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## Food culture in rural Northern Ireland : Results from an exploratory ethnographic study undertaken in the 'Decent Food for All (DFfA)' study areas

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# **Food culture in rural Northern Ireland**

**Results from an exploratory ethnographic study  
undertaken in the 'Decent Food for All (DFfA)' study  
areas**

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July 2006



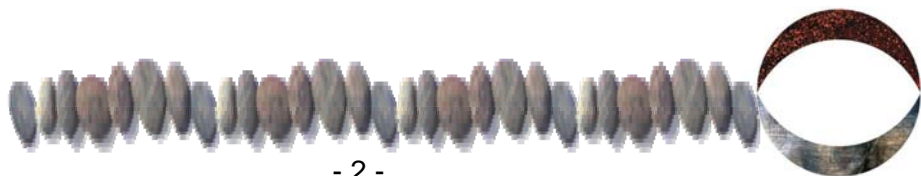
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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

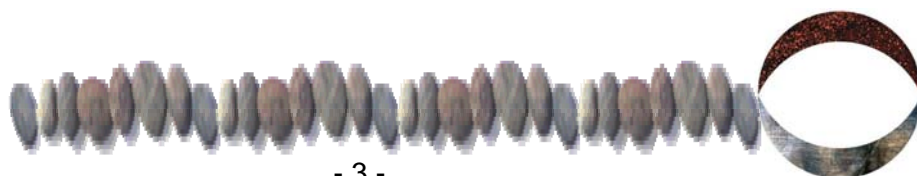
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We would like to thank the participants who agreed to be part of this research.

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland gratefully acknowledges the grant received from the Food Safety Promotion Board that allowed this work to be undertaken.

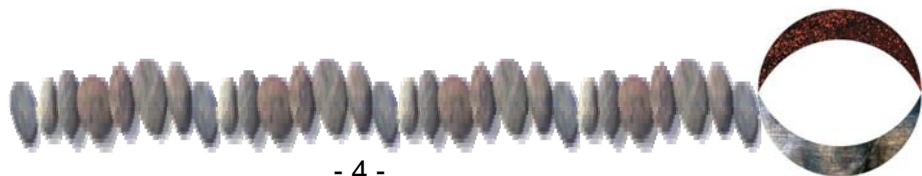


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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

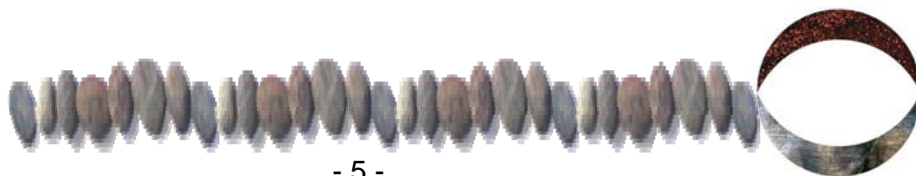
Food and food consumption is profoundly social. The way we think about food, decide what we eat, where to buy it and how to prepare it is linked with a range of social, cultural and economic factors. This ethnographic study looks at how some of these issues were expressed among participants in the 'Decent Food for All' intervention run by the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone (ADHAZ) in Northern Ireland. This study is a component of 'All-Ireland Learning from the Decent Food for All' Intervention' a research and evaluation intervention coordinated by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland and funded by the Food Safety Promotion Board. To date research related to cultural conceptualisations of food and food consumption has not been conducted in Northern Ireland, therefore this study provides new empirical information.

### Methods

Participants included people that attended DFfA workshops and programmes and ADHAZ staff and community food workers involved in the delivery of such programmes and workshops. Three main methods were used to gather both generated and naturally occurring data: four focus groups (involving 19 participants, nearly all female), four participant observation sessions (involving 33 participants, 25 of whom were female), and content analysis of 61 items that appeared in the local media over a three month period. Focus groups were conducted from September to November in 2005.

### Summary of findings

Food may serve as a means of expressing parts of one's identity, including one's value system. This was evident in a number of ways from the research. The high value placed on eating together with the family, and in particular the "Sunday dinner" was highlighted. Clear gender roles were evident in relation to purchasing, preparing and consuming food. For instance women were mainly responsible for buying and preparing food, and were perceived as eating more healthy foods than men. In addition meat was associated with masculinity and was a type of food men favoured as part of a "proper dinner". Food was also associated with status and the type of food served depended on the occasion



and the guests present. In addition, a strong emphasis on local identity and the need for local unity was expressed through the close links between the local paper and local businesses.

The findings of this study suggest that people conceptualise food and food events in terms of a set of binary oppositions, and utilise these when making decisions about their diet or that of their family. These dichotomies include 'good' and 'bad' food, 'local' and 'foreign' food, 'proper' and 'junk' food. The analysis suggests that these dichotomies have a very strong social and cultural basis: there may be strong links between the meanings attached to food and food events on one hand; and gender, family and local identity on the other.

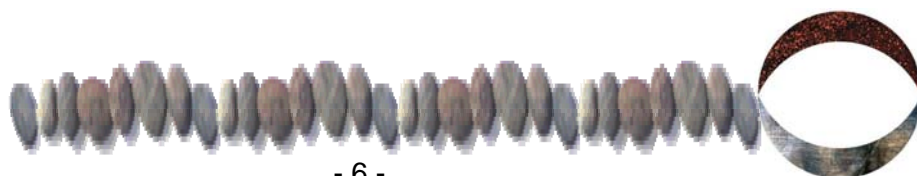
In order to arrive at sound recommendations for public health policy and practice, the findings from this exploratory ethnographic study must be analysed in conjunction with other elements of the 'All-Ireland Learning from the DFfA Intervention' research project. While this ethnographic study focuses on people's attitudes and the meanings they attach to food, other data collections of the research project include comprehensive quantitative surveys of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours; and studies of the availability and price of food. When interpreted in the context of this other data, a more comprehensive and valid understanding of the role of social and cultural issues will emerge.

### **Preliminary implications for community food interventions**

Lessons learnt from research and practice should be used to develop methods and tools to assist those who develop, deliver and evaluate community interventions. While this is an exploratory study, some preliminary implications for community food interventions can be identified:

#### General

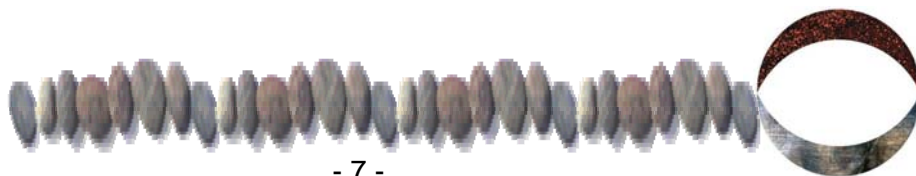
- The ways in which people conceptualise food and food events appear to have a significant effect on their food decisions and behaviours, and those of their families and friends. Health communications that are framed in terms of the dichotomies are likely to be well received.



- The strong social and cultural meanings people bring when they think about food and food events suggests that interventions should take account of these issues.
- People tend to rely on culturally established binary oppositions when making decisions about food or diet. Beliefs and attitudes about gender, kinship and identity, for example, are not easy to change. The success of community food interventions are, to some extent, influenced by societal developments and initiatives that deal with these wider social and cultural issues.
- The close link between locale and consumption highlights the importance of contextualising both food behaviour and community intervention activities in local circumstances.

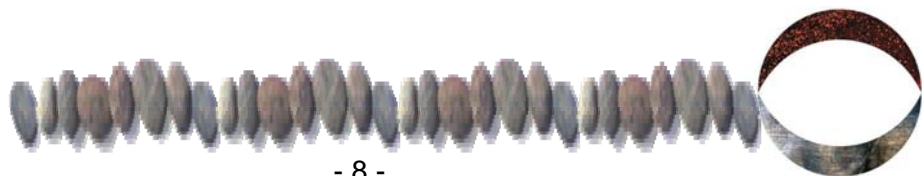
### Specific

- There is a certain amount of confusion in relation to what constitutes a healthy diet. Dietary guidelines need to use more accessible language to describe what changes need to be made to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Vague terms such as 'servings' and 'portions' which are used to demonstrate size recommendations should be replaced by more specific terms. Efforts should also be made to ensure that food labelling and food marketing is accurate, not misleading and easy to understand to enable the consumer to make informed choices about the foods they purchase.
- Food is commonly classified as 'good' and 'bad', and the 'good' food is also healthy food. Strong perceptions that it is difficult to consume a healthy diet and that it requires considerable effort may represent barriers for interventions.
- The general avoidance and dislike of fish which was highlighted by focus group participants is something which should be addressed in future community food interventions as fish can make a significant contribution to the nutrient needs of all consumers, especially growing children and the elderly.
- Women are often the gate keepers to a family's food consumption, and this role may be intimately linked with female personal identify. This is mediated by age, and interventions may need to be age-specific.
- The local media represent a trusted channel of information and they support local business and cover local healthy food events. The close link, observed in this study, between local business and the media highlights the fundamental role that



the local food production and retail sector play in shaping the way people think about food.

- Food safety is an important issue for consumers, particularly in relation to the importance of washing hands when preparing food, not consuming food that is past its sell-by date, knowing the source of meat products and concern about additives and preservatives in food.



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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*“The consumption of food is always embedded in an everyday context that revolves around organisational, social and cultural practices”*

Hansen et al. 2003:117

## 1.1 FOOD POVERTY

Food poverty has been defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Riches 2002). For some this may be the result of simply not being able to afford a balanced diet. Others may live in areas where there is limited availability of healthy affordable food. Others again may not have the knowledge or skills required to ensure a healthy diet. The factors contributing to food poverty may therefore be of a social, cultural, geographical, political or fiscal nature.

Diets become progressively more unbalanced with decreasing socio-economic status. A study from the UK found that people in the lowest income group consume only a third as much fruit as the top income group. They consumed, however, more white bread, sugar, and meat products (e.g. pies, sausages, burgers) (Dowler & Caraher 2003). High consumption rates of red meat among men in manual occupations have been reported elsewhere (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992).

Differences in food consumption among different socio-economic groups has also been observed in Northern Ireland. In 1999, the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland conducted a survey which explored the dietary habits of adults (HPA 2001a) and children (HPA 2001b). The survey found that people working in non-manual professions and from higher income households were more like to comply with dietary guidelines compared with those working in manual professions and lower income households. The survey identified a number of key issues:

- Only 21% of adults and 11% of children eat the recommended five daily portions



- of fruit and vegetables and 11% of adults and 10% of children do not eat fruit or vegetables in an average day
- Both children and adults eat considerably more than the recommended amount of foods which contain sugar and fat
  - Men eat red meat more often than women and those in manual jobs eat red meat more often than those in non-manual jobs
  - Women are more aware of dietary recommendations and also eat healthier than men.

Overall, the survey showed that there are systematic differences in dietary behaviours based on gender, age and socio-economic background.

## 1.2 THE SOCIAL NATURE OF FOOD

Food serves many functions other than meeting nutritional requirements and satisfying hunger, and most of these functions are profoundly social. We eat to celebrate social events, we build social relationships by inviting people to eat with us, and we negotiate status by going to “posh” restaurants or by preparing complicated dishes. We have some, often unspoken, rules about what type of food may be consumed in different circumstances. For example, while it is legitimate and desirable to serve ice lollies and jelly to celebrate someone’s 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, this would be socially awkward and possibly embarrassing when celebrating a 66<sup>th</sup> birthday. Likewise, different food is considered suitable when eating together with old friends on a Friday afternoon compared with having one’s future parents-in-law for Sunday lunch for the first time. The ways in which food is prepared varies considerably across cultures. For example, an orthodox Jewish kitchen will have separate cooking vessels for dairy and other foods and in some Indian settings the social rank of the person preparing food determines who can and cannot eat it. Distinct gender roles often exist in relation to food preparation and in most cultures women take responsibility for preparing food for the household. In addition to rules about how to cook, rules about how to eat are also subject to great variation. In most Western countries it is thought impolite to eat with one’s hands, unless what is being consumed is a sandwich, chicken leg (but not chicken breast) or other exceptions from the rule that appear “obvious” to members of that culture.



What people deem as appropriate to eat also varies across cultures. While in some places people relish eating snakes, dogs or whales (e.g. China, the Philippines and Norway respectively). In other places eating these animals would be unthinkable and, in many cases, deemed immoral. Indeed, food avoidance is often incorporated into religious teachings, such as the vegetarianism of Hinduism and the taboo against eating pork in Judaism and Islam.

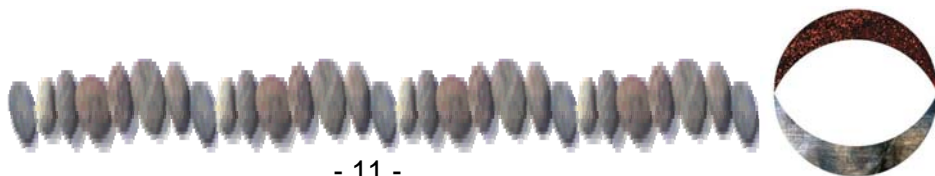
High value is placed on eating or serving high status food. In the UK, as in other parts of the West, food and food preparation is becoming a fashion statement with an ever-increasing number of celebrity chefs teaching us how to cook new and exciting dishes through glossy cookery books, prime time television programmes or even through live shows at stadiums with tens of thousands of people attending. Leading supermarket chains and the food industry use advertising and marketing methods to portray the sophistication of their products which often misleads the consumer into thinking that the glamour and style will reflect on them were they to purchase particular foods.

