Why Don’T Parents Walk Their Talk? Exploring Parental Deviant Food Socialization Behaviors Within the Family

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Exploring Parental Deviant Food Socialization Behaviors within the Family
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ABSTRACT
This study, drawing on neutralization theory, explores how parents neutralize their feelings of guilt when performing deviant food socialization practices (e.g. offering unhealthy food to their children). The findings highlight how neutralization techniques help lessen parents’ self-blame through performing negative displays of parenthood.

INTRODUCTION
Why do parents socialize their children in ways that they know they shouldn’t be doing? Parents sometimes find it difficult to behave in accordance with the ideals of good parenting, particularly in the context of food socialization. Parents are considered to be the most powerful socialization agents for children (Dotson and Hyatt 2005; Hunter-Jones 2014; Moschis and Churchill 1978) with parents playing a pervasive role in shaping children’s consumption patterns (Kerrane, Bettany, and Hogg 2014), especially food consumption habits (Nicklas et al. 2001). Given the global concern surrounding childhood obesity1 (WHO 2017) and recent calls for research to explore the role parents play in forming healthy family food socialization practices (Grier and Moore 2012), it is timely to explore parental food socialization behaviors that may, eventually, contribute to obesity amongst children (Ayadi and Bree 2010).

In this paper, we explore the deviant food socialization behaviors of a sample of parents, as food preparers, in the United Kingdom from October 2015 to June 2016, using multiple stages of qualitative data collection - existential phenomenological interviews, photoelicitation exercises, and accompanied grocery shopping trips. We draw on the theoretical tenants of neutralization theory and the techniques of neutralization to gain a better understanding of how parents ‘neutralize’ their deviant food behaviors, and show how such deviant food behaviors can work to develop food habits.

The findings, thus, extend our understanding of the attitude-behavior gap through exploring the performance of deviant behaviors of parents within the context of food socialization/consumption, as called for in previous studies (Grier and Moore 2012; Hoy and Childers 2012; Moschis and Cox 1989) and the implications of such parental deviance (offering unhealthy food to their children) are discussed, with parents violating the norms of ‘good’ parenting. This is one of the first studies to apply neutralization theory to family food consumption. Our potential contribution responds to the call for extending the use of neutralization theory to other deviant consumption behaviors, rather than ethical consumption alone (Chatzidakis, Hibbert, and Smith 2007; Harris and Daunt 2011; Strutton, Vitell, and Pelton 1994).

Attitude-behavior gap, deviant consumer behavior, and neutralization literature
The ‘attitude-behavior’ gap has been extensively studied in consumer behavior, particularly in relation to ethical consumption (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Elliot and Jankel-Elliott 2003; Harrison et al. 2005). It is proposed that the attitudes of individuals are determined by personal values, moral norms, and internal ethics (Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell 2010; Shaw and Shui 2002). Thus, the attitude-behavior gap may occur in behavior that deviates from social norms. It is noted that such gaps remain poorly understood and are under-researched, especially in the field of consumption (Belk et al. 2005; Connolly and Shaw 2006; Carrington et al. 2010).

The majority of studies in the consumption literature often link the attitude-behavior gap with organic or fair-trade products (Brunner 2014; Hempel and Hamm 2016) their food purchase behaviour and their personal characteristics. The purpose is to investigate the differences in attitudes and willingness-to-pay values between consumers who consider the organic production of food (very or those associated with environmental concern (Atkinson and Kim 2014). Prior studies exploring the attitude-behavior gap among parents have shown the existence of attitude-behavior inconsistencies among parents in providing food to their children (Hughner and Mahler 2006; Gram 2014). However, what is yet known is how parents alleviate their feelings of guilt associated with such discrepancies or ‘paradoxical’ behavior (Hoy and Childers 2012, 569).

Behavior is considered to be ‘deviant’ when it deviates or does not adhere to social norms (Moschis and Cox 1989). Although socially acceptable behaviors are considered norms, such behaviors may not be formally administered by law within society (Dootson et al. 2016). Thus, consumers often see deviant consumer behavior as logical from their own perspectives (Harris and Daunt 2011). Studies in consumer behavior suggest that much less is known about the rationalizations associated with performing deviant acts of consumption, despite the fact that such behavior is thought to be common (Fullerton and Punj 1993, 2004; Harris and Daunt 2011).

