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Concepts of Healthy Eating Food Research: Phases I and II, 1992-1996

Archiving

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Concepts of Healthy Eating:
The history of two ESRC-funded research projects on food in the 1990s
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'Preserving food (data): Food related research held at the UK Data Archive'[1]

Abstract

In the 1990s, the ESRC funded an inter-disciplinary research programme 'The Nation's Diet'[2]. Two of the projects, both entitled 'Concepts of Healthy Eating', were based in the anthropology department at Goldsmiths. These looked at people's conceptions of the relationship between food and health in an inner city area (Project 1 – Lewisham) and in a rural area of Pembrokeshire (Project 2). Both used a wide variety of methods (participant observation, semi-structured interviews, food frequency questionnaires, 7-day food diaries, and analysis of large quantities of secondary data). While a variety of publications resulted from these projects, much data remains available and it was decided to archive as much of the material as possible, including 'work in progress' such as annual reports.

This short paper, then, presents the history of a large and complex food project over a period of some fifteen years, from its initial stages, through data-gathering, publication of findings, to archiving, including dealing with ethical matters such as confidentiality and anonymity. It is hoped that this paper will not only publicise the existence of this rich collection, but will also stimulate discussion around the following questions: How may material collected by such methods be archived? What use can be made of such archives for further analysis and by whom?

Introduction: why a food project?

In the 1990s, the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) issued a call for a new inter-disciplinary Research Programme 'The Nation's Diet', which posed the question 'Why do people eat what they do?' In the first phase, projects in psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics and media were awards grants.

It was scarcely surprising that this programme should have emerged at this point in time. In 1983, the National Advisory Committee on Nutrition Education (NACNE) had issued a report entitled *Proposals for Nutritional Guidelines for Health Education in Britain*, which showed that the increasing amount of fat, salt and sugar in the British diet was becoming a health problem, but this report had been ignored (some even said concealed) by the government, until Jeffrey Cannon, food correspondent of the Sunday Times, highlighted the issue in his column. Later, he and his partner Caroline Walker, a nutritionist, published the first of a series of books: *The Food Scandal: What's Wrong with the British Diet and How to Put it Right (*Century Publishing 1984). It took some time for the

[1] The other paper in the symposium was by Libby Bishop 'Cooking with left-overs: Exploring and reusing existing food research data'. The two papers were discussed together.
[2] The Research Programme was directed by Anne Murcott, who also edited a collection of chapters from all of the constituent projects at the end (Murcott

government to respond, but finally in 1992, there came a white paper *The Health of the Nation: A Strategy for health in England* (HMSO).

Clearly the (Conservative) government of the day was concerned about the potential costs to the health service of all of the trends in unhealthy eating, but its response was mainly to place responsibility on the individual, part of a wider turn towards a 'risk society' (Beck 1992). The tension between the individual responsibility of the consumer, on the one hand, and the responsibility of the state for public health on the other, is one which has continued to this day. It was and continues to be regularly aired in moral panics around food such as salmonella in eggs, the various phases of BSE outbreaks and the growing concerns around food and health, obesity, coronary heart disease, diabetes and other 'diseases of affluence'. There were of course attempts, some of them state-funded, to persuade people to eat more healthily, such as the campaign 'Look after your heart', but most of them failed fairly abysmally.

There were other important issues around food during the period of the 1980s and early 1990s. One was the growing importance of supermarkets and concern about their control over the food distribution chain. Another was the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy which resulted in the production of huge surpluses: 'wine lakes' and 'butter mountains'. A third was the increase in the number of people eating out regularly, and the growth in 'ethnic' foods, with curry fast becoming the most popular food in UK.