In summary, food and food consumption is profoundly social. The way we think about food, decide what we eat, where to buy it and how to prepare it is linked with a range of social, cultural and economic factors. This report looks at how some of these issues were expressed among participants in the 'Decent Food for All' intervention run by the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone (ADHAZ) in Northern Ireland.

### **1.3 THE DECENT FOOD FOR ALL INTERVENTION**

The Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone (ADHAZ) established the DFfA intervention to tackle food poverty in the ADHAZ area. Launched in 2003, the intervention aims to address inequalities in access to locally available and affordable safe and healthy food, particularly for those on low incomes. DFfA has three main strands developed to correspond with different aspects of food poverty:

- Tackling information access
- Tackling financial access
- Tackling physical access.



The intervention encourages and supports local communities, families and individuals to achieve a healthy safe diet by providing practical, community-based help and advice on food issues and nutrition. It does this by focusing on community education, healthy lifestyle choice and regeneration of local communities and sustainability. Twelve electoral wards across the ADHAZ area were selected as DFfA intervention areas, and within these areas the target population includes people living on low hold farms, those on low incomes, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other minority groups.

#### **1.4 ALL-ISLAND LEARNING FROM THE DECENT FOOD FOR ALL INTERVENTION**

'All-island learning from the DFfA Intervention' runs in parallel with the DFfA intervention, as a co-operation between the Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) and ADHAZ. Funding for the research is provided by the Food Safety Promotion Board. The overall aim of the research and evaluation element is to assess the effectiveness of DFfA in reducing food poverty within the twelve target wards in ADHAZ.

'All-island learning from the Decent Food for All intervention' is a community based intervention. The intervention operates within twelve electoral wards within the ADHAZ. A matched comparison area was selected in the Newry/Mourne area of Co. Down in order to take into account background changes not directly attributable to DFfA.

The objectives of the research are:

1. To identify aspects of the intervention which increase food knowledge and reduce food poverty in rural and urban communities; in socio-economic disadvantaged areas; and in border areas;
2. To identify aspects of the intervention which can be applied across Northern Ireland and the island;
3. To identify aspects of the intervention which can be used to support all-island communication and marketing campaigns; and
4. To asses the overall effect of the DFfA Intervention in the programmme area.



The main components of the research and evaluation plan are:

- Pre-test and post-test community surveys
- Pre-test and post-test mapping of physical and financial access to healthy food
- Ethnographic study of food and food consumption

## **1.5 RATIONALE FOR CONDUCTING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

People's attitude towards health and the relationship between attitudes and behaviour has been seen as an interesting subject of research only during the past 15 years or so. In the disciplines of Health Promotion and Public Health the concept and study of "lay beliefs" and "lay concepts of health" is now central to research and interventions. "Lay" beliefs can be defined as "commonsense understandings and personal experience, imbued with professional rationalisations" (Blaxter 2004: 46).

Identifying the beliefs and attitudes which influence decisions and behaviours carries certain methodological challenges and many social scientists are sceptical about any study of lay attitudes that does not fully take into account the socio-cultural environment of these beliefs and attitudes. To address such concerns, better utilisation of qualitative methods in policy related research has been suggested; as such frameworks largely avoid the isolation of attitudes from their social environments (Hansen et al. 2003).

The policy making cycle commonly consists of phases of formulation, implementation and appraisal (Lewis, 2003). Qualitative research and particularly ethnographic studies are increasingly applied to the appraisal phase of public policy. These research methods have helped in many instances to "critically review the intended or unintended negative impacts of policy on the lives and well-being of people targeted by social policy" (Castro 2002: xiii). There is, however, a need for incorporating this type of insight into the formulation phase of policy making. There are developments in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with regard to policy formation around food consumption, particularly in the fields of food poverty and obesity. In the Republic of Ireland, a recent review of policy oriented towards food poverty showed that differences in diet and dietary behaviour are related to social status, with those in the highest socio-economic groups enjoying the best diet, and those most disadvantaged eating less well but spending a



higher proportion of their income on food and finding it harder to access healthy food (Friel & Conlon 2004). A similar review is underway in Northern Ireland with the support of the Food Safety Promotion Board.

Relatively few studies have focused on lay understandings of food and food consumption in Western societies. Lupton (2005) argues that the concerns of lay people in relation to food and food consumption varies between cultures and countries and suggests there is a need for studies to adopt a wider focus in terms of populations and issues. An ethnographic study of food was therefore designed to explore aspects of the local food culture in the DFfA target areas in order to maximise the policy lessons deriving from the All-Ireland Learning from the 'Decent Food for All' Intervention. Given the limited existing research on which to base the study, and keeping Lupton's concern of 'ethnocentrism' in previous research in mind, it was designed to be explorative and focus on a relatively limited number of factors as identified by study participants. To date research related to cultural conceptualisations of food and food consumption has not been conducted in Northern Ireland, therefore this study provides new empirical information.

Due to Northern Ireland's position within the UK and the close historical, political and cultural links to Britain, it is expected that some of the findings are similar to existing British studies. In line with the approach of the overall research intervention to develop a set of research and evaluation tools, the explorative ethnographic study provides a basis from which larger and longitudinal studies can develop. Given the relative cultural homogeneity on the island of Ireland, the results will largely be transferable across the island and to rural settings. This report includes the main empirical findings from the explorative ethnographic study. These will be incorporated into the analysis of the overall DFfA evaluation report where a more advanced analysis will take place.

## **1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

This introductory chapter has given an overview of the DFfA intervention and the rationale behind the ethnographic study. Given the lack of studies of this nature in Northern Ireland, Chapter 2 contains a review of existing literature from other Western



societies presented in light of some well established themes in the sociology of food. Chapter 3 describes the research methods applied in this study. Chapters 4 & 5 present the research findings: Chapter 4 summarises the findings from focus groups and participant observations, and Chapter 5 presents an analysis of issues around food and food consumption that featured in the local media during the research period. Finally, in Chapter 6 some of the key findings are discussed in light of existing literature and their potential policy implications explored.



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## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF FOOD CULTURE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

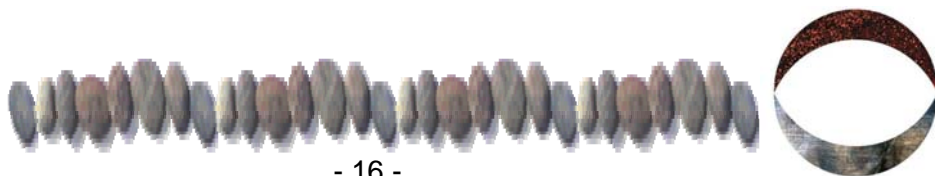
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Culture in the social sciences is understood to be what is learned, shared and transmitted among a group and across generations. Culinary culture has been described as “the ensemble of attitudes and tastes that people bring to cooking and eating” (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992: 20). The different cultural and social dimensions of food and food consumption have been studied from different perspectives within the social sciences. Døving (1999) summarises some of these ways as follows: Food is good to think with when making sense of a social landscape; food consumptions can be seen as something that structures our life; food consumption displays one’s status in the family and in society; food may be a marker of ethnicity and of morality both ethnically, personally, and socially. Food beliefs have been found to be “intensely linked to factors such as place of residence, gender, ethnicity and age” (Lupton 2005: 450). This chapter will introduce research that explores these issues theoretically and empirically.

### 2.1 NATURE AND CULTURE

A distinction between “nature” and “culture” as a way of understanding the social nature of food was emphasised first by the structuralist tradition in the social sciences. Food consumption was seen as a means of expressing the dominance of man over nature. According to Levi-Strauss (1983) the distinction between raw and cooked should be understood as a parallel to the distinction between nature and culture, and by hunting and cooking meat humans expressed their dominance over nature. Food preparation and consumption could be seen as a means of making sense of the social landscape, and as Levi-Strauss argues, it displays the very structure of human thought.

Although Levi-Strauss’ ambition of detecting universal human thought processes through food cognition was largely abandoned, the distinction between nature and culture, and the raw and the cooked has remained central to sociological thinking about food. Reliance on such binary oppositions inherent in cultural representations is a common

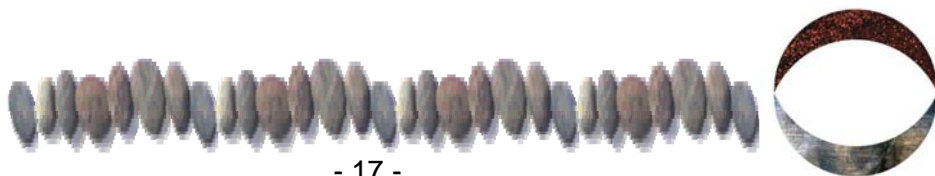


way in which lay people make decisions about what food related information to trust (Lupton 2005). For example, distinctions between low vs. high fat food; natural vs. artificial; or wholesome vs. junk food provide easy decision making guidance (ibid). In particular, many studies have found that people avoid food that is “raw”, as it is perceived as “uncultured”. More recent work has focused on the changing relationship between animals and humans (particularly in Western cultures) and how the traditional hierarchical relationship between humans and animals is now challenged. To cope with the unease of continuing to eat animals, the ways that food is presented to the consumer increasingly hides the production process and presents “anonymous” meat through the supermarket shelves, which does not resemble the animal (Allen & Baines 2002).

## **2.2 FOOD AND SOCIAL MORALITY**

Social scientists following in Levi-Strauss’ tradition, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Mary Douglas, focus more on how food consumption displays social structure. Focusing on the cultural patterns of food consumption and taste, Douglas (1978: 59 in (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992) seeks to explore “the cultural controls on perception” which means that by being born into a culture, individuals are born into a set of preferences, likes and dislikes. Each social system, or culture, will have a rank system for foods that are considered high or low status or may or may not be eaten. Such food categories encode social events and express hierarchies, inclusion/exclusion from a group, boundaries and transactions and the role of food in symbolic boundary maintenance (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992). Food consumption is thus connected with the social order and with morality; that is with what is right and wrong. This may, in part, be exacerbated by cultural images of the body beautiful or health messages about diet and nutrition, and can also be linked in with other cultural perceptions such as the threat fat represents to the Australian image of a lean, tanned body (Lupton, 2005).

The link between food consumption and value systems is also the focus in some more recent studies. Allen and Baines (2002: 118-119) explain how people seek consistency between their value system and the values that their food symbolises: “Consumers form attitudes to products by evaluating the human values symbolised by a product against the values that they (themselves) endorse”. For example, through their research they



found that “people who identified themselves as heavy eaters of meat were stronger in authoritarianism and preferred hierarchically organised social structures more than those who ate little meat” (p.120).

## 2.3 CLASS

Within the sociology of food, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of connections between class structure in society, class identity and consumption as a means of displaying, perpetuating or acquiring identity or status has been particularly influential (Bourdieu, 1995). Bourdieu seeks to explain how differences in taste and food preferences are shaped by our social standing and he argues that food is used to distinguish between classes. In France, like many other Western countries, clear differences in dietary patterns exist across social classes with those in lower social classes consuming more food high in sugar, fat and salt.. This is based, Bordieu argues, on differences in taste which have developed over time in conjunction with needs and available resources. Thus, the taste of sweet, filling food, high in fat among the poor came about as a taste of necessity, because people traditionally needed energy from cheap sources. As children are socialised into a social setting, they acquire the taste of that setting. Over time, this socially based taste becomes part of what he calls ‘Habitus’, which is the way we act, think, feel and display preferences without thinking which unconsciously impacts on our behaviour. For example, we associate certain food or consumption patterns, such as caviar and white table cloths with the values of certain classes and others, such as brown sauce, with those of different classes.

Over the last decades, some social theorists have suggested that there have been profound breakdowns in the traditional class systems in Western societies and, as a consequence, erosion of the social structuring of consumption. Arguing against such ideas (attributed to thinkers such as Giddens, Beck and Featherstone), Tivadar and Luthar (2005: 215, secondary references omitted) argue that “social class remains a major correlate of food practice in Western societies. It influences the proportion of the household budget spent on food, food tastes, the use of convenience food, the frequency of eating out and the types of restaurants preferred”. This view gains support



from studies of food poverty, demonstrating associations between socio-economic class and food consumption (Friel, Conlon 2004).

Insisting on the importance of a link between taste and class does not mean however, that taste cannot change over time. Such change may, in part, be due to individuals seeking to acquire tastes other than those they grew up with, as part of a strategy maybe to increase their social standing. This may, however, lead to counter-changes by the “higher “ classes as indicated by Wright and colleagues: “ingredients such as balsamic vinegar or sun dried tomatoes now move with such dazzling speed from expensive restaurant to crisp flavourings that it is only by demonstrating more authentic ways of consuming that superiority can be maintained” (Wright, Nancarrow & Kwok, Pamela 2001: 354).

