



Original Research Article

“Eating isn’t just swallowing food”: Food practices in the context of social class trajectory

Brenda L. Beagan,¹ Elaine M. Power,² and Gwen E. Chapman³

¹ Associate Professor, School of Occupational Therapy, Dalhousie University (corresponding author: brenda.beagan@dal.ca)

² Associate Professor, School of Kinesiology & Health Studies, Queen's University

³ Professor, Food, Nutrition & Health, University of British Columbia

Abstract

Drawing from a qualitative study with 105 families across Canada, this paper focuses on sixteen households in which one or more adults experienced significant social class trajectories in their lifetimes. Using semi-structured interviews and two photo-elicitation techniques, adults and teens articulated their perceptions of healthy eating, eating well, conflicts and struggles around food, and typical household food patterns. This analysis examines how *habitus* from class of origin can influence food dispositions, as well as how participants used food and talk about food to mark symbolic and moral boundaries on the basis of class. In particular, people used discourses of cosmopolitan and omnivorous eating, ethical eating, and healthy eating, as well as the moral virtue of frugality, to align or disidentify with class of origin or current class location. Our analysis shows that food can be a powerful symbolic means of marking class boundaries.

Keywords: social class, eating patterns, eating habits, food practices, class mobility, class trajectory, socioeconomic status

Introduction

[If] middle-class existence is constituted on the basis of a radical exclusion, pathologizing and Othering of working-class existence, what happens when people occupy both a working-class and a middle-class habitus during the same lifetime? (Lawler, 1999, p. 14)

Food and eating have long been markers of social class distinctions. In this paper we draw on qualitative interviews with people who have experienced upward or downward class mobility, to explore how they use food to mark symbolic class boundaries. Despite widespread belief in equality among Canadians, disparities persist in income levels, occupational statuses, and education levels that perpetuate and reproduce social inequities. While class distinctions are seldom articulated, everyday consumption is a key site for challenging and/or reproducing class. Following Bourdieu (1984), we first establish two differing dispositions toward food evident among study participants, demarcated by proximity to necessity. We then show how participants spoke through food to distinguish themselves from or align with particular class locations—sometimes aligning with class of origin, sometimes with current class location. Our intent is to show not how social class affects food practices, but rather how people use food practices and food talk to signal alignment with or distance from particular classes. We explore the social processes of boundary-marking through food.

Cultural distinction or omnivorousness?

Bourdieu (1984) argues that particular highbrow (elite) and lowbrow (base or popular) cultural tastes map onto social classes, serving to recreate and maintain class distinctions. *Habitus* is the embodiment of class through the development of tastes for particular cultural forms. People develop dispositions toward practices and tastes that fit with the class structures that produce them. Preferences that feel highly individual and personal are socially produced. Tastes enacted through consumption both express social class and recreate class hierarchies—not through deliberate exclusion processes but through apparently innocent preferences: “Through the expression of tastes, individuals classify themselves; the practices and goods with which people outfit themselves place them in a rank-ordering of classes and class fractions; in other words, tastes both reflect and reinscribe social status” (Elliott, 2013, p. 301).

For Bourdieu (1984), all social practice has logic, related to varying amounts of capitals available in different class positions. Economic capital (income, wealth), cultural capital (education, cultural ease and goods, knowing the “right” things), social capital (networks, knowing the “right” people), and symbolic capital (honour, respect, recognition) all influence everyday cultural practices. According to Bourdieu, for those with little economic capital, everyday purchasing decisions always have a financial component with relatively limited choices and options. Those who live close to necessity may need to obtain the most calories for their

money to avoid hunger. Eating well means plenty of food, tasty and filling. Those more distant from necessity, with greater economic and other forms of capital, are more likely to cultivate an aesthetic disposition toward food, seeing it not as fuel, but as an arena of stylistic distinction, pleasure, and appreciation (Bourdieu, 1984). Choice in consumption is valued, and the practices of those closer to necessity are rejected as distasteful and unappealing (Lawler, 2005).

In recent years, the existence of distinct elite or highbrow cultural forms has been questioned. The cultural *omnivore thesis* (Peterson & Kern, 1996) suggests that in an anti-elitist or anti-snobbery move, social elites may consume both high- and lowbrow cultures, valuing breadth and variety over exclusivity. Comfort with a range of cultural forms is prized, with narrowness and rigidity being castigated as inferior (Bennett et al., 2009). In this case, eating in an elite way would mean eating omnivorously, consuming both highbrow and lowbrow foods. Canadian survey data show educational and economic capital clearly linked with highbrow cultural practices such as attending theatre, art galleries, historic sites, dance, opera, golf, and downhill skiing, while television-watching is associated with those who have lower economic and educational capital (Veenstra, 2010). Yet supporting the cultural omnivore thesis, *all* of the cultural practices investigated were common among those with higher educational and economic capital, who distinguish themselves by breadth and variety of pursuits, enjoying sports and television along with opera and downhill skiing. It appears there are distinctly elite objects of consumption, but omnivorous consumption has also become a marker of elite class status. This paper explores the use of omnivorousness and other markers of class distinction in relation to food.

Food as a site of class distinctions

In contemporary food practices, taste hierarchies may be marked through commitment to omnivorous and cosmopolitan eating, “ethical” eating, and to some extent “healthy” eating. Culinary omnivores seek out foods that are novel, authentic, and exotic (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Kaplan, 2013; Zukin, 2008). They draw from an assortment of food cultures, unintimidated by distinctions of class or ethnicity, disparaging only mass-produced “common” foods. Unlike culinary “snobs” (Petersen & Kern, 1996), who may differentiate themselves through *expensive* tastes, culinary omnivores distinguish themselves through the adoption of *expansive* tastes (Conner, 2008, p. 34). Rigid food conventions are eschewed in favour of eclecticism and a range of cuisines that demonstrate worldliness and the confidence to defy food conventions (Mellor et al., 2010). Some lower class foods become celebrated, re-branded as “cool” (Kaplan, 2013), like the gourmet macaroni and cheese or organic buffalo burgers found in upscale restaurants. Elite forms of cosmopolitan eating demonstrate sophisticated palates through connoisseur knowledge of the most authentic “ethnic” food products, and exotic and hard-to-find ingredients (Cappeliez & Johnston, 2013; Kaplan 2013). For these consumers, “the cuisine of social Others is regarded as a source of intellectual curiosity and exotic interest” (Cappeliez & Johnston, 2013, p. 443). Heldke (2003) condemns what she sees as commodification and appropriation of the food

practices of exotic cultural Others for personal satisfaction, calling it cultural food colonialism. The same could be said of the appropriation of foods across class borders.

