Got Milk? Then Get Rid of It! the Making of a Mythology of Family Health

Dorthe Brogård Kristensen, University of Southern Denmark, Odense
Søren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark, Odense

This paper follows the counter-discourse of the anti-milk trend building around a popular book in Denmark, a traditionally dairy producing and consuming country. It follows the growing movement of inspired by Mauritzen’s book and examines the growing mistrust in health messages from the government. It uses interviews and public debate events to establish the link between health, body, individual and state in a Danish setting.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The family is not a natural formation. That is to say, families are discursively and materially produced through the practices and discourses that prevail in particular socio-historical contexts. The contingency of family constellations is vividly depicted in Kerreen Reiger’s (1985) study of the Australian family. In her book, Modernizing the Australian Family, 1880-1940 she explored how professional experts (such as members of the medical profession, teachers and kindergarteners, domestic science and child guidance specialists) had set out to transform family and domestic life through “…efforts to introduce technology to the household and to define the housewife as a ‘modern,’ ‘efficient’ houseworker” (Reiger 1985, p.2). Taking up a Foucauldian perspective on subjectivity formation, Chambers (2001) suggests that by studying discursive practices, the family can be seen as one of “the key regulatory discourses through which our identities become gendered …So the family can be seen as a discursive construct. Political rhetoric, academic knowledge and popular media texts are all discourses that place restrictions on ways of talking about the family as a topic” (Chambers 2001, p.26). Food and its consumption has been the centre of the family and health debates in the public sphere for centuries. Thus we focus on the particular discourses of food and how these are implicated in the shaping of the notion of family.

Beginning with the notion of the fluidity around the idea of “family,” which takes on meanings within a particular context and discourse, we follow Hall’s (1997) idea that we examine carefully the “elements” of the discourse around the “family” in particular socio-historical contexts. The statements about, the rules that prescribe, the “truth and authority” of knowledge about and the practices around food and family need to be carefully studied. This is where we situate our study.

This special session focuses on the way one particular part of cultural discourse around food and health shape the form of the “family” as a construct. The similarities/differences between the messages around family, home, food and consumption communicated via popular culture in the Scotland, Denmark, England and Australia are examined in this session. This session contributes firstly, to the international debate about the role of marketing and popular media in promoting lifestyles to consumer subjects; and secondly to academic and policy understanding of changing views on the “Consuming family.”

From Denmark, Kristensen and Askegaard explore the discourses of morality, modernity and mistrust around milk. The social meanings of milk and the risk society are examined within the context of questions of identity. The issues of consumer choice are detailed in relation to the controversy over whether milk keeps its traditional place in the consumption sphere or becomes an object of distrust. It points to the ever changing discourses around food and its place in the family.

Scottish children speak about their experiences of snacking, and the meaning and place of such “not meal” foods in their lives; and the place of snacking in the family. The increasing “agency” of child consumers in making food choices is highlighted, while revealing at the same time the parents’ role as guardians of family health. The shift in how children and parents see their roles in food choices and their perceptions of agency are explored by Marshall in his paper.

Using a socio-historical comparison, Schneider, Davis and Hogg explore discourses in comparable magazine advertising in Britain and Australia, mapping shifting views on the family, children and women in relation to food and health. Changing subject positions over 5 decades are identified and analysed.

We anticipate that this session will draw an audience of scholars working in the areas of food, family and discourse. The discursive device of ‘family’ has been used to shape consuming subjects for domestic products, food, leisure and many other product categories. Food is a key arena where these discourses are played out. For scholars interested in how cultural notions of family and food are used by the market to shape everyday consumption, these papers form a discussion point drawing on a global network of research.

REFERENCES

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Got milk? Then Get Rid of It! The Making of a Mythology of Family Health”
Dorthe Brogård Kristensen, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark
Søren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

In Denmark, whole milk belongs to the generally worshiped daily foods contributing to a healthy lifestyle. As such, milk traditionally symbolizes the practice of caring for the family (Jönsson 2005). More recently, however, this position has become increasingly challenged by various market agents. A recent, very popular book on health (Mauritzen 2008), advises consumers to mistrust official health recommendations of drinking milk and to abandon the consumption of milk, sugar and gluten altogether. Following the guidelines of the book and the numerous commercial and educational activities including courses, public arrangements etc. that sprang from it, a number of Danish consumers have completely abandoned milk, thereby expressing mistrust in the Danish government, its official dietary advice as well as the food industry. Instead, and still according to the advice of Mauritzen (2008), they have turned to what is generally referred to as “their own bodily experience and inner senses.” Given the popularity and public visibility of this movement the dairy industry as well as a variety of public health organizations have been forced to publicly debate the viewpoints expressed by Mauritzen in an official attempt to refute the accusations. Thus, the struggle for milk takes us into moral discourses and values, through which consumers position themselves within their social, cultural and economic context.

