practices

Irmak Karademir Hazir, Oxford Brookes University

Abstract:

This study unpacks how class processes shape understandings and practices of 'good feeding' in families with young children. It brings a Bourdieusian class consumption focus together with food parenting studies and approaches feeding as encompassing a wide range of processes including cooking, shopping, and planning. To capture the lived experience of feeding work, the study draws on a longitudinal and ethnographic study conducted in the south-east of England over the course of two years. The analysis suggests that, regardless of their resources, parents tend to internalise the dominant discourse on 'healthy' and varied' feeding. However, closer inspection of day-to-day practices reveals a nuanced class-cultural patterning in how these terms are defined and achieved. Moreover, it reveals how different interpretations of key notions such as homemade, nutritious, and balanced generate practices that contribute to the cultivation of distinctively classed culinary agencies in children. This study also questions what potential role these understandings can play in reproducing taste hierarchies and maintaining symbolic boundaries from very early ages.

Key words: Feeding, food, class, Bourdieu, parenting, taste

Introduction

In England, how we feed our children has never been simply a private family matter; it is a subject of great public concern. Parents constantly receive dietary messages sanctioned by various voices of authority, including government experts, the public health sector, and

celebrity chefs. For instance, most recently, parental feeding work has been in the spotlight thanks to a Public Health England campaign called Change4Life, with the aim of teaching parents how to be ‘food smart’. Such campaigns place their emphasis on educating families and children to make the ‘right choices’, obscuring the unequal conditions within which eating habits emerge (Parsons, 2016). Moreover, they have contributed to a dominant discourse on healthy feeding that devalues and penalises the feeding practices of families with fewer economic, cultural, and temporal resources. Albeit unintentionally, academic studies that emanate from the perspective of nutritional science have further reinforced this. Motivated by concerns about child obesity, such studies have identified parental feeding styles and explored how these styles correlate with possible health outcomes and parents’ socio-economic status (e.g., Cardel et al. 2012, Vereecken et al. 2012). While such studies demonstrate the existence of patterns in feeding strategies, they fail to unpack exactly how class processes shape understandings of ‘good feeding’. This study aims to fill this gap and asks how the dominant healthy feeding discourse is interpreted by parents from diverse class backgrounds. In what ways do these interpretations influence parents’ day-to-day foodwork? What potential role can feeding practices play in reproducing culinary taste hierarchies?

To address these questions, this paper brings a Bourdieusian class consumption focus together with food parenting studies. The former has revealed how tastes in food are structured in relation to individuals’ positions in class-conditioned social space (e.g., Smith Maguire 2017, Flemmen et al. 2018, Atkinson and Deeming 2015). This approach has also underlined how the transmission of culinary repertoires plays out in the reproduction of inequalities more generally. However, it has not adequately addressed how the transmission from parents to children occurs in the context of everyday foodwork (for an exception, see Wills et al. 2011). Food parenting studies, on the other hand, have developed a nuanced understanding of parents’ strategies and their implications (e.g., DeVault 1994, Cairns and Johnston 2015, Beagan et al. 2015). While much insight into class-based differences in feeding notions and practices has been gleaned, the focus has typically been on changing motherhood discourses and the gendered structure of feeding work. In this paper, inspired by the study of Wright et al. (2015) on Australian mothers, I will elaborate on the role of class-cultural processes in the lived experience of feeding in England, focusing on the practices of all family members involved and not just mothers. Feeding is broadly conceptualised here as a series of processes involving the ‘planning, purchasing, preparation, and emotional and domestic management of children’s eating’ (Wright et al. 2015). Using longitudinal ethnographic data collected over two years,

feeding as a process is examined and theorised. The findings show how resources generate different interpretations of what *varied* and *balanced* feeding means and the kinds of practices parents engage in to achieve it.

Agendas of ‘good feeding’ and parental feeding styles

As elsewhere, parents in England are exposed to various popular, medical, and academic resources on what constitutes ‘good’ feeding. *Healthiness* and *variation* are often used to judge the quality of feeding practices. For instance, the British Nutritional Foundation provides detailed tables to help parents monitor the variation in their children’s routine diets¹. Similarly, the NHS recommends offering children varied meals and closely monitoring the sugar content of their snacks². In addition to *what* children eat, there seems to be a concern about *how* children consume it. For instance, one of the most popular parenthood web-portals in England, babycentre.co.uk, advises parents to sit and eat together with their babies as a family every day in order to establish life-long healthy eating habits³. Similarly, allowing babies to pick up, explore, and eat food by themselves (baby-led weaning) and recognising children’s food agency are being increasingly encouraged by various sources of authority in England. (Locke 2015).