Ethical eating is another means of marking class distinctions through food: fair trade, sustainable, locally produced, humane, organic (Cairns et al., 2013; Elliott, 2013; Guthman, 2003; Johnston et al., 2011; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010). Not only are such products more costly, they also often require more effort and travel time to obtain (Kriwy & Mecking, 2012). The extra time, money, knowledge, and energy required position ethical eating as a potential status-marker. It is important to note, however, that those with less economic capital to purchase ethical products may nonetheless engage in other aspects of ethical consumption, such as recycling, buying reduced packaging, buying in bulk, and avoiding food waste (Johnston et al., 2011).

Finally, “healthy eating”¹ may be employed as a marker of social class (Crawford, 2006; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2010). In Eastern Scotland, healthy eating was a major focus for middle-class parents’ scrutiny of teen diets; cooking from scratch and avoiding prepared foods were priorities (Wills et al., 2011). These parents also promoted cosmopolitan eating, striving to cultivate future social and cultural capital in their offspring. Working class parents focused far less on molding children’s palates, with young people’s food preferences seen as their own concern (Backett-Millburn et al., 2010; Wills et al., 2011). In contrast, Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) found people living in (often extreme) poverty in Northeast England discursively positioned themselves as healthy eaters, and other (less deserving) “poor people” as unhealthy eaters. Though the distance between these studies—in time and in geography—is minimal, Shildrick and MacDonald suggest their findings reflect rising prejudice against the working class, with subsequent diminishment of working-class solidarity.

Food practices in class trajectories: Boundary marking

Lawler (1999) argues that those who experience upward class mobility face *disrupted habitus* (p. 14), a situation rife with pain, sense of displacement, shame, and anxiety about being caught out. The habitus formed in one’s family of origin is most durable, probably because it is least conscious (Bourdieu, 1984). When social contexts change with class mobility, ways of being that feel natural or unconscious may no longer allow smooth movement through social settings; the primary habitus is no longer a good fit. Bourdieu (2000) called these situations double binds, which can leave people in a kind of “social schizophrenia” (Grenfell, 2004, p. 29) where class of origin social and cultural capital no longer reap benefits. While people may learn to skillfully and strategically straddle class differences, if adaptation proves impossible, the tension may amount to what Bourdieu (1984) called *hysteresis* (p. 142).

In Lawler’s (1999) study, upwardly mobile women distanced themselves from their working class origins, depicting their families as lacking: “They do not know the right things,

¹ There is no one, superior version of “healthy eating.” Nonetheless, discourses that draw from nutritional science are employed to assess the eating practices of self and others, often making judgments about moral worth (Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman & Beagan, 2010).

they do not value the right things, they do not want the right things” (p. 11). Similarly, in a study of middle-class dinner parties one woman saw her desire to provide high-quality food as distancing herself “from the shame of growing up poor, and specifically from the embarrassment of her family’s struggle to afford enough food for guests” (Mellor et al., 2010, p. 11). Upward class mobility may leave people ever-conscious of their precarious social positions, anxious to renounce their class origins, yet not entirely comfortable with their new class locations (Friedman, 2012).

Double binds may be equally painful for the downwardly mobile. Gross and Rosenberger (2010) found that people in rural Oregon who had moved into poverty continued to seek middle-class cultural capital, to their own detriment. Their food dispositions no longer fit. They still strove to engage in ethical eating, and emphasized nutrition and preparing food from scratch—food practices they associated with the middle class—even though they no longer had the time or money for those food practices. They still preferred meat as a source of protein, for example, and might buy smaller amounts or cheaper cuts, rather than consume beans for protein. Participants still strove to display middle class affiliation: “The habits of their upbringing have ill-prepared them to strategize in the world they live in today as poor members of society” (Gross & Rosenberger, 2010, p. 67). Parents reported they themselves went hungry at times, but (unlike other families) their children never did. At times, “listening children rolled their eyes” (Gross & Rosenberger, 2010, p. 61).

Hierarchies of taste, where some sets of preferences are more highly prized than others, not only allow people to establish their own identities through social performances, but also to establish boundaries between “them” and “us,” with a sense of moral or cultural superiority connected to “us.” Groups construct their own rankings, establishing themselves as “worthy” on specific grounds in comparison to those perceived as higher and as lower than themselves (Lamont, 2010). When food consumption is employed in such boundary work (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár 2002), it can help define the parameters of inclusion and exclusion. As such, symbolic boundaries can construct members of lower classes as having less of everything valued by higher classes: less taste, less intelligence, less virtue, less respectability, less humanity (Lawler, 1999; 2005). Those in middle-class positions may “push away” with repugnance the practices of those in lower-class positions with a vehemence that can only be described as disgust. Such rejection helps to constitute and solidify their own class positions (Lawler, 2005).

It is important to note that symbolic and moral boundary marking is multidirectional; the lower classes, too, distinguish themselves through particular moral virtues (Lamont, 2000). As Bourdieu (1984) explains, “social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat” (p. 479). Those who feel shame in occupying a stigmatized social position (e.g., the working poor/impoverished) must work hard to assert their worth and dignity against those in a similar position, to assert their virtue in comparison with the less-virtuous masses. Thus, in a process of class disidentification, people living in poverty may take pains to distinguish themselves from “the poor” through their ability to manage, to cope, while nameless Others (the poor) are not coping due to moral failure

(Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Similarly, those who have moved from such a stigmatized position and still feel the sting of shame may do similar moral work by distancing themselves from their pasts (Lawler, 1999). On the other hand, those who have moved out of poverty may also draw upon the moral virtue structures of their pasts to distance from their new class location (Mellor et al., 2010).