As previously referred to, food poverty research highlights clear difference in dietary patterns across different socio-economic groups. This may be reflected in class based differences in taste. The association of “health” with the middle class culture dates back to the 1920s, and “food related meanings may play an important role in reinforcing class differences in food consumption and related health outcomes” (Barker, Tandy & Stookey 1999: 316).

## **2.4 THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE PREPARATION AND CONSUMPTION OF FOOD**

Cooking is closely associated with femininity and female identity in most cultures. Women are commonly socialised into performing “kitchen tasks” and managing the family’s food consumption (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002). Consequently, much of the sociological literature on food focuses on women and their role in the domestic sphere. Kneafsey and Cox (2002) explored links between the roles of women and ethnic identity in an Irish community in Coventry. A strong need to maintain cultural identity was observed and the authors illustrated how food consumption and dietary practices helped in this regard. Central to this was the sharing and cooking of food, which was understood as “activities that constitute motherhood and womanhood”.

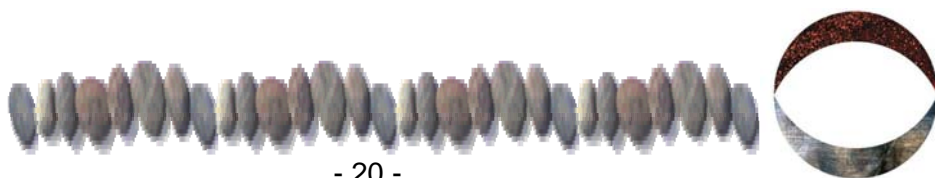
The link between women’s role “in the kitchen” and the social relation within and



between families has been identified in many studies. According to Gustafsson and Sidenwall (2002), older women in Sweden see providing food as an expression of friendship or giving a gift and they attach high value on family meals. Other studies have reported that within families, there is a tendency for differences in consumption between men and women, women frequently giving what is considered to be the best food to men and children (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992). On the other hand, by preparing the family meal, setting the table and sharing the food with their family women also report that they contribute to their own wellbeing and happiness (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002). Among single women, however, such motivating factors for food preparation are not as evident and food and food preparation is not necessarily considered an enjoyable or rewarding task. In the Swedish study, some single women discussed eating when separated from its social context simply as the intake of fuel (ibid). The traditional gender role associated with food consumption and other domestic chores is, of course, a central theme to feminist scholarship, much of which challenges these roles and seek to emancipate women to appreciate the value of their many other contributions to society.

There seems to be differences between men and women with regard to food preferences and consumption. Women and older adults are significantly more likely to eat healthier foods with men in many western cultures (Rappoport et al. 1993). The type of food consumed and understood to be appropriate for consumption by men and women has cultural and moral overtones (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992). For example, based on a study of the symbolic meaning of meat, Allen and Baines (2002: 119) state that “red and white meat has come to symbolise masculinity, high socioeconomic status, strength, and human domination over nature, whereas fruits and vegetables are associated with femininity, low socioeconomic status, weakness, and less dominant relations to animals”. Similarly, in an American study, high fat diets were considered more masculine than low fat diets (Barker, Tandy & Stookey 1999).

Other studies have also found that the amount of food people eat is related to gender ideology. Barker and colleagues (1999) refer to an American study which showed that while the quantity of food consumed communicated femininity (women who eat less were considered more feminine) the amount men ate did not reflect on masculinity. The concern with being slim and the associations between certain body images and what is



considered attractive seem to have much more impact on women than on men (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992). Likewise, and perhaps as a consequence of this, the rapid increase in eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa has been most notable among women (ibid).

Worries over amount and type of food consumed emerge in many studies and draws attention to other moral dimensions of food. Food is often classified into categories of 'good' and 'bad', and considerable fear or guilt is often associated with the consumption of 'bad' food. Gustafsson and Sidenwall's (2002) study of older women in Sweden identified how the participants conceptualised issues around food and health in a context where eating habits are increasingly seen as a moral issue and where there are 'good' and 'bad' foods and consumption patterns. The women, aged between 65 and 88 years, reported that health messages impacted on the way they thought about food. Fear of fatness and gaining weight was prominent as was concerns with losing weight. Even the oldest participant, aged 88, reported feeling guilty about using whole milk and butter in her diet because "one ought to lose weight". For many of the women, the health messages had led to fear and frustration. Some respondents believed, however, that the health messages were exaggerated and they chose to continue using full fat foods such as butter and cream, their philosophy being that "if you feel healthy, you are eating well".

The ways in which women approach their role in relation to food preparation and consumption may be mediated by age. In a study of the experiences and perceptions of people living in food deserts, Whelan and colleagues (Whelan et al. 2002) found differences in how women perceive their economic access to food was based on where in the life cycle the respondents were. Women with younger children were primarily concerned with saving money. They would buy cheap food and use a variety of different food outlets and shops. Women with older school-aged children, while still concerned with cost, were also concerned with quality, healthy eating and convenience. They considered that cheaper shops did not provide the quality they wanted. The elderly women were primarily concerned with convenience when shopping, such as being able to access all they needed in the same shop, and that the food they bought was easy to cook and eat.



As mentioned, older people are more likely to have healthier diets than younger people (Rappoport et al. 1993). This may be associated with older people keeping the eating and food preparation patterns of their childhood or early life (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002) which may have been healthier in terms of the sugar, fat and salt content. In general, older people have more positive views about fat than younger people who hold more negative views of people on a high fat diet (Barker et al, 1999). Studies have shown that for older people, perceptions of “healthy eating” is associated with a “proper meal”, including meat or fish and vegetables, sometimes with an emphasis on the food being “fresh” and “natural”. Interestingly, in one study it was found that “healthy eating also involves a pattern of regular eating events, whereas proper meals include a social spirit of community” (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002: 165), again reflecting the importance placed on the social nature of eating.

## **2.5 PERCEPTIONS OF RISK FROM FOOD**

The concept of risk has received increasing attention in the social sciences over the last two decades and in particular in the work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Beck (1992: 21) defines risk as “a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself”. He argues that since the advent of the industrial society and the modernisation that followed, the risks we face as members of society have changed. Whereas in traditional societies risk usually had natural causes, today risk is increasingly man-made. Beck describes risk society as one predominantly concerned with manufactured risks. Man-made disasters such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident has, according to Giddens (1990) reduced the public trust in government, industry and experts, and also results in the breakdown of traditional social organisation. The distribution of risk in society is uneven: “In some of their dimensions these (distributions) follow the inequalities of class and strata positions, but they bring fundamentally different distribution logics into play” (Beck 1992: 23). Beck argues that unlike many other inequalities, risk inequality originates mainly from knowledge and not from wealth. Wealth can, however, enable people to avoid risk.

There has been increasing unease about the safety of food and food production across Western Europe over the last few decades (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992). Risk



perception has also been found to vary across culture. A study which explored such differences (Lupton (2005: 450)) explains that “the American group associated food most with health and the risks related to food, and least with pleasure, while the French and Belgians (sic) were the most pleasure-oriented and the least health-oriented, with the Japanese in between”. A recent review of the literature on risk perception and food shows that food hazards are associated with what is manmade. Artificial aspects of food seen as “unnatural” are perceived as more hazardous than what is understood as “natural” (Hansen et al. 2003). GM food is frequently perceived as “meddling” with nature, causing anxiety. The BSE crisis was provided as another example of how meddling with nature is perceived as having long term social and health consequences (ibid).

The perceptions of risk among the general public are sometimes described by experts as excessive or irrational (Hansen et al. 2003). The discrepancy between the views of experts and what is commonly called “lay” beliefs in risk perception is often attributed to “knowledge deficit” on behalf of lay people. Such a description is based on the view that experts are “right” and lay people are “wrong” in the assessment of risk due to ignorance. Hansen et al. (2003) argue that rather than seeing lay risk assessment as an inferior or ill informed version of the expert assessment, it should be seen as a qualitatively different complex calculation which is sensitive to, and expressive of, personal value systems. “Lay” people may have very different concerns and priorities from those of expert and take into account much broader issues when assessing risk. For example, worries about food “are often combined with (and perhaps supported by) rather general reservations about contemporary social trends... for example, the trend towards large scale, profit driven farms... Risk awareness is not an abstract form of knowledge but an integral part of embodied practices and emotional engagement with the world”.

When faced with risk, people must choose what information to trust, and what food source to trust. For example, the establishment of alternative channels of food distribution such as buying directly from farmers or butchers has become more common as a way for the consumer to be assured of the quality of their food. This represents a form of relational trust based on a personal, reciprocal relationship between the farmer



or butcher and the consumer. Consumer trust is also context dependent. It has been found that, at the individual level, changes in life such as becoming a parent, trigger more concern with food safety. Structural trust, such as relying on government intervention or legislation has also been found to be dominant where food safety is concerned (Hansen et al. 2003)

## **2.6 SUMMARY: FOOD, CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY**

All the literature referred to above has a common concern with the links between food, food consumption and identity. Tivadar and Luthar (2005) argue that food consumption is part of the expression of a moral order and a specific way of “being in the world” which is related to taste in politics, ethics and aesthetics. Food consumption is thus part and parcel of an expression of identity, and can relate to class, gender, age or other identities and can be used in negotiation over identity. Identity may also be seen as linked with people’s value base, and that the personal identity that is the basis of food choice include moral, religious and political dimensions (Lindeman & Stark 1999).

Social identification through food consumption may be positive and negative. For example, Barker et al (1999) refer to an American study where consumers of low-fat diets were described as “picky” and “self-centred” as well as “attractive” and “physically fit”. Another study found that students distinguish between “good” and “bad” food, and this reflects on the way people who consume such food, are evaluated. Those eating “good” food were evaluated more positively than those eating “bad” food. Such evaluation of food behaviour was also found by Lupton (2005), who reported that the concept of “trying”, that is attempting to consume mostly “good” food, became an important way of coping with this morally based distinction.

In a variety of ways, food may serve as a means for expressing identity and morality at individual or group level, as summed up by Barker et al (1999: 310):

*“Food and food events are invested with many meanings and values that communicate, reflect, and reaffirm social identity, roles and prestige [...] Food and food events can, for example, convey group membership, masculinity/femininity,*



*ethnicity or socio-economic class. Consumption of food literally and figuratively allows people to internalize group values, and to assert group membership to themselves and others”*



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### 3. METHODS

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'All-Ireland Learning from the DFfA Intervention' is a comprehensive research project which runs in parallel with the DFfA intervention, as a co-operation between the Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) and ADHAZ. An exploratory ethnographic study was designed mainly to contribute to Key Outcome 3.1 of the overall DFfA Intervention<sup>1</sup> by providing an in-depth understanding of the culture of food and its consumption in order to help us to understand why people choose to eat what they eat.

Ethnographic research employs a range of research methods, most of which are qualitative and participatory. In order to meet the aims of the study, three main methods were selected for data collection of both generated and naturally occurring data. These were:

- Focus group discussions
- Participant observation
- Content analysis of local media.

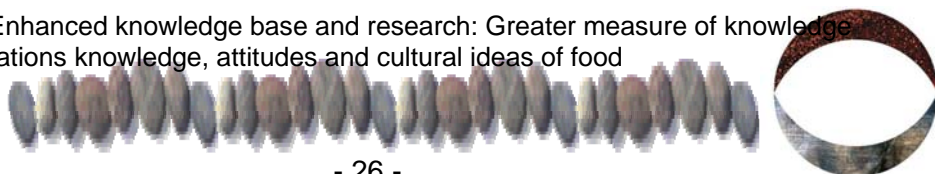
#### 3.1 FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups bring together a group of people with the explicit purpose of discussing a topic or phenomenon and are a more common method of generating qualitative data. Focus groups have the advantage of creating safe peer environments, where participants can respond to and elaborate on each other's views. It is an effective way of accessing a diversity of responses (Kitzinger, 1994), which means they are useful tools to explore collective phenomena.

The approach taken to focus groups recognises group interviews as purposeful conversations (Collins, 1998): The interview is understood as a process in which both interviewer and interviewees actively participate and negotiate meanings through questioning, narrating and discussing defined topics. There is, however, a possibility of peer pressure and some people are unwilling to share personal issues with a group

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<sup>1</sup> Outcome 3.1 Enhanced knowledge base and research: Greater measure of knowledge regarding populations knowledge, attitudes and cultural ideas of food



(ibid). However, the topics for discussion were not of a sensitive nature and concentrated on what people thought of different foods and food practices.

A total of four focus groups were conducted and consisted of:

- Participants and leaders on 'Cook It' - a cooking course for young mothers (n=5 all female)
- Participants in the DFfA food co-op (n=2 all female)
- Participants in a 'Balance of Good Health' information session delivered to a local support group (n=6, all female)
- ADHAZ staff (n=6, 5 females and 1 male)

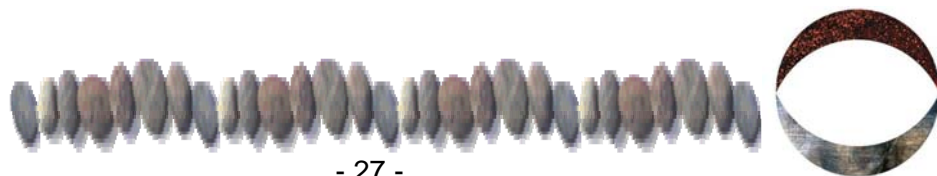
Topic guides and vignettes were prepared in advance of the focus groups to trigger thoughts and discussion. The focus groups were recorded through detailed notes which were then subject to content analysis (Burnard, 1991; Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000).