Neutralization theory is commonly used in the sociology of deviance (Maruna and Copes 2005; Minor 1981) with Sykes and Matza (1957) outlining a range of neutralization techniques in their seminal study of juvenile delinquency. Five neutralization techniques are identified; (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of victim, (4) condemning the condemners and (5) appeal to higher loyalties (see Sykes and Matza (1957) for a comprehensive review of each technique).

Existing consumer studies have applied neutralization theory contexts including shoplifting (Strutton et al. 1994), consumer fraud (Rosenbaum and Kuntze 2003), ethical consumption (Chatzidakiss et al. 2007; Strutton et al. 1997), alcohol and cigarette consumption, and cannabis use (Peretti-Watel et al. 2003; Piacentini, Chatzidakis, and Banister 2012). However, neutralization theory has not been adequately studied, remains under-theorised, and has received limited attention in consumer behavior research (Brunner 2014; Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Piacentini et al. 2012; Strutton et al. 1994). It is also noted that the studies of wider forms of deviant consumer behaviors are lacking and the understanding of consumers for justifying their norm-contradicting behaviors should be extended to a range of consumer activities (Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Harris and Daunt 2011). Moschis and Cox (1989) highlight that adopting a socialization approach in the study of deviant consumer behavior is imminently sensible given that the acquisition of deviant behaviors (such as unhealthy eating practices) could be as a direct result of the consumer socialization process.

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1 The WHO acknowledges childhood obesity as today’s greatest health concern with over 42 million children worldwide under the age of five classified as obese (WHO 2017).
METHOD

Thirty parents, who self-identified as the primary food preparer in their family, participated in this study. Informants were recruited through social media, nurseries and primary schools (places where children were present). Parents of younger children were recruited because they exert the greatest influence on children when they were born up until adolescence (Moore and Moschis 1980). Multiple stages of data collection occurred, drawing on a photo-elicitation task, an existential-phenomenological interview, and an accompanied grocery-shopping trip. First, participants were asked to take photos of the food inside their kitchen cabinets, refrigerator, and the meals they prepared for their children during a one-week period. Such an approach to data collection has been employed within studies of consumption (Fournier 1998; Harman and Cappellini 2014, 2015). Next, participants were asked to talk about the photos they took at the beginning of an in-depth interview. The descriptive information from the photos was used to identify any attitude-behavior gaps among the parents (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003). Each interview lasted between one and two hours, with the interview exploring topics such as how the food preparers make sure that their children eat healthy food and in what situations (if any) they allowed their children treats, capturing the justifications behind such actions. The interviews were conducted at the home of each participant, or at a convenient location of their choice. Participants then took part in an accompanied grocery-shopping trip or an observational interview (Belk et al. 2012), which lasted between thirty minutes to one hour. Multiple methods of qualitative data collection were utilized to shed greater light on how consumers perform deviant acts and, in turn, to understand how they rationalize such actions (Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014). The interviews were audio recorded, and procedures taken to ensure the ethical credibility of the research project. Transcripts were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

FINDINGS

The findings offer an in-depth understanding of ‘deviant’ behavior practiced by parents and show how techniques of neutralization can be successfully applied to food socialization practices within the family, as called for by earlier research (Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Harris and Daunt 2011). Five neutralization techniques were found within our data, although, as reported by others (Brunner 2014; Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Piacentini et al. 2012), certain techniques were more prominent. We find that ‘denial of responsibility’ and ‘denial of injury’ have been employed the most, while ‘denial of victim’ has been employed the least. Thus, the elicited family stories associated with four dominant neutralization techniques (denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemning the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalty) will be discussed in turn. Illustrative quotes from the participants are offered in table 1.

Parents Feel They Have Limited Control Over Their Deviant Food Consumption Practices

Parents denied their responsibility because they felt that there were many forces beyond their control in terms of their children’s food intake, resulting in their children consuming unhealthy food (Sykes and Matza 1957) (“It’s not my fault, I had no other choice”). Most parents mentioned that when their children attend a friend’s party or house, or even when they are at school, children would be given sweets and other ‘unhealthy’ food products. These are situations in which parents feel that they “can’t avoid” unhealthy food practices/consumption, and where they “don’t know what is given and have no control over it”.

Many participants identified themselves as being time-poor parents. Time-pressure is another constraint contemporary parents face in raising their family (Copelton 2007), especially given the rise in dual-income families. Participants often employed this technique when providing ready meals for their children. As such, they often denied that there was anything wrong in giving ready meals to their children, justifying such practices on the basis of being time poor.

Parents feel that giving children some ‘treats’ does not do any real harm.