In this paper we examine how people who have experienced class trajectories (moving upward or downward), resulting in situations of disrupted habitus, make use of available hierarchies in eating practices to symbolically mark class boundaries, displaying affiliation with or distance from particular class groups through food.

Methods

This paper draws from a large qualitative study with 105 families in ten sites (rural and urban) across Canada; guided by critical theory and social constructivism, that study explored how gender, class and place shape food practices. Following ethical approval in all sites,² families were recruited through advertising and word-of-mouth and were selected to ensure variety. “Family” meant whatever participants understood it to mean. Each family had to include minimally one adult woman and one teen willing to be interviewed. In each family we interviewed at least two members, one adult and one teen (thirteen to nineteen years), though often additional family members participated. In the first semi-structured interview, participants were asked about typical eating habits, food shopping, what they thought was good or not-so-good about the way they ate, and the influence of their upbringing on eating. They were then given cameras and asked to take photographs of foods they ate regularly, enjoyed, or disliked, and places where they shopped, ate out, or refused to frequent. These photos were the basis for discussion in a second interview. We also gave them photos of foods and eating establishments, asking them to sort those images into categories of comfortable or uncomfortable, trying to help people articulate the taken-for-granted concerning food. Interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded using Atlas/ti (<http://atlasti.com>). The coding was conducted by research assistants at each site; regular team discussions ensured interpretive consensus among the team and the coding and analysis emerged.

Categorizing class and class trajectories

The analyses here draw on interviews from a sub-sample of sixteen families in which at least one parent had experienced significant class trajectory, upward or downward. We categorized class

² Ethical approval was obtained at University of British Columbia for two sites in BC, at University of Alberta for two sites in Alberta, at University of Toronto for two sites in that city, at Queens University for two other sites in Ontario, and at Dalhousie University for two sites in Nova Scotia. In every case except Toronto, sites included one rural area plus one urban area.

taking into account education, income and occupational prestige (Gilbert, 2008; Goldthorpe, 1987; Lamont, 1992; Macionis & Gerber, 2011), employing five class categories.³ Confusing situations were discussed until consensus was reached. For example, adults who did manual labour but ran small businesses to provide those services tended to be classified as lower-middle class, with relatively high income and autonomy, but lower occupational prestige. Those who had experienced class mobility were categorized primarily based on current employment and household income.

Six families had clear upward trajectories, such that at least one adult had significantly higher income and education than their parents, and had greater occupational prestige, such as moving from manual work to white-collar work; all were now categorized as upper-middle class. Seven families had clear downward trajectories, with at least one adult whose income and occupational prestige were significantly lower than the previous generation, whose education level may have been lower, and whose employment (if any) may have been more manual or clerical compared with managerial or professional employment in the previous generation; five families were now considered working poor/impoverished, one working class, and one lower-middle class. Three families had mixed class trajectories, moving up then down or vice versa, when comparing their income, prestige, education and occupational categories with those of their parents.

As is typical in Canada (Macionis & Gerber, 2011), class mobility was usually due to education, divorce, single parenting, illness, or disability (see Table 1). The current analysis excludes families that were recent migrants to Canada, since class trajectory and food habits are both thoroughly disrupted by migration (e.g., Vallianatos & Raine, 2008). For this analysis we draw only on the interviews with adults, as the teens had not really experienced class trajectory. The sub-sample for this analysis included sixteen adult women and three adult men. Annual incomes ranged from \$8,000 to \$420,000, and all but one family lived in urban areas. Participants were all of Euro-Canadian origin, except for three families. One single mother was half Aboriginal, half Euro-Canadian; two other mothers were of Dutch and Serbian heritage, though second-generation Canadian.

³ Class categories focused primarily on occupation (which to some extent incorporates education level, income). The categories used were: Upper class (live off existing wealth, top three to five percent of population); upper-middle class (high status white collar, managers, professionals, business people); lower-middle class (lower status white collar, highly skilled blue/pink collar, lower-level administrators and managers, nurses, executive assistants, skilled trades); working class (lower skilled blue/pink collar, manual and clerical jobs with less formal skills, training and education); and working poor/impoverished (precarious work and insecure incomes that fall at or below the poverty line, reliance on income assistance).

Table 1: Participant demographics

Upward trajectory						
Family	Class origin	Current class	Trajectory	Education	Employment	Ethnicity
#1	Working	Upper-middle	Higher education,* marriage	Graduate	Professional	White Euro-Canadian
#2	Working	Upper-middle	Higher education, marriage	Graduate	Professional	White Euro-Canadian
#3	Working	Upper-middle	Higher education, marriage	Graduate & undergrad	Professional	White Euro-Canadian
#4	Working	Upper-middle	Second generation Canadian, higher education, marriage	Graduate	Professional	Serbian Canadian second generation
#5	Working	Upper-middle	Higher education, marriage	Graduate & undergrad	Professional	White Euro-Canadian
#6	Working	Upper-middle	Higher education, marriage	Graduate	Professional	White Euro-Canadian

Downward trajectory						
Family	Class origin	Current class	Trajectory	Education	Employment	Ethnicity
#7	Upper- or lower-middle**	Working poor/impoverished	Lower education, disability	Some post-secondary	Income assistance	White Euro-Canadian
#8	Lower-middle	Working poor/impoverished	Health issues, unemployment	College diploma	Income assistance	White Euro-Canadian
#9	Upper- or lower-middle	Working	Divorce	Undergrad	Service and retail	White Euro-Canadian
#10	Lower-middle	Working poor/impoverished	Disability	Undergrad	Income assistance, part-time service work	White Euro-Canadian
#11	Upper- or lower-middle	Lower-middle	Lower education, unstable employment, single parenting	Some post-secondary	Clerical, between jobs	Dutch Canadian second generation
#12	Lower-middle	Working poor/impoverished	Divorce, disability	Some post-secondary	Income assistance	White Euro-Canadian
#13	Upper-middle	Working poor/impoverished	Single parent, lower education, disability	Some post-secondary	Income assistance	Aboriginal and Scottish (second generation)