### **3.2 RECRUITMENT**

Focus groups were conducted from September to November in 2005. Participants included people that attended DFfA workshops and programmes and ADHAZ staff and community food workers involved in the delivery of such programmes and workshops. All but one participant was female, and lived in the ADHAZ area. No systematic information on the participant's socio-economic background was collected. As DFfA programmes target communities living in social and economic deprivation, the majority of the participants were from such areas.

### **3.3 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS**

Participant observation is a way of gathering naturally occurring data (Lewis, 2003), and is the most common method applied in ethnographic studies. The method involves the researcher's participation in activities together with the study population, recording interaction, conversation and events. This provides an opportunity to access people's thoughts and actions in real life situations as opposed to how they reflect upon their actions through interviews. It also encourages closeness and intimacy between



researchers and respondents through sharing experiences and activities, and is an efficient method of exploring beliefs and meanings people attach to selected topics (Brewer 2003). To maximise the utility of the data, observations for the most part were conducted with the same people that participated in the focus groups. In these cases the observations were conducted before the focus groups. The role of the researcher was made clear prior to the observations and all groups were asked for their agreement well in advance.

Participant observations were undertaken in four DFfA programmes which took place between September and November in 2005. Two observations were conducted on a 'Cook It' cooking course which focuses on how to prepare healthy on a budget. One of these observations was targeted at young mothers (n=6, all females) and the other observation involved women from a local housing estate (n=5, all females). Two further observations were conducted at 'Balance of Good Health' information sessions. One of these observations included members of a support group for people who had suffered from stroke (n=16, 8 females, 8 males) and the other observation included a local support group (n=6, all females)

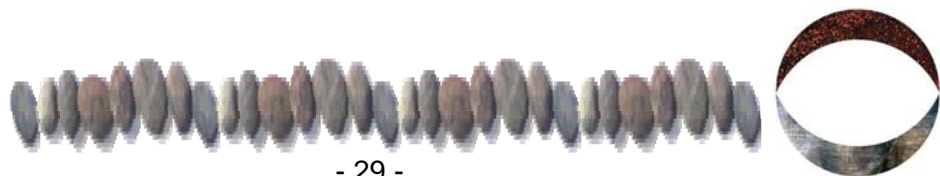
These activities were selected as they provided a particularly good forum for finding out about how participants think about food and food preparations. The 'Cook It' cooking course consisted of two parts. Firstly, the course leader provided basic information about the 'Balance of Good Health Model' and portion sizes. This took the form of a conversation between everyone present. The second part consisted of the preparation of a meal involving all participants. Through the 'Balance of Good Health' workshop the course leader explained the framework, and invited participants to engage in conversations and in the categorisation of food. It also informed people, in an entertaining way, of the sugar content of common food items. At the end, the course leader demonstrated how to make a fruit smoothie and invited participants to taste it.

The observations provided rich and in-depth data on how participants conceptualise food and food preparation. After each observation, detailed notes were written up and these were subject to analysis in conjunction with the data from the focus groups.



### 3.4 CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LOCAL MEDIA

To supplement the focus group and observational data, analysis of the local media was also conducted. Documentary analysis provides another means of recording naturally occurring data. In particular, it may reflect public, as opposed to private, views on events or phenomena (Lewis 2003). One local paper, The Dungannon News and Tyrone Courier (referred to locally only as the Tyrone Courier) was selected by the ADHAZ team as being representative of the local press, and as one which is read by members of the community. Like all the local papers, the Tyrone Courier is published weekly, and contains local news a list of events and advertisements from local retailers. All items related to the production, retailing, preparation and consumption of food was featured in the paper over a two month period from August to October 2005 were identified and analysed. In addition, all advertisements of food were recorded and subject to content analysis, and a brief quantification of selected items was conducted.



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## 4. FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

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This chapter outlines the findings from the focus group and observations. It is presented under headings that emerged through data analysis.

### 4.1 LIKES AND DISLIKES

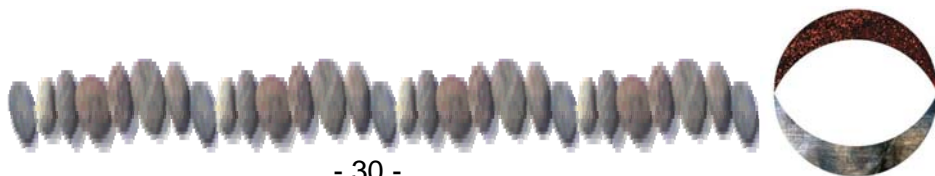
#### Favourite Food

The focus groups usually began by the researcher asking people to identify their favourite food, whether or not they regarded it as healthy. A typical list included:

- Chicken
- Crisps
- Bread
- Chocolate
- Spaghetti Bolognese
- Roast beef
- Sauces
- Pasta
- Roast chicken dinner
- Sunday lunch

The vast majority of the favourite food was different types of savoury food which is usually served warm: “dinners”. The women explained this by pointing out that this is the type of food that “tastes good” and that people would “crave”. The association between “food” and “dinner” might be because this is traditionally the most substantive meal of the day and also due to the association with spending time with the family.

The respondents (who were all but one female) were asked what they believed men would have put down on the list of favourite foods had they been asked. Common answers were “big dinners”, steak, potatoes, chips and other fried food and “not sweets”. One woman said she thought it would be more or less like their own list, but in general



the opinion was that men would go for “heavier” food. This was seen as possibly linked to men having heavier jobs in which they expended a lot of energy. The higher daily calorie requirement of men was also mentioned. One woman recalled a time when she had made vegetable soup for her husband in an effort to introduce healthier food to their diet. After finishing his soup her husband had said: “so, where is my dinner?” This was seen as reflecting how important it is for men to eat meat. Several others made similar comments about how fathers or husbands really “needed” meat in order to have “a proper dinner”. It was also agreed that men were probably less adventurous when it came to tasting vegetables and therefore ate less of a variety of them compared with women.

Younger people were described as preferring “different” food for “their dinner”. They would eat more “McDonalds and take-aways” compared with older people who would eat “plainer stuff, such as meat and potatoes”. It was commented that older people would not know what to do with pasta or rice and would not consider a meal without potatoes a “proper dinner”. Negative comments were made about young people’s eating habits, such as relying on vending machines in schools and leisure centres. It was seen as ironic that such machines were placed in leisure centres as young people would negate the positive effects of exercise by eating “rubbish”.

### **Food that is avoided**

A question about the kind of food participants would not eat or which they strongly disliked triggered lively conversations in all groups. Interestingly, most of the foods mentioned were savoury “dinner” type foods. A typical list contained items such as:

- Fish
- Liver
- Pork
- Herring
- Sardines
- Tomatoes
- Tongue
- Haggis
- Cheesecake



- Caviar
- Peanuts

Many of the women would not eat fish. Seafood, shellfish and calamari were also frequently mentioned. Fish with bones in or fish “when you see the whole thing, the eyes and all” were mentioned in particular. One woman found the idea of caviar disgusting and added “so, no caviar lifestyle for me!”

Raw food was in general thought of as “disgusting” or inedible. When prompted about whether they would taste foods like sushi or oysters, many were unsure what it was or how it was meant to be eaten, and most were sceptical. Most of the women stated that they strongly disliked rare steak and that they wanted their meat well cooked, explaining that when ordering food they would always ask for it to be well done: “It is the way we have been brought up”. The thought of eating blood was considered especially off-putting and food containing blood was in general avoided with the exception of one of the oldest participants who said she was fond of blood pudding. Rare meat or food containing blood was seen as particularly disgusting if it was cold or chewy.

During discussions about food avoidance several women mentioned that they had tasted food they considered unusual and that others may avoid. One woman mentioned that she had tasted mussels that were cooked in their shells and that she had quite liked it. In another focus group one woman said that she had tried deer’s heart and venison while on holiday and another woman said that she had eaten seafood paella.

In the focus group consisting of ADHAZ staff, some food items that are considered unhealthy by health professionals were mentioned as food they avoided such as:

- TV dinners
- Convenience/processed food
- Greasy food
- Indian take away
- Mayo or salad cream

#### **4.2 FOOD, SOCIAL OCCASIONS AND STATUS**



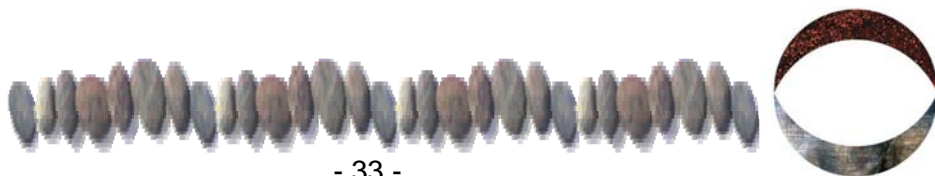
### **Importance of family meals**

High value was attached to the sharing of food through eating together. In particular, the importance of eating together with the family was emphasised, and in most households it was the norm, or at least the ambition, that the family would eat their evening meal together. Sitting down around the table was seen as "family time" and something that should be given priority. One of the women shared a story about a nursery where the children were allowed to get their snacks whenever they felt like it as opposed to having a set time where they all had their food together. The group agreed that this was not good; eating together has great value and should be taught from an early age.

When discussing their favourite food, participants frequently mentioned the "Sunday dinner". It was clear, however, that it was not simply the food itself that was the attraction, but the social dimension that made this such an important event. Traditionally, Sunday lunch consists of roast meat and vegetables and it is customary that the family or extended family gather for the occasion. Most of the participants regularly have Sunday lunch with the family. For some families the time of day of the meal varied, depending on other activities such as sport events etc.

One woman explained that because only she and her daughter were living in the home, she did not really feel like cooking a full Sunday roast for only the two of them. She said she sometimes felt bad about this, and that she did miss the family gathering. Her daughter would sometimes ask for a "proper dinner". The woman expressed some guilt over this saying that she "did not feel that you properly fed a child unless you serve a proper dinner". One of the young participants, on the other hand reported that she does prepare this meal for only herself and her partner. For the other women Sunday lunch was an occasion for their extended family. The younger participants usually went to their parents home (usually stating that they were going to "their Mother's") for Sunday lunch. Among the middle aged, particularly those with grown up children, it was more common to have Sunday lunch in their own home, being the hostess for their children with partners and their own or their husband's parents.

The women reflected that, at Sunday dinner, "everyone is there", and "you have your full



three course meal". Some of the women who still went "home" for the Sunday meal described this as "a highlight of the week". The women also reminisced about Sunday dinners from their childhood and talked about the anticipation during preparation time, and the way they occasionally nibbled on the food before the meal. The importance attached to Sunday dinner appeared to be of most significance to the older participants. The women explained this by the age gap reporting that family ties got more important as they matured.

**Food and status: Friends vs. Clinton**

The participants in the focus groups were asked what they would serve if (i) they were having a few of their close friends around for a meal on a Friday night, and what they would serve if (ii) Bill Clinton was coming for a meal. Nearly all the women said they would serve different types of food at the two occasions. In one focus group the following foods were identified:

<b>Friends</b>	<b>Clinton</b>
Chinese	Steak dinner
Chinese	Steak dinner
Chinese	Steak dinner
Chicken stir fry and nibbles	Salmon, potatoes, vegetables
Chinese, pizza, crisps, alcohol	Irish stew
Steak, chips, mushrooms, desert	The same: Steak, chips, mushrooms, desert

Chinese take-away food was described as "handy", "nice", and "everyone likes it". It was seen as a "social" food that would be suitable to eat together with friends. One woman said that one advantage of take-away food was that it could be delivered. She added, with a laugh, that if she had had a few drinks it would much more convenient and safe to have food delivered to the door.

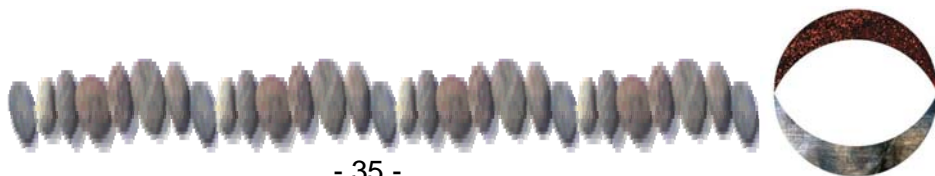
For the oldest participants, who were in their late 50s and 60s, serving homemade food to visitors was the norm. Several of them agreed that when they had visitors they would cook "everything, including dessert". Some differences emerged between women in professional jobs and others. Those in the former category were more likely to state that



they enjoyed cooking and that they considered it important to serve their guests something they had prepared themselves. One group identified the age gap between them as an explanation of why the younger would serve something they bought while older people felt it should be something they prepared themselves. However, another group thought that occupation might account for the difference between those who thought it was important to serve homemade food and those who preferred serving ready-made food.

The foods the women said they would serve Bill Clinton were all associated with "something special", "extra good" and with "being rich", indicating that it was conceptualised as high status food. Clinton was described as influential, that people would be "in awe of him" and that as "he is very rich and high up" he would be accustomed to high standards. However hypothetical, it was important to the women to serve Clinton food that was appropriate for the "high standard that he is used to", "something elaborate, such as pheasant!" The women wanted to be able to "show off", and "to impress" their guest. Some of the women said that they would serve some "traditional Irish food for the American" so that he could experience that side of Irish culture.

