

Understanding life-style and food use: contributions from the social sciences

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The contribution of social sciences to the study of life-style and food use in Britain is illustrated by drawing on recent evidence of purchasing patterns, reports of the organisation of meals, snacks, eating out and images of the origins of food. Work discussed underlines a considerable degree of empirical complexity, demonstrates that the supply side as well as demand should be taken into account, and illustrates the manner in which even supposedly highly voluntaristic spheres of consumption activity may none the less be circumscribed. The article is prefaced by briefly contrasting the approach to 'life-style' adopted by market researchers, public health professionals and social theorists. It concludes with the proposal that in order to understand the complexity surrounding human food use, we may be advised to consider ensuring that the descriptive and conceptual tools being used can capture that complexity.

This article illustrates the contribution of selected social sciences to the study of life-style and food use in Britain. Its underlying purpose is to indicate that between them, the social sciences represent diverse types of research approach that may enhance understandings of the health of a nation, its food chain and its population's dietary selection. What follows is an overview of some recent, evidence-based insights which assume no prior acquaintance with any of the social sciences. In introducing recent contributions from human geography, economics, sociology and media studies, this article seeks to complement other, more tightly-focused examinations of social, psychological or economic topics in this volume. Though the substantive focus here is parochially British, it is anticipated that readers will be able to draw on material for regions with which they are familiar to apply the analytical outlooks made available here.

It will be useful to bear in mind that several considerations intended to illuminate the current 'state of the art' have been taken into account in selecting the material to follow. One is a concern to illustrate the wide diversity to be found amongst disciplines that fall under the generic heading social sciences¹. In terms of their epistemology, approach to

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research design, modes of procedure and technicalities of method, this group of disciplines lies between, but also spans, the gap between CP Snow's 'two cultures'. In these respects they run from those lying very close to some of the biomedical sciences – psychology is an example – to those that display much greater affinity with the humanities – for instance social anthropology or social history². Second, is a concern to high-light topics that are less usually taken into account when contemplating the implications of life-style for diet and health, but which, none the less, are relevant – for instance those associated with the supply side, the structure of production and distribution of food, together with the regulatory climate within which they are to operate. A third consideration is not simply to illustrate the steady increase in the volume of contributions from the social sciences. It is also to emphasise the increased recognition that understanding human food use requires attention to substantial empirical complexity. Correspondingly, this demands an analytical complexity, of which reflection on the terminology being used is a necessary component. A corollary of this complexity is renewed confirmation that, realistically, there is no single set of ready answers for understanding human behaviour in respect of diet – or indeed anything else – any more than there are fool-proof blueprints for engineering change – dietary or otherwise.

Life-style

Although 'life-style' is widely accepted as relevant to health, food purchase and dietary choice, defining it presents some difficulty. The word is used in such a multiplicity of circumstances it may come as little surprise to find a prophecy made as long ago as 1981 that it 'will soon include everything and mean nothing, all at the same time'³. Yet getting to grips with the difficulty is integral to understanding life-style and food use. To begin so doing, this section sketches differences in the degree of precision with which (i) market research, (ii) public health, epidemiology and health promotion and (iii) a modern strand of social theory, have used the word in relation to health and food use.

Market research

Good access to the use to which market research puts the word life-style is not readily available to academics, and systematic scrutiny of the obtainable reports and journals to establish a well-substantiated analysis has, as far as is known, yet to be undertaken. At the same time, a usage

illustrated by Lowe almost 20 years ago continues to be widely reported in and perpetuated by the mass media. More than anything else, this usage is allusive.

In an article, in whose title he chose to include the word life-styles⁴, Lowe lists the following changes in Britain's eating habits: (i) new meal patterns; (ii) what is being prepared?; (iii) who is preparing the meal?; (iv) snacks; (v) take-away foods; (vi) eating out; (vii) foreign foods; and (viii) health foods.