How parents perform vis-a-vis these ideals is a concern for public health and nutrition science, since ‘poor’ or ‘unhealthy’ diets have been associated with the development of obesity, anaemia, and dental caries (Hayter et al. 2015), particularly among lower socio-economic groups, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and ill-health (Lovelace and Rabiee-Khan 2015). However, this body of literature fails to generate insight into how parents appropriate advice on what constitutes a varied and healthy diet, because it tends to be typified by a methodological focus on the identification and consequences of fixed ‘types’ of parental feeding and control, such as authoritarian, permissive, or authoritative (e.g., Ventura et al. 2010). It also often exaggerates the extent to which rational choice drives what people choose to feed and underestimates the extent to which eating is embedded in the flow of day-to-day life (Delormier et al. 2009). Moreover, these types are treated as if they emerge in a vacuum,

¹ <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/healthyliving/lifestages/children.html>

² <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/what-to-feed-young-children/>

³ <https://www.babycentre.co.uk/a25010525/eating-as-a-family>

independent of broader parenting discourses shaping parents' approaches, such as the 'intensive feeding' ideology (Brenton 2017), which equates good mothering with intensive food labour. Also understudied is the potential role that feeding plays in the reproduction of class cultures. Through parental foodwork, children not only develop a sensory palate; they also learn certain associations with food (e.g., manners, values, functions), which are used to construct symbolic boundaries as early as primary school (Oncini 2020). However, transmission or socialisation does not only happen at the point of feeding, so monitoring 'what' children are fed is an insufficient focus in unpacking class processes. Instead, feeding needs to be redefined as a wide-ranging process involving the 'planning, purchasing, preparation, and emotional and domestic management of children's eating' and contextualised into parental dispositions towards food and eating (Wright et al. 2015).

Food taste and class analysis

The ways in which culinary boundaries and class processes overlap have been well documented. In his classic study, Bourdieu (1984) showed that greater distance from economic necessity generates an aesthetic approach to eating that helps the privileged pursue non-material agendas, such as health and refinement. Limited resources, on the other hand, teach their holders to see food more in terms of its nutritional value, as fuel, and encourage them to make culinary choices regarding fulfilling meals, value for money, and efficient recipes. More recent empirical explorations have confirmed that such distinctions still operate, albeit with some new dimensions. In England, for example, ethical concerns guide the food choices of those higher up the socio-economic scale since they have the 'capacity to project oneself and one's doings into the longer-term future' (Atkinson and Deeming 2015: 893). This disposition is underpinned by a motivation to discipline and regulate consumption and contrasts with working classes' supposed lack of control over material conditions determining their food choices. Studies conducted in other national contexts such as the south of Scotland (Wills et al. 2011), Canada (Beagan et al. 2015), Norway (Flemmen et al. 2018), and Australia (Beagan et al. 2014) have revealed similar patterns. The breadth of culinary repertoires has also become indicative of class position, as the omnivore literature reveals the declining status of narrow, snobbish, and exclusive taste profiles (Karademir Hazir and Warde 2015). In food terms, this points to a rise of a new gourmet culture, in which artisanal, non-industrial, and international foodstuffs are appreciated alongside more traditionally highbrow health-oriented and ethical diets (Johnston and Baumann 2015).

These classed patterns in food practices are not merely descriptive differences; they contribute to the accumulation of symbolic capital. Upper-class choices are assumed to reflect superior taste and virtue, becoming established in dominant discourses about what constitutes ‘good eating’ (Beagan et al. 2016: 47). Consequently, food choices of disadvantaged groups are labelled as ‘bad’, deemed to be less valuable and less respectable because they lack the control and restraint habitually performed by middle and upper classes. These patterns also enable the reproduction of privilege in the broader scheme of class-cultural dynamics. According to Bourdieu (1984), the dispositions outlined above are generated by habitus, a scheme that imprints social structures such as class ‘under our skin’. It is determined by the volume, composition, and trajectory of different forms of capital and embodied through a long process of socialisation. Therefore, seemingly individual food habits, such as an appreciation of exotic foodstuffs, are likely to be established after being raised in a culture where trying new and unfamiliar types of food is valued—and affordable. Families are the key sites for this transmission; nutritional science confirms that children acquire food preferences through repeated exposure in early childhood and maintain most of them until adolescence (Daniel 2015). Through parents’ different understandings and practices of good feeding, symbolically valued and legitimised food tastes, manners, and notions are taught to the next generation, reproducing privilege and symbolic domination. The traditional Bourdieusian literature on class taste and consumption has not yet focused explicitly on child-feeding practices (for an exception, see Oncini 2019, 2020). However, some useful insights can be drawn from the existing food parenting research about how far the classed dispositions towards food outlined above guide feeding practices.