Mixed trajectory						
Family	Class origin	Current class	Trajectory	Education	Employment	Ethnicity
#14	Lower-middle to impoverished then back up	Working	Single parent	College diploma	Administrative	White Euro-Canadian
#15	Lower-middle to impoverished then back up	Lower-middle	Higher education, divorce	Graduate diploma	Social services	White Euro-Canadian
#16	Working to upper-middle then income loss	Upper-middle (↓ income)	Higher education, marriage, divorce, unstable work	Undergrad	Sales	White Euro-Canadian

* Higher or lower education level relative to own parents

** Sometimes it was hard to precisely assess class of origin. For example, in family #7, the education of the mother’s parents was not mentioned, but the mother talked about educational expectations, travelling for family vacations, a family car, a formal dining room, and all of her siblings earned graduate degrees.

Data analysis

For each family, in addition to line-by-line coding, we read all transcripts repeatedly, looking at the effects of income, upbringing, and how they talked about the eating practices of others, and themselves at previous times. We wrote summary memos for each family, then returned to transcripts, identifying themes. We attended to food practices, but also ideas and constructs concerning food, particularly as people indicated difference from or similarity to others. For the current analysis, all transcripts were read and re-read, with more detailed coding conducted by the first author specifically focused on how people used talk about food to distance from or affiliate with others by class.

Reflexivity and limitations

The larger research team included six researchers plus fourteen research assistants. Among us we included a wide range of ages, family forms and structures, class backgrounds, and personal food practices and values. We included men and women, health professionals as well as social scientists. Working closely as a team throughout data collection and analysis meant study rigour was enhanced by constant discussions that challenged individual biases. The authors of this paper have all experienced upward class trajectories, and have diverse current relationships to food. We include health professionals and social scientists. The current analysis is limited by our exclusion of recent migrants, who generally experience significant downward class mobility. Though we did not select for ethnicity from the remaining sample, the sixteen families included

here are nonetheless quite homogenous, with primarily British- or other Euro-Canadian origins. While this means fewer complicating factors, it also limits the ability to analyse intersections of class with ethnicity or race. Future studies should attend specifically to this gap.

Results

In the two sections below we first illustrate two differing orientations toward food (pragmatism and pleasure), evident in participants' food practices, marked by proximity to or distance from necessity (Bourdieu, 1984). Current income levels (available economic capital) featured heavily—though not exclusively—here. Secondly, we show how these participants who had experienced class mobility used discourses of healthy eating, ethical eating, and cosmopolitan eating, as well as an emphasis on frugality, to draw moral and symbolic boundaries around class (Lamont, 1992). Here the intent is not to show how social class affects food practices, but rather how people use food practices, and talk about food, to signal their alignment with or distance from specific class positions. The social processes are those of boundary-marking through food.

Food orientations: Pragmatism versus pleasure

Pragmatism

For some participants, food was a pragmatic, utilitarian necessity, with few elements of choice or satisfaction. For example, one woman said:

Food is, to me it is a necessity.... I never would in my mind waste money frivolously on things that we really didn't need, but focus on what we did need. Like, always get your milk, your bread, your meat, your vegetable, et cetera. The fancy cakes, well, we'll save that for your birthday, kind of thing. (48, UMC, upward)⁴

This utilitarian approach was evident among most participants who were low income, but also many of those who had experienced upward mobility but carried a frugal, pragmatic habitus with them.

In the pragmatic orientation, food shopping was experienced as a necessary chore to be accomplished as efficiently as possible. Those with a low income tended to plan menus, shop from a list, buy in bulk, and use coupons. They had extensive knowledge about sales, discount pricing, and the costs of individual food items at different stores. Shopping was based on need, budget and cost, and convenience. The low-income participants rarely shopped at multiple

⁴ Quotations are identified by age, current class location (UMC=upper-middle class; LMC=lower-middle class; WC=working class) and whether their trajectory was upward or downward.

stores, but when they did, it was for “chasing sales.” Despite their economic resources, some of the participants with upward class trajectories continued to value convenience and avoided shopping at multiple stores or specialty shops:

It’s just like “Oh God, I have to go grocery shopping,” and I just hate it. So like you go to Safeway [large supermarket] because you know where everything is... I don’t go to four other places... I’m just not that kind of a shopper.
(50, UMC, upward)

Cooking in the pragmatic orientation was also a utilitarian chore, usually learned from family or friends, and rarely used for displays of capital. Those who were currently low income avoided experimenting with new foods or preparation methods.

I’m not very adventuresome. If I’m going to cook I’m measuring everything carefully whereas I have a friend who just, “Oh, you put some of this and put some of that.” I couldn’t possibly cook like that because, partly because of the expense, because I wouldn’t want to waste the money. (55, WC, downward)

Such pragmatism and caution suggest little distance from necessity and little ability to use food for displays of capital. Yet even when finances permitted, some with upward trajectories rejected the use of food to impress. When asked what she might prepare for guests, one woman said she would barbeque, “Nothing really fancy, but just food that people will like” (48, UMC, upward). Another participant described her cooking as “pretty basic,” “just very straight cooking,” such as hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken, and roasts. She described her upper-middle class husband as liking “to bring the cookbook out and do the fancy, come up with different tastes and things” (50, UMC, upward). Among pragmatic cooks, homemade foods were taken for granted, normal, just “what you do.”

