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## 'Bad mothers and the production of fat children': Situating maternal foodwork and the development of child eating practices

Maxine Woolhouse

Children's diets are argued to be central to their health and development (Birch, 1990) yet, in 1990 Paul Rozin lamented the paucity of developmental psychological research into children's acquisition of dietary habits. However, recent years have witnessed an explosion of research investigating maternal feeding practices and children's eating patterns (and the like) prompted by concerns around the putative 'child obesity epidemic'. Corresponding with the general trend in orthodox developmental psychology (Burman, 2008), it is mothers who are most subject to scrutiny in this body of research which, it seems, is driven by the assumption that the identification of mothers' faulty feeding practices will go a long way to 'solving' the so-called 'obesity problem' and children will develop into happy, healthy adults.

The key argument in this chapter is that the development of dietary practices, tastes, and so forth *and* maternal feeding practices cannot be isolated from the specific social, cultural, economic and political conditions within which these practices take place. In particular, I argue for the necessity to take social class into account (see Day, Rickett & Woolhouse, 2014) along with other dimensions of difference, in attempting to make sense of food and eating-related practices. Moreover, failing to interrogate the structural and ideological contexts of eating and feeding practices produces yet another example of 'mother-blaming' (Jackson & Mannix, 2004) and the pathologisation of those who position themselves outside of the white, middle-class norm.

I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of some of the criticisms directed at developmental psychology in recent decades, and some of the ways in which such criticisms have shaped theoretical thinking in recent years. I then move on to present a critical discussion of some of the developmental research on maternal feeding practices and children's eating habits, highlighting a number of problems with this body of work. Finally, I draw on a selection of critical and primarily discursive scholarship in this area to illustrate the locatedness of food and eating practices and how these cannot be adequately understood when viewed in isolation from economic circumstances *and* the classed, gendered and culture-specific meanings imbued within food practices.

In recent decades, orthodox developmental psychology has attracted a number of critics (e.g. Burman, 1994, 2008; Morss, 1996; Walkerdine, 1993) all of whom have brought to our attention a number of shortcomings in the fundamental assumptions underpinning the discipline. As it is beyond the scope of this chapter to reiterate all of these arguments, I focus on those pertaining to the way in which the individual and the social surround are theorized and conceived of, and more specifically, criticisms regarding the treatment of social class and the ways in which this contributes to the production of developmental psychological accounts which are partial, limited, and unhelpful (Singer, 1993).

During the 1970s and beyond, concerns were expressed from within the developmental psychology community about the dominance of positivism and, among other problems associated with this, how this had led to a neglect of the social and cultural environments within which development takes place (Morss, 1996). In response, there emerged a trend towards 'social context approaches' which attempted to recast understandings of child development through a consideration of 'social

influences' (Morss, 1996). Illustrative of this shift in theorising is represented in the work of those such as Bronfenbrenner and Bruner (1979 and 1990 respectively, cited in Morss, 1996) and the renewal of interest in the work of Lev Vygotsky (Morss, 1996). For example, a key strand of Vygotsky's thesis was that human activity is inherently social, and that children and adults naturally learn from and assist each other in a relationship of reciprocity (Morss, 1996). However, according to Morss, although this change in direction of thinking could be considered progressive, the social surround within 'social context' approaches simply becomes an additional lens through which research findings may be interpreted (Burman, 1994, 2008; Morss, 1996). In other words, the underlying philosophical, methodological and theoretical tenets of 'mainstream' developmental psychology were not really challenged. The individual remains as the prime unit of analysis, with the addition of a social context which commonly doesn't extend beyond 'the mother' (Burman, 1994).

### Blaming mother

This predominant notion of the social environment as constituted by 'the mother' provides a narrow and impoverished understanding and produces individualistic accounts devoid of adequate consideration of the wider structures, processes and relations of power within which children and mothers (and mothering practices) are situated (Burman, 1994, 2008). A troubling consequence of this is 'mother blaming'; if mothers are conceived of as constituting the child's social world, then mothers are held accountable for virtually all aspects of their child's well-being (Burman, 1994, 2008; Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Kokkonen, 2009). However, not only is she held responsible for her child's 'outcomes', she is positioned as culpable for her own life circumstances such as experiencing poverty, abandonment or abuse (Jackson, 2000), perhaps especially those circumstances deemed to have detrimental effects on the 'life chances' of her child/ren. Such modes of understanding are politically convenient in that they reflect, and bolster neo-liberal rationalities whereby individuals are expected to take responsibility for all aspects of their lives with minimal state intervention, and are thus held accountable for the consequences of the 'choices' they make (Crawford, 2006).