Class antinomies in feeding practices

Research so far has persistently identified three class antinomies in feeding practices, which have been empirically explored in different settings of the global north: nutritional discourse vs. functional approach, broad vs. narrow feeding repertoires, and dominant vs. marginal roles of ethical principles. To begin with, middle-class families’ accounts of feeding, it is argued, are characterised by a strong nutritional discourse, prioritising ‘good health’ and the ‘right food’ over other concerns (Wills et al. 2011). These feeding ‘choices’ are made not only to contribute to the health of children now, but also for the future, and they are articulated by

parents reflexively through the use of scientific and nutrition-based terminology. Children growing up in these families may benefit from frequent conversations about healthy eating. Superficially, such conversations seek to guide choices (Fielding-Singh and Wang 2017); however, their frequency is interpreted as a sign of heightened parental scrutiny (O’Connell and Brannen 2013). This scrutiny contrasts with the working-class approach, which treats young people’s tastes primarily as their own concern (Backett-Milburn et al. 2010). In these families, ‘hierarchies of need’ can mean that nutritional concerns are supplanted by other concerns. That their children are suitably nourished is gauged through outward appearance and functionality, indicating that the food choices made enable the children to thrive (Wills et al. 2011). Such distinctions in feeding dispositions do not emerge in a vacuum but are linked to broader parenting cultures, which are heavily classed, especially in the context of neoliberalist preoccupations with individual control (Miller 2017).

Importantly, the classed distinction between narrow vs. broad tastes seems to operate in feeding practices, as well. Research shows that, for parents with more cultural resources, developing an eclectic, cosmopolitan taste palate and cultivating independent sensory agency in children is considered to be a priority (Wills et al. 2011, Beagan et al. 2015). Economic resources are important, too, as children need to be exposed to diverse taste cultures, such as during holidays abroad, to be able to learn how to appreciate tastes outside their comfort zone. As DeVault (1994) suggests, this geographic mobility among professional/managerial households also helps them develop a social life beyond the family, which includes entertaining with food. These children inherit a culturally richer food heritage and learn to associate food with pleasure, attractive presentations, and enjoyable settings. This is in contrast to ‘internally valued’ practices in working class families, which highlight the importance of eating ‘with your kind’, at home (Wills et al. 2011). Broadening taste repertoires requires serious temporal investment. As O’Connell and Brannen (2014) show, time poverty forces working-class parents to choose foodstuffs that are familiar and leads to an approach and attitude that can be (mis)interpreted from the outside as ‘laid back’.

Concern over food ethics is another classed antinomy mirrored in feeding practices. Principles concerning the sustainability of the environment and animal welfare tend to guide the feeding work of parents with high volumes of capital more intensely. Cultivated feeding work is often judged in relation to the ideal of the ‘organic child’ (Cairns et al. 2013); in other words, good mothers should feed their children with the purest and most ethical ingredients. Superficially,

such feeding dispositions may seem to solely reflect parents' moral values, but what they actually do is function as a source of distinction. Pre-conceived notions about food choices made by disadvantaged groups, expressed through images of grocery carts filled with hotdogs and crisps (Cairns and Johnston 2015), are denigrated as 'bad' and 'irresponsible'. Moreover, farmers markets and specialty stores associated with ethical eating carry connotations of elitism, which tend to make working-class consumers uncomfortable (Beagan et al., 2015) and further distance their feeding work from the 'organic child' ideal.

These antinomies resonate with the opposing class-based feeding strategies of concerted cultivation and concerted leniency that Oncini (2019) identified in the context of Italy, demonstrating their explanatory power beyond the immediate location within which they emerge empirically. Such striking parallels between eating and feeding dispositions suggest that the hierarchies revealed by the Bourdieusian taste literature (e.g., broad vs. narrow) are likely to be reproduced in the next generation through feeding practices. In fact, culinary distinctions are observed to be at play even in primary school, demarcating children from different social classes in terms of their gastronomic horizons, understandings of health, and table manners (Oncini 2019).

Class patterns revealed in Bourdieusian culinary taste literature as well as food parenting literature help us understand the value hierarchy in a given social practice and its repercussions. However, they don't necessarily help us unpack the nuanced understandings and interpretations that guide individual choices. In other words, there are shortcomings attached to looking through the lens of antinomies. For instance, middle class concern for healthiness and working class concern for practicality are often discussed in oppositional terms, but little is known about how parents with different resources define 'healthy', nor about the kinds of practices they engage with in order to achieve their ideals. Given the strength of the neo-liberal discourse on self-care, it would be unrealistic to assume that healthiness has no place in shaping working class practices. However, so long as an instrumental approach is extracted as the main characteristic of the 'taste of necessity', there is little incentive to investigate how healthiness is interpreted and enacted. Similarly, thinking with antinomies encourages us to define working class feeding practices by what they supposedly lack, e.g. breadth, ethical concerns, or heightened nutritional principles. However, as Beagan et al. (2015) show, parents who know the 'taste of necessity' use their own strategies to display virtue and respectability on their own terms, especially through frugality. For instance, these parents take pride in their thriftiness and

in their knowledge of how to feed their children economically; they draw moral boundaries between themselves and other parents who, in their view, have wasteful, extravagant, and frivolous feeding habits. In a similar vein, the restricted habitus of working-class families does not necessarily generate unethical feeding (Beagan et al. 2015). When parents with limited resources subscribe to ethical eating repertoires, it is usually an unrecognised alternative achieved through different intentions, e.g., buying locally to preserve tradition and facilitate mutual support and survival.

These examples mark an important new direction by enabling the exploration of how feeding is negotiated in everyday family life (Oncini 2019a), the nuanced differences in parents' interpretations of good feeding discourses and key terms such as 'healthy', 'varied', 'sustainable', 'balanced'.