Aesthetics and pleasure

For many of those with greater distance from necessity, food was part of an “aesthetic disposition.” Food was a source of pleasure, adventure, joy, connection, and discovery: “I’m fascinated by the flavours and the textures and the visuals of food as well. It’s kind of an all-around package. The preparation of the food as well. It’s not about how fast can I make something” (41, LMC, mixed). One very low income single mother insisted:

Eating isn’t just swallowing food... For me food is part of what I call wholesome sensuality. A beautiful part of being is food and preparing it and eating it and feeling good from it and knowing how connected it is to sustaining our well being. (62, working poor/impoverished, downward)

This orientation was most common among those with an upward class trajectory who had the financial resources to turn a biological necessity into an aesthetic choice and a vehicle for displays of capital in their search for distinction. As is evident in this quote, however, it then becomes available for marking class alignment among those who have slid downward in income, as we will discuss below.

In the pleasure orientation, food shopping was not a chore to be efficiently dispatched, but rather a leisure activity, an adventure, or as one participant said, “a destination”:

I'll find myself at the market maybe a couple of times over the course of a week to buy fresh things. And there are times when we feel like little splurges and that's when we go to places like the Grotto del Formaggio ... which has amazing cheeses and we love our cheeses. So we'll try a new, different kind of cheese. Or we'll go to Fratelli's bakery, and get some special treat there. And go to the deli on the Drive and—. Sort of make our shopping a bit of a destination, a bit of an activity that's fun to do... Exploration and taste testing. It's a foodie experience. (41, LMC, mixed)

When finances allowed, shopping was based on wants and desires, rather than need or cost: “When I go shopping as I did for the last five weeks I didn't think about cost. I simply thought about what I was going cook with what I bought” (53, UMC, upward).

People tended to shop in multiple specialty shops, foregoing the convenience of a supermarket for the pleasure of seeking out just the right ingredients. They might go to a produce store, a farmers' market, a cheese shop, a fish monger, a meat market, a coffee shop, a bakery, and so on. They knew all the best places to get all the right ingredients. Despite lower incomes, some with downward trajectories retained this orientation to shopping. One woman had organic produce delivered, and also went to a discount grocery, and several other stores:

I go to [family-owned] stores along Roncesvalles and some of the food markets there. And I try to go to Rowe's [meat vendor] once every couple weeks. And then there's a store on Queen Street called Good Catch General Store. Part of what they carry is what you'd see in a health food store. So the organic cheese and coffee beans from Alternative Grounds. The [organic] milk from Harmony... Bacchus [roti shop], and if we want a quick treat we go into Brown Sugar. It's a little café. (49, LMC, downward)

In the pleasure orientation, cooking was seen as leisure, indulgence, a focus of adventure and discovery, as well as a vehicle for self-expression and displays of cultural and symbolic capital. People had often learned to cook from books, the internet, television, and courses, yet were also highly experimental, willing to attempt any new dish or cuisine. One participant

described having spent an entire day making Thai food from scratch, something she'd never cooked before. Another stated, "I'll try new things with abandon... [I prefer] to cook Northern Indian food, Pakistani food, Iranian food, Mogul food, Southern Indian food, and Thai food" (53, UMC, upward). This participant regularly made bread in a brick oven he had built in his yard.

Through cooking, shopping and their overall approach to food, participants tended to display an orientation focused either on pragmatic utilitarianism, or pleasure and appreciation. Distance from necessity shaped this, through relative access to economic capital. But several participants displayed food orientations that were not obviously linked to current finances; it appeared that the habitus of their class of origin might be at play, directing an approach to food that was not in keeping with their current class status. People found ways to indulge in pleasure with food despite economic constraints, or continued to see food as a necessity despite access to ample financial resources.

Moral boundary marking

Participants used food symbolically to align with the perceived practices of the class to which they wished to signal their belonging, establishing themselves as virtuous, respectable or worthy in comparison to others whose practices they rejected. Some emphasized the practices and moral dispositions of their class of origin to distance themselves from their current class situation, some emphasized the practices and moral dispositions of their current class location to distinguish themselves from their class of origin.

Distancing from "lowbrow" food: A discourse of "healthy eating"

Most participants, regardless of class trajectory, distanced themselves from foods perceived as lower class, or "lowbrow." Foods that were spoken of contemptuously included soft drinks, fast food, "junk" food, processed meats, white flour, powdered milk, and margarine. This distancing was most often accomplished through the language of "healthy eating"⁵ which seemed to cross class boundaries. One woman spoke of the children's lunches at a school in a low-income neighbourhood where she used to live, horrified that children brought pop, chocolate bars, cakes, and cookies: "I remember thinking 'Oh my God, this is just awful!' I couldn't believe it" (38, UMC, upward). Another woman suggested parents were "ignorant of the label-reading skills": "When you look at some of these lunches that these parents send these children, what are they thinking?" (46, working poor/impoverished, downward). Whether participants came from a lower class and were disparaging the way they grew up, or were now lower class and disparaging the ways people around them ate, lowbrow foods were almost universally disparaged as unhealthy.

⁵ Here we do not endorse the notion that there is one, uncontested version of healthy eating; rather we are interested in how people used that concept, often left undefined, to evaluate themselves and others. When asked directly, most people did echo mainstream nutritional discourse to some extent. The point here, however, is the use of the idea of healthy eating, rather than its content.