Whilst it can be argued that all mothers are interpellated within a discourse of mother-blame, as Jackson and Mannix (2004) remind us, it is *particular* mothers who will be subject to a more piercing judgmental gaze, held up as more likely to be responsible for their children's 'shortcomings'. These include single mothers, black and minority ethnic mothers, lesbian mothers, working-class mothers (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991) and those in paid employment (Lewis, 1991). In other words, mothers who do not fit the white, heterosexual middle-class norm of developmental psychology's object/subject of study.

### The scrutiny of maternal feeding practices in a discursive climate of 'childhood obesity'.

As Wright, Maher and Tanner (2015) note, it is mothers who are placed under most scrutiny and held responsible for shaping the eating practices of their children, and relatedly, as responsible for their current and future health. Furthermore, in academic literature, mass media and in the popular cultural imagination, maternal food practices are saturated with class-based rhetoric. For example, poor and working-class mothers are commonly assumed to be ignorant of practices which purportedly will 'protect against childhood obesity' (Wright et al., 2015) and are deemed as 'high risk' families who make 'bad choices' (e.g. see Gross, Mendelsohn, Fierman, Hauser & Messito, 2014; Hernandez, Thompson, Cheng & Serwint, 2012). On the other hand, middle-class mothers are subject to accusations that they lack the time to provide a healthy environment due to, for example,

maternal employment (Maher, Fraser & Wright, 2010). I argue then that this domain of research represents the crystallization of a number of contemporary, potent and pervasive discourses around the 'epidemic of childhood obesity' (and the attendant moral panic), 'maternal responsibility', 'healthy eating', 'the unintended consequences of feminism', 'the ignorant working-class' and so forth, and therefore powerfully illustrates some of the limitations of mainstream developmental psychology and the detrimental effects these may have for those groups who are implicated in this body of research.

Surveying a selection of the developmental research in the area of maternal and child feeding/eating practices brings to our attention a number of themes which I argue to be problematic. First of all, it is notable how the 'social context' is primarily reduced to mother-child relations. Although most authors begin with references to '*parental* feeding practices' [my emphasis] and the like (Gregory, Paxton & Brozovic, 2010, p. 1), these are soon replaced with references to *mothers* (e.g. Gregory et al., 2010; Hays, Power & Olvera, 2001; Rodgers et al., 2013) implying that 'parent' and 'mother' are synonymous. For example, Rodgers et al., (2013, p. 2) state

As feeding practices are potentially modifiable risk factors [in child obesity], understanding relationships between *parent* [my emphasis] feeding practices and child weight and eating behaviors is of importance. However, to date, there has been a lack of clearly defined constructs describing *maternal* [my emphasis] feeding practices. (Rodgers et al., 2013, p. 2)

This conflation of parents and mothers has a number of consequences. First, it is assumed that fathers play little role in the feeding of children or more generally in family-related foodwork. Whilst it may be the case that mothers continue to do the bulk of this work (Moisio, Arnould & Price, 2004), that isn't to say that fathers have no bearing on food practices (in households where mother and father co-habit). For example, Valentine (1999) argues that even when food is purchased and prepared by mothers, food choices are often based on the tastes and preferences of their partners and children.

Second, this exclusive focus on mothers means it is they who are held accountable for their perceived inadequacies and the supposed consequences these have on their child. For example, in a prospective study examining the relationship between maternal feeding practices and weight gain in young children, Rodgers et al., (2013, p. 7) state that their findings "support the importance of maternal feeding practices in relation to child weight gain and the development of obesogenic eating behaviors in young children. They provide evidence of the importance of considering maternal feeding practices in relation to obesity in childhood". The only other 'factors' involved in children's weight gain considered by the authors are "other maternal variables" (p. 9). In other words, it is almost exclusively mothers who are positioned as pivotal in producing 'childhood obesity' and consequently are the sole targets of intervention.