Some of the groups were asked whether they would serve the same kind of food to impress other people, specifically the parents of a new boyfriend/partner when meeting them for the first time. The women agreed that for such an occasion they would serve more traditional "Sunday lunch" food such as a roast dinner or a pot roast and not the steak that they had selected for Bill Clinton. When discussing the need to impress other people, whether it was friends or the likes of Clinton, other methods used to impress people were identified such as setting the table nicely, serving wine, serving homemade food, presenting three courses, and in general being seen to be "making an effort". One woman told how she had some "hoity-toity friends from England" and how she used different kitchenware from what she would have used for her other friends when they visited. She explained this by wanting to conform with their standard because "they're used to it". Difference in lifestyle was therefore something that was taken into account when being a hostess.



In one of the focus group one woman explained how she also used “lying” as a means of ensuring that her guests were duly impressed: She would present a sauce or a dessert as homemade, as this was the expectation in her social circle, while the food in fact was something she had bought at the local supermarket. Admitting to lying caused some laughter and amusement, but the other women recognised that they would also sometimes “cheat” in similar ways. One woman said she was certain that her friends did that same thing as it had become an unspoken rule among her friends never to share recipes.

### **Eating out**

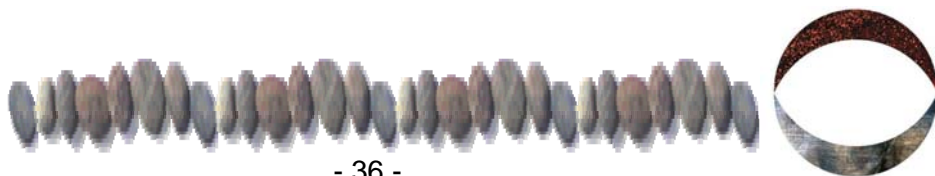
The “culture of eating out” was also seen as having changed considerably in the last generation. Most of the women explained that when they were children they never went out to restaurants as a family, whereas today this is quite common. One example was mentioned of a girl who had wanted to go to a "five star restaurant" to celebrate her first communion. This would not have happened in the past. Expectations have changed, and children are used to eating out at birthday parties etc, and consequently eating out is no longer a special event.

## **4.3 SHOPPING AND PREPARING FOOD**

### **Purchasing patterns**

Commenting on the changes in shopping patterns over her life-time, one woman said that these days there is almost too much choice, which makes it more difficult to shop. The participants in her group agreed that there had been a general decline in people’s diets, stating that “before there was less choice and healthier diets”.

TV and advertising were identified as the biggest influence on shopping habits. Special offers in shops, the “temptation” of well presented shop shelves and the layout of the shops themselves were also identified as influencing purchasing. In particular, some of the women emphasised that the attractive presentation of ready-made dinners made it very tempting to buy these convenience foods often at a higher price than the healthier alternatives.



The women from low income families stated that the price of food, although sometimes unreasonably high, was secondary to the quality of food. When discussing price and quality of food one participant commented with a laugh that she would “buy anything that was cheap”, and that she did not see any problem with that. She added that the only thing she would not buy were dented tins. The other women disagreed and it was emphasised that quality was the highest priority when shopping.

The price of some foods did however limit the frequency with which the women thought they could afford it, even if it was considered both healthy and tasty. For example, one woman commented that she and her husband were both very fond of asparagus but that she only bought in when it was on discount as she considered the usual price too expensive. In one focus group it was agreed that lamb was tasty but too expensive to buy.

For the women who were in employment, convenience was a priority as the time they spent shopping was considered more of a concern than getting the lowest price. Shopping was considered a chore and none of the women said that they enjoyed it. Convenience was therefore a key issue, and one woman said that if she did not have a pound coin in her pocket for the trolley at the local supermarket she may end up shopping at a more expensive convenience store because of the hassle of having to get change.

The issue of meat was again raised and most participants were very clear about not wanting to buy cheap meat; the price of quality meat was considered well worth it. As a consequence, most of the women used several food outlets on a regular basis, buying most of their food in a supermarket and then going to a local butcher to buy meat. When asked if they had the same concerns about fish, there was usually little response. One woman laughed and said “I’ll buy it anywhere as long as it is in batter”, indicating that she knew this was not the healthiest option. In addition to not being a very popular food, fish was considered by some to be too expensive, and salmon was specifically mentioned. Of those who bought fish, most would buy fish at the supermarket, which was considered convenient and safe.



Status is attached to certain brands and there was a clear belief that certain brands were of superior quality. For example, one woman who stated that “I like my brands” said she would buy Kellogg’s corn flakes and Heinz beans as she considered them to be superior to the supermarkets’ own brands. One of the other participants replied that although she preferred the “high quality” brands, with five children in the house she bought some own brand foods such as Tesco’s cornflakes because they were cheaper. Some had developed strategies in an attempt to get around the issue. One woman explained that her five year old daughter's favourite cereal was Kellogg’s Coco-pops. On one occasion the mother had bought a cheaper brand and put it into the empty Kellogg’s box, thinking that the child would not taste the difference. The daughter, however, complained that “this tastes different” and the mother had returned to buying the more expensive brand.

### **Food Labelling**

The topic of food labelling was discussed in some detail during some focus groups. The way in which food is labelled was seen as “not clear enough”, and the women wanted information that was clear and easy to understand. The older among the participants found labelling particularly difficult to understand. As one older women pointed out “I can’t be looking at the labels. I wouldn’t know what to look for”. Another woman said she routinely looked at labels to identify ‘E’s’<sup>2</sup>. She added that she did not really know what ‘E’s’ were, but was concerned about unnatural additions to her food. Hidden salts and sugars were also pointed out as a labelling issue that some of the women were concerned about.

### **Learning to cook**

Most of the women learned to cook by watching female members of the family. In most cases this was their mothers, but also older sisters and grandmothers (and in one case a father) were mentioned. Some came from large families sometimes with eight or more children, and were accustomed to helping with domestic chores, including cooking from an early age.

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<sup>2</sup> E numbers are codes for food additives and are usually found on food labels throughout the European Union.



Others were largely self-taught and one woman explained that her mother would cook very different things from her and that she had “picked up most things as I went along”. Some reported that they had never been particularly interested in learning how to cook and a couple of the younger women had not been responsible for cooking an entire meal on their own until they had set up their own home. Those who participated in the ‘Cook-It’ courses commented that they had been introduced to new things through the course. One commented that she had never cooked with tuna fish before while others had enjoyed making curry sauces and stated that they “would make it again at home”.

### **Gender roles**

The role mothers played in family life was important to the women as they were growing up, and the preparation of food had been a key part of this role. One woman described how she had watched her mother shell peas on Saturdays in preparation for the family dinner the following day. She came from a large family and her mother “never had time to sit down to eat together with the rest”, keeping herself busy with food preparation, clearing up and “keeping an eye on everybody and everything”.

The women described themselves as the main cooks in their home and as the person with responsibility for the planning, shopping and preparation of food. They saw this as part of the traditional pattern where men were “not allowed” in the kitchen and said that there is still a fairly strict division of labour along gender lines. Although recognising that younger men would do more cooking than their fathers, comments such as “my husband can’t boil water” were made by younger women. One woman said that she “blamed their mothers” for this, suggesting that mothers do not expect sons to participate in domestic chores that involve food preparation but do expect this of their daughters. Similar comments were made by many of the women, and one said that “mine (husband) goes to his mother’s whenever I am not home. He says he’s going to ‘the restaurant!’”

When men did participate in food preparation, it usually was at special occasions or in relation to specific tasks. For example, one woman said that when she was a child it was always her father who made the Champ. Several others commented that fathers prepared certain “special things”. One woman said that her husband sometimes did the Sunday dinner and he always cooked at Christmas. Although fitting in with the pattern of

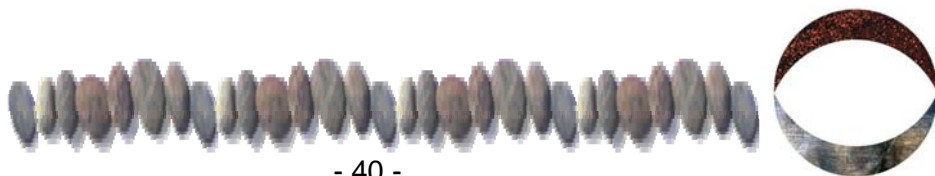


men sometimes taking on food preparation for special occasions, other women commented “where did you get hold of him!?” Furthermore, if food was ever prepared outdoors, such as during barbeques, it would usually be men who were responsible for cooking. This was explained by an association between masculinity and the outdoors. It was recognised that most of the prestigious chefs in TV or elsewhere are male. This led the women in one focus group to state that “men are chefs; women are cooks.” By this they meant that while women do the everyday preparation and planning of meals, men, when they participate in food preparation, do the most prestigious parts of cooking. This includes some of the most “public” and masculine aspects of food preparation such as barbequing, or carving the Sunday roast.

There was full agreement that even if men these days sometimes cook, it is still the women who do the shopping and planning of the household's food consumption. Men were described as reluctant when it came to shopping. According to one woman, if he came with her at all her husband “refuses to carry the basket in the shop”. Another woman said that “my husband is always pushing the trolley”, suggesting that he saw it as some form of vehicle suitable for a man to drive and thereby legitimising his presence in the shop. Men were described as lacking the skills needed for shopping for a household. They were considered poor at assessing the right quantities of food and would frequently buy too much of things. Men were described as buying what they wanted without thinking of price or budgeting, and that they in general did not plan their shopping schedules very well. Several of the women commented that when shopping together, the men would invariably be the one paying at the till.

### **Safe food**

Hygiene and hand washing in particular was often mentioned first when discussing the things people deemed important when preparing food. This was considered important both for hygienic reasons and for “the feel of it”. Some of the women said that they would routinely wash all the fruit and vegetables, even the “pre-washed” ones while others considered these as adequately clean. One woman commented that she usually washed them but that she occasionally “cheated”, indicating that she believed that they did need to be washed. In general the standard of food hygiene was seen as better today than in “the past”.



A key concern raised in all focus groups was the source of the meat consumed by the household. When asked, most of the women said that they would only buy meat at specialist stores or their local butcher because then “you know where it is coming from”, and “it is prepared in front of you”. Participants were in general sceptical about the meat sold in big supermarket chains such as Tesco and Lidl, and did not like to not buy their meat there. One woman was concerned that their meat had red dye and stripes of fat added to make it look more “real”.

One older woman said she bought meat, or the “steak for the men” as she put it, from local farmers’ markets. When asked whether it was expensive, she replied that it was not really that expensive, that she considered it cleaner and that she wanted to know where it was coming from. She also liked to support local businesses. Some of the younger women bought their meat at Tesco, which was explained by older participants as an “age thing”, and that they might get more concerned with meat quality as they get older.

Another key food safety concern was to avoid eating food that was past its sell-by date. All the women reported that they routinely check dates. One woman described herself as being “strict” and threw away anything that had expired. Others would not even eat food on the day that it expired. One woman said she would cut off the mould off old cheese and then eat it, but others emphatically stated that they would not and some appeared horrified by the thought.

#### **4.4 PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTHY FOOD**

##### **Today’s diet**

Participants’ perceptions of how diets have changes in recent years were to some extent inconsistent. On one hand, today’s food and food preparation methods were considered healthier than previous generations. For example, their grandmothers’, and, to a lesser extent, their mothers’ generation would have used more lard in their cooking and deep fried more food than today. The women described themselves as being educated about healthy eating through schools and media (TV in particular). On the other hand, today’s

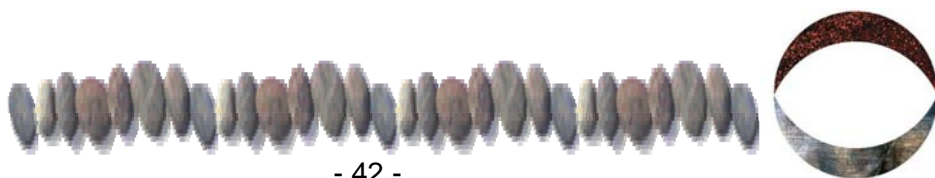


diet was also described as inferior to the traditional diet, which was described as healthier: “Many people eat stew, bacon and cabbage, which are healthy, but then they chose the ready-made version which is not”. One of the older women commented that people did not seem to live as long as they used to due to much higher cancer rates, and she believed that food consumption played an important role in this development. There was, however, a feeling that the culture is changing towards a “back to basics” approach of more traditional fresh, wholesome food. They described a culture change towards valuing fresh food more. There was also a general consensus that homemade and fresh food was the healthiest, and some of the women thought organic food could really make a difference to health.

### **Dietary knowledge**

All participants emphasised the importance of fruit and vegetable in contributing to a healthy diet whether they ate it themselves or not. Many found it difficult, however, to get their children to eat fruit and vegetables, in particular if it was a type of fruit or vegetable they had not tasted before. When asked about the price of fruit, the consensus seemed to be that: “I don’t mind paying if it’s good for you”. All the women were aware of the five-a-day message and considered this an aim, although few were eating five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Moreover, many were unaware that tinned and frozen food could contribute towards the portions. What constitutes a portion of fruit and vegetable was also subject to confusion. For example, one woman thought that a small bag of fruit salad containing five different types of fruit would be five portions.