Participants who were on income assistance (welfare) took pains to distinguish themselves from “the poor” who ate unhealthy foods. One woman spoke of people on welfare eating bologna, canned meats, hotdogs, “and I don’t even know what they’re called.” Drawing a clear boundary of virtue, she went on, “Once I realized how processed those meats were, they became despicable to me” (62, working poor/impoverished, downward). Despicable is a word laden with moral overtones. Speaking about others on income assistance one woman said:

Their diet will probably be McDonald’s, processed cheese sandwich on white bread, and Kraft Dinner, wieners, hot dogs and bologna sandwiches ... Just about zero vegetables. Just about zero fruits. Tons of sugar, ice cream. Pop. ... Their diets are horrible, really, really bad. (49, working poor/impoverished, downward)

Notions of healthy eating were also used by some participants with upward class trajectories to distance from their food roots. One woman referred to having grown up in a “Hamburger Helper household,” in which her employed mother relied on pre-packaged foods, cheap uncoloured margarine, and powdered milk: “It was gross... I hated it. I remember very clearly thinking, ‘As soon as I get out of this place it’s going to be real butter. It’s going to be real milk’” (41, LMC, mixed). The disdain was palpable. One man even more explicitly disparaged the way he ate growing up working class in a small town:

I grew up in a small lunch-bucket town in Ontario and all we ate was bologna sandwiches with ketchup. [laughter] That’s the honest to God truth. ... It was brutal. And my mom cooked the bejeezus out of protein, boiled the snot out of brussels sprouts. Everything was mushy vegetables and burnt beef. [laughs] It was terrible! ... Salads with a base of Jello. It was amazing... That’s what I grew up with. Blah... You were lucky if you had lettuce. ... When I look back on it, it was pretty abysmal. (53, UMC, upward)

His wife chimed in, “It wasn’t healthy eating. It wasn’t a healthy lifestyle.”

Distancing through ethical eating

For those with enough economic capital, one way to distance themselves from Others and show their affiliation with prized class locations was to emphasize ethical eating over cost and necessity. Interestingly, participants with upward class trajectories tended not to show strong commitment to ethical eating. As one man said, “I’m still somewhat sceptical that the claims for organic are really, truly organic” (53, UMC, upward). Another participant suggested, “At some point if I can get enough time to do research and get my head around it I would definitely like to focus more on organic meats and stuff like that” (38, UMC, upward). Others commented on the cost and inconvenience of ethical eating. Perhaps these participants were showing the effects of

a working class habitus, resisting the expense of ethical consumption, or perhaps they were able to mark symbolic boundaries and display cultural capital in other ways.

The most extensive displays of ethical eating were by participants with downward and mixed class trajectories, marking alignment with middle-class origins. They emphasized knowing the nearby vendors of organic, local, sustainable foods, including organic delivery programs and food co-ops. One woman reported,

I like to buy organic bananas because bananas are really heavily sprayed. And strawberries too, but they're expensive. And apples because you eat the peel, so those are the ones [organic products] I'd like to purchase most. ... The organic milk... I'm not as convinced that it's that much healthier. (55, WC, downward)

She went on to say she felt like “a complete hypocrite” because she could not afford to buy ethically produced food for her cat. These participants, despite often being very low income, spent scarce food dollars on ethical eating, and spoke about it as a type of moral virtue that set them apart from other lower class people around them. One working poor/impooverished woman purchased almost exclusively ethically produced products, including only organic flour. Though she had no access to a car, she preferred to buy from producers or small vendors rather than chain grocers, despite the inconvenience. Another participant noted that with the higher cost of ethical eating, she purchased organic, free-range, fair-trade, but bought less meat, poultry, and coffee: “I feel good about what it is that I'm eating but I try to keep it to a minimum” (41, LMC, mixed).

Distancing through cosmopolitan and omnivorous eating

The connoisseur mode of cosmopolitan eating, which tends to be associated with upper classes, is marked by food adventurousness, openness to any kind of cuisine, emphasis on esoteric food knowledge, and prizing authenticity (Cappeliez & Johnston, 2013; Kaplan, 2013). Adding culinary omnivorousness to this, we would expect to see openness to any kind of eating establishment as a feature of cultural capital displays (Conner, 2008; Johnston & Baumann, 2010). Such displays of culinary capital were evident in almost all of the families with upward class trajectories, and all of those with mixed trajectories.

Connoisseur cosmopolitanism rests on displays of specialized food knowledge. Several participants with upward class trajectories spoke in extraordinary detail about specific foods. For example:

The little Crottin de Chavignol is really delicious.... It's a goat cheese, a French cheese and it just has a lovely sharpness to it and sweetness... There's this beautiful texture to it. It's approaching dry when it's in a form that I like. ... it's not as dry as chalky, but there's this certain dryness to it that is really appealing.

This is when I like them, about this age. If you let them really age, the outside becomes very gnarly looking and the inside becomes more liquid. ... But this is the form I like it, right about at that point. (53, UMC, upward)

These participants tended to display esoteric knowledge about ingredients and where to buy them, about specialty food markets, and about multiple types of restaurants, giving details about menus, owners and chefs.

Adventurousness and willingness to eat from any cuisine was another hallmark of cosmopolitanism, including willingness to prepare foods from any cuisine. Emphasizing the exotic, participants with upward and mixed class trajectories indicated confidence cooking Mexican, Northern Indian, Southern Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Mogul, Ethiopian, Somalian, Greek, Lebanese, Thai, Japanese and Korean foods. One woman said,

I love different ethnic foods. I love Indian foods, curries and tabouleh... I love different things, I love trying Greek foods, any of it. I like all different ethnic foods. ... I'm up for whatever comes. I'll give it a whirl. I'll try anything once, if I don't like it, I won't eat it again. (42, UMC, mixed)

These participants also spoke about very deliberately inculcating a preference for cosmopolitan eating in their children. One couple spoke with pride of their teen sons' favourite restaurant, noting that it was not a French bistro, but an Alsatian bistro (50 & 53, UMC, upward).

Authenticity is key to connoisseur cosmopolitanism. Among those with upward and mixed trajectories, homemade foods, which were taken for granted in the pragmatic food orientation, were prized as superior quality.