He took the view that these were related to the preceding three decades of social changes in British society, including alterations in values and the growth of new social attitudes leading to 'new life-styles which in turn have produced new demands and expectations from meals and food'. Drawing on commercial research data collected by Taylor Nelson, the company he represented, Lowe's article illustrates the way that contrasts between social attitudes which he described as 'return to nature' and 'acceptance of disorder', can lead to both contrasts as well as 'convergence in the market place'. In other words, it is possible to buy the same items, e.g. 'health foods', in the name of dramatically different allegiances – respectively: a commitment to 'healthy' and 'natural' food; the pursuit of novelty or excitement. It is to be noted that the article happens to exclude all technical discussion, and correspondingly, offering neither discussion nor definition of life-style is able to treat its meaning as self-evident. It is likely that the phenomena to which Lowe refers may correspond to those with which public health experts are also concerned when discussing life-style. Where they differ is that the purposes of market research – purposes associated with work that is only ever conducted in so far as it addresses someone's life as a consumer of commercially supplied goods and services by those providing a commercial service for an industrial client's requirements for information about markets – reduces the need to stop and define terms.

Epidemiology/public health/health promotion

Academics in this field have, however, addressed the definition of life-style. Hetzel and McMichael were sufficiently convinced of its significance for the cover of the 1988 edition of their book *The LS Factor* to read: 'of all the health issues affecting our society today the life style factor is the most crucial'⁵. They admitted that the word presented difficulty, and arguably their efforts at defining it proved awkward. In practice, they enumerate several life-style factors (in the plural) noting that those which have been 'studied extensively include: diet, alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, physical activity, sexuality and reproductive behaviour'. Associated with this well-established use of

'life-style' in epidemiology and public health⁶, a distinction is made between two main elements of health promotion⁷. One has been described as structural, an approach covering fiscal policies, legislative or environmental measures – commentators give as examples of the latter two, measures governing the use of seat belts and regulating the positioning of out-fall waste pipes, respectively. The other is based on 'life-style approaches', which centre on the individual not the group, and are geared to 'the identification and subsequent reduction of behavioural risk factors associated with morbidity and/or premature death'.

Life-style approaches typically rest on an assumption that some behaviour under scrutiny carries more or less risk to health, is enacted voluntarily, and is a matter of option or choice – albeit, if correlated with adverse health consequences, choice that is held to be ill-educated or uninformed. Several commentators have argued that there has been an undue emphasis on life-style approaches at the expense of the structural, which in any case, they add, cannot adequately be confined to regulation or to the effect of the physical environment⁸. So doing, they note, is to neglect a great body of evidence that socio-economic factors, including income, employment status, occupation, and housing persistently affect health. Such structural factors contrast with life-style by acting as constraints, limiting the scope for voluntary action and, thereby, shaping the behaviour of the individual. For some, then, the public health agenda is to extend beyond what is regarded as the individualistic focus of life-style.

Social theory, identity, modernity

In the hands of social theorists⁹, life-style is the focus of considerable debate, where definitions are more likely to be ostensive than precise, part of a much broader discussion about modernity, *i.e.* the distinctive state of society toward the end of the 20th century. Here, health and food use tend to be included by way of illustrating abstract discussion, and are presented alongside reference to contemporary aesthetic and ethical concerns about identity and nature, dress and décor, or how to conduct oneself at work.

By referring back to its origins in the early years of this century, Giddens, as one of the leading contemporary social theorists, suggests that the notion of life-style risks being corrupted by consumerisms and trivialised by marketing. Life-style, he argues, is much more than that. Moreover, it is not just a collection of routine practices that are incorporated into usual ways of dressing, eating, frequenting favoured haunts and so forth. Life-style implies choice within a plurality of possible options, and is 'adopted' rather than 'handed down'¹⁰.

For Giddens, life-style is more than about how to act, it is also about who to be. In other words, life-style is about identity. There is an active, creative even inventive element to life-style. Rather than being obedient, passive followers of fashion, people are well aware, *i.e.* self-conscious, of the artificiality of life-styles and can choose to don or discard them. This active element is reflected in the adoption of the expression 'food use' in place of 'food habits'.

Like the contrast drawn by those in public health, *etc.*, social theorists also distinguish between life-style as involving the realm of choices – albeit of considerable complexity – and the limits placed on those choices by economic constraints of, at the extreme, social disadvantage. But Giddens, in particular, views that distinction from a strikingly different angle. He implies that in modern society, such constraints are no longer liable to be accepted fatalistically. Possibilities for the pursuit of a type of life-style which are denied by economic deprivation are regarded as just that, possibilities. As a result, life-style routines may themselves be created as part of resistances to exclusion and deprivation; and, in less dramatic form, a resolute decision to by-pass research findings on the wisdom of a low-fat-low-sugar-low-salt, high fibre diet is, Giddens claims, conduct which none the less forms part of a distinctive life-style – precisely because the world now consists of a plurality of choices within which people may choose whether to opt for alternatives.