Concepts of Healthy Eating Phases I and II

'Concepts of Healthy Eating' Phase I was an anthropological project based in the anthropology department at Goldsmiths and focusing its attention on the London Borough of Lewisham in which the college was situated. Two half term Research Associates, Anna Willetts and Anne Keane, were appointed and also registered as Ph.D. students. Anne Keane was to develop a particular interest in the body and embodiment (Keane 1997) and Anna Willetts in urban alternative lifestyles, especially vegetarianism and permaculture (Willetts 1997). At a later stage, the ESRC awarded funding for a second phase of the Research Programme, and an application was made for a second tranche of funding for another 'Concepts of Healthy Eating' project, this time based in West Wales. Dr. Janice Williams was appointed as a full-time Research Associate and Karen Catling as administrator for the two projects[3]. In Wales Janice Williams, in addition to her more general research, focused on Welsh farmers, tourists, and 'alternatives' (Williams 1997, 2003).

Anthropologists have long had an interest in food, the study of which may reveal ideas about purity and pollution (Douglas 1966) the construction of a meal (Douglas 1975), the social history of a commodity such as sugar (Mintz 1985), food habits and social change (Fischler 1980), and the relationship between cooking, cuisine and class (Goody 1982). However, while there was a fairly rich ethnographic literature on food in other parts of the world, notably south Asia, in the early 1990s, little research had been carried out by anthropologists on the UK or indeed, Europe more generally.

[3]Additional assistance was also provided in Lewisham by Sabine Durand-Gasselin (MA student who carried out a small study of cafes and restaurants), in Wales by Sandra Bayes (who collected and analysed secondary data), and for both projects, by Jim Ottoway, who carried out further NUDIST analysis.

The Concepts of Healthy Eating projects posed a series of questions[4] about why people eat what they do and about their perceptions of the relationship between food and health. Some of the questions which appeared in both applications included the following:

- How can food be seen in its social and cultural context?
- How can a cultural and symbolic analysis tie up with an economic one?
- Given the frequent largely unsuccessful exhortations for people to eat more healthily, where is the rationality in decision-making? How do people see relation between food and health?
- What is the significance of views of the body and embodiment?
- How does an approach using the concept of entitlements, which brings in power differentials, help to explain who gets what and why?
- Would there be discernible differences based on the classic factors of gender, age, ethnicity, class and location, especially urban and rural?

The first application was made to the ESRC in 1992, with Project 1 starting in 1993 and lasting until 1997, with fieldwork from 1994-5. The final report went to the ESRC in 1997. The second application was made in 1993, the project started in 1994, with fieldwork from 1994-6, and the final report was made in 1996.

Methods

The teams used a variety of methods to carry out this work. One was the standard anthropological technique of participant observation in events to do with food (cookery classes, weight watchers, gym, local organisations, pubs, meetings). The second was to carry out a series of taped semi-structured interviews[5] with lay participants, food and health professionals, 'alternatives', and tourists which resulted in almost 300 transcribed interviews of 1-2 hours in length. These interviews were later placed in a searchable NUDIST database. The third was to devise a set of Food Frequency Questionnaires which was given to interested general informants and to children in schools to complete. The results of this questionnaire were analysed using the Paradox programme and quantitative data obtained. Fourthly, some participants undertook to complete 7 day food diaries, which required them to record all 'food events', where they took place and with whom, and gave a page at the end for their reflections and comments. These diaries too were digitised and analysed.

In addition to the primary generated in the above ways, the projects accumulated a huge amount of secondary data: newspaper reports (especially local papers), local advertising, menus in local restaurants and so on.

'Findings' and issues

Like most projects, ours inevitably developed lives of their own. We had expected to find differences based on ethnicity, gender and age. We had also expected to find the existence of what Davidson et al. (1991) had already termed a 'lay epidemiology', although we were somewhat surprised to find that the health professionals we interviewed, instead of utilising an entirely 'scientific' discourse, actually talked also in

[4] see also list of questions below
[5] See questionnaires which were tailored for different categories

terms of their own experiences (Keane and Caplan 1998). We were interested in following up the work of Douglas (1975) and Murcott (1985) on 'the proper meal', and comparing notions of this with ideas about convenience foods, fast foods and takeaways. Sure enough, meals were indeed contrasted with snacks in both Lewisham and west Wales, the former being often termed 'proper meals' while the latter had a different set of connotations.