This work is based on 10 in-depth interviews with Danish consumers who have followed the guidelines of Mauritzen (2008) and as a consequence introduced fairly radical changes in their dietary patterns, not just personally, but pertaining to the family in general. In addition to the interview data, we also base our research on the first author’s participation in three public conferences and a brunch event held by followers of Mauritzen.
We thus focus specifically on the interaction between self-proclaimed experts, public health policy and consumers. Drawing on the work of Wilk (2001) and Miller (1998) and taking departure in the milk struggle among Danish consumers, the aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between consumption, modern family identity and moral discourses. The milk struggle represents an example of how food consumption is closely associated to the notion of trust and mistrust (Luhmann 1979) and risk (Beck 1993) and is illustrative of the competing strategies of modern governance of health that shape the discursive environment in which families struggle to navigate. Consequently, our work contributes to the questioning of the standard model of the consumer most often underlying public health campaigns, presenting the consumer as a predominantly cognitive being; an information processor making informed choices (Lindbladh 2002; Yoder 2008).

We will discuss how the notion of free choice, individual control and self-discipline in connection with food consumption plays a central role in consumers’ notion of healthiness, as the data will show these notions have penetrated as well the consumers’ self perception as the ways in which they seek to construct family through caring behaviour (Miller 1998; Warde 1997). In addition, many consumers rely on their own bodily experiences and inner senses to decide on which food to consume. Ultimately, by focusing on the relationship between the enterprising self and trust/mistrust in a neoliberal context (Luhmann 1979; Rose 1999), the aim of the paper is to give possible explanations of the prevalent mistrust in health messages from the government by analysing the link between health, body, individual and state in a Danish setting.

REFERENCES

“Be(com)ing Consumers: Young Children’s Everyday Accounts of Snacking”
David Marshall, University of Edinburgh, UK
Scotland ranks second to the USA in terms of obesity and recent reports have shown one in five boys (18%) and one in ten girls (14%) aged 2-15 are now obese (Grant, Fischbacher, and Whyte 2007). While much of the attention has centred on the influence of marketing and promotion on children’s food preferences (Hastings et al. 2003) we know much less about how children snack. Given the shift towards child centred parenting, more negotiation and democratisation of the family (Dixon and Branwell 2004; Johansson 2006) there is a question about the role children play in food related decisions. According to Ofcom (2005) the majority of parents will often defer to their children’s food preferences buying HFSS foods. Romani (2005) suggests that children now have more agency in shaping their own food consumption. Children appear to be resisting parental expectations about food and ideas about eating properly (Bisogni et al. 2007). However, there is a question over the degree of agency, in the sense that children’s food consumption may be discretionary (children choose), negotiated (children contribute), or mandated (parents decide) (Marshall et al. 2007)

This paper looks at Scottish middle class children’s accounts of their snack consumption and reports on qualitative research with 8-11 year old Scottish primary school children about their snacking experiences both at home and in school. It reports on the children’s own accounts of snacks and snacking and shows that much of their eating activity is mandated by adults concerned with regulating both the type of snacks they eat and how much is consumed of both “healthy” and “unhealthy” snacks. Children’s accounts ranged from free access to certain snacks through to highly restricted access for other items reflecting different degrees of agency. The discussions on pocket money revealed the limited extent of their discretionary expenditure on snack foods. It appears that children are being included in this democratisation process but are generally not responsible for buying their own snacks. Negotiation with parents was reported in the shopping aisle and at home but this depended on the type of product and snack occasion. There was little resistance to the idea of eating properly and children discussed snacks in relation to a much broader range of eating experiences into which they had been socialised. Overall, the children’s level of discretionary consumption was limited, leading to the conclusion that when it comes to this aspect of food choice children are “becoming,” rather than “being” food consumers and are still primarily reliant on parents for their snacks.

REFERENCES