A third major problem with the exclusive scrutiny of mothers and their feeding practices is that, with its intense individualism, it obfuscates the complex socio-cultural, political and economic environments within which mothering takes place and functions as a convenient distraction from wider structural inequalities, discursive conditions, and the unequal relations of power within which women as mothers are positioned (Arendell, 2000). Furthermore, the complex and multiple ways in which mothers are interpellated into contradictory discourses around mothering, food, health, choice, risk, childhood obesity and so forth are disregarded. For example, Rodgers et al., (2013)

reportedly found that maternal instrumental and emotional feeding, restricting foods and encouraging children to eat more are associated with child weight gain and eating behaviours which promote obesity. On the other hand, maternal monitoring of high calorie foods aids in the development of healthy eating habits. However, what the authors fail to interrogate are the myriad complex and contradictory cultural meanings invoked here. Regarded as an important expression of femininity (Fürst, 1997), feeding children may be a symbolic act of care and nurturance for mothers (Daniels, Glorieux, Minnen & van Tienoven, 2012) and constitutes them as 'good mothers' (Locke, 2015). However, in contrast, positioned as the gatekeeper to the child's diet (Gregory et al., 2010), and therefore the child's current and future health (Stang & Loth, 2011) mothers are expected to make the 'right' choices (Locke, 2015), negotiating the tensions, for example, between discretely monitoring food consumption without being coercive and controlling (Wright et al., 2015). Thus, failing to consider the perilous discursive terrain and structural conditions within which mothering and foodwork takes place results in a depleted account of the development of children's dietary patterns, weight and so forth and simply becomes yet another example of implicit mother-blaming.

Food practices are inextricably linked with social class (Atkinson & Deeming, 2015) structured by the volume and forms of capital (e.g. cultural, social, and economic) at our disposal (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words our food practices are generally reflective of our financial resources, and expressive of identities, values, and aspirations - that is *if* we are sufficiently distanced from economic necessity (e.g. see Atkinson & Deeming, 2015). It might be expected then that psychological research on maternal feeding practices, the formation of children's dietary habits and so forth would engage in some form of sympathetic, class-based analysis when attempting to interpret findings. However, in the 'mainstream' literature this seems far from the case. It appears that social class is either indirectly referenced through the provision of some related demographic data (e.g. education/income/occupation) but then there is little or no discussion around this data (e.g. Rodgers et al., 2013) or, class (typically coded as 'low' or 'high' income) is a key variable where attempts are made to link income with an array of maternal feeding practices and food-related attitudes (e.g. Gross et al., 2014; Hays et al., 2001). As an example of the first case scenario, Rodgers et al., (2013) examined the relationship between a variety of different maternal feeding practices and child weight gain over a one year period and the development of so-called child 'obesogenic' eating behaviours. The authors reported data regarding mothers' educational attainment and income levels and commented that, "Mothers, on average were well-educated, and had a medium household income" (p. 3) (In fact, over 70% of mothers were educated to university level and 75% had a household income exceeding \$60,000). However, of note is the absence of discussion around social class in attempting to make sense of the findings. It seems this is a prime example of the normalization and invisibility of middle-classness; it is only the working-classes who are marked out as classed, as if class has no bearing in the production of middle-class subjectivities and lifestyles (Day et al., 2014).

In contrast, there are many examples of studies which include samples of 'low-income' mothers whose children are deemed to be at 'high-risk' of child obesity; these mothers also tend to be drawn from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) populations in the United States (e.g. see Gross et al., 2014; Hays et al., 2001). Such studies are typically premised on the argument that children from low-income (especially BME) families are more likely to become 'obese' and therefore the feeding practices of mothers in such families need to be identified and (ultimately) corrected. For example, Hughes et al., (2006) aimed to develop a measure to identify styles of feeding specifically in caregivers of low-income US minority children. Four patterns of feeding styles were identified –

authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent, and uninvolved. Authoritarian style of feeding is related to high levels of control (e.g. pressurising child to eat; restricting food etc. - Hughes et al., 2005) and low levels of responsiveness to the child, and was reportedly the most common one found among caregivers in the study (over one-third of African American and Hispanic parents). This style of feeding is said to be associated with 'problems' such as the child not recognising satiety cues when eating energy dense foods (Johnson & Birch, 1993 cited in Hughes et al., 2005). The authors argue that gaining a better understanding of this feeding style and identifying specific feeding behaviours as a target of change may be helpful. They also note that approximately 15% of the sample exhibited "an authoritative feeding style" (Hughes et al., 2005, p. 90) characterized by exercising "appropriate control" (p. 90) over the feeding environment but relying on "child-centered techniques to do so" (p. 90). This child-centered approach to feeding is held up by the authors as ideal, whereby children may lean towards consuming healthy foods prompted by internal rather than external (i.e. parental) control.