Data and methodological approach

Generating insight into feeding work is methodologically challenging, as habitual, ritualised routine relationships are rarely reflexive and therefore difficult to articulate. Feeding is a part of the “invisible” nature of family feeding’ (Delormier et al. 2009), alerting researchers to the important subtleties of ‘silent discourses’. There is much that is tacitly understood in the recurrent mundanity of planning and organising food supplies, in addition to meal preparation, presenting both challenges and opportunities in terms of how data might be generated. In this ethnographic and longitudinal project, ‘go-along interviews’ were used to explore food dynamics, understandings, and feeding practices in families with young children (Kusenbach 2018). The sample comprised 12 families, each of whom had at least one child aged between 1.5 and 4 years. Each family participated in three rounds of interviews. In the first interview, the focus was on food and feeding routines and a meal was prepared and shared together with children. The second go-along interview was conducted 6 to 8 months later, in interviewees’ regular supermarkets as they did their shopping. The third interview took place almost 18-24 months after the first interview and focused on how food routines had changed as their children grew. A total of 36 interviews were conducted, lasting between 1 and 4 hours, and all were recorded for transcription. Families were recruited using established local networks and by distributing posters in family centres located in neighbourhoods with different socio-economic characteristics. Fathers were actively involved in the interviews in six of the families. Parents

received £20 worth of supermarket vouchers as a token of appreciation for their time after each interview. Interviewees' names were anonymised before the analysis.

Parental notions of good feeding and their practices were analysed thematically (Boyatzis 1998) by attaching different levels of coding to transcriptions manually. First level codes, such as 'homemade', 'nutritious', 'balanced', 'sustainable' evolved into higher order codes, such as 'health concerns', when analysed in relation to the context within which they appear. The two largest higher order codes that emerged from the data were 'healthiness' and 'variation'. These were consistent with the advice given by medical and popular resources. However, the first level codes which contributed to the higher order codes were patterned in terms of class backgrounds. For instance, 'balanced' was more common in working class families' narratives on healthy feeding, whereas 'sustainability' appeared exclusively in middle class families' accounts. Depending on respondents' living standards (single earner, blue collar) and educational background (below university level), five of the families in the sample were considered to be closer to the working-class habitus. The other seven families had significantly higher volumes of (institutionalised) cultural capital (most above university level), although their economic capital still placed some restrictions on their choices. None of the families in the sample were in immediate financial need or particularly rich; the variation in the sample was greater in terms of cultural capital than economic capital. The research design led to in-depth exploration of how dominant feeding principles of *variation* and *healthiness* are understood and negotiated in families with diverse resources.

Different facets of *varied diet*: the making of the 'gourmet' vs. 'unfussy' child

All parents in the sample aimed to teach their children to accept a broad spectrum of flavours, textures, and types of food. However, the resources at these families' disposal were fundamental in shaping their motivations as well as their strategies and brought about variety in different ways. For middle-class interviewees, variety was essential in cultivating a broad, autonomous, and individual taste. This involved constantly introducing different types of food, cooking and serving styles to '*educate the palate*', as one of my interviewees put it. Baby food pouches, despite being marketed with buzzwords such as 'organic', were not found appealing because they fail to help children identify the taste of individual ingredients. For instance, Katie

described them as ‘*banal*’ and ‘*horrible*’, like ‘*cat food*’, and suggested that she’d prefer her baby to ‘*steal from a plate, enjoy food, and become a foodie*’. Similarly, during her shopping trip, Anna said she preferred her baby ‘*to develop a taste for proper food, not for stuff out of a jar*’ and avoids them because she thinks ‘*if he develops a taste for the jar stuff, he is never going to get a complex palate*’. Working parents have to make huge temporal investments to achieve this advanced ideal of variety. For instance, Katie carefully organises the weekly food routine at home to enhance her baby’s repertoire by offering foods that her husband does not fancy, such as fish, during daytime, when he is not at home. In fact, in the first interview, Katie cooked salmon for her daughter and served it with three different side dishes: grilled courgettes, boiled carrots, and pan-roasted spinach. When asked if this is her routine, she said:

Two nights ago, there was pasta with onions and cabbage for us and chili added at the last minute. And when I was cooking I was thinking ‘not sure if Zoe likes cabbage’, so I just made a third pot, and there was carrots and spinach on the side, and I make another pot with peas and broccoli ... I end up having five or six things on the table. I like that thing that you read online, ‘parents provide and baby decides’, so I try to put out stuff and then she decides what she wants to eat.