But inevitably there were also some surprises. Although there had been several food panics prior to the start of the first project, we had not reckoned with the impact of BSE and the profound effects it would have on people's eating, nor with the extent to which people worried about the safety of the food they ate. In order to deal with such issues, we found that many people were 'sceptical' eaters, utilising notions such as balance, moderation and variety to rationalise their choices. In other contexts, such as being on holiday or eating out, ideas around release and control and 'treats' came to the foreground.

Furthermore, while we had expected to find some evidence of eating disorders, on which a large literature already existed, we had not expected to find that every single woman interviewed in Lewisham would state spontaneously that she was either ' on a diet', was about to go on one, or had been on one. Yet in west Wales, an area with a high rate of CHD, there were much less concern at that time about body image, and almost no cases of eating disorders could be found among general informants, a statistic which was confirmed by local medical practitioners.

The members of the two teams disseminated information about their research and its findings throughout this period via attendance and speaking at numerous conferences[6], articles (including in the national press) and book chapters, as well as in published reports, reports to the ESRC, a Ph.D. thesis, and a book. It should be noted that there were both joint and individual publications, and the database was treated as a common pool.

Archiving issues

When these projects were conceived and carried out, archiving was not yet the norm, nor was it an ESRC requirement. There was thus no funding for archiving built into the projects, and although the ESRC tried to apply their new rule retrospectively, they did not offer funds to do so. Meanwhile, when the projects finished, the Research Associates moved away to do other things. Furthermore, when I came to consider archiving this material over a decade later, the computers containing the data were not immediately available, although fortunately the material had been backed up on the Goldsmiths College server and on diskettes, so most of it was retrievable.

There were further problems. Most social science researchers rely as much on their 'head-notes' as on their written or recorded notes. However I had relatively few of the

[6] Conferences attended were numerous and included one or two ESRC Research Programme conferences each year; Potsdam 1993, Reading 1993, British Association for the Advancement of Science 1995, CUCR (Centre for Urban and Community Research) Goldsmiths 1995, Nutritional Consultants' Association Annual Conference 1996, Eating Disorders Association Annual Conference New York 1998, Cardiff 1998, Tokyo 2003, Sweden 2006, British Sociological Association Harrogate 2006, BSA Food Studies Conference London 2008.

first since for several reasons. Firstly, although I had been Principal Investigator on both projects, I had not done full-time fieldwork on either (although I did do some interviews) but had played a mainly supervisory role and had continued to carry heavy academic responsibilities (e.g. being head of department for the first two years of the projects), and continuing to work on my earlier research areas of Tanzania and South India. Secondly, there had been a considerable lapse of time between the end of the projects in 1997 and the decision to archive a decade later in 2007. Finally, both databases are extremely large.

In addition, there were ethical questions in archiving such material: while the Lewisham data had immediately been codified and thus rendered anonymous, the Welsh data was not so treated and thus needed much work. Furthermore, many people appearing in the Welsh dataset, derived from work in a small community, would be instantly recognisable, so it was not just a question of changing their names, but in some cases of also removing place names and other information. In a few instances, the data was of such an intimate and personal nature, given by someone whose identity it was difficult to conceal, that I removed some sections from interviews.

In the summer of 2007 I worked on this archive for several months, seeking to recapture the progress and logic of the two phases and fill in any gaps, and also trying to make it all intelligible to an outsider. Eventually virtual copies of all interviews (which by then had all been anonymised) and food diaries were placed in the ESDS archive, as well as hard copies of the Food Frequency Questionnaire which may subsequently be anonymised and digitised.