Life-style and food use in Britain: some recent evidence

The brief sketch just presented exposes different degrees of precision in the use of the notion of life-style. In the process, it suggests that attempts to understand food use and life-style are liable to be inadequate if the relation, the tension even, between voluntary active choice and constraints limiting that choice is ignored. It is with a consideration of constraints that this selected overview of recent evidence from the social sciences begins. Except where indicated by the provision of a full reference, the evidence derives from 18 research projects funded under the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) Research Programme *The Nation's Diet* 1992–98. For the sake of brevity, the separate publications are not referenced, although the principal researchers concerned are named¹¹.

Systems of supply, images of origins

Economic constraints limiting active expression of food use is not solely a matter of the level of an individual's resources on the demand, or consumption, side of the economic equation. It is also a matter of the

supply side, where changes may alter how far those resources can stretch. One of the notable features of food retailing in late 1980s and early 1990s Britain was the growth of superstores on edge-of-city sites. Critics became concerned that not only was this contributing to a decline in town centres but with it, reduced access to food shops for sectors of the population unable to afford appropriate transport. Regulations introducing tightened land-use planning (1993, 1994, 1996) which prioritised the viability of town centres would, it was believed, among other things reduce the severity of economic constraint. But in his analysis of the underlying economic geography of the broader competitive trends, Wrigley shows that by the end of 1997 at least, the effect remained muted, and somewhat mixed. Certainly retailers had, to some extent, 'returned to the high street'. But higher operating costs – despite the inclusion on the shelves of a larger proportion of 'value added' items – depressed the achievement of satisfactory returns on investment. At the same time, the workings of the regulatory framework in practice, still meant that new, out-of-town development was set to continue.

A more complicated example of the intertwining of supply and demand is demonstrated by Fine who records, for instance, the irony that though purchases of low-fat foods are increasing, levels of purchase of cream and high fat dairy products have remained steady. Part of his work can shed some light on the conundrum that, despite improved public awareness of advice to eat less fat, actual levels of intake for the population overall have altered little. A well-established conclusion is drawn by psychologists that attitudes or knowledge do not neatly lead to corresponding behaviour. Fine's innovative economic analysis approaches the matter rather differently. He brings supply and demand together in taking the length of the whole food chain into account, to include examining both its production and consumption constituent parts. First he is able to confirm that familiar variables, notably income, are indeed correlated with whether or not households purchase different foods. But he also showed that socio-economic variables are related to patterns of purchase which differ from one type of food to another, echoing the structures of supply. Instead of a single food chain for all foods, Fine argues that it is necessary to develop analyses in terms of a separate production chain for each group of foodstuffs, meat, sugar, dairy products, *etc.*, reflecting back again in separate consumption parts of each chain. Behind each are major differences in the complex pattern of incentives associated with relations between primary producers, processors/manufacturers and retailers, combined with the workings of agriculture policies, and the presence, absence or changes in marketing boards.

Pursuing the question of new products, Fine takes the case of the dairy system of provision. Trends over the last two decades in this chain of

production involve restructuring which can be credited with making 'healthier' products available. Skimmed milk production has increased, and vegetable oils have been substituted for butter. The resulting surplus butterfat has, however, remained in the food system, ending up in more extensive production of cheese or diverted to new products, such as desserts or 'up-market' ready prepared meals. In a separate part of his analysis, Fine shows that there are also systematic variations in purchasing patterns for new products. Those households which spend more on food are those most likely to buy food items newly on the market. But, he finds, that it is these same households which are also most likely to continue buying 'older' products the novelties might have supplanted. The scene is now set for a plausible, though still speculative, interpretation in terms of the social theorists' creativity in life-style. Echoing a political and commercial allegiance to 'consumer choice' and reflecting the plurality of options and milieu in which people can adopt one life-style or another, a self-conscious pursuit of 'healthy' activities during the week can co-exist, in the name of balance, with an equally self-conscious pursuit of stylish or more self-indulgent relaxation at weekends. This switching between styles of eating, is found in Warde's work on eating out which is most commonly thought of as some type of special occasion, as well as in Caplan's study where tourists to West Wales regarded their time off as a short holiday, not simply away from work and home, but also away from the attentiveness to dietary advice. As a result, **both** skimmed milk and thick cream are added to the same shopping basket.