Katie’s emphasis on the child’s food agency and the emotional investment she makes demonstrates how deeply she has internalised an intensive feeding ideology (Brenton 2017). However, introducing variety means more than providing ‘interesting’ options. It includes teaching children to appreciate ‘foreign’ foodstuffs and develop an omnivorous disposition towards food. Learning to enjoy ‘exotic’ foods was also encouraged, because it is considered to be a ‘rite of passage’ towards acquiring adult tastes (Wills et al. 2011). For instance, Anna was very happy to see her son enjoy kale hummus and other Mediterranean mezzes because she believed this showed that he will be ‘a real gourmet’. With similar intentions, Emily once organised a spice tasting session at home, after which her daughter ‘*decided she likes coriander seeds*’, so she got ‘*the pestle out*’ to grind coriander for their food. Such concerns about variety seem to be underpinned by a willingness to instil a ‘taste for distinction’ in the younger generation early on. Consequently, the idea of feeding bland mashed baby food was devalued and contrasted with one in which children are taught to appreciate their parents’ refined repertoire.

For families with fewer resources, teaching their children to appreciate a varied diet was still a main concern and guided their feeding work, albeit for entirely different reasons. Instead of cultivating and educating the palate of a gourmet, these families had instrumental concerns about narrow diets, as feeding ‘fussy children’ is demanding on many grounds. For instance, when James was explaining to me which advice on feeding he found most useful, he said:

I don't know, give them as many different kind of tastes and flavours as possible... Uhm, that was quite good advice. 'Cause, you know, you kind of hear, parents have fussy eaters. I was trying to avoid that, it's quite important. So yeah, some other advice was to, this always, they always eat what everyone else is eating at the table.

Parents who appreciate variety for practical reasons (e.g., avoiding fussiness) make different choices than parents who prioritise it to achieve an open, complex, and cultivated palate. In the former case, in order to increase the chances of acceptance, parents tend to ‘hide’ the foodstuffs that their children do not fancy in the dishes that they tend to like. For instance, Becky chops mushrooms so finely that her younger daughter eats them ‘*without knowing it*’. Dealing with fussy eating is also important because of the snowball effect it might have on other members of the family. Becky knew that if she offered mushrooms openly and risked their rejection, it would encourage others to insist on their own individual preferences, which would have economic and temporal consequences. Another strategy to minimise the risk of rejection is to allow children to watch videos or TV while they eat. For instance, Tracy suggested that her children ‘*tend not to notice*’ what is on their plate and eat easily if they are concentrating on a screen. While such pragmatic strategies ensure that variation is delivered and sustained, they fail to instil in children the qualities that middle-class parents strive for, such as heightened culinary agency. A broad taste repertoire was also seen as being key in facilitating food socialisations that take place outside of the home, which are central to the middle-class aim of cultivating a richer food heritage that is shared externally (DeVault 1998). For instance, Anna believes that the acquisition of a complex palate would help her son eat in different contexts with different kinds of people, emphasising the value of variety beyond that of nutrition and in the development of soft skills:

I really want him to enjoy the food 'cause if he enjoys food, it's just a big part of life, isn't it? You can go out to eat with different people, it's lovely... You know, if you, if you learn about

all the tastes and textures, you know what goes with this and you know, it's exciting to eat out and socialise... It's not just about, you know, filling a gap and, and being hungry.

Since a varied palate is key to many different ideals, such as building up a positive, enthusiastic attitude, middle-class interviewees put much effort into diversifying and updating the culinary routine both at home and outside of it. Working-class parents' emphasis on variety, primarily driven by instrumental reasons and restricted by circumstances, seems to generate less willingness to challenge repetition. For instance, Tracy does not want to cook 'risky' meals in order to avoid stress and instead repeats the meals that she is certain her children will accept. She believes that the only way to make children accept foodstuffs that they have previously rejected is to let them go hungry until they accept them, a strategy of which she does not approve. Achieving the desired variety in the context of limited resources encourages parents to find practical strategies. For instance, Maisie serves the same food for lunch and dinner so as to reduce or eliminate waste, but she alters the recipe by adding rice, for example, before serving it the second time. Furthermore, as Jess's account suggests, if there is more than one child at home, concerns over variety can be offset against nutritional value:

For a certain reason, we always have a roast dinner on a Wednesday. And a roast dinner on a Friday [laughs], no, Sunday, sorry. And the school does roast dinners on Wednesdays as well. So, like, my youngest come home and say 'Oh, not again'. [laughs]. They're like 'Oh, again, two in one day is too much!' [laughs] And the older one, she said, 'We have roast so often that I've gone off it'. [laughs] But it's good for you, it's meat and vegetables.

Shaped by parents' resources, these different rationales and strategies for achieving variation lead to hierarchical culinary socialisations. Children learn how to approach food (e.g., adventurous vs. instrumental) and what is acceptable when it comes to consuming it (in front of the TV or with heightened senses) through parents' day-to-day foodwork. Moreover, such notions get embedded in our sensory selves, demarcating apparently physical sensations along class lines.