Early on, the decision was made not to archive either the tapes of the interviews or any photographs, in the interest of preserving the undertakings of confidentiality which were made at the outset of both projects. However, I am currently working on digitising and archiving a small number of tapes of oral history interviews from Wales which involves obtaining consent from the people concerned or, since most of them have now died, their relatives. This is a task which has turned out to be more complicated than anticipated, both in terms of locating relatives and explaining the raison d'etre of the project to them.

Material which is archived ceases to be entirely within the domain of social science, and enters that of history, which has different premises about the provenance of data. For historians the notion of anonymised data is unthinkable – a major part of the validity of data is knowing who said or wrote it and when. Nonetheless, the Concepts of Healthy Eating Projects gives us a snapshot of ideas about food and health in two very different locations in the UK at a particular point in time, a moment when important social changes – political, economic and cultural – were taking place and were vividly represented in people's discourse about food and their everyday food practices.

Most of the potential users of a project such as this are scholars, most likely academics, although it is also possible for people such as local historians to register with and access the archive. But other potential users include the subjects themselves, their families and neighbours. While on the one hand, they may seek to discover more about themselves through reading the material in the archive, on the other, those whose words appear may be embarrassed to find their words in the public domain in a way they had never expected, even though it is unlikely that others would recognise them.

As far as the depositor is concerned, there are a number of concerns. One is to preserve the promises made at the time of the research. But another is to 'finish' a project by tidying and systematising it, making its data intelligible to others, and thereby prolonging its 'shelf-life'. Such an aim also includes the hope that others may find it of use, either comparatively with their own work, historically as being of a particular time, or may obviate the necessity to re-invent the wheel and ask again questions which have already been asked and answered[7].

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Janice Williams: 'Globalisation in Rural Wales: Some Dietary Changes and Continuities in Welsh Farms': Goldsmiths College Working Paper., pp. 58. ISBN: 0 902986

[7] Prime examples of this trend include the current explosion of concern over issues which were around in the 1990s (obesity, children's health and school meals, junk food and its effects, eating disorders, farming practices) and well explored in The Nation's Diet Research Programme and other projects.

Janice Williams, 1997. 'We never eat like this at home: food on holiday' in P. Caplan (ed.) *Food, Health and Identity* Routledge: London and New York
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Annexe – Initial questions for the projects (appended to the second application to the ESRC)

- What is the impact of gender, age, ethnicity, class and income on consumption in quality, quantity and type of food?
- Who gives what to whom, in what context? What hierarchies are? Are there 'comfort' foods associated with love and care?
- To what extent do people have choices in the food they eat?
- To what extent do people eat food outside the home and what are the differences between food taken inside and outside?
- How are eating habits changing and how quickly? What is the place of memory and nostalgia in eating? Are there conscious attempts to revive what are perceived to be 'traditional' practices in eating?
- What are the differences between 'ordinary' or 'everyday' food and 'special' food (e.g. calendrical rituals, life cycle rituals, even weekends/Sundays)? To what extent does food structure time?
- Which categories of people need special food (e.g. pregnant women, adolescents, weanlings, the elderly, invalids)? What kind of food?
- What is the perceived relationship between food and health? What kinds of foods are 'healthy' or 'good for you'? Are such foods enjoyable to eat?
- What is the meaning of health? To what extent is it related to ideas about weight and the 'body beautiful'?
- From where do people get their ideas about health food? How much nutritional knowledge do they have? To what extent do they act upon it? What is the meaning of a 'balanced' diet?
- How do people make sense of the information they have? How do they deal with contradictions between what they know and what they do, or with different and opposing sets of information?
- To what extent is it believed that diet can be causative of illness? Do particular states of illness need a particular kind of diet?
- What is the perceived relationship between food and morality?