During an observation session of a ‘Balance of Good Health’ workshop participants asked many questions, particularly in relation to their children’s diet. Many of the questions related to how to get their children to eat properly, as some had children that were very "picky" and would only eat limited types of food. One child would not eat bread, any fruit or vegetables and the mother was despairing about what to give her. Many of the women seemed to give their children quite a lot of high sugary foods such as cereal bars, thinking they were acceptable since they were advertised as “yoghurt bars”, “fibre bars” etc. They did not realise how much sugar was in these types of foods. Some were quite shocked when the DFfA community food worker demonstrated the sugar content in some common foods/snacks. One woman usually gave her child a bag



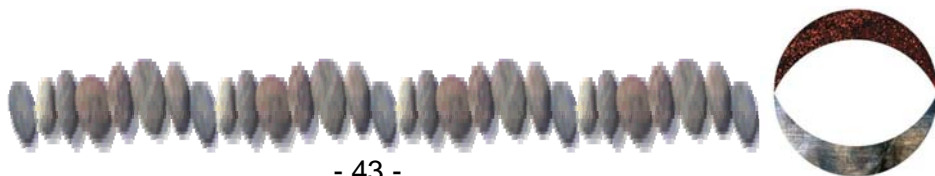
of jelly beans on a Friday evening. When she heard that there is about 60 sugar lumps in one bag she said that she would “never give him that again”. Different ways of giving children sweets and treats that were less sugary was discussed and this woman decided that she would get a chocolate bar and cut it into pieces for them instead rather than continuing with the jelly beans.

The women found different health messages conflicting. "One week coffee is good for you, the next it is bad for you". The women agreed that the government was not doing enough about the public's diet. They particularly thought it would be important to include healthy eating programmes in schools to give children the knowledge and skills which would stay with them throughout life. Some of the older women, however, raised the issue of most initiatives and media focus being on young people. "What about our age? We need to learn as well". Apart from the health of older people themselves, it was seen as important to include them in healthy eating programmes to benefit family food consumption as grandmothers frequently look after their grandchildren during the day to allow both parents to work.

## 4.5 FOOD AND EMOTIONS

### Food and guilt

People "today" were seen as becoming more and more concerned with health. When asked whether or not initiatives such as DFfA or other information programmes had an impact it was pointed out that these could be negative as well as positive: "People may be left feeling guilty or that they are being blamed for a lack of will power". Some thought that food, in the same way as smoking, could become a moral issue. For example there are certain foods people do not want to admit to eating as they are thought of as 'bad' and reflect negatively on the consumer. During one 'Cook-It' observation session when the participants were asked to fill in the food diary they were a little reluctant as they had had a 'bad' day the day before. The foods that were described as 'bad' included chips,



sausage rolls, prepared sandwiches, sausages and blood pudding.

Eating certain food can thus be associated with emotional states and feelings of guilt. One woman who picked chocolate as her favourite food was very open about this being part of a pattern of comfort eating. What she ate would depend on her mood and eating chocolate and other similar foods made her feel better. Sometimes, however, “eating one chocolate can lead to feeling guilty, and to deal with the guilt I eat another!” It was agreed that although eating chocolate was bad, it was better than “going for the bottle” as a method of dealing with emotional stress.

Men were seen to have a more pragmatic attitude to food compared with women: they simply “eat what they want” in order “to get full”. Their interest in sport was seen as a reason why they were not eating so much or so interested in food. Their interest in sport was seen as being linked with food behaviour in two ways: (i) they were only looking after themselves in contrast to women who are looking after the whole family and (ii) sport may represent a way of dealing with difficulties; where women may turn to eating men were seen as turning to sports. Men had the option of using the pub as a means of dealing with problems in a way the women did not see as a possible option. In combination with the pub they would frequently order “a big Chinese” (take away food from a Chinese food outlet) on their way home which was seen as equally unhealthy as women’s chocolate habits and one woman commented: “that would not comfort me. I would need the sweets”.

The ways men and women discussed food was also seen as different and it was agreed that while many men ate chocolate they would not talk about it in the same way as women do: “Women would talk about it, buy it, and crave it!” The participants pointed out that for women talking about the guilt they feel when eating ‘bad’ food such as chocolate could represent a way of dealing with the guilt. Some believed that men do not associate food with pleasure the way that women do. One woman disagreed with this stating that “my husband certainly enjoys his food”. After some discussions the group agreed that women are more attached to the emotions and the comfort that food represents than men, even if both sexes enjoy and get pleasure from eating.



### **Food and body image**

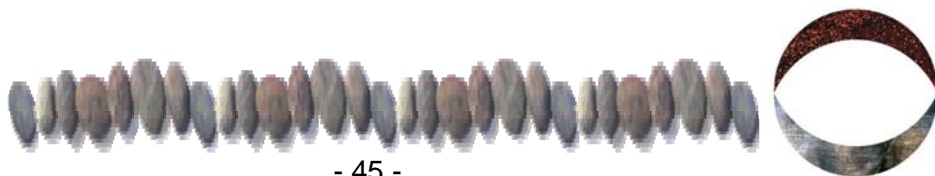
Concern with food was also seen as related to other pressures to conform to social norms and in particular, the way women feel that they need to look slim and young. The general view was that while men would be "proud of their bellies" and not think that this decreased their appeal, women would feel bad about not being thin. The concern with body image and the associated pressure felt by many women was seen as a "mental thing". Several of the women stated that their husbands thought they were fine even if they themselves thought they were overweight.

The desire to stay slim was seen as being associated with the ideals of youth in fashion and advertisements and "the media" was seen as being largely responsible. One woman described how while her grandmother used to "sit with a big shawl around her", her mother, was now, at the same age "struggling to look good". One woman pointed out that those in charge of advertisements and media are all men and the group jokingly agreed to "blame the men".

Concern about their weight was not seen as an exclusively female issue but men and women were seen as having different strategies and options for losing and maintaining weight. Weight Watchers was, for example, seen primarily as a woman's thing, and it was suggested that there may be stigma attached to attending for men. One woman said that there are now Weight Watchers courses specially designed for men and delivered online so that they do not have to attend a meeting. Men were seen as more likely to go to the gym or engage in sports as a means to reduce weight or keep slim in a way that women do not.

### **4.6 LIVING IN DEPRIVATION**

Health, diet and nutrition may not always be a top priority for people living in deprived circumstances. During one focus group it emerged that the women living in one particular housing estate live in constant fear of violence, burglary and rioting like many of the other residents. The women had been involved in community attempts to turn things around, but "the men in balaclavas" would dominate public meetings and "veto our suggestions". One of the women had bought her home from the Northern Ireland



Housing Executive some years ago and still had a mortgage. She would be unable to sell the house without a considerable loss which she could not afford, and described herself as "trapped on the estate". She said if the opportunity arose she would move immediately. The women told stories about violence, destruction and terror. Their levels of stress were considerable and it was commented that counting numbers of portions of daily fruit and vegetable consumption can appear meaningless in the midst of the struggles and worries of everyday life.



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## 5. FINDINGS FROM MEDIA ANALYSIS

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### 5.1. FOOD IN THE NEWS

As described in Chapter 3, Dungannon News and Tyrone Courier (the 'Tyrone Courier') was selected for the media analysis component because this is a newspaper which focuses on local issues in DFfA Intervention area. The Tyrone Courier forms part of the Alpha newspaper group which publishes twelve local papers across Northern Ireland. It is the largest circulation newspaper in County Tyrone and, like the other local newspapers in the area; it is published on a weekly basis. Established in 1880, the paper sells over 15,000 copies each week and has local editorial offices in Dungannon and Cookstown.

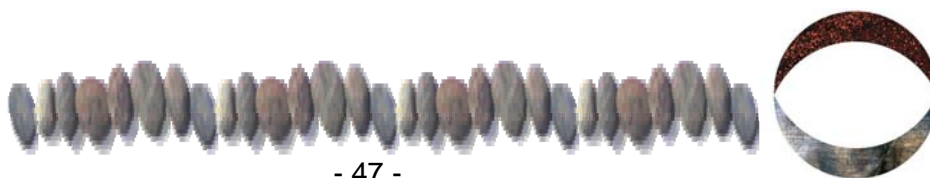
In the period from August to October 2005, copies of the Tyrone Courier were examined and articles related to the production, retailing, preparation and consumption of food were identified. A total of 61 articles were found and, based on their content, categorised into four types:

- Local business (45 items), divided into the following sub-categories:
  - Existing businesses (15 items)
  - Awards and anniversaries (15 items)
  - Opening of new businesses (7 items)
- Farming (8 items)
- Health issues (6 items) divided into
  - Healthy eating initiatives (4 items)
  - Avian flu (2 items)
- Other (10 items)

#### **Local business**

##### Existing businesses

There seems to be close links between the local media and local businesses in the DFfA intervention area. The Tyrone Courier frequently publishes articles which describe local food outlets or restaurants featured in conjunction with advertisements from that



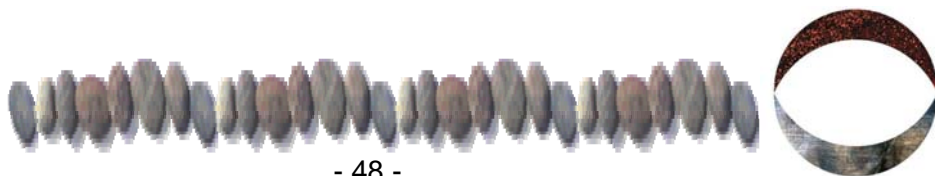
particular business:

- The article *Grab a slice of Pizza Hut Dungannon* (31 August) states that “When mum deserves a break, Pizza Hut Dungannon is the perfect answer”. The article includes a general description of the restaurant, and is illustrated with two pictures. The article is placed next to an advert from Pizza Hut which includes a 25% discount voucher.
- *Join in the fun at Spar Aughnacloy* (12 October) is illustrated with 8 pictures and describes an upcoming event to celebrate the store’s refurbishment. The article is placed next to a large advert from the shop. The story was followed up in *A day of celebrations at Spar Aughnacloy* two weeks later which includes pictures from the celebration of the refurbished store (26 October).
- An ‘*Eating Out*’ special over 1½ pages on 28 September also includes a mix of articles and adverts from some of the same restaurants such as *Wednesday night is Ladies’ night at the Dragon House* which explains that women get half price drinks on those nights. The Dragon House also advertises in the same section, again highlighting the discount for women.

The Tyrone Courier covers developments in the local food retail sector in various ways. Some food production companies are important employers locally, and developments within the retail industry therefore feature as important news. For example, a recent death in the Moy Park poultry factory is described in an article which headlines *Moy Park probe urged following worker’s death* (24 August), outlining how the coroner called for a health and safety check at the inquest of a worker who had died inside a blood processing tank. Moy Park also features in the ‘*This Day 25 Years Ago*’ section on 14 September, which outlines the construction of the factory.

The newspaper frequently covers stories of local retailers’ contributions to community life. For example, the ‘*Out and About*’ section on 26 October features a picture of a Supervalu manager handing over a £500 check as the shop’s annual contribution to a local play group. A picture of scouts and their leaders together with Tesco staff who had “joined forces for a weed-pick at the Tesco superstore” is included on 5 October.

Local businesses also use advertisements to show their interest in local community life.



Both Curley's and Centra supermarkets had advertisements on 28 September to congratulate the Tyrone Gaelic Football team who had won the All-Ireland Football championship. A number of local bars and restaurants also had similar advertisements. On 26 October, Centra had an advert which invited local people to a Halloween Fun Day.

### Awards and anniversaries

The strong links between the local newspaper and local businesses were also apparent. Local businesses received several retail awards during the research period, which were described in the following newspaper articles:

- *Saying cheese* features a local creamery who won an international award for their cheese (24 August).
- *Curley's supermarkets are simply the Best!* describes how Curley's supermarket received two awards from the Supplier of the Year Awards (31 August, included two pictures).
- *Retailer in award final* (14 September) explains how a local Supervalu shop was short listed as one of Ireland's best retailers in the category of Best Customer Service. This was followed up a month later with the report that the shop had won the award (*Super success for Supervalu*, 5 October). The article reports that the local Spar shop also received an award.
- The *Out and About* section features a picture of Newell's Deli manageress as a finalist in Neighbourhood Retailer in Store Deli of the Year Award 2005 (5 October).

Anniversaries for local food outlet businesses are also well covered. Curley's supermarket, which is one of the largest retailers in the Oaks Centre in Dungannon, features prominently in the six items on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Centre. The coverage of the anniversary was often presented in conjunction with advertisements from Curley's and the Oaks Centre.