Feeding *healthy*, but how? Conflicting repertoires of a homemade, nutritious meal

Resonating with Beagan et al. (2016)'s findings, when first asked about what they understood to be good feeding, all parents, without exception, referred to offering healthy options. However, there was great variation in terms of how 'healthy' was defined and the practices

parents engaged in to achieve it. A heightened nutritional discourse and a critical approach to authoritative views were more pronounced among middle-class parents. This is not very surprising, given that these parents have more resources to critically engage with competing recommendations. For instance, Katie was sceptical about the course offered to her by health visitors⁴, in which they explained weaning through the terminology of ‘stages’ commonly used by the baby food industry instead of ‘*scientific*’ nutritional concepts. Anna was even more critical and described the training as ‘*terrible*’ because all the emphasis was on health and safety instead of taste development. She also disparaged parents who lack a critical nutritional approach and ‘*fall for*’ the buzzwords exploited by baby food brands:

It does surprise me that some people don't know about nutrition at all. I know someone, she gives her child tons of crisps, and she just goes on, 'Well, it's organic', and I said, 'Organic doesn't actually mean healthy', and she was like 'What?' She didn't realise, just 'cause it's organic it doesn't mean...it's healthy, so... It just means they don't put pesticides in.

This critical nutritional approach can become a problem for parents as babies get older and other actors become involved. For instance, Katie and Emma’s toddlers started nursery in between the first and third interviews, and they were noticeably worried about how the school might undermine the routines they had established so far. When we met for the shopping trip, Emma had already been in contact with the nursery manager to complain about the fat and salt content in the lunches served. Emma had also shared her concern with the cook about carbohydrate-heavy vegetarian options and repetitive weekly menus. Interestingly, Becky, who is at the other end of the class spectrum, found the same transition stressful, but for entirely different reasons. Instead of losing nutritional control, Becky was concerned that her daughter’s eating practices and packed lunches would be subject to critical scrutiny. To cope with the stress of this, she kept reminding herself that ‘*in the end there is gonna be children that are gonna eat far worse*’ than hers. Such emotional differences in parental confidence levels point to the hierarchical ordering of feeding practices—and parents’ explicit awareness of it. However, it is important to note that such emotional accounts were mostly present in mothers’ narratives; working class fathers in the study tended not to refer explicitly to surveillance as a cause of concern. Similarly, anxiety about taste socialization potentially

⁴ Health visitors are registered nurses/midwives who have additional training in community public health nursing.

being disrupted by external institutions, such as a nursery, was uncommon in middle class fathers' accounts. This suggests that such classed processes are also deeply gendered, in that mothers not only do the much of the labour of feeding, but also the cultural transmission.

During cooking/eating sessions, it became clear that middle class parents who have established an elaborate repertoire tend to talk to their children about nutritional values from very early on. For instance, after developing a strong liking for smoked salmon and sliced ham, Emily's daughter was taught why *'smoked food and cured meat is not good for health despite the fact that they are rich in protein'*. This refined nutritional agenda tended to generate distinct shopping habits, such as label checking. Although, when asked in earlier interviews, almost all parents claimed that they read food labels, the shopping trips made it clear that this was more common among middle-class interviewees. This may be linked to the tendency of these parents to try new recipes and brands more often.

In contrast, rather than a heightened emphasis on nutritional information, what was prevalent in working-class families' notions of healthy feeding was a concern for achieving balance between food groups. For instance, Tracy claimed that she had always been *'alert since having children, always questioning if they had enough meat, carbs, and veggies every day'*. To achieve this objective, Tracy uses strategies that would be unlikely to be adopted by middle-class parents, such as sprinkling refined sugar on top of the fruits less favoured by her children. Additionally, in contrast to a critical, nutritional approach to feeding, working-class parents' understandings of dietary balance were very much shaped by mainstream feeding guidelines, such as the five-a-day rule. From the perspective of middle-class parents, just like the stage categorisations used by the baby food industry, the five-a-day rule is an unsophisticated public health message. From the perspective of working-class parents, its simplicity reduces stress, helping them achieve what they consider to be a balanced feeding regime. For instance, after discussing feeling guilty about serving instant meals, Becky said:

Like yesterday we had the pizza, it was nice to have that, so I think once a week or twice a week, it's not gonna hurt anyone. 'Cause I even, from beans, you can get one of your five-a-day from beans, baked beans. And like your spaghetti hoops as well will be passed, as one of your five-a-day.

Similarly, Maisie showed great trust in the feeding work advice she received from various

mainstream resources. For instance, when we cooked lunch for her daughter, Maisie used a promotional recipe book sent to her by a baby food brand known for its affordability. Throughout the interviews, she complained about her '*lack of imagination*' when it comes to offering healthy options, and any inspiration—even from the baby food industry—was gratefully received. Importantly, in these households, achieving balance was primarily the concern of the mothers. All except one of the working class mothers made jokes about how their children would be fed if the decisions were left to their fathers - even when fathers were present in the interviews. Tracy commented that her husband '*would cause children to have a sugar overdose*' whereas Jess was certain that her partner would '*give kids plain canned sausage every day*'. In addition to emphasising the maternal role in the organization of food work and gatekeeping, this reveals how gender differences are heavily classed in the sphere of food consumption. Working class mothers' dispositions in this case were more open to change (for example, via nutritional guidelines, responsabilising discourses) compared to those of the fathers, whose notions seemed to remain closer to the taste of necessity, as originally defined by Bourdieu (1984).