Discussion for Symposium on Preserving Food Data[1]

a) context

The first question raised was the importance of context in placing the contents of an archive – to what extent should the 'personal biography' or 'story' of research projects be included with the database or form part of the background document? In the foregoing paper, many issues were considered reflexively: how the project came into being, how it was conducted, by whom, where, with whom and the relationships with participants. There was also consideration of the particular temporal context in which it happened which helps explains how an interest in diet and health eating suddenly appeared on the radar of both government and funding agency. Discussants considered the question of how much of this narrative should be included in the archive and the extent to which it is needed or relevant for a "valid" analysis?

Secondly, there was discussion around the question of how much of this context is needed for analysis and claims-making. Comparison was made between work such as this by social scientists, and that by historians who are perhaps less squeamish about working with little or no contextual information. A historian who was present spoke of differing methods for differing analytical aims.

Thirdly, if we consider the usefulness of data such as that in the 'Concepts of Healthy Eating' archive in terms of analysis by someone not involved in the original projects, does absence of information about context make analysis impossible? Some participants wondered whether ESDS provides any guidance on this.

2. The ethics of data sharing and further analysis

The first question here was around the ethics of data sharing, since it was recognized that participants would have given data to a particular person or project. It was recognized by discussants that it was difficult to obtain consent for archiving retrospectively and therefore suggested that consent for archiving data should be sought at the outset.

A second question was around anonymisation of data. How effective is it, particularly with research in a small scale community? How can it be done at all with material such as tapes and photos? Do attempts to anonymise data reduce their value and if so, how does one balance the historical importance of the material again promises of confidentiality? Would it be possible to archive anonymous data but release the names after a period of time, as is done for example with government records (which are subject to a 30-year rule)?

Finally, there is the question of intellectual property rights. Do the team members (Principal Investigator, Research Associates) lose these when data is archived? How much control can they retain to try and ensure that no harm occurs to informants and participants and that the data is used in a scholarly and professional way and one not

[1] Notes on the discussion were taken by Libby Bishop, who also presented a paper on the ESDS Qualidata Archive's holdings on food material, and by Alizon Draper, who also chaired the session.

antithetical to the original objectives of the project? How would depositor like to see their data used by others?

BSA Food Study Group
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Special Symposium Preserving Food (data): Notes of Discussion

1. The importance of context

- How much of this should be included in an archive, including the personal biography of research projects? Some of this debate was in response to the very reflexive and personal account that Pat gave of her project (just archived) in terms of how it came to be, how it was conducted, who by, where, who with and the relationships with participants, and the particular temporal context in which it happened, i.e. the wider public health context of NACNE etc and how healthy eating suddenly crashed onto the government's and also funder's agendas.

- How much of this context is needed for analysis and claims-making? Comparison was made with historians and historical research methods; they are less squeamish about working with little or no contextual information. So how much of Pat's narrative is needed or relevant for a "valid" analysis? As I recall no consensus was reached on this, but we all nodded wisely when the historian spoke of differing methods for differing analytical aims. [as an aside, even a few epidemiologists question the validity of meta-analyses of quantitative data á la Cochrane Centre derived from multiple studies that may share methods but have differing research aims. This relates to point below about further uses of data that may run contrary to the aims of the original PI]

- Does absence of information about context make replication of analysis possible, but is that even a goal?

- Does UKDA provide any guidance on this?

2. The ethics of data sharing and further analysis:

- The challenge of obtaining consent retrospectively
- To avoid this should consent for archiving data be sought up front?
- How can anonymisation be done, e.g. with tapes?
- How effective is it, particularly with small scale research?
- Anonymisation of audio/video can destroy the value of data.
- How would Pat like her data to be used? Not in a way antithetical to her objectives [is this was you said Pat? I couldn't quite remember], but is this an issue?
- Does the PI/contributor of data lose control over future use. This feels like a problem, but is it necessarily?

3. Technical issues:

- How to archive caqdas packages? UKDA does, but use is not supported.
- How to archive participant observation? Field notes suggested, but the importance of the unsaid or the untapped pointed out; it is often that which provides those moments of insight. Relates to points about context above.
- Can those outside the UK access these resources? Yes.