I like it to be all homemade, so you know homemade desserts and homemade appetizers and just you know—I don't, it's pretty rare that I'll buy a boxed something. Something pre-prepared. Because I want to be in charge of the flavours and the ingredients. (41, LMC, mixed)

Participants vigorously distanced themselves from pre-packaged and prepared foods which seemed to be seen as common, lower quality: “We don't eat almost any packaged food at all, like pre-packaged skillet this or canned that” (51, UMC, upward). There was often little explanation, not even citing health, simply rejecting prepared foods as inferior. Participants might eat a grilled cheese sandwich, but only with specialized ingredients to mark distinction:

Really neat crusty bread, maybe marbled with a pumpernickel swirl running through it and a really neat gruyere cheese with something else, you know, a really interesting side dish, it might be construed as a deli dish or something, like with really neat tomatoes. (51, UMC, upward)

Another participant said she would add “capers and olives” (50, UMC, upward).

Most participants with upward and mixed class trajectories also strenuously rejected fast food, seen as mass-produced and lacking quality. One man said he would eat fast food if he were “starving.” Rather, they sought out the most authentic Thai curry or Caribbean roti, referring to little-known, “one of a kind” restaurants or take-outs. One couple described several “fantastic little hole-in-the-wall” places, providing the background stories about owners or chefs. Another participant said, “I find the best foods are often dingy little places, like little Thai places where they could care less about how things look” (39, UMC, upward).

All but one of the participants with upward or mixed trajectories reported being comfortable in any type of restaurant (except fast-food), from low-end to high-end: “From your really informal to your formal places, I mean everywhere I go I can make a choice that’s good for me” (39, UMC, upward). One woman had developed comfort with high-end restaurants through waitressing, another through her husband: “His mom used to set a very fancy table, very formal table. Usually Sunday dinner. Or you would go to a restaurant with her like that. I wasn’t raised like that” (50, UMC, upward).

Finally, two of the couples with upward class trajectories made a point of marking their food practices as not being elitist, snobbish, or pretentious. One man joked that the family didn’t eat caviar. Another dismissed some restaurants as “too stuffy” and overly self-conscious. He and his wife specifically disparaged what they referred to as upper middle class “epicureanism,” in which people sought out “the most fabulous baguette” rather than “normal bread”, wanting to be “seen to consume the best.” They saw this as superficial (53 & 50, UMC, upward).

Most participants with downward class trajectories seemed far less likely to use cosmopolitan eating to mark distinction. Some would prefer to eat more diverse cuisines, but could not afford the specialized ingredients, or the preparation time. Experimentation can be risky for those close to necessity. It seemed important to express openness to new foods, but current knowledge of diverse foods was hindered by low income. For example, one woman saw eating out as an opportunity to try something different: “It’s like, wow, I’ve never tasted this before. This is awesome!” (39, working poor/impoverished, downward). Enthusiasm aside, she was unable to speak knowledgeably about foods she could not afford to sample.

Three of the participants with downward class trajectories indicated they would be comfortable in any restaurant, stating, “I would think that I would find something on the menu at all these places” (49, LMC, downward). One woman clearly articulated the effects of her upper-middle class primary habitus:

I’m also comfortable in very formal places because I was raised in a very rich family... I was raised with very proper manners and table settings and stuff so I’m not uncomfortable in that situation... We had very formal dinners with my grandmother. You know, the multi plates and many forks and knives, pure silver, crystal and all that so ... it’s easier for me than most I guess. ... The most

comfortable I feel is really an easy-going atmosphere where you don't have to pretend or use special manners. But I can pull them off immediately. (49, working poor/impooverished, downward)

Distancing through frugality

Lastly, some of the participants who had upward class trajectories drew moral boundaries distinguishing themselves from their current class location through emphasizing the virtue of frugality, something they explicitly stated was retained from their lower class origins. There was a sense of indirectly referencing the upper classes as wasteful, spendthrift, and less moral due to their extravagance. As one woman remarked, “There are some couples that go out three times a week and I said, wow that must really add up!... [I was] never really extravagant to begin with” (48, UMC, upward). The highest income mother in our study repeated throughout her interviews that she was frugal, thrifty, and hated spending money.

Even though [husband] has a lot more money than me and he doesn't care, I still am in budget mode. I'm in budget mode. And that's probably, that's how I was raised. And that's how I will always be... I will always be frugal.... I don't believe in wasting money on anything. (38, UMC, upward)

This pride in frugality was one of the most obvious places where working-class habitus conflicted with current class location, with the potential for *hysteresis* (Bourdieu, 1984). This same participant described ongoing family tension concerning food-spending, though it did not appear to elevate to conflict: “I'm really frugal when it comes to eating and that drives [my husband] crazy. I think because I grew up so poor...It's just very different backgrounds, right? He would just buy what he wants” (38, UMC, upward).

Discussion

We identified two distinct food orientations, one focused on pragmatic utilitarianism, one on food as pleasure (Bourdieu, 1984). Among these participants who had experienced upward, downward or mixed class trajectories, they did not map neatly onto current class situation—though available economic capital made a difference. People with low incomes could not risk being experimental—a culinary experiment resulting in potentially inedible food could pose too great a cost to their food budgets. Frequenting multiple specialty shops lost pleasure when travelling by foot or bus. Yet some people displayed food orientations that contradicted their current financial circumstances, enjoying food as “wholesome sensuality” despite living on \$8,000 per year, or refusing to “waste money frivolously” despite an annual family income over \$200,000. While distance from necessity seemed to be part of the explanation, primary habitus

seemed also to have an effect. Many participants were in situations of *double binds* (Gross & Rosenberger, 2010) or *disrupted habitus* (Lawler, 1999), where their food dispositions no longer fit current class circumstances.

Those with upward and mixed trajectories sought distinction through culinary cosmopolitanism and omnivorousness, emphasizing specialized knowledge, exotic cuisines, authenticity, adventurousness, and openness to any food experience (Cappeliez & Johnston, 2013; Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Kaplan, 2013). These participants cultivated sophisticated palates in their children; such concern for children's culinary capital may distinguish the middle classes from the working class (Backett-Millburn, 2010; Gross & Rosenberger, 2010; Wills, 2011). Lowbrow foods were accepted, though often transformed with more exotic ingredients (Johnston & Baumann, 2010). Notably, however, fast foods and pre-packaged foods were soundly dismissed as unacceptable; as Conner (2008) suggests, "mass-produced foods may represent a homogenization of food culture that the omnivore must reject on principle" (p. 11). Distinction from that which is "common" matters (Lawler, 2005).