While working-class parents were strongly committed to the principle of balance, middle-class parents had the confidence to deviate from this and make their own informed interpretations and choices. For instance, in line with their broader concern for the environment and wellbeing, it was common among middle-class parents to offer plant-based alternatives instead of meat. Emily dropped her family's meat consumption to once a week and offered legumes, nut butter, and tofu as alternatives. She and her husband also talked to their children regularly about the disadvantages of consuming meat, but without going into details of poor animal welfare. Similarly, when asked about the lack of meat in her shopping trolley, Emma explained how they cut down on it intentionally because local, sustainable, and affordable options were limited. This resonates with the findings of the feeding literature (Cairns and Johnston 2018) and class literature (Atkinson and Deeming 2015): middle-class food repertoires tend to be marked by long-term environmental concerns. The extensive involvement of fathers in this process also contrasts with working class fathers' approach, as briefly described above.

Such concerns shape not only what parents feed their children, but also how they teach them to appreciate food. For middle-class parents, teaching children about the journey of the meal, from the soil to the plate, is a key element of good feeding. Clare, for example, started to plant and grow vegetables after having children because *'it has something to do with, like, a real value for food, like, knowing where food comes from and respecting'*. Similarly, Anna grows her own vegetables because she wants her son *'to understand that you get food from the ground and it grows...to appreciate his environment, to have a kind of affinity with it'*. These concerns are very much in line with the dominant ethical repertoire (Johnston et al. 2011), which gives the culturally privileged class fractions the moral high ground. These parents are aware that what they are trying to teach is a disposition with higher moral and cultural value, one that cannot be suddenly acquired in adulthood. Moreover, they were reflexive about how this disposition should be embodied, starting from as early as the weaning period, and how it goes significantly beyond mainstream guidelines such as five-a-day.

The desire to educate their children about the whole trajectory of food, from soil to plate, not only encourages parents to garden with their children but also to develop stricter criteria for homemade food. As a broad term, 'homemade' was used by all families as a criterion by which to judge the quality of the food as well as the practices of (mostly) maternal feeding (Parsons 2016). However, as in the case of nutritional approaches, middle-class parents' definition of 'homemade' was exclusionary. For instance, during our shopping, Katie explained to me her understanding of 'homemade' as something *'cooked with the minimum amount of prepacked stuff'* or *'things with no list of ingredients'*, which also *'produces less plastic waste'*. She was even hesitant about buying frozen chopped onions and courgettes and spent about five minutes in front of the freezer before deciding against it. Katie also avoided using any frozen vegetables when we cooked together because she wanted to chop them freshly herself, in the size her recipe required. This strict definition of 'homemade' contrasted with the more practical one employed by families with fewer resources. Instead of referring to unprocessed, unpackaged, and homegrown foodstuffs, the term, to them, indicated that the meal was assembled and consumed at home *'properly'*, regardless of the number of industrial steps involved in the preparation of the items prior to purchase. For instance, after sharing her pride in preparing her daughter a 'homemade' lunch, Becky served a plate of food comprising a peanut butter sandwich with a pack of crisps and fruity yogurt marketed for children. Similarly, Jess showed me the 'homemade' snacks and lunch that she takes with her to the baby play group: chicken nuggets she has cooked from frozen and store-bought fruit pouches.

These examples do not suggest that cooking at home was deemed unimportant across working-class households. Both Becky and Jess emphasised that they avoid serving their children food from fast-food chains and limit their consumption of ready meals. They also highlighted how different their feeding work is from the stereotypical ‘unconcerned McDonalds mum’ (Cairns et al. 2018). Moreover, serving homemade food involved a sense of pride, especially when done economically. For instance, Becky did some mental arithmetic to calculate how much a portion of cottage pie costs if she cooks it in batches using own-brands instead of the well-known ones preferred by ‘food snob’ parents. This demonstrates that, for parents with fewer resources, ‘homemade’ as a concept has permeable boundaries and is far less imbued with abstract environmental ideals. This distinction is also noticeable in the way parents respond to their children’s consumption of food that is known to be ‘bad’ for them. For instance, allowing treats on weekends, when children are free to eat store-bought sweets and takeaway as much as they want, was reflected on as being joyful, rather than the result of ‘*losing control*’. Therefore, permeable boundaries seem to serve an emotional function, too. As Devine et al. suggest (2006), treats can be used as a core strategy for coping with the work–family spillover, or as a way for mothers ‘to express their devotion to their children beyond basic survival needs’ and be part of consumer society like their other well-off peers.