What is remarkable here is the evaluative language and tone of approval used to describe the practices of the so-called authoritative parents – they exercise "appropriate" and "considerable control" over their child's eating, but "control" is qualified by this being "child-centered" (Hughes et al., 2005, p. 90). As Burman argues (1994, 2008), in spite of developmental psychology's claims to be scientific (and therefore objective and value-free) it slips into moral prescription and therefore serves to regulate mothering practices. Child-centered parenting is very much set up as the ideal (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1996) and this extends to child feeding practices where parents (read: mothers) are expected to feed on demand in response to the child's 'natural' appetite but, simultaneously, discretely exercise control over the types of food made available in order to provide a 'healthy eating' environment (Locke, 2015). Drawing on Walkerdine and Lucey (1989), Phoenix and Woollett (1991) note how mothers are expected to raise children to be self-regulating by exercising control, but not overtly, and cultivate self-regulation in children "...without appearing to do so" (p. 18). However, as noted earlier, this model of good mothering is constructed around the white (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), married (Arendell, 2000), middle-class mother (Singer, 1993; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989) who may have access to the various forms of necessary capital in order to engage in such idealised mothering practices in ways which mothers who are differently located (for example, through class, income, 'race', sexuality, marital status, dis/ability etc.) do not (Arendell, 2000).

To summarise, a number of themes are discernible in the mainstream developmental psychological literature related to maternal feeding practices and children's diets (and/or body mass indices etc.) which I argue to be problematic. First, it is striking how the social context is generally reduced to the mother and mother-child relations (Burman, 1994, 2008). In addition to assuming that it is only *mothers* who are involved in feeding children, this literature also obscures the wider socio-political, economic and discursive conditions within which maternal foodwork takes place. This, at least implicitly, leads to mother-blaming whereby mothers are held accountable for their perceived shortcomings in the child feeding arena and are therefore the main target of intervention (e.g. see Chan, Magarey & Daniels, 2011).

Second, social class is typically conceptualized as socio-economic status (SES) through the collection and reporting of data regarding maternal education, income and/or occupation (e.g. Gregory et al., 2010; Hernandez et al., 2012; Moroshko & Brennan, 2013; Rodgers et al., 2013). However, as Day et

al., (2014) have argued, socio-economic status alone provides an over-simplified understanding of social class; whilst such information is a useful indicator of access to economic and social capital, it tells us nothing about how class is experienced and 'plays out' in our everyday lives (Day et al., 2014) and how, for example, we might be differently positioned according to class within and through a variety of discourses (e.g. see Wright et al., 2015).

Finally of note is that, in contrast to the bulk of research conducted in Psychology more generally where social class has been neglected (Day et al., 2014; Ostrove & Cole, 2003) low-income mothers *are* commonly included in the sample on the premise that children of low-income mothers are deemed 'high-risk' in terms of 'developing obesity' (Gross et al., 2014). Thus, this area of research represents a prime example of what Woollett and Phoenix (1997, p. 278) refer to as a 'normalised absence/pathological presence'. Within this literature, low-income mothers' food-related practices (especially mothers of colour) are implicitly framed as inadequate and detrimental to the child's future health, and therefore in need of remedy. For example, Hernandez et al., (2012) suggest that focusing on improving parenting strategies to avoid food being used to manipulate child behavior may be particularly beneficial for low-income parents "...where limited support systems may predispose them to placating their child with food" (p. 667). Whilst there is some (albeit limited) acknowledgement here of the circumstances within which foodwork is undertaken (i.e. "limited support systems" p. 667) the target of intervention remains at the level of individual parents (by improving their parenting skills) rather than calls for change at the wider structural level.

It can be argued then that mainstream developmental psychological literature in this domain reflects and reproduces neo-liberal sentiments by pitching what is deemed to be a social problem (i.e. the development of 'unhealthy' eating patterns and 'child obesity') at the level of the individual. However, it is mothers, and particularly poor mothers and mothers of colour who are constructed as especially problematic and become the prime targets of change (Boero, 2007). Framed within scientific discourse, such work purports to be apolitical and value-free yet its individualising effects and the pathologising of gender, ethnicity and class suggests this to be far from the case.