*Save over £25 with Curley's supermarket and meet chef Paul Rankin* features on the front page on 5 October, and inside *Play your cards right at the Oaks Centre and win* describes a scratch card lottery that was run as a cooperation between Curley's and the



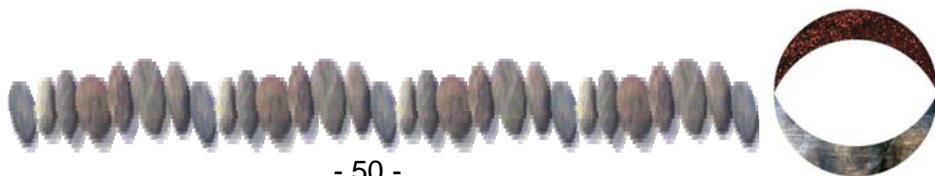
Oaks Centre to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The article also explains that the celebrity chef Paul Rankin was due to make an appearance at the Curley's shop the following day. The article is placed next to a large advertisement for the same event. A picture from Rankin's visit to Curley's supermarket was included in 12 October edition. As part of the anniversary celebrations, Curley's advertised on the front page on 19 October that readers could find coupon vouchers for up to £25 off selected food (including egg, milk, sirloin steak, chicken, ham, tea, pizza, cheese, wine, vodka, beer) inside the newspaper. This was part of an item on the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration special and included a number of colour pictures. In the same edition, *Birthday spectacular at the Oaks Centre, Dungannon* describes the centre's history as well as its current shops and included two pictures from the fish monger and butcher at Curley's. A large advertisement for Oaks centre 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations was included on 26 October.

Other anniversaries for local businesses are also described. On 28 September an article features the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a local business park, and *Torrent Deli Sandwich Bar* describes a food outlet in the park. The 19 October issue includes a one page feature on The Loft Coffee Bar which celebrated 5 years in business. The article is illustrated with five pictures and is placed next to an advert for the bar.

### Opening of new businesses

The establishment of new local businesses is important in all areas, and particularly so for a rural area with limited employment opportunities. The establishment of local food retail outlets is followed closely by the Tyrone Courier. The story of the opening of an ASDA store in Cookstown ran throughout the period:

- *ASDA opening confirmed.* News on the opening of ASDA stores in Northern Ireland (28 September).
- *ASDA all set to open up in Cookstown* describes how more than 2000 people in Cookstown applied for jobs at the supermarket due to open in the town (5 October).
- *Keightly family to open ASDA superstore* outlines the plans for the opening of the ASDA superstore. The official opening was to be conducted by the family of a man who lost his life in the Tsunami disaster. The family was nominated by the community in response to ASDA's search for "local heroes" (5 October).



- *Shoppers throng to new ASDA superstore* reports on the opening of the new ASDA store (12 October).

News of the opening of other food outlets included:

- *New bakery opened in Dungannon* describes how a woman who started off selling her products at local farmers markets had been given support through a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development scheme to set up her own bakery. The article is illustrated by two pictures of representatives from the funders eating her products (28 September).
- *New Centra store opens* reports on a new store in Dungannon with a description of the premises and pictures of the shop and the management (28 September).
- *Drive through restaurant for Cookstown* describes how permission has been given to build a drive through restaurant. As there already is a local drive-in Mc Donald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Burger King were both contacted but were not interested (26 October).

## **Farming**

Issues surrounding farming and the situation for local farmers features in many news items throughout the period. For example, the paper routinely includes a one page special entitled '*Mid Ulster Farmer*'. This article includes the local prices of livestock, news from livestock auctions and articles on farming equipment and agricultural technological developments. It also features events such as the *Tullylagan Valley Owners Association traditional harvest of potatoes* (5 October). On 5 October there was a large number of notices of Harvest Church Services to be held in various churches the following Sunday. *Gildernew welcomes wet weather payment* (31 August) describes how a local MLA welcomed a new scheme announced to compensate farmers for losses of production, is given a prominent place in the paper. Of the many news items related to farming, eight were of direct relevance to the study.

Farmer's markets are described in several articles, and in one in particular, the high quality of the food sold at such markets is highlighted. *Back to school market* (31 August) states that the Dungannon country market has a range of "wholesome, good quality food" for children's lunch boxes. The description of the food emphasises qualities such



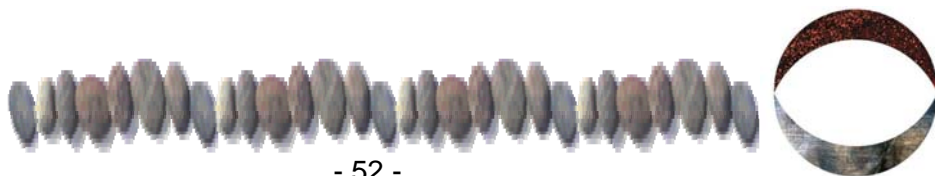
as "organic", "homemade", "high quality", and "excellence". The article is illustrated with a photograph of the organisers exhibiting a poster saying "welcome to excellence". The article is placed next to an advertisement for the market. *Tyrone Farmers' Market at Curley's* (26 October) returns to the 20 year anniversary of the shop and describes how the occasion was marked by launching a farmers' market that will be held on Curley's grounds on the last Saturday of each month. This will be an addition to the market held on the first Saturday of the month at Tesco's grounds. Again, the article is placed next to an advertisement for the market.

Throughout the research period the newspaper featured articles highlighting local farmers' concerns about the importation of foreign beef, in particular from Brazil, representing a threat to local farming. *Northern Ireland farmers and Scottish farmers join forces* (24 August) outlines how Farmers Unions in the two jurisdictions collaborate to secure more sustainable prices for local farmers. Particular reference is made to the importation of Brazilian beef, the "quality and integrity of local produce", and that consumers have the right to make informed choices. The article also suggests that foreign beef is of inferior quality and therefore that current developments will not benefit local consumers. *Farmers group pickets Tesco* (28 September) describes demonstrations across Northern Ireland protesting against Tesco stores selling Brazilian beef. One such demonstration took place in Dungannon and a picture shows local farmers holding a placard reading: "Please help us by shopping at your local family owned supermarkets, butchers, bakers, fruit and vegetable shops". On 19 October, *MP joints farmers' protest* outlines how a local Sinn Fein MP had joined the demonstrations supporting local beef farmers.

## **Health issues**

### Healthy eating initiatives

Four local initiatives involving a focus on healthy eating were reported in the research period, two of which involved ADHAZ. *Healthy option at Milltown and Ballygawley Road area* (24 August) describes the ADHAZ food co-op which delivers fresh fruit and vegetables to people's homes on a weekly basis. A picture of ADHAZ staff delivering a box of food to a local householder is included.



*Students in Dungannon given a tonic for success* (28 September) presents the Water Bottle Project run by ADHAZ which provides water bottles for children in primary schools in order to increase their water consumption. The item includes a picture of children from one primary school together with ADHAZ staff.

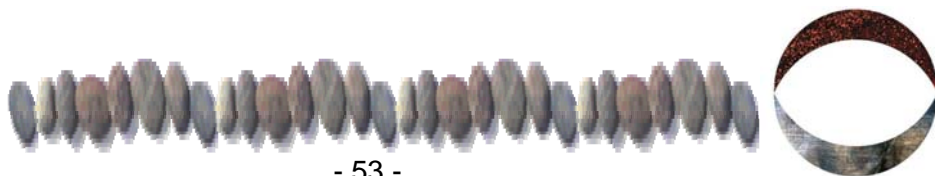
Under the *'Mid Ulster Farmer'* special on 24 August, an article entitled *Council staff promote healthy living at Clogher Valley Show* describes how the Council's Environmental Health Department used the show to distribute information on a range of health and safety issues, including hand washing, food poisoning prevention and safe cooking outdoors. *Orritor Primary School gets healthy with Wally & Wise* (19 October) outlines how Action Cancer's Wally and Wise's puppet show highlighted a range of health issues (including healthy eating) to children.

### Avian flu

The international avian flu scare, which reached a peak during the period, could have had a huge impact on Moy Park poultry factory and other local food producers. Two articles focused on the precautions taken by the Moy Park to minimise effects should the virus infect their stock. *Thousands of Moy chickens slaughtered in bird flu trial* (28 September) describes how 10,000 chickens had been slaughtered in order to study and learn from the methods adopted. The article stresses that the animals would have been killed in any event and reports that health authorities had emphasised that there is no risk at the moment and low risk in the future for avian flu to affect the area. A further article, *Tyrone taking bird flu precautions* (19 October), discusses the precautions taken by Moy Park in the event of an outbreak of the avian flu virus.

### **Other**

Four news items relate to training opportunities in the field of food production and hygiene. *Moy Park managers flock to Loughry* (24 August) features a Moy Park employee who is enjoying her Food Supply Management course at Loughry College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and explains how her studies may be beneficial to her work. Loughry College is one of the few further and higher education institutions in the local area. The college also features in *Dare to be different! Choose an exciting career* (31 August), which focuses on the courses on offer. The article is placed next to



an advert for the college. *Food and fun at Loughry College this weekend (31 August)* outlines an event for the following weekend, including details of the different activities such as food and cookery demonstrations, food stalls etc.

Once a month, the Tyrone Courier includes a one page cooking section, 'Cook with Norah'. On 24 August the focus was on making jam, with three recipes for jam and one for Victoria sponge. In October the column featured Halloween food and provided recipes for tangy roast sausage and onion sizzle, mulled red wine, harvest scone and smoky tomato soup (26 October).

## 5.2 FOOD ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE LOCAL MEDIA

All advertisements related to food which were featured in the Tyrone Courier during the research period were identified and categorised. In total, 8 different food retailers advertised in the newspaper during this period. Apart from Lidl and Tesco, these retailers were local or local franchise outlets. Tesco had only two adverts during the period, both of which were generic advertisements for their bakery products and wine selection. Lidl routinely had the same advertisements across Northern Ireland, some of which may only have included one or two food items.

Some 38 adverts included food items:

- 22 of these adverts included no fruit or vegetable items
- Of the 16 that did include fruit and vegetables, 4 had potatoes as the only fruit or vegetable item advertised
- One of these advert was a generic advert from Lidl stating that the prices of their fruit and vegetables had been reduced
- 4 adverts included fish products
- 26 adverts included one or more soft drink with high sugar content.

There was a total of 432 food items advertised:

- 30 of these items were fruit and vegetables, 6 of which were potatoes
- One advert contained 11 of the 30 fruit and vegetable items; this was advertised



as a Halloween special

- 8 fish items were advertised. 5 of these were in a frozen fish fillet special from Lidl. Of the other 3 items, 2 were for fish fingers and one was battered fish
- 63 items were soft drinks with high sugar content
- 25 items were crisps
- 93 were for meat products, many of which were fresh meat.



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## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

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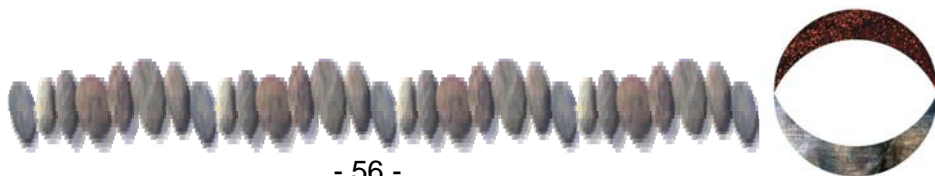
### 6.1 FOOD PREFERENCES

Food preferences are deeply rooted in attitudes and therefore difficult to shift (Rappoport et al. 1993). Health related messages may conflict with meanings and values not related to health. When there is a conflict between the two, it may be the case that what is considered "proper" food, based on cultural value judgements, is the most persuasive. The findings from this research support the view that this is probably not only due to ignorance or lack of information among the public (though this may contribute to some extent), but due to the complex web of meanings, priorities and emotions upon which people base their decisions (Hansen et al. 2003).

In discussing the links between people's value systems and the values symbolised through food, Allen and Baines (2002) suggest that health promoting initiatives should try to change the values or meanings attached to food instead of trying to convince people to change their habits. A similar conclusion was reached by Barker et al. (1999:316), stating that "in order to encourage dietary change towards lower-fat diets, it may be necessary to counteract the notions that 'low fat diets are for girls', that low fat diets mean denial and that they are the prerogative of the bourgeoisie".

Although this may seem like a sensible approach, a reservation with such an approach can be derived from the example of public images of smoking. The meaning attached to smoking has changed significantly over the last few decades. It used to be promoted as glamorous, sophisticated and was associated with affluence but it is now seen as destructive, dirty and associated with low socioeconomic status or poverty. In the period during which this change has emerged, smoking rates have decreased significantly among more affluent people. They have remained largely stable, however, among less affluent people contributing to a widening of health inequalities. Changing the meanings attached to consumption may therefore have beneficial outcomes for some population groups, but not for others.

### 6.2 'GOOD' AND 'BAD' FOOD



It is common to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' food (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002). While eating 'bad' food is commonly associated with feelings of guilt (Barker, Tandy & Stookey 1999), the women in this study emphasised that eating 'bad' food can also be used to moderate emotions for example eating chocolate to make one feel better. Expressions of guilt may be interpreted as a means of expressing morality by letting others know that one is aware of the food being 'bad'. According to the women in this study, these uses of food are not especially applicable to men. Lupton (2005: 455) argues that the discourse of "trying" is central to the ways in which people talk about food. She suggests that "one must exert effort when doing so, as one's natural inclination may be to eat bad food". The women in our study discussed their habits in similar ways, "trying" to eat "good" food and provide healthy diets to their families. The perception that it is difficult to consume a healthy diet and that it requires considerable effort represents a barrier to change..