With denial of injury parents did not deny their deviant behaviors (i.e. they recognised that they did offer unhealthy food to children at times), but they felt that their behavior did not really cause any great harm to their children (Sykes and Matza 1957) (“what’s the big deal?”). Parents reported that their children would get some treats for special occasions, such as birthdays or on designated treat days. Although acknowledging their actions, the participants felt that this was in no way harmful because they were only engaging in such deviant behaviors occasionally (i.e. on designated treat days alone). Participants mentioned that their children would have their treat days every week, most often at the weekend.

Kate, for example, mentioned that ‘finger food’ at birthday parties was not healthy. But, she is fine with her children eating such food (as (a) this is not a frequent occurrence; and (b) such food consumption occasionally falls outside her control, noting the relationship with the earlier neutralization technique). This signifies that she tends to identify herself as a ‘good’ parent through providing more healthy food than unhealthy foods for her daughter. Such a notion is considered a way to display good parenting as parents are judged by the way that they follow social norms in providing healthy food for the family (Harman and Cappellini, 2014).

Other Parents and Other Children are Performing the Same Deviant Food Behaviors

For condemning the condemners (“everyone else does it”), parents attempt to shift attention away from their deviant acts towards the acts of those who condemn their deviant behaviors (e.g. other parents or other children) (Sykes and Matza 1957). Individuals rationalize their actions by asserting that others are doing worse and yet they are not caught (De Bock and Van Kenhove 2011). Parents mentioned that other parents would allow children to have sweets on special occasions. For example, Isabella remarked that giving children treats is what “other parents always do”. In addition, Joy’s opinion (see table 1) provides a good example of how parents condemn other parents (i.e. those other parents have done worse). Moreover, parents also highlight that other children are eating food, which is considerably worse (healthy eating wise) than they provide.

Children follow their Friends and Parents Allow them To

With appeal to higher loyalty parents neutralize their deviant behaviors by signaling that what they did was for the good of their family, prioritizing their bond to the subculture or inner social group rather than to society as a whole (Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Sykes and Matza 1957). Parents consider consuming finger food, sweets, and sugary drinks at parties or at social gatherings as normal and socially expected among other parents and other children within their personal networks.

Parents commented that it would be difficult to tell their children what to eat at such gatherings because their children see other children eating such unhealthy foods. Here, parents justify such un-
healthy food consumption as they want their children to ‘fit in’, and not to be ostracized by their peers should they be denied unhealthy foods. Parents also commented that the reason their children want to go to McDonald’s is because they have seen other children going, and the parents did not want their children to feel like ‘the odd one out’ in denying them such visits.

**DISCUSSION**

Stories of ‘deviant’ parental food socialization practices demonstrate a clear gap between parents’ attitudes of performing good parenting (adhering to the social norm of providing healthy food to their children) and the actual performance of ‘deviant’ parental acts. Parents tend to identify themselves as ‘good parents’ by adhering to norms of society in providing healthy food to their children, with parents feeling ‘on display’ through the food they provide to their children (Harman and Cappellini 2014, 2015). However, because of a range of factors (e.g. limited income, perceptions of being time ‘poor’) parents engage in ‘deviant’ food socialization behaviors in providing less than healthy food to their children, and draw on neutralization techniques to justify doing so to protect their negative self-image (Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Copelton 2007). The findings, yet, suggest that parents sometimes perform deviant acts as they are in the best interests of their children (i.e. I allow unhealthy food because my children likes that food; my children will be socially excluded by their friends if I do not allow them to eat such food). Techniques of neutralization provide insight into how parents neutralize their feelings of guilt when undertaking ‘deviant’ food socialization practices without changing their intended attitude.

Although this study used a relatively homogenous sample, it contributes to our understanding of parental deviant food behaviors and shows that the theory of neutralization can be applied to various perspectives of deviant consumer behavior as previously calls for research encourage (Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Harris and Daunt 2011). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that explores parental deviant acts in the context of food-socialization. It extends our knowledge of parental attitude-behavior gaps, as also called for by existing research (Grier and Moore 2012; Hoy and Childers 2012).

This paper offers opportunities for policymakers to counter the possibility of repeated parental deviant food behaviors (i.e. having treat days every week), such as encouraging parents to provide fruits to children as normal weekly treat. Also, marketers could use such knowledge to implement strategies to tackle childhood obesity or to promote products/services that could prevent parents from situations where deviant food behavior is likely to occur.

**REFERENCES**