Concluding Discussion

Drawing on the findings from a small-scale, ethnographic, and longitudinal study, this article has shown how class processes shape parental feeding practices, broadly in line with findings of earlier Bourdieusian studies on food consumption. In addition, it has shown how parents interpret and act on the dominant discourse on ‘good’ feeding in different ways. For example, definitions of ‘homemade’ and the strategies used to ensure balance, such as sprinkling sugar on fruits, were remarkably different across families. So too was the extent to which parents have self-confidence and competence sufficient to challenge popular mainstream guidelines, health authorities’ recommendations, or the baby food industry’s campaigns. However, this study reveals that such differences do not necessarily operate in oppositional ways. In this respect, the findings mark a divergence from the conclusions of Bourdieu (1984) or Oncini (2019). For instance, concerns over health, hitherto considered to be the preserve of the middle class in relation to food work, appear to be very pronounced among working classes

mothers' narratives of what constitutes good feeding. At first glance, this seems to support Beagan et al. (2016), who suggest that class distinctions performed on the basis of health and ethical concerns are diminishing, due to a strong public discourse that is now shaping food consciousness in similar ways across the social classes. But this may only be a partial explanation. By focusing more closely on day-to-day practices, my work suggests shifting class-based conceptualisations of food work. Middle class families, for example, seem to have moved on from concerns over health to an advanced and sophisticated critical nutritional framework, while discarding the (more basic) practical guidelines targeting wider public as being inadequate and untrustworthy. Similarly, while variety was a priority for all parents, middle-class parents chose to achieve it by heightening children's culinary agency, whereas working-class parents prioritised the consumption, one way or another, of *various* food groups. In theory, the concern is the same, but these two strategies, negotiated differently, will generate culinary repertoires with different exchange values in the future. Similarly, the concept of a home-cooked meal as a symbol of good parenting (Parsons 2014) was internalised as an ideal by all interviewees, regardless of their social class. However, through parents' differing notions of cooking from scratch, children learn different criteria as to what constitutes authentic culinary production. Social class may not generate completely oppositional feeding principles, such as attitudes toward homemade vs. convenience food, but it does tend to shape foodwork in finer, complex ways through day-to-day feeding practices. In this process of classed taste socialization, gender also plays a significant role. Women not only carry the burden of communicating the family's socioeconomic status and being 'good' mothers, they also consider (classed) taste socialization as being their responsibility. Unpacking the gender dimension was beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, the differences found between working class mothers' and fathers' approaches hint at a myriad of ways in which gender interacts with classing and classifying processes.

Notions about good taste in food are transmitted through parental food practices enacted in various contexts, ranging from shopping to monitoring school meals. Focusing on a rather underexplored stage in food parenting, this paper shows that this moulding process starts as early as babies' first introduction to solid food. For instance, middle-class parents transmit their heightened nutritional discourse by talking to their children about healthy food even before children reach a conversational stage. Parental practices train the 'physical' senses, too (e.g., teaching how to match the spice to the dish) and expand them (e.g., by exposure to international cuisine). Such habits established through what might be considered as a cultivated feeding

disposition (e.g., teaching cosmopolitan tastes, a joyful approach to eating, a strong sense of individual taste) are likely to generate higher symbolic value when these children become adults. A cultivated repertoire will also occupy the moral high ground as it is characterised by environmental concerns embodied from early childhood. Feeding strategies used by working classes to display virtue, such as frugality, are unlikely to generate food dispositions that will yield such symbolic capital in the future. Nor will the practical strategies adopted to make children accept new tastes from time to time (e.g., hiding food to avoid fussiness).

Such finer differences in class dispositions would not be visible had this study focused solely on what children eat. Nutritional and public health science is keenly interested in the correlation between what children are fed, parental feeding ‘styles’ and socioeconomic status. Similarly, Bourdieusian class researchers outline links between positions in the social space and self-declared tastes and consumption practices. However, as this paper reveals, the quantitative designs typically employed by such literature are not useful in capturing subtler, more nuanced distinctions. Moreover, neither the guidelines on good feeding nor parental notions are limited to food intake; they are concerned more broadly about how food is consumed as well as manners or etiquette, which are underpinned by moral and cultural values. For instance, there seems to be a clear class pattern in terms of the ways in which children were encouraged to eat. The use of distraction techniques adopted by working-class parents as a pragmatic means of achieving dietary balance and variation were anathema to highly educated parents. On the other hand, baby-led weaning, which is more commonly used by middle-class parents for its capacity to enhance the culinary agency of children, was denigrated by working-class parents as ‘fashionable’, wasteful, and messy. These feeding work notions contribute to the construction of cultural boundaries as parents judge their practices and those of others comparatively. For instance, some middle-class parents explicitly suggested that those who offer baby food from jars to their children are feeding them ‘*cat food*’, devoid of proper taste and texture, whereas for some working-class parents, those who insist on not buying own-brand baby snacks are simply ‘food snobs’. This boundary work shapes not only parents’ identities, but also children’s understandings of them/us as early as primary school. As Oncini’s (2020) ethnographic study of school canteens demonstrates, children display significant class-based differences in terms of eating manners, knowledge, and gastronomic horizons, which inevitably factors in their feelings of belonging to or feeling alienated from certain social groups. Longitudinal, ethnographic studies such as this one, but looking at longer time spans, can further illuminate how class continues to shape relations with food in the context of children’s secondary

socialisation as well as the consequences of diverse culinary socialisations for children's social lives.

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