What this points to then is the need for an interrogation of the specific historical, cultural, material and discursive locatedness of maternal foodwork and the formation of children's eating practices. This includes a critical examination of the various meanings attached to food and eating practices according to the particular conditions under which maternal foodwork takes place. As such, I now turn my attention to a review of a selection of critical and discursive work in this area which, I argue, offers a far more sensitive and nuanced understanding of maternal foodwork and serves to address the limitations of the work reviewed above.

### Situating maternal foodwork and child eating practices

Feeding practices and the meanings attached to these are shaped by the resources available to mothers (e.g. financial, time, social support and so forth). However, as Wright et al., (2015) argue, contemporary neo-liberal discourses are negotiated in various ways depending on how parents/mothers are socially located. In other words, discourses may 'speak to us' differently according to our particular class positionings and of course according to other dimensions of difference.

To illustrate, Wright et al., (2015) interviewed middle- and working-class mothers of pre-school children in Australia about their everyday food practices and understandings of obesity and health. They found that the mothers' differing social locations and access to resources shaped their feeding practices and how they articulated and experienced neo-liberal discourses around maternal responsibility and child feeding. For example, although family meals were "...a minefield to be negotiated for most of the mothers" (p. 427) they were a particular source of anxiety for middle-class mothers who, through having the economic means to do so, attempted to accommodate individual child preferences along with considering nutritional needs, health, the household economy and values around mothering and "responsible citizenship" (p. 427). A key consideration was providing foods which were perceived as ensuring current and future health. In contrast, for the working-class mothers meals were less about catering to individual tastes and more about offering what was available and had been prepared. That doesn't mean to say they weren't aware of the middle-class emphasis on individual choice, just that it wasn't a value they shared, considering it to be "unfair" (p. 428) and more important for everyone to eat the same meal. For the working-class mothers, the meanings around foodwork also extended beyond concerns over nutrition and health; eating and cooking together was about strengthening and reinforcing family relationships, sometimes in the aftermath of relationship breakdowns.

In a similar study, Woolhouse (2012) interviewed working- and middle-class mothers and their teenage daughters (in the UK) about food, eating and body management practices. As with the Wright et al. study (2015), there were notable classed differences through the ways in which mothers and daughters talked positioned themselves within dominant discourses around food, health and (in the case of mothers), maternal foodwork. For example, many of the working-class mothers pointed to the multiple constraints they contended with when attempting to achieve what they recognized as 'the ideal' in terms of maternal foodwork:

Asha (Mother): it's difficult because like (.) Paul [husband] will be on (.) he (.) he does alternate shifts (.) like one week he'll be on 'earlies' un one week he'll be on 'lates' (.) so there'll be every other week (.) Marella's home at four, I finish at four so I'm home about ten past four (.) so (.) there'll just be me un Marella so we'll (.) I'll cook (.) un I'll have to cook for like (.) an hour after I'm in (.) un sometimes I'll just cook for Marella un then I'll eat later (.) sometimes it can be really awkward actually 'cos I'll cook about three different things in one night (.) erm (.) un other times it's like (.) you either eat it or you don't eat [laughs] that kind of thing 'cos otherwise it's just too much messing about (.) erm (.) un on those weeks sometimes we do end up with a lot of takeaways don't we? 'cos it's just a bit easier (.) un we shouldn't but (1.0) but we do (.) un weekends we kind of

Marella (Daughter): [well there's just like them little takeaway shops down t'road

Here, Asha points to the complexities of everyday life where family members are in and out of the house at different times of the day and night due to work or other commitments, and the ease of availability of takeaways (as indicated by Marella). The ideal of the whole family sitting down together for an evening meal cooked from scratch by mother (e.g. Backett-Milburn, Wills, Roberts & Lawton, 2006), an ideal built around white, educated, middle-class values (Boero, 2007), is elusive in this account. Asha is fully aware of discourses around 'junk food and health risks' (etc.), notable



when in reference to takeaways she says 'un we shouldn't', but she also points to a host of reasons why takeaways may sometimes be a practical solution in negotiating a complicated family life.