These two examples of studies demonstrate the manner in which the structure and nature of the food supply literally figures in patterns of food purchase. In contrast are studies of people's images of the food supply, particularly of the origins of food. It is assumed that in some, as yet imperfectly specified fashion, such images not only form an integral part of life-style and food use, they also affect purchasing patterns and, thereby, the patterns of what actually gets eaten. Investigating the former, Cook and colleagues¹² noted twin stereotypes of 'the consumer': on the one hand is the sovereign, super-informed consumer which the industry is urged to understand and be responsive to; on the other is that of a consumer ignorant of the origin or the nutritional composition of foods, who is kept less well informed, *e.g.* by limited product labelling. They uncovered images of geographical origins of foodstuffs to show that the reality may well include both these, but that there is a range of quite sophisticated images that cross-cut them. Far from being ignorant about the origins of foods, people have wide-ranging and socially differentiated images, deriving, mosaic-fashion, from childhood recollections, experience of travel, mass media coverage of food issues, even school geography lessons. It is no doubt the case that the actual

complexity of the food-chain and its modern, global character, powerfully militate against any but the professional experts being able to approach complete actual knowledge. Instead, people develop images of foods' origins that serve as a shorthand, which, Cook suggests, can account for the well-recognised trust in brand names, reliance on the recommendations of popular TV chefs, or the recent growth of farmers' markets in British cities.

That the mass media represent one of the sources of people's images of the food supply, is familiar – not least in the common accusation that journalists are responsible for sensationalist reporting of threats to food safety that plays on the ignorance of a gullible public. It is an accusation, however, that is not well based on evidence. Research in the area repeatedly confirms that the mass media do not tell people what to think, though they may well tell people what to think about. When the mass media bring a topic to the attention of their audiences, evidence regularly indicates that people do not passively 'believe all they read in the newspapers'. Eldridge showed that the manner in which people interpret media coverage of *Salmonella enteritidis*, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and associated images of the food supply, was mediated by several types of factor. One duly reflected the widely reported scepticism of official advice, but finds that such scepticism is likely to be re-inforced by quite other sources of information, for example first-hand acquaintance with the catering or other sector of the industry. Less frequently noticed, however, is his finding that a positive image of the food-chain prevailed. In practice, safety problems were regarded as temporary, with people treating the reduction in mass media attention as signalling that the difficulties had been successfully resolved and a secure or safe supply had been restored. In turn, this allowed people relief from restrictions on buying or eating.

Meal patterns, snacks and eating out

It is highly likely that when Lowe¹³ presented his paper 20 years ago, his London audience immediately recognised his reference to 'new meal patterns'. Meals – especially family meals – were then, and are now, held to be disappearing, replaced, in the market researcher's evocative phrase, by 'grazing'¹⁴. The prospect repeatedly evokes dismay in public commentary lest it presage not only a nutritional decline but also some type of social disintegration, a decline in the quality of family bonds. Before evaluation of either type of decline can be initiated, however, the changes alluded to need to be substantiated.

For a topic so widely covered, it is striking that adequate quality trend data are not obviously available. What is becoming apparent, however,

is that the very concern about a supposed decline in family meals itself may not be new: evidence of its expression is vividly reported in a study of a small American town in the 1920s. Recent British work is starting, piece by piece, to build up a picture which suggests people are making a self-conscious distinction between what is practicable – grazing – and what is important for family life – a continued allegiance to the idea of family meals, which then become slightly special occasions. Whether it is couples who have just set up house together, women who go out of their way to accommodate one household member's dietary changes (whether for medical or non-medical reasons) African Caribbean Londoners for whom it is an important aspect of black identity, the importance of family meals may turn out to be more robust than has been feared. If further work supports this suggestion, then the social theorists' meaning of life-style which emphasises a plurality of choices, a creative response to a multiplicity of options, might be the most suitable definition to adopt when characterising emerging trends.