Focus group participants appeared to have a good level of awareness of healthy eating principles and in particular emphasised the importance of fresh, wholesome and homemade food. To some extent this corresponds with traditional Irish food (although this was sometimes seen as high in saturated fat), which may explain why many believed that today's diet is inferior compared with that of previous times.

The high value attached to this type of food may, however, may be due to it being considered 'proper' food rather than 'healthy' food (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002). It corresponds with the traditional role of women, which includes the preparation of home made meals from fresh produce. It also corresponds with the ethos of the locality: food such as meat, potatoes and vegetables, central to traditional cuisine are produced locally and promoted in the local media.

### **6.3 SAFE FOOD**

The perception of risk associated with food consumption was evident from the research. Participants were in particular concerned that food should be natural (i.e. without chemicals or additives), locally produced and thoroughly cooked. The concerns expressed about food safety may be interpreted as concern about the safety and well being of their family. The shock of learning about the poor nutritional value of food they



regularly gave to their children led several of the women to express guilt and that they in some way had failed as "good mothers".

Participants also expressed concern over the difficulty they experiences in understanding food labelling. In a society where we receive an ever increasing amount of information, which may provide partly conflicting advice, individuals need to make decisions about what information sources to trust. In Australia, people tend to trust government sources on information related to food risks, while people in Britain are more sceptical to this information source (Lupton 2005). Hanson and colleagues (2003) distinguish between structural and relational trust. Structural trust relates to people's believe in the ability of food producers or government institutions to maintain adequate levels of food safety. Relational trust, on the other hand develops from personal, reciprocal relationships. This can refer to alternative channels of food distribution such as buying directly from farmers or butchers, or the information received from family or friends. As mentioned, research participants reported considerable concern with buying meat from supermarkets which they clearly did not trust. To combat these concerns, strategies such as establishing trust relationships with local providers were applied. Relying on relational trust, may therefore be a way of dealing with perceived risk (ibid). Moreover, during the observations, participants made it clear that they trusted the advice provided by the DFfA workers.

## **6.4 CULTURAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES**

### **Expressing family unity**

Food may serve as a means of expressing one's identity, including one's value system (Tivadar & Luthar 2005). In Irish culture, high values are attached to the family unit (Kneafsey & Cox 2002). The high value placed on eating together with the family, and in particular the "Sunday dinner" which emerged through this research, is consistent with these values. The ritualised gathering of the family, with the focus on "the roast", may therefore be seen as an expression of family values. Furthermore, as sharing food is also a method of asserting membership of a group (Barker, Tandy & Stookey 1999), the Sunday dinner may also serve as an expression of the unity of the family. When people comment that they would miss the gathering if it did not happen, or that there is no point



in arranging it for only one or two people, they may indirectly be commenting on the lack of group identity. Conversely, the participant who said that she does cook Sunday dinner for only her self and her husband may be communicating that although small, theirs is a strong unit.

### **Local identity**

93 of the 432 food items advertised in the Tyrone Courier during the research period were advertising meat and meat products. This may be another reflection of the central position of meat in the local food culture. For local farmers the issue of local produce is, of course, closely connected to their livelihood, but the evocative language used in their campaign against imported meat reflected the view that local produce was superior and even indicated that the local consumers might be placed at risk should local production not be conserved. The preference for buying meat directly from a local butcher so that "you know where it comes from" may reflect trust in local producers and by extension trust or identity attached to the local community and the rural way of life. Moreover, a strong emphasis on local identity and the need for local unity was expressed through the close links between the local paper and local businesses. Had such relations been expressed through national media, one might have expected issues of the media's integrity and independence to be raised. Here, however, the close relationship may be interpreted as an expression of local unity.

As highlighted by Hansen and colleagues (2003), "lay" people make their decisions on the basis of the complexities of their lives, taking into account a wide range of factors and priorities. The importance of locality in structuring lay perceptions about food risk has been noted elsewhere (Lupton 2005). Indeed, the social and economic context has been described as so important that not only "we are what we eat, but we are where we eat" (Bell and Valentine quoted in Lupton 2005: 465).

In addition, people living in food poverty may live in social circumstances that add to the complexities of their situation. As described, some of the women who participated in this research live in areas that are marked by deprivation, social unrest and with high levels of crime and fear of crime and violence. Their levels of stress were considerable and it was commented that counting numbers of portions of daily fruit and vegetable



consumption can appear meaningless in the midst of the struggles and worries of everyday life. This demonstrates the importance of contextualising both food behaviour, and intervention programmes in the local circumstances.

### **Status and masculinity**

In spite of the high value attached to the Sunday roast, it was not considered the most prestigious food. The women all agreed that when serving someone of high social standing, exemplified by Bill Clinton, steak was seen as more appropriate. Steak, associated with masculinity, may therefore be seen as symbolising high status and more distant social relationships compared with a roast. Meat is associated with “proper” food, in particular with a proper “dinner”. Meat was seen as particularly appropriate for men, and men were understood to prefer or need this food more than women do. It was seen as important that meat should be properly cooked, which, according to Levi Strauss (1993) could be seen as an expression of the superiority of culture over nature. Studies from Western settings have found an increasing preference for ‘anonymised’ meat that does not resemble the animal from where it came (Allen & Baines 2002). Similarly, Lupton (2005) found a high degree of trust of supermarkets as a meat source in an Australian study. The reverse seems to be the case in our study, where people expressed a preference of buying meat from a local butcher.

### **Expression of female identity**

Women’s responsibility for the expression and maintenance of the family unit is exemplified in their preparation of the Sunday dinner. More specifically, it seems to be middle aged women who organise the events. This is consistent with the study of an Irish community in Coventry, where women had responsibility for maintaining group identity (Kneafsey & Cox 2002). These responsibilities change with age. Younger women expressed that they go to “their Mother’s” (or “their Mother in law’s”) for Sunday lunch, but as they reach middle age, many take on the responsibility themselves. Hosting the Sunday dinner may therefore be a way of expressing, not only identity as a woman, but as a mature woman capable of holding the family together. In spite of the labour involved, the role may be rewarding because of its importance to the family unity.



Age was also an important factor when explaining shopping behaviour. Only a few of the women admitted to buying “cheap” food. This was explained by age, and it was expected that the younger participants would change their habits with time. This view corresponds with Whelan and colleagues' study (Whelan et al. 2002), which found that low price seemed to become less of a priority when shopping for food as people get older. There are, of course, clear links between a household's income and what they can afford to spend on food. There may, however, also be other issues to take into account. As is the case with Sunday dinner, it may be the case that the provision of "proper" food becomes an increasingly important part of the female identity as women move through the life cycle. Becoming parents, for example, has been found to impact on people's food related priorities (Hansen et al. 2003).

The women showed great concern with the quality of the meat they bought. Meat being the key element of the “dinner” may be interpreted as a way of expressing care for the family by means of purchasing good quality meat. As the person with responsibility for this meal, the quality of the meat may also reflect on the woman and her execution of this important role, which makes the occasion important to women's identity. Similarly, throughout the focus groups, the women emphasised that when shopping they prioritise quality over price: “I don't mind paying if it is good for you”. By prioritising quality over cost the women demonstrate that they value the well-being of their family over finances.

Women are also responsible for representing themselves and their family through a variety of social events. This includes presenting food appropriate for different occasions and in accordance with the social standing of visitors. The women participating in this study expressed that it was important to them to be seen to execute this role competently. The presentation of food seems therefore to be important to female identity (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 1992) and to their level of contentment (Gustafsson & Sidenwall 2002). What is considered appropriate food often varies between socio-economic groups (Friel & Conlon 2004), and in this study some differences emerged between professionals and non-professionals. For example, it appeared to be more important for those in professional occupations to serve food that was homemade. This may symbolise a personal investment in the social interaction. For the non-professionals, serving ready-made food was appropriate for informal situations, which may emphasise



the ability to provide for guests.

## 6.5 CONCLUSIONS

Food may serve as a means of expressing parts of one's identity, including, one's value system. This was evident in a number of ways from the research. The high value placed on eating together with the family, and in particular the "Sunday dinner" was highlighted. Clear gender roles were evident in relation to the purchasing, preparation and consumption of food. In addition, a strong emphasis on local identity and the need for local unity was expressed through the close links between the local paper and local businesses.

The findings of this study suggest that people think about food and food events in terms of a set of binary oppositions, and utilize these when making decisions about their diet or that of their family. These dichotomies include:



<b>Types of food</b>	
'good'	'bad'
Fresh	Processed
Tasty	Not tasty
'Proper' food	Junk food
Safe	Dangerous
Home made	Ready made
Local	Foreign food
<b>Preparing and eating food</b>	
Easy to prepare	Hard to prepare
Fancy	Plain
Difficult to consume	Easy to consume
Formal occasions	Informal occasions
Eating in	Eating out
Eating together	Eating alone
<b>Food for different people</b>	
Friends and family	Important guests
Women's food	Men's food
Older people's diet	Young people's diet

Food can also be thought of as being important for:

- Coping
- Surviving
- Celebrating
- Socialising
- Impressing others

The analysis presented suggests that these dichotomies have a very strong social and cultural basis: there may be strong links between the meanings attached to food and food events on one hand; and gender, family and local identity on the other.

The food behaviours reported here do not signify particularly unhealthy eating patterns.



The study does, however, highlight how deep and personal the symbolism of food behaviour can be.

In order to arrive at sound recommendations for public health policy and practice, the findings from this exploratory ethnographic study must be analysed in conjunction with other elements of the 'All-Ireland Learning from the DFfA Intervention' research project. While this ethnographic study focuses on people's attitudes and the meanings they attach to food, other data collections of the research project include comprehensive quantitative surveys of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours; and studies of the availability and price of food. When interpreted in the context of this other data, a more comprehensive and valid understanding of the role of social and cultural issues will emerge.

## **6.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY FOOD INTERVENTIONS**

Lessons learnt from research and practice should be used to develop methods and tools to assist those who develop, deliver and evaluate community interventions. While this is an exploratory study, some preliminary implications for community food interventions can be identified:

### General

- The ways in which people conceptualise food and food events appear to have a significant effect on their food decisions and behaviours, and those of their families and friends. Health communications that are framed in terms of the dichotomies that people seem to use are likely to be better received than those that are expressed in other terms.
- The strong social and cultural meanings people bring when they think about food and food events suggests that more successful interventions are likely to be those that take account of these issues.
- People tend to rely on culturally established binary oppositions when making decisions about food or diet. Beliefs and attitudes about gender, kinship and identity, for example, are not easy to change. The success of community food interventions are, to some extent, influenced by societal developments and



- initiatives that deal with these wider social and cultural issues.
- The close link between locale and consumption highlights the importance of contextualising both food behaviour and community intervention activities in local circumstances.

### Specific

- There is a certain amount of confusion in relation to what constitutes a healthy diet. Dietary guidelines need to use more accessible language to describe what changes need to be made to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Vague terms such as 'servings' and 'portions' which are used to demonstrate size recommendations should be replaced by more specific terms. Efforts should also be made to ensure that food labelling and food marketing is accurate, not misleading and easy to understand to enable the consumer to make informed choices about the foods they purchase.
- Food is commonly classified as 'good' and 'bad', and the 'good' food is also healthy food. Strong perceptions that it is difficult to consume a healthy diet and that it requires considerable effort may represent barriers for interventions.
- The general avoidance and dislike of fish which was highlighted by focus group participants is something which should be addressed in future community food interventions as fish can make a significant contribution to the nutrient needs of all consumers, especially growing children and the elderly.
- Women are often the gate keepers to a family's food consumption, and this role may be intimately linked with female personal identify. This is mediated by age, and interventions may need to be age-specific.
- The local media represent a trusted channel of information and they support local business and cover local healthy food events. The close link, observed in this study, between local business and the media highlights the fundamental role that the local food production and retail sector play in shaping the way people think about food.
- Food safety is an important issue for consumers, particularly in relation to the importance of washing hands when preparing food, not consuming food that is past its sell-by date, knowing the source of meat products and concern about additives and preservatives in food.



## 6.7 FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was the first of its kind to focus people's attitudes and the meanings attached to food and food events in Northern Ireland. As it was an exploratory study, the findings provide new empirical information and a basis for further research. In particular, research is needed to explore in more depth:

- the views of men as well as women
- differences between different socio-economic groups
- the reasons why the consumption of 'good' food is perceived as effortful and difficult
- differences among age groups
- the social and cultural factors which influence food choices



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## APPENDICES

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### APPENDIX 1. MEMBERSHIP OF THE IPH EVALUATION GROUP, INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN IRELAND

#### Present members

Jane Wilde	Institute of Public Health in Ireland
Kevin P Balanda (chair)	Institute of Public Health in Ireland
Steve Barron	Institute of Public Health in Ireland
Emma Turkington	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Paula Tally	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone

#### Past members

Alison Crawford	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Aodhann O' Donnell	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Eleanor Gill	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Lyndsey McCann	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Michael Donaldson	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Tracy Powell	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Jennifer McBratney	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
Shirley Hawkes	Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone
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Orla Walsh	Institute of Public Health in Ireland