In a similar vein, one of the working-class single mothers in the study (also in full-time paid employment) highlighted how extensive time spent cooking (when time and money are precious resources) is often not worthwhile and, despite cultural assumptions to the contrary (Fürst, 1997), isn't an enjoyable activity for all mothers:

Diane (mother): yeah completely, I think if you've (.) if you do a Sunday dinner un you've made a lot of effort un it's taking you forever un you've had this joint of beef in all day or whatever (.) un they [the kids] don't eat it (.) you do think 'why did I bother?' (.) I could have made beans on toast in five minutes

Diane: then (.) I couldn't (.) I don't know (.) un I do think there's a culture now of (.) it all being about home-cooked stuff (.) you know (.) 'you be the next Jamie Oliver' or (.) 'have you tried this, this un this' (.) this (.) I don't know you feel (.) I say to people 'I hate cooking' un I do hate cooking, I absolutely detest it (.) but (.) it's like saying 'I can't read' you know 'what do you mean you don't like cooking?'

Here, Diane points to the cultural expectation that not only will mothers devote significant time to 'cooking from scratch' for their children but also that they should gain pleasure and fulfilment through this. Moreover, Diane draws attention to maternal foodwork as a performance of social class wherein mothers who aren't inspired by 'celebrity chefs' and, what's more, declare a dislike of cooking are positioned as lacking in cultural capital ("it's like saying 'I can't read'") and treated with suspicion and incredulity.

Constructions of the good/ideal mother, and therefore optimal child development are infused with neo-liberal sentiments around individual responsibility and choice, and class-based assumptions of the availability of resources (Kukla, 2006). This is particularly salient when it comes to advice around infant feeding. In the UK and elsewhere, breastfeeding has been vociferously promoted as the best type of feeding practice (Faircloth, 2010) whilst formula feeding is regarded as the 'risky choice' (Keenan & Stapleton, 2010) and mothers who 'choose' to bottle feed are framed as selfish and irresponsible (Murphy, 1999). Typically in breastfeeding promotional campaigns, the social and economic constraints to breastfeeding plus the multitude of historical and cultural meanings attached to it are overlooked. In a critical examination of the National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign (launched in the United States in 2004), Wolf (2007) draws attention to the ways in which the 'breast is best/formula is risky' message is saturated with cultural and class-based assumptions about the resources available to mothers and the meanings they attach to breast or bottle feeding. For example, Wolf cites the work of Blum (1999) who found that working-class African American women didn't conceive of good mothering as an exclusive mother-baby relationship; rather, the raising of a child was deemed a shared responsibility among older siblings and other family members. As such, bottle feeding was more conducive to this end. The importance of returning to work to support the family was also emphasised, something which, again, didn't allow for breastfeeding. Wolf (2007) points out that, in efforts to encourage black and working-class mothers to breastfeed, public health campaigns offer advice on, and promote the practice of expressing milk

whilst at work. However, as Wolf argues, this advice is based on assumptions that the nature of the work, the employer, and the working environment will all allow for time out to use a breast pump which, for many women in low paid and insecure jobs, is simply not the case. Finally, Blum (1999, cited in Wolf, 2007) also found that for some of the African American women in her research, the legacy of slavery and the enforced wet nursing of white women's children, in addition to racist derogatory meanings attached to black women's bodies meant that breastfeeding didn't signify what Kukla (2006, p. 161) argues is the image normally sold to us of "a joyous natural bonding experience".

In a further illustration of the role of class-based identities and socio-economic circumstances in the formation of food practices, Backett-Milburn et al. (2006, 2010) conducted interviews with working- and middle-class families living in Eastern Scotland about their eating practices in the context of their everyday lives and their understandings of health and healthy behaviours. In the study with working-class families the sample comprised of mostly mothers but also included grandmothers and one father (i.e. the person predominantly responsible for food provision). All the families had at least one young teenager. A common theme in the talk of the participants was that they regarded "good eaters" (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006, p. 628) as teenagers who don't complain about the food prepared for them (as opposed to 'fussy eaters') and who would eat everything offered to them rather than defining a 'good eater' as someone who eats 'healthy' foods. Similarly, given the limited food budgets available to these families, there was greater concern about teenagers wasting food than there was about the exact nutritional content of food consumed. Of particular note was that interviewees accepted the diminishing control they had over their teenagers' diets (due to their increasing independence) and simply saw this as part of their growing up; of much greater concern to the carers were other potential 'risks' such as smoking, alcohol, drugs, sex, and "mixing with a bad crowd" (p. 629). Finally, it was also noted how the carers were far more worried about thinness (and teen preoccupation with thinness) than they were about fatness, often referring disparagingly to thin people as 'stick insects' (p. 630). Similar sentiments were also observed in a study by Woolhouse, Day, Rickett and Milnes (2012) in which working-class teenage girls constructed preoccupations with thinness as associated with 'posh' girls, vanity and superficiality, something from which the participants were keen to distance themselves.