Evidence that family meals at home in the evening continue to be valued is found in a pioneering study of both primary and secondary school-based eating by Burgess. Conducted in the wake of policy changes that have sought to replace universal welfare/state provision with family responsibility and 'consumer choice', his work offers a view on food use and life-style among the young. Legislation in Britain now permits schools to cease standard provision, although, as in the case of one of the primary schools in Burgess' study, space and supervision for children to eat at midday is made available. This would seem to maximise the opportunity for choices from home to be manifest in what each child ate, leading, in principle, to the anticipation of considerable variety in the food pupils daily carried into school. In practice, institutional arrangements limited the types of food that could be included, for it has to be conveniently carried by a child below 11-years-old, be storable unrefrigerated for some 3 h, and easily eaten without either cutlery or plates.

Small wonder that the study's best description for school dinner time was a 'large indoor picnic' comprising a selection of snacks, which, far from reflecting any anticipated wide variety, conformed to a standardised format. What parents actually sent to school entailed compromises between their notions of nutritional adequacy, the practicalities of lunch box storage, and familiarity with their own child's preferences. Compromises took into account two further dimensions which re-introduces the question of constraint to the closing stages of this short article: what could be afforded and acute sensitivity to their children's anxieties about being different from their friends. These two dimensions also introduce a distinction between financial and non-financial constraints. Both are found to be at issue in final case to be mentioned here. This case is the first known academic study out in the UK of eating

out – another item in Lowe’s list of new life-styles and changes in British eating habits.

There is a view that the activities involved in consumption allow the majority a considerable degree of discretion, greater even than in most other aspects of modern life. It may be that this view has served as a spur to what public health critics argue is an overemphasis on life-style as a realm of voluntary action. For many, such discretion is a norm both for shopping for specific items and also for engaging in specific leisure pursuits of which eating specific foods may be a particular instance. If that is held to be the case, then as all these coincide, they support an idea that eating out allows more freedom from restriction than any other sphere of modern life. There are several associated features of eating out. For example, as part of the commercial rather than domestic sphere, it means that the relation between the diner and the cook is contractual, shorn of mutual family obligations and household practicalities where a shared meal also tends to entail a shared menu. Again, the conventions of eating in a commercial outlet provide for diners selecting different dishes from one another at the self-same meal.

All this helps underscore eating out as an occasion for maximum individual discretion, optimal circumstances for active, creative life-style choice. So it is the more surprising that Warde finds any evidence of constraint among those able to afford to eat out. Yet he reports that there are those who commonly claim that they were often constrained as to what they ate, in the sense that they had little or no voice in decisions about whether or where to eat out. It then become clear that the non-financial constraints of day-to-day cultural conventions and norms of appropriate behaviour come into play. It is the social complexities of decision-making – negotiations between couples, the ‘give-and-take among friends – that turn out differentially to affect the ‘say’ people have in what they actually get to eat. In this fashion, the ‘freedom’ to choose is limited in one of the very sectors of modern life which at times is considered to constitute the epitome of aesthetic stylishness, creativity and plurality of choices that the word ‘life-style’ is held to connote.

Concluding observations

This article has indicated that the three separate spheres of market research, public health/health promotion and modern social theory, approach and use the word life-style in rather different ways. In the world of market research, there may be little need to analyse its meaning. Work can proceed by allusion, apparently anticipating shared assumptions. By contrast, experts in public health and health promotion

propose that structural as well as individualistic concerns should explicitly be addressed. Thus, they seek to ensure that an emphasis on option or choice, does not lead to neglecting the constraints that limit the scope for voluntary action. Different again, certain modern social theorists are approaching the matter the other way on. They propose that life-style is also about identity, in that it entails a self-conscious, creative act of choice.

Briefly identifying these differing usages here, is emphatically not to be confused with adjudicating between them. Any such evaluation is not intended, and in any case would represent an untenable intellectual exercise. The present purpose of making comparisons is to expose two matters for careful consideration. First, it is to underline the absence of, and difficulty in achieving, an adequate and agreed definition of the word 'life-style' when seeking scientifically to describe modern dietary habits or food purchasing patterns. Second, as the main part of the article aims to illustrate albeit in compressed and selected form, the realm to which 'life-style' has been used to refer is characterised by considerable empirical social, economic and political complexity. Thus, if we are trying to understand that self-same complexity, we may be very well advised to start by matching our descriptive and conceptual tools to its multi-dimensional nature – and in the process avail ourselves of this component, among the others, of the contribution to be made by the social sciences in efforts to improve understandings of the health of a nation, its food-chain and its population's food use.

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