The omnivore thesis (Peterson & Kern, 1996) rests on the perceived superiority of a kind of "un-snobbish multiculturalism" in food practices (Kaplan, 2013, p. 249). There was some evidence in our sample of not just un-snobbishness, but even anti-snobbishness. A few participants who had moved up in class, and whole-heartedly drew distinctions through cosmopolitan and omnivorous eating, nonetheless took pains to establish that they were not food snobs. They stressed their discerning judgment regarding authenticity and quality, not only by insisting on their enjoyment of "hole-in-the-wall" diners, but also by baking bread in a wood-fired oven while castigating those who search out the best baguette as pretentious "epicureans." Their cultural capital lies in knowing where to get the best Caribbean roti, not the most elite caviar. This symbolic emphasis on authenticity may arise from having professional status, but not unlimited economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291-95).

Surprisingly, dominant modes of ethical eating were not widely used by those with upward class trajectories to establish cultural capital. Why were they not highly invested in ethical eating, a cultural repertoire linked with the upper-middle class (Elliott, 2013; Johnston et al., 2011)? Is cosmopolitan eating simply more valuable as an exchange for cultural capital? After all, once a piece of lamb is prepared in an authentic Moroccan curry who can tell if it was organic? Is it safe to express scepticism about the superiority of ethical products when economic, social and cultural capital are so clearly established in multiple other ways? Or are upwardly mobile participants who do not engage in ethical eating expressing a disrupted habitus, prioritizing the working class virtue of thrift and frugality over the cultural distinction of ethical eating? Perhaps as Julie Guthman (2003) has suggested, organic food production is losing its specialized status, and therefore its ability to distinguish?

In contrast, the downwardly mobile participants were almost all highly invested in ethical eating. Many ate organic, local, sustainable products, even when doing so cost dearly in money and effort. They described spending scarce food dollars on ethical products as a moral virtue that set them apart from others on low incomes. Given that ethical eating typically carries

high symbolic capital (Elliott, 2013; Johnston et al., 2011; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010), it may be a means of moral boundary marking, distinguishing from lower-class others, and signalling continued belonging to the middle class, despite current circumstances. On the other hand, adherence to ethical eating when financial resources do not support this may reflect the operation of a middle-class habitus, the expression of taste, rather than intentional status-seeking (Elliott, 2013). This is particularly likely when the ethical consumption practices are relatively invisible (*ibid.*).

Lastly, like Shildrick and MacDonald (2013), we found support for the mainstream dictates of healthy eating across our sample, regardless of class of origin, or current financial circumstances. Perhaps signalling the overwhelming dominance of healthy eating discourses aligned with an anti-obesity framework (Beagan et al., 2015), almost everyone distanced themselves from lowbrow pre-packaged foods and fast foods, almost always through the moral discourse of healthy eating. Those with upward class trajectories were often harsh in disparaging their own lower class food histories as unhealthy (“gross,” “abysmal,” “just awful”). As Lawler (2005) suggests, the middle-class project of self-realization is never complete, and those who move into the middle classes are always at risk of being shamed (Lawler, 1999; Mellor et al., 2010). Expressions of disgust and repulsion at working-class lives entrench the middle classes as superior to the subordinate Other (Lawler, 2005). The intensity with which some upwardly mobile participants distanced from their earlier food practices suggests such disgust, in service of class distinction.

Healthy eating was employed at least as extensively by those with downward trajectories, who described the eating practices of others around them as “despicable,” “horrible,” “really bad,” insisting that they would never eat like “those people”. Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) call this class disidentification, suggesting that people living in poverty are necessarily “drawn into conjuring up phantom Others; an ‘underclass’ situated financially, culturally, socially and morally below them” (p. 299). In their study too, nutrition and diet were the focus for moral judgments, depicting the undeserving poor as providing food of poor nutritional quality for their families. In our study, participants with downward class trajectories used discourses of healthy eating to bolster their (former) middle-class identities, distancing from low-income others. While ethical eating concerns moral issues, neither it nor cosmopolitan eating seemed to carry the moral imperative of the healthy eating discourse; people seemed able to opt in or out of those food practices, to use them at will, without the accompanying messages of moral worth.

Conclusion

Food consumption practices are powerful means through which to mark symbolic class boundaries. Particular orientations to food are affected not only by current financial resources, but also by class of origin food dispositions. In an era when culinary cosmopolitanism and omnivorousness carry a certain cachet, people may use food knowledge, adventurousness and

openness to establish belonging in a social class to which they were not born. Similarly, those who slide down the class hierarchy may use ethical eating to establish their distinction from those who surround them, or may display food dispositions that no longer fit their economic circumstances. Healthy eating, the most prevalent discourse concerning food in Canada today (Beagan et al., 2015), appears to be employed for distinctly moral boundary marking, illustrated by the vociferousness with which participants marked their own eating practices as more worthy than those they deemed “abysmal” and “despicable.” On an optimistic note for those involved in the field of nutrition, mainstream discourses of healthy eating seem to have become pervasive, available to and known across social class groups, suggesting dissemination of healthy eating messages has been highly effective.

Future research

Research in the area of class and food too often employs a narrow focus that equates class with current income, perhaps adding education level to the mix. While income obviously affects food practices in direct ways, more research is needed on the social processes through which “food dispositions” and food-related discourses are produced and employed. Food practices—and the values, beliefs and tendencies with which people approach food—do not necessarily change when economic capital changes, or simply through providing more education. Food and talk about food are used by people to navigate the moral and symbolic boundaries connected to social class. People are social actors who use food, as well as other consumption practices, to signify their social identities and positioning within complex social hierarchies. Considerably more research is needed to understand better how this works in relation to class, as well as gender, ethnicity, region, and other categories of difference.

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