In much contrast, Backett-Milburn et al.'s (2010) study with middle-class families revealed little reference to economic constraints and the types of challenges faced from the immediate environment talked about by the working-class participants. Instead, surveillance of, and influence over their teenagers' diets were prominent aspects of their talk; even those parents who didn't think their children's diets were nutritionally ideal subscribed to the idea that change was possible with appropriate parenting strategies. Portion sizes were controlled and comments were made if parents thought their child was eating too much or too little. Parents also checked on what their children had eaten outside of the home. Much emphasis was placed on educating their children about healthy diets and cultivating their tastes towards more "adult" and "cosmopolitan" foods (p. 1320), something which the authors argued to be part of the production of their imagined future middle-class adult identities and lifestyles (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010). In short, the food practices of these middle-class families were not only afforded through their "distance from necessity" (Atkinson & Deeming, 2015, p. 890) but were also expressions and displays of middle-class identities and class aspirations, signaling 'who they were' and importantly, 'who they were not' (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010).

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have aimed to draw attention to a number of shortcomings in 'mainstream' developmental psychology through an examination of a selection of literature in the area of maternal feeding practices and child eating habits. This, I argued is a domain which represents the crystallisation of a number of these shortcomings, and therefore serves as a particularly illuminating example of the potential implications and negative consequences for the various groups of people who are interpellated into the discourses produced and reproduced in and through this body of work.

For example, the intense scrutiny and surveillance of how mothers feed their children holds them almost exclusively accountable for any perceived inadequacies in the development of their children's dietary habits, weight, shape and size, and ultimately current and future health. This is particularly acute for mothers whose children are deemed 'high risk' in terms of, for example, 'becoming obese' (e.g. see Gross et al., 2014; Hernandez et al., 2012) such as those of mothers of colour, single and poor mothers. When the specific cultural, social, political and economic conditions are occluded from analyses and the ways in which these shape and inform practices, this results in highly individualised and pathologising understandings.

Children, of course are also implicated within the (classed) discourses (re)produced in developmental research on maternal feeding practices. Children of working-class mothers are either positioned as 'victims' of their incompetent, inadequate parents (mothers) or as 'guilty by association' and/or as manipulative and over-demanding. In a discursive study analyzing the online commentary in response to British newspaper articles related to 'child obesity', Whisker and Woolhouse (2015) noted comments such as 'The child doesn't stand a chance just being fed TV dinners and takeaways' thereby positioning them as victims of their implied lazy parents and having no hope for the future. Similarly, but more perniciously, one post read: 'Use fat kids for hunting instead of foxes, wouldn't take long to retrain the hounds. Lets be honest, they are not going to amount to much in adulthood'. Although 'fat kids' are not explicitly labeled here as working-class, by referring to fox hunting (certainly a white, upper-class pursuit), the construction is very much classed and raced where fat children are Other to the hunting class and whose lives have no value.

As this online commentary indicates (Whisker & Woolhouse, 2015), 'child obesity' discourse is deployed as yet another means of reinstating class (and racialised) boundaries. What's more, the somewhat crude linking of maternal feeding practices with the development of 'unhealthy' eating practices and 'child obesity' (as reviewed earlier), however well-intentioned, serves to reproduce classist, sexist and racist discourse by holding mothers, but in particular marginalized and disadvantaged mothers morally accountable for the purported ills of society. Children are located within a vast array of material, economic, cultural and discursive conditions, intersecting in complex ways, all of which shape the development of their food and eating practices. As Boreo (2007) argues, it is these conditions of possibility and constraint that should form the bedrock of our understandings as opposed to casting a scrutinizing gaze upon individual mothers and